

FINAL DRAFT:

Social Farmers' Networking for Inclusive Tourism

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurship plays a key role in making tourism an inclusive activity. Literature on the topic is increasing but needs to pay more attention to collaboration, which is crucial for social enterprises. To overcome this gap, the research focuses on the impact that social entrepreneurs' drivers and barriers towards collaboration might have on providing decent work in rural tourism. The research considers the case of social farming, which has important implications for developing inclusive tourism.

1. Introduction

Tourism would never be sustainable without considering local communities' well-being. Even though tourism has a significant impact on world economies, this does not automatically make it a sustainable activity [1]. As stated by the OECD [1], tourism success should not solely be measured in visitor numbers.

More theoretical insights are needed: if it is true that tourism is inclusive when it creates conditions for the inclusion of all, it is of the utmost importance to consider how inclusive working conditions are [2]. This topic has been mainly explored in mainstream tourism contexts [3][4] rather than in alternative businesses such as social enterprises in rural places [5], which could instead be an asset to generate social and economic inclusion [6]. The more neglected the topic is, the more difficult it is to orient decent working policies toward the tourism sector [4].

Although social enterprises have generally been underestimated in tourism planning, they can certainly contribute to creating sustainable tourism activities [7]. In rural areas, whose development is mainly hampered by structural characteristics, social enterprises can develop inclusive tourism activities by creating employment opportunities for the most marginalised communities [2][8]. It is recognised that their work is strongly influenced by their ability to network, which allows them to secure human, technical, and knowledge resources [8] while contributing to the joint promotion of the territory [7]. Because of their influence on tourism, scholars argue that policymakers should increasingly consider social entrepreneurial experiences in tourism planning, to make tourism more sustainable [7].

2. Social Entrepreneurs: Why They Matter for Inclusive Tourism in Rural Areas

Tourism has powerful impacts on local communities. To ensure the long-term sustainability of this sector, tourism activities should be an asset to answer communities' needs and benefit local development [1]. This approach is critical in rural areas, with tourism being one of the primary resources for economic and social development [9]. It is first and foremost in the interest of tourism businesses to break the mould and engage communities in a collective learning process, to make their activities a vehicle of local well-being [10]. This need to make tourism "responsive and answerable to the society in which it occurs" has been particularly evident with the COVID-19 pandemic, whose effects have led to major consideration on reinforcing business corporate social responsibility (CSR) [11] (p. 517).

Social entrepreneurship is one of the most vivid representations of CSR [12], which according to Matten and Moon [13] consists of "clearly articulated and communicated policies and practices [...] for some of the wider societal good" (p. 405). Indeed, social entrepreneurship is seen as a catalyst for innovation and social development, whose actions aim to create inclusion, empower marginalised communities, and, more generally, contribute to changing public perception of them [12][14][15]. Although there is a clear need for the tourism industry to consider different stakeholders and promote more significant CSR actions [16], tourism practitioners still underestimate the role of social entrepreneurs [7].

However, it is acknowledged that they can use tourism to provide innovative solutions to contextual problems [17]: by addressing challenges from their roots, they make tourism a more conscious activity for visitors and residents [18]. In general, social entrepreneurship is recognised to support positive change in communities, mediating the power of neoliberal capitalist agendas when supported by institutional initiatives consistent with their mission [19]. Their impact is even more substantial in rural areas, where resources, good transport connections, and employment opportunities are generally lacking [7][20]. They use tourism to create new economic opportunities for local people [20][21][22], thus reducing the abandonment of rural places [20]. Their tourism activities create an advantage for multiple local stakeholders [20][22][23][24] and also attract attention to the needs of most isolated areas [7][24]. Indeed, social entrepreneurs adopt an educational approach towards tourism, allowing sharing of sustainable principles inside and outside the destination [21].

Besides many other sustainable purposes, rural social entrepreneurs can use tourism to generate inclusion. According to some scholars, social enterprises are often created to protect the dignity of mostly marginalised communities [25][26][27][28]. As Aquino et al. [8] explain, they "might increase the likelihood for marginalised communities to have a meaningful participation into tourism, and for their needs and aspirations to be heard and actioned" (p. 15). Inclusion might be promoted in different ways that may be more or less effective, from selling artistic products made by rural communities [25][27] to supporting employment opportunities for all through business models adopting inclusive recruitment policies and flexible schedules and tasks [20][25][26].

Nevertheless, to generate inclusive economic growth in rural areas, developing and fostering local skills and knowledge is necessary. Social entrepreneurship can do it in different ways: by creating activities to enhance local culture and heritage [25][28] or by providing rural communities with the knowledge and skills related to hospitality and tourism managerial aspects [20][25][26][28]. The latter does not always imply a direct economic return for the social enterprises [25] but can generate benefits in the long term for rural populations by allowing them to develop their career pathways [20][25][26][28] and further entrepreneurial opportunities [25][26][28].

3. Networking for Inclusive Tourism in Rural Areas

The opportunity for social entrepreneurs to fulfil their mission will depend on their ability to manage the interest of different social groups [23][24]. Therefore, collaboration is essential to legitimise their activities [24] and build trust and social cohesion [23]. Established networks might support the entire territory by stimulating innovation [22][23] and closer social dialogue among companies and national and supranational public bodies. The intensified coordination at a territorial level also enables activities of inclusive tourism, which have a significant potential to ensure decent work [27].

3.1. Drivers towards Collaboration

One of the main reasons for social entrepreneurs to develop collaborations is to access resources and valuable knowledge for their activities [7][20][21][23][24]. It should be noted that social enterprises widely depend on public resources [24]. Therefore, creating a collaborative environment with public actors is crucial for the feasibility of their social projects [21][23][24][28]. At the same time, collaboration allows them to gather valuable knowledge they might lack for their activities [28]. Moreover, to attract visitors to rural areas, the non-competitive spirit of social entrepreneurship allows for partnerships with other local businesses to be established [7][21]. This cooperation might both strengthen the market by creating competitive cost advantages for consumers and provide coordination to the activities of the entire destination [21]. As a result, a collaborative approach is a valuable asset in disseminating the values of places, people, and products generally underestimated in rural areas [7][21].

Besides being functional in creating tourism activities [8], collaboration is crucial for social entrepreneurs to foster inclusion [8][25][26][28]. Partnering with local actors is essential to identify the nature of local challenges and set long-term goals for their social activities [8], besides gaining emphasis on social causes and acceding to governmental aid programmes and funding [25][26][28]. At the same time, horizontal collaborations with local organisations sharing similar goals allow a greater emphasis on social causes and projects helpful in sustaining inclusiveness through tourism activities [25]. Furthermore, commercial collaborations are also essential to ensure decent work in rural tourism. Partnerships with local businesses enable control of production prices and foster employee work stability [26]. In general, networking in a

rural context is a valuable tool for social entrepreneurs to gather increased visibility, thus calling the attention of public policies to their work to develop policies to protect the dignity of the most vulnerable people [26][28].

3.2. Barriers towards Collaboration

Territorial distance is a significant factor affecting collaborations. Actors operating in the same territory find networking easier since short distances can encourage a sense of belonging to a group united by the same objectives [7]. However, social entrepreneurs also tend to work with like-minded people [7][24] with similar social goals and “a tone of transparency, collaboration, positivity and fun” [7] (p. 85). In this case, exchanging mutual help, knowledge, and ideas can favour the organisation of activities benefitting their social and economic aims [7][28].

Therefore, physical distance can be less important than other factors.

Conversely, competition for public funds drastically affects their propensity to collaborate [24]. Although difficult to access due to excessive bureaucracy [24], public funds play a vital role in social enterprises: they help ensure the implementation of social activities while supporting their competitiveness with traditional businesses whose primary purpose is to reduce costs instead of guaranteeing the maximum societal benefits from their economic activities [26]. Consequently, a weak economic foundation results in the inability of social enterprises to employ people from marginalised communities based on respect for human rights and social security, as initially planned [28].

4. Framing Social Farming in Inclusive Tourism

Social farming is an entrepreneurial activity involving agricultural resources to provide disadvantaged people with health, social, and working opportunities [29][30]. The role of social farms is more significant in mountainous and extremely peripheral areas, where they actively support isolated communities through socially innovative activities [29]. “Built on the principles of equal human, social and working dignity”, social farming developed in Mediterranean contexts is “an inclusive model” [31] (p. 12), receiving support from farms and the entire civil society [29]. In this context, farms become a laboratory for personal growth, connecting disadvantaged groups with the surrounding community by helping them to develop sectorial working skills for social and work integration [31][32].

Tourism is an essential resource for the viability of social farming projects, as well as an innovative response to inclusive market demand: it has always been a resource for the economic sustainability of rural Southern Europe [33][34] and a key asset for small family-run farms [29]. Although tourism literature is still in its infancy, recent contributions explore the numerous recreational services that social farming can generate, from the well-known agritourism to sport and educational activities to promoting a new responsible tourism approach known as “Woofing” [33]. As highlighted by Uvarova and Vitola [35], small farms dealing with specific social needs

are also more likely to find new pathways to meet new market demands, thus making social farming a resource for developing an inclusive tourism offer in rural areas [36].

When combined with agricultural projects, tourism can serve to develop social activities for local communities. One example could be the development of educational projects to transmit farming and environmental sustainability values [37][38]. Tourism can also promote the employment of people needing help accessing the job market by providing specific and sectorial-related training [34]. For example, agritourism offers employment opportunities to people with intellectual, relational, and physical disabilities [39] and generates positive externalities for individuals by improving their participation in social life [33].

Alongside support for disadvantaged people, tourism provides opportunities for social farmers to engage with communities [40]. Collaboration is essential to develop social farming experiences [40][41]. Indeed, social farmers collaborate with public and private actors to effectively design and implement activities according to the needs of rural communities [29]. However, there are numerous obstacles hindering the networking process. These are generally related to the diffidence and the competitive attitude typical of farmers [41] which might also hinder the insertion of new entrants to local agricultural knowledge systems [38]. In addition, the geography of marginal places often causes isolation, lack of institutional support, and discontinuity and weaknesses in the relation among territorial actors (which, according to the very recent study from Fazari and Musolino [42], already have a predominantly informal nature) [43]. In most marginal areas, the promotion of cultural and natural resources through projects involving local communities becomes an input for networking with local actors and civil society [37][40][44]. According to [37], the role of women and the young generation significantly contributes to developing farm diversification activities, although for social projects this does not imply significant economic income.

At the same time, activities in farm tourism, agritourism, and rural tourism allow social farmers to extend the tourism season, attracting new clients, improving quality standards, and gaining a stable source of income [45], besides contributing to the maintenance of rural landscapes [33][34]. From a consumption-based perspective, recent studies from Calabrò et al. [36] point out that networking enables the creation of multiple ad hoc services allowing visitors to base their decisions on their wishes and choices rather than having to choose among very few options.

There is no doubt that networking is crucial for rural social entrepreneurs in developing inclusive projects, including recreational and tourism activities. The literature reviewed highlights various aspects of networking, starting from the purposes generally related to the need for knowledge and resources for their activities, as well as the development of joint projects or commercial activities, to the type of actors involved from both vertical (mainly institutions and funding bodies) and horizontal (other companies with similar purposes) relations. The case of social farming is a clear example to highlight the social entrepreneurs' collaboration with the broader civil society to realise ad hoc inclusive projects. However, the question of how networking affects the provision of decent work in rural tourism is still open. According to the literature, it can be deduced that the social entrepreneurs' motivations towards networking (drivers), as well as those that hinder collaboration (barriers), both impact decent work in rural tourism. By testing

these two research hypotheses, this study aims to understand how drivers and barriers towards networking impact decent work when related to tourism in rural areas.

5. Conclusions

The results confirm the research hypothesis that both drivers and barriers to collaboration impact the provision of decent work in rural tourism. Indeed, the research revealed that the propensity to network matches the different pillars of decent work according to three main themes related to the feasibility of collaboration (i.e., the reasons that make collaboration sustainable), social and working inclusion, and personal growth. The findings showed that networking could, first and foremost, boost the creation of new employment opportunities for both social entrepreneurs and marginalised people included in work programmes. This also proves the complementarity of agricultural, social, and tourism activities in the rural contexts of Mediterranean areas [29][33][34]. For social entrepreneurs, the propensity to network would contribute to broadening the range of opportunities for adequate earnings and productive work for them, increasing on-farm tourism activities, and creating additional opportunities to promote products in social agriculture. When designed for tourism purposes, recreational activities become a source of extra income for the farm and, thus, an incentive for generational turnover and for fighting rural depopulation. Networking would also increase the opportunities for social dialogue with other local farms, public administration, and society in general. It facilitates the acquisition and exchange of resources, raising awareness and fostering education on social issues.

On the contrary, the obstacles to collaboration experienced by social entrepreneurship reveal that lack of resources and low embeddedness could negatively affect the provision of decent work. Concerning the household (individual) dimension, the lack of economic and infrastructural resources could undermine the stability and security of work in social enterprises. In contrast, the lack of human resources could create working conditions that go beyond decent working time. From this perspective, the tourism network is an opportunity to employ new human capital to manage tourism activities in a more coordinated way. On the other hand, the lack of adequate legislative resources for recreational activities can undermine the social protection of those involved in such activities. For the former, the lack of insurance regulations protecting the entrepreneur would hinder new tourism experiences in agriculture, such as Woofing, which, as reported by Giannetto and Lanfranchi [33], is growing strongly in social agricultural contexts.

This study reveals relevant implications from both a theoretical and managerial perspective. Investigating social entrepreneurship in the context of inclusive tourism [6][25][27] constituted a first attempt to respond to the need for studies on the tourism workforce in non-mainstream contexts [4][5]. By examining the collaboration sphere, we had a clear and more punctual overview of the embeddedness of social entrepreneurs' actions in the territory [8]. Furthermore, the use of decent working pillars as a tool to analyse results supported an understanding of how social entrepreneurs make tourism an inclusive economic activity [6], i.e., in which terms their tourism activities are capable of generating decent work [25].

Concerning the managerial implications, this study showed that social entrepreneurship significantly and robustly influences the creation of inclusive and sustainable tourism activities

in rural areas. Therefore, it further highlighted the need to consider those experiences in tourism planning activities [7]. The study details the limits and opportunities for joint development from the state of the art, including individual or collective dimensions identified by the respondents. Focusing mainly on the obstacles to collaboration, the need for more significant economic and infrastructural support emerges. Vázquez-Maguirre [26] emphasises that social enterprises that promote labour inclusion need more support from policies than standard businesses. The legislative aspect is, therefore, of the utmost importance as its support is particularly required to allow recreational activities to be managed while guaranteeing the social security of both the social entrepreneurs and the marginalised groups participating in farm activities. Therefore, increased legislative attention to solve specific gaps concerning tourism in farms and agricultural environments could be crucial for developing collaboration as a first step towards an inclusive tourist destination.

Overall, this study outlines significant policy implications. While didactic farms are the only type of social farming formally recognised to provide tourism experiences because of their educational mission (see the National Law 141/2015 on social farming [46]), the results of this study showed that the contribution of social farming to tourism is instead extended to different types of social businesses. To concretely support the development of individual and networked tourism activities in social farming, there is a need for tourism policies to consider social farming experiences, as well as to strengthen the collaboration with agricultural and social policies where social farming is generally developed (see the study from Genova et al. [47]).

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