

Network Impact of a Social Innovation Initiative in Rural Areas of Southern Italy

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Abstract : In according to the scientific debate on the definition of Social Innovation (SI), the present paper identifies SI as new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. This concept offers important tools to unravel the difficult condition for the agricultural sector in marginalized areas, characterized by the abandonment of activities, low level of farmer education, and low generational renewal, hampering new territorial strategies addressed at and integrated and sustainable development. Models of SI in agriculture, starting from bottom up approach or from the community, are considered to represent the driving force of an ecological and digital revolution. A system based on SI may be able to grasp and satisfy individual and social needs and to promote new forms of entrepreneurship. In this context, Vazapp ('Go Hoeing') is an emerging SI model in southern Italy that promotes solutions for satisfying needs of farmers and facilitates their relationships (creation of network). The Vazapp's initiative, considered in this study, is the Contadinner ('Farmer's dinners'), a dinner held at farmer's house where stakeholders living in the surrounding area know each other and are able to build a network for possible future professional collaborations. The aim of the paper is to identify the evolution of farmers' relationships, both quantitatively and qualitatively, because of the Contadinner's initiative organized by Vazapp. To this end, the study adopts the Social Network Analysis (SNA) methodology by using UCINET (Version 6.667) software to analyze the relational structure. Data collection was realized through a questionnaire distributed to 387 participants in the twenty 'Contadinner', held from February 2016 to June 2018. The response rate to the survey was about 50% of farmers. The elaboration data was focused on different aspects, such as: a) the measurement of relational reciprocity among the farmers using the symmetrize method of answers; b) the measurement of the answer reliability using the dichotomize method; c) the description of evolution of social capital using the cohesion method; d) the clustering of the Contadinner's participants in followers and not-followers of Vazapp to evaluate its impact on the local social capital. The results concern the effectiveness of this initiative in generating trustworthy relationships within the rural area of southern Italy, typically affected by individualism and mistrust. The number of relationships represents the quantitative indicator to define the dimension of the network development; while the typologies of relationships (from simple friendship to formal collaborations, for branding new cooperation initiatives) represents the qualitative indicator that offers a diversified perspective of the network impact. From the analysis carried out, Vazapp's initiative represents surely a virtuous SI model to catalyze the relationships within the rural areas and to develop entrepreneurship based on the real needs of the community.

Keywords :

Conference Title : ICSEI 2019 : International Conference on Social Enterprise and Innovation

Conference Location : Rome, Italy

Conference Dates : September 17-18, 2019