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Empowerment and Engagement in small enterprises – the case of the Tuscan Wine Hub

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Abstract

Moving from the diffusion of hubs in the last decade and the potential role they can play in fostering community empowerment and developing social innovation, this paper describes steps, activities and implication related to the setting up of the Tuscan Wine Hub,

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within the European project *The Wine Lab*. After the definition of the wine business scenario and hub main peculiarities, the analysis moves to the description of the main outcomes of the activities carried out within the Tuscany Wine Hub, highlighting the potential of this tool to foster collaboration among different stakeholders and promote innovative practices in rural and disadvantaged areas.

Partendo dalla diffusione che hanno avuto gli hub nell'ultimo decennio e dal ruolo potenziale che possono svolgere in termini di rafforzamento della comunità e innovazione sociale, il contributo descrive le principali fasi, attività e implicazioni legate al Wine Hub nato in Toscana nell'ambito del progetto europeo *The Wine Lab*. Il lavoro, dopo aver illustrato le principali caratteristiche del settore viticolo italiano e dello strumento degli hub, si focalizza sull'analisi dei principali risultati conseguiti attraverso le attività organizzate nell'ambito dell'hub toscano, sottolineando le potenzialità di questo strumento per favorire la collaborazione tra stakeholder diversi e promuovere pratiche di innovazione nelle aree rurali e svantaggiate.

Introduction

In the last ten years, the hub has spread in different sectors and various organisations. As suggested by the British Council, this way of organising work has become «a ubiquitous idea connoting a dynamic bringing together of diverse talents, disciplines, and skills to intensify innovation»¹. During the last years, there has been a proliferation of hubs, due to their efficacy in fostering community empowerment or in developing social innovation; furthermore, hubs represent an effective tool for answering to local needs, such as a lack of services for the community.

Given this potential, the interest of policy makers and university managers towards hubs grew over years: firstly, since they understand that the process of innovation creation has changed and secondly, as hubs can represent a valid answer to the emerging needs of a local community. In general, people think about hubs as a place where the members of a community can meet, discuss and plan actions, but hubs can be virtual as well. Hubs can effectively improve co-creating solutions, and as outlined by Gathege and Moraa, through the development of an experience-based participatory culture, they can also build technological skills and literacy². Research has outlined how hubs can foster a process of community empowerment and social innovation³. Hubs can stimulate a dialogue among involved stakeholders, and they can be engines for the development of innovative solutions to common problems.

In this paper, we describe the experience of a team of researchers and companies involved in the setting up of the Tuscany Wine Hub, within the

¹ British Council 2016.

² Gathege, Moraa 2013.

³ Jimenez Cisneros, Zheng 2016.

three-year European funded project *The Wine Lab. Generating Innovation between Practice and Research*⁴. Starting from the main outcomes of the activities carried out in Tuscany based on a collaboration between the Santa Chiara Lab (University of Siena) and the Federation of Wine, Olive Oil and Tuscan flavours roads, we outline the role that hubs can have in promoting engagement and empowerment among different stakeholders in rural areas.

The scenario: the wine business

The wine business covers a leading role in the Italian economy, as wine is one of the primary exporting goods in the field of agribusiness. Scholars highlight the role that wine can have in diversifying economic activities and in improving the financial health of a specific area; for instance, Maciejzak describes this dynamic in Eastern Europe⁵, while Van De Ploeg and Renting highlight the positive impact that the wine routes had on the Tuscany rural economy⁶. Viassone and others analysed the relationship between wine sector and regional competitiveness, by observing regional and wine business competitiveness indexes. They found that regional and wine sector competitiveness indexes were highly related⁷. The wine industry is highly fragmented, and location has an impact on the pursuit of competitive advantage: climatic conditions can influence the quality of production, and some areas have gained notoriety at an international level⁸. Even if Tuscany role in the global wine industry is under everybody's eyes, some areas are disadvantaged and experience difficulties, while others benefit from a competitive advantage based on the reputation of the product and the awareness of location.

Background research shows that Italian wine companies can resist adopting innovation⁹, and that location has an impact on reducing this resistance. In our view, and according to insights emerging from the literature¹⁰, innovation can support small wineries in the pursuit of competitive advantage. The active presence of a system of relationships in a specific area can positively influence the competitiveness of an industry¹¹. Clusters that are characterised by a consolidated system of relationships among stakeholders show a strong

⁴ The Wine Lab, <<https://www.thewinelab.eu/en/>>, 09.09.2020.

⁵ Maciejzak 2018.

⁶ Van Der Ploeg, Renting 2000.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ Gilinsky *et al.* 2008.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ Kinder, Aylward 2006; Santini *et al.* 2007; Slavova 2009; Doloreux, Lord-Tarte 2013; Aylward *et al.* 2014.

¹¹ Porter 1990.

orientation towards innovation. There is no doubt that where wine firms are embedded in localised networks, knowledge-based innovation is more likely to happen¹². A relationship that involves universities, research centres, institutions, and professionals, creates the basis for the development of innovative solutions.

Hubs: definitions and characteristics

The topic of hubs attracts scholars from many fields. Hubs found a wide diffusion in the field of social innovation and technology. Still, there are examples of their effectiveness also in other areas, such as entrepreneurial development and education. The diffusion of hubs grew in the last decade: they succeed in promoting community empowerment and the development of social innovation. Scholars, professionals, and policy makers have started to consider hubs as useful tools to address local needs, especially when communities experience a lack of services. Also, policy makers have supported hubs: their ability to foster innovation and to keep pace with social transformations motivates the interest by governments and local institutions.

A hub can be defined as a way of organising work¹³. Yet, more than the organisational principles that inspire hubs, what appeals it is the dynamism and the idea of collecting different talents and skills, and to put together disciplines for achieving innovation¹⁴. The effectiveness of the hubs to address social innovation and community empowerment goals has been confirmed by previous experiences¹⁵. Also, the case of the London Hub¹⁶, depicts not only the birth of hubs but also their profound implications in the development of social innovation and community enhancement. Hubs can also foster entrepreneurial behaviours. In particular, the relationship among stakeholders can facilitate the diffusion of innovative ideas and the implementation of innovative solutions. Research has underlined the role that hubs have in the diffusion of innovation in mature industries¹⁷.

Examples of successful hubs cover social enterprises, highly innovative sectors (as in the case of Silicon Valley), but also rural businesses¹⁸. Horwitch highlights the decisive role that hubs play in promoting both social innovation and social entrepreneurial behaviour¹⁹. To achieve these aims, however, the hubs should be built by considering several aspects.

¹² Giuliani 1997.

¹³ Virani *et al.* 2016.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ Jimenez Cisneros, Zheng 2016.

¹⁶ Bachmann 2014.

¹⁷ Leifer *et al.* 2001.

¹⁸ Kovács, Zoltán 2017.

¹⁹ Horwitch 2010.

The first goal should be the creation of working environments facilitating aggregation and exchange. Most of the success of the hub depends on the quality of relationships between members. Hubs can be classified according to their size and the typology of relationships established among participants²⁰. The number of hubs' members can be small or large, and benefit of a diverse set of facilities – such as café or exhibition spaces – that can facilitate co-working and aggregation. Most important, it is the relationship generated by the aggregation: to reach the higher level of co-creation and define a joint value proposition, the members of the hub should achieve a mutual relationship²¹. The establishment of such a kind of relationship can be supported by participatory processes²².

Diversity is another relevant factor in hubs. It should be ensured, either concerning gender or social status, to support the spreading of ideas among community members. Heterogeneous knowledge is a plus in entrepreneurial development process; having members with a different set of knowledge resources could be a fundamental leverage for the development of innovative solutions. Thus, to be effective, hubs must ensure egalitarianism among participants: participants must have equal access to resources and the same advantages and benefits.

Another essential characteristic of hubs is the shared motivation among participants: a creative collaboration among stakeholders involved in a project occurs when there are personal involvement and motivations. A mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, where personal involvement plays a crucial role, is fundamental for the generation of entrepreneurial creativity²³.

Finally, the flow of information, both on the informal and formal levels, should be guaranteed. Information is a key resource for the development of entrepreneurial behaviours²⁴, and support the building of a shared knowledge base to address the identified problem. Additionally, shared and open communication enforce trust between the members of the community.

The Tuscany Wine Hub

The Wine Lab. Generating Innovation between Practice and Research was a three-years research project, running from 2017 to 2019. The project was funded by the European Commission through the *Knowledge Alliance* program. One of the aims of the project was to foster a collaboration between wine professionals operating in disadvantaged areas, institutions, and universities to promote innovative practices.

²⁰ Virani *et al.* 2016.

²¹ Ivi, p. 18.

²² Moraa, Gathege 2013.

²³ Amabile 1997.

²⁴ Nonaka 1988.

For achieving the settled goals, the project adopted the format of hubs. The project promoted thus the establishment of five hubs in wine areas of the partner countries (Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy). In Italy, two regional hubs were created: one of them was established in Tuscany.

In the frame of the project, a wine hub was defined as:

an active group of interest composed by stakeholders concerned by the wine sector – including then producers, researchers, policymakers, other private and public organisations (e.g., tourist organisations, cultural heritage bodies, etc.). A wine hub is mainly a learning community at territorial level in which sharing, and cooperation is aimed at pursuing new ideas for joint territorial development²⁵.

To support hubs creation, the research team collected insights and suggestions from the literature and developed some guidelines²⁶. After collecting secondary data, researchers' first step was the identification of stakeholders, by means of a common tool highlighting primary information about each stakeholder, to ensure that representativeness of the territory was comprehensive. In parallel, the team defined structures supporting the hub management, designed the information flow among future members, and developed monitoring and evaluation procedures. The latter was considered particularly relevant, both for performance assessment and for collecting ongoing data to understand if the process as designed required modifications. The research group developed a set of questionnaires, focus groups protocols, and surveys for gathering data. The following step was the stakeholder engagement process. Each hub was expected to be promoted by two or more partners, of which at least one representing higher education, and one representing the wine business.

The first activities of the Tuscany Wine Hub were organised in a limited geographical area (Candia, Northern Tuscany), and included the organisation of one event on natural wines. Further activities of stakeholder engagement, then, allowed to cover regional level. The creation of a regional-wide wine hub was based on the active collaboration between the Federation of Wine, Olive Oil and Tuscan flavours roads e the Santa Chiara Lab described in table 1.

²⁵ Santini *et al.* 2017.

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

Entity	Description
Federation of Wine, Olive Oil and Tuscan flavours roads	The Wine Roads of Tuscany Federation was founded in 2001 and transformed in 2005 into the Federation of Wine, Olive Oil and Tuscan flavours roads. It was the first experience at national level, primarily as a response to the need to promote all business tied to wine tourism, but also gastronomic business. The Federation can be considered an integrated tourism system, formed from different territorial realities which have a unified vision of local development ²⁷ .
Santa Chiara Lab	The Santa Chiara Lab of the University of Siena is a multidisciplinary teaching and learning centre where faculty and students can find support to develop collaborative projects. It is a self-sustained organisation within the University, as a meeting place for citizens and researchers to develop products and ideas. The lab exemplifies both the economic and societal aspects of knowledge exchange and collaboration as well as the synergies between the three missions of a university – teaching, research and third mission ²⁸ .

Tab. 1. Federation of Wine, Olive Oil and Tuscan flavours roads and Santa Chiara Lab description (source: own elaboration)

In January 2018, the hub was launched during a conference organised by the University of Siena, in the frame of the *Wine & Siena festival*, a city-wide event organised by Gourmet's International together with Siena Confcommercio, Siena-Arezzo chamber of commerce and Siena Municipality. The conference was the first opportunity to boost a dialogue between public and private partners about the importance of partnerships to face common challenges in the wine sector. During the conference, winemakers and researchers identified the first challenges that should be addressed by the future hub. The identification of the problems allowed to define a preliminary programme of following hub activities.

The first hub operational meeting took place in Siena, in July 2018, in the frame of a workshop organised by Santa Chiara Lab. The event aimed to debate on the problem of ungulates and wild boars in the vineyards. The event counted on the active participation of public bodies, private companies, consultants, scholars, students, and NGOs. Participants discussed about pros and cons of different solutions, especially those based on ICT tools. This event represented a mix of brokerage, matchmaking, and scientific workshop.

²⁷ Federation of Wine, Olive Oil and Tuscan flavours roads, <<http://www.stradevinoditoscana.it/>>, 09.06-2020.

²⁸ Santa Chiara Lab, <<https://santachiarylabor.unisi.it/>>, 09.06.2020.

A second meeting took place in November 2018 at Santa Chiara Lab. The event was co-organised by the Federation of Wine, Olive Oil and Tuscan flavours roads and the main topic discussed was the future of wine tourism in Tuscany. The event was organised according to the open space technology approach²⁹, and it was the first time that the main players involved in wine tourism were sharing thoughts. Along with the Federation, participants were the Italian Association of Wine Cities, the Italian Movement of wine tourism, the Italian Association of women in wine. These institutional bodies, together with scholars, students, and consultants planned further activities to be carried out to revitalise marginalised rural areas and wine destinations with less international reputation if compared with Montalcino or Chianti.

A third activity was aimed at sharing knowledge and experiences with other project hubs. In March 2019, the Tuscany Hub, hosted and organised in cooperation with University of Macerata and University of Siena, the *Italian Wine Week*, an exchange conceived as a “learning week”. The activity was participated by higher education students and wine stakeholders coming from the IMC University of Applied Sciences of Krems (Austria) and three representatives from the IPLERIA – University of Aveiro (Portugal). The focal point of all activities was the experiential learning format. Participants had the opportunity to get to know the territory at 360 degrees, since activities included seven field visits in Tuscan wineries, wine tasting sessions, cultural tours, meetings and direct interactions with academics, entrepreneurs and experts. The program included activities across the six provinces of the Region. This aspect allowed to put the group in touch with different wine areas of Tuscany, characterised by high diversity in terms of dimension of the production, types of vineyards, and corporate heritage. Each day, different groups of students, belonging to universities located on the visited area, joined the group: this made possible also the interaction among students coming from different countries and field of study (management, oenology and winemaking, agribusiness, etc.). According to the collected evaluation data, the *Italian Wine Week* was a satisfactory experience in terms of cooperation among Tuscany regional players but also to foster university-business collaboration within the Tuscany Hub. International guests were delighted to discover a “different Tuscany” and to have the opportunity to discuss with peers and experts about similar problems, that belong to any winemaker located in disadvantaged area regardless of the country.

Finally, in October 2019, the Tuscany Hub hosted the *Transnational Wine Hackathon*, organised simultaneously in the four countries of the consortium. The event took place at the Department of Business and Law of the University of Siena, and involved 26 participants, among students, winemakers, and researchers, divided into mixed groups. Groups were asked to provide

²⁹ Owen 2008.

proposals and solutions to make wine regions more appealing for millennials³⁰. The competition took place on two levels: first groups of each country worked on national proposals; then, the national winning team participated in the international competition. The final part of the hackathon, which included the presentation of the national winning groups, represented an interesting overview about the perception of the wine sector by millennials from different national contexts. It also provided research insights for marketing research. The hackathon format confirmed to be a useful tool to create a positive interaction among experts, students, and professionals. It served the aim both of business and universities, both from a research and teaching point of view. Students' evaluation of the event highlighted an increased understanding of different variables of the same topic, mainly through dialogue with business members, and supported the acquisition of problem-solving and team working skills.

Lessons learnt and critical issues

The Tuscany Wine Hub was established around the Federation of Wine, Olive Oil and Tuscan flavours roads and its members as a starting point. During the first year of the project it focused around the Candia area (northern Tuscany), to be enlarged then to the entire regional territory.

There was already a quite committed network in Tuscany: *The Wine Lab* project represented an added value to increase a shared ownership of the network with players not traditionally belonging to wine, such as tourism operators, schools, civil society, higher education students, young people, and above all universities. The project approach and tools allowed to start working with the territory toward a more inclusive and participated vision of the future of regional rural areas.

The Tuscany Wine Hub is at the moment a not legally established network and it is participated informally by all five Tuscany universities. 2020-2021 plans include:

- a) joint events, which will be probably focused on organic and natural wine and environmental sustainability as initial topics;
- b) increased cooperation with young people, in particular students and graduates by means of:
- c) increased traineeship agreements between universities and companies, also beyond agri-food, agriculture, and oenology to provide opportunities at least to students in business, languages, and marketing;

³⁰ The challenge participants were asked to face to was: *What can unknown/unspoiled culinary / wine regions do to attract (more) young visitors to their destination? Which strategies can local producers of regional specialities apply in order to address millennials in particular?*

- d) joint annual event in the frame of the Santa Chiara Lab (University of Siena), focused on employability and/or local development;
- e) joint research between companies and universities, addressing local needs (wild fauna management, which was started within the project; environmental sustainability; marketing and branding of Tuscany wines not belonging to the Chianti area);
- f) workshops in different wine areas;
- g) participation in courses by entrepreneurs, in the frame of curricular courses (as case studies or in the frame of project-based learning or by organising field visits);
- h) organisation of the second wine week, as the first was recognised as a successful event both for regional social dynamics (creating joint work between different disadvantaged/marginalised areas), and for learning purposes.

The companies more involved and committed in the Tuscany Wine Hub were located in disadvantaged areas or in places whose reputation is limited. This type of companies deals with some limits, including internal and external factors: they have high production costs; they are labour intensive, given the nature of production area; they experience a sort of isolation due to the lack of services and accessibility. In the depicted scenario, the aggregation has been a positive experience for all of them. Prospectively, this can have a decisive role in firms' development³¹.

Yet some critical aspects have emerged. Some concerns refer to the direct link between the needs and the hub functions. Given the peculiar areas addressed by the hub, to which extent the hub is lived as an exchange opportunity and not as a tool to address (and solve) problems? Providing an answer to these questions has meant for us, as researchers, to reflect on perceived and actual needs concerning the hub. Are participants truly aware of the potential of hubs for local development? What is the corporate culture of the participant companies? What is the role of the participant in the local wine industry? What are the emerging needs of the participant company? The last question is vital for the effectiveness of the wine hub. For this reason, from a research point of view, a needs assessment of the sub-sector of small wine producers is undergoing.

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³¹ Porter 1998; Giuliani, Bell 2004.

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