

Introduction to the proceedings of the Piccola Impresa/Small Business Workshop:

“Beyond the crisis: what is the future for small businesses? Challenges, opportunities and lessons learned

by Tonino Pencarelli, Francesca Maria Cesaroni, Paola Demartini, Roberta Bocconcelli and Mara del Baldo

Dear readers, in this volume, we are pleased to present the proceedings of the 5th Workshop organised by the journal Piccola Impresa/Small Business in collaboration with the Association for the study of small enterprises (ASPI), the Research Center on Entrepreneurship and Small-medium firms (CRIMPI), the Italian Academy of Business Economics (AIDEA) and the European Council for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (ECSB). The workshop title was “*Beyond the crisis: what is the future for small businesses? Challenges, opportunities and lessons learned*”, and it took place online on December 4-5, 2021.

The aim of the conference was to bring together scholars of entrepreneurship and small and medium-sized enterprises, to discuss the emerging issues following the Covid-19 pandemic.

As we have highlighted in the call for papers of the workshop and a previous editorial published in the journal mentioned above (Pencarelli et al. 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the largest public health crisis in living memory, with serious—and still unpredictable—consequences for the global economy. Available data clearly shows that SMEs have particularly suffered from economic downturn: their inherent weaknesses have amplified and accelerated the effects of the crisis compared to larger firms (Cowling et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Notably, in Italy, the Covid-19 outbreak has challenged SMEs’ survival after a decade of a slow and incomplete recovery (CERVED, 2020, 2021).

The crisis has also generated the opportunity to (*re*)think about the economy and society as a whole (Barbier and Burgess, 2020), accelerating some already ongoing key trends: *innovation, digitalisation, sustainability, flexibility*. On the one hand, these big challenges represent the future we aim for and the future we would like to build (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020; Kumar et al., 2021). On the other hand, they mark the way forward in the face of the changes that are now unavoidable for everyone: people, firms and policymakers (Giones et al., 2020; Nadina et al., 2021).

For SMEs, this means “looking inward” to truly understand what is needed to move forward and activate those changes—in production systems, organisations and relationships with the markets—that cannot be postponed any longer (Cortez and Johnston, 2020; Modena, 2020).

Almost two years after the start of the pandemic, it is apparent that policy measures adopted by the governments of several countries worldwide, including Italy, are deemed urgent to compensate for the loss of turnover, especially in sectors more heavily affected by the crisis (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Pencarelli et al., 2021), can only provide

short-term benefits and will be insufficient to support SMEs in handling the forthcoming challenges, once the crisis is over (Liguori and Pittz, 2020; Wenzel et al., 2020).

Therefore, we must look to the future, beyond the crisis, to discover and understand the social, economic and political scenarios the SMEs will act in, and to explore the critical strategic choices and policy measures that together will allow SMEs to revitalise and return to the economic scene as protagonists (Ritter, 2020). To explore these issues, the PISB 2021 Workshop has encouraged scholars to submit both empirical and theoretical contributions that advance our understanding of how SMEs are preparing to tackle and overcome this crisis and how they can effectively address, enhance and exploit policy measures at the local, national and European level (i.e., NextGenerationEU, The UK Government's COVID-19 Recovery Strategy) to move successfully towards this completely renewed and challenging scenario.

At the end of the refereeing process, twenty-four papers were presented at the workshop; twenty-one of them have been included in these proceedings. The authors addressed the themes of the workshop from a variety of theoretical perspectives, proposing both qualitative and quantitative methods of investigation, as well as conceptual reflections. In agreement, the included contributions are either long abstracts or full papers. Manuscripts are presented under the title of the sessions that took place during the workshop and that refer to the main topics addressed by scholars, namely: *Sustainable Business; Marketing and Strategies; Values and Humane Entrepreneurship; COVID's Impact on SMEs; Resilience and Recovery Strategies; COVID and Business Crisis; Cross-Cultural Contexts*. During the parallel sessions, the authors exposed the salient aspects that emerged from their research and were able to receive feedback from the participants to improve and expand their papers, especially the works in progress.

The workshop was enhanced by the participation of two guest speakers: Professor Roberto Grandinetti, from the University of Padua, Italy, who discussed "*The future for small businesses and their territories*" and Professor John Dumay, from Macquarie University, Australia, who presented the topic: "*Rethinking small business strategies during COVID-19: Identifying the job to be done*". We would like to thank both speakers for their stimulating insights and for providing a valuable platform for analysis and discussion, as well as future research.

We would also like to thank the members of the organising committee and the scientific committee for their valuable support during the workshop.

In conclusion, we would like to thank all the authors who, with their research, have contributed to the ongoing debate on such a vital topic for the future of the Italian and European economy.

References

Banca d'Italia, 2020, Economie regionali L'economia delle regioni italiane Dinamiche recenti e aspetti strutturali. Available at <https://www.bancaditalia.it/pubblicazioni/economie-regionali/2020/2020-0022/20-22-eco-regioni.pdf>

Barbier, E. B., & Burgess, J. C. (2020). Sustainability and development after COVID-19. *World Development*, 135, 105082.

OECD (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19): SME Policy Responses. Available at <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/coronavirus-covid-19-sme-policy-responses-04440101/>

CERVED (2020). Rapporto CERVED PMI 2020. Available at Available at <https://know.cerved.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RAPPORTO-CERVED-PMI-2020-2.pdf>

CERVED (2021). Rapporto CERVED PMI 2021. Available at https://know.cerved.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ESECUTIVO_WEB-RAP-CERVED-PMI-2021.pdf

Cortez, R. M., & Johnston, W. J. (2020). The Coronavirus crisis in B2B settings: Crisis uniqueness and managerial implications based on social exchange theory. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 88, 125-135.

Cowling, M., Brown, R., & Rocha, A. (2020). Did you save some cash for a rainy COVID-19 day? The crisis and SMEs. *International Small Business Journal*, 38(7), 593-604.

Donthu, N., & Gustafsson, A. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on business and research. *Journal of business research*, Vol. 117, September, pp. 284–289.

Giones, F., Brem, A., Pollack, J. M., Michaelis, T. L., Klyver, K., & Brinckmann, J. (2020). Revising entrepreneurial action in response to exogenous shocks: Considering the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 14, e00186.

Gössling, S., Scott, D., & Hall, C. M. (2020). Pandemics, tourism and global change: a rapid assessment of COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(1), 1-20.

International Monetary Fund (2020), World Economic Outlook. A Long and Difficult Ascent, October Available at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/09/30/world-economic-outlook-october-2020>

Kumar, Anuj & Ayedee, Dr. Nishu (2021). Technology Adoption: A Solution for SMEs to Overcome Problems during COVID-19. Forthcoming, *Academy of Marketing Studies Journal*, Vol. 25, N. 1, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3745814>.

Liguori, E. W., & Pittz, T. G. (2020). Strategies for small business: Surviving and thriving in the era of COVID-19. *Journal of the International Council for Small Business*, Vol. 1, N. 2, pp. 106-110.

Modina, M. (2020). COVID-19 e le implicazioni per le imprese. *Quaderni di ricerca sull'artigianato*, 2 (maggio-agosto), 196-213.

Pencarelli, T., Cesaroni, F. M., & Demartini, P. (2021). Covid-19 and Italian small and medium-sized enterprises: consequences, threats and opportunities. *Piccola Impresa/Small Business*, (3), 10-18.

Ritter, T., & Pedersen, C. L. (2020). Analyzing the impact of the coronavirus crisis on business models. *Industrial Marketing Management*. Vol. 88, July, pp. 214-224.