

Chapter 17

Rural Entrepreneurship, Innovation, and Technology: Narratives From the Italian AgriFood Startup Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

Innovative startups, namely newly-created, innovation-based companies, are regarded as drivers of local development in addition to mirroring the entrepreneurial attitude of a local innovation ecosystem. However, “smart” and “startups” have become “buzzy” words, often used as labels to attract new investors and/or high-profile residents, namely in urban contexts. Although often depicted as marginalized, rural areas are not new to innovation. Agriculture and food technologies have enormous potential in terms of sustainable food production, provision, and protection of rural areas. As a result, it is interesting to evaluate to what extent the rhetoric of the “startup effect” also affects rural areas, traditionally depicted as marginalized. Thus, the chapter scrutinizes the narratives about the “startup effect” in the Italian AgriFood sector, and explores the relations among innovative AgriFood startups, rural milieu, and local entrepreneurial ecosystem from an Economic Geography perspective.

INTRODUCTION

According to FAO predictions (2015), on the one hand food production should increase by 60% in order to feed a global growing population, which will be of 9 billion people in 2050. On the other hand, consumers ask for growingly safe, affordable and healthy food (Sarkar & Costa, 2008), an arduous task which is increasingly untrusted to the Agri-Food sector.

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Over the last decades, agriculture and food production have been facing rapid changes emerged both on the demand side and the supply side, at the point that farmers' entrepreneurial attitude has been regarded as an essential asset to face a growingly multifaceted, multifunctional and diversified sector, due to new challenges in consumer habits, food safety, biotechnology and sustainability (Dries et al., 2014).

As a result, farmers' adaptation behavior to the still lasting socio-economic and environmental crisis has resulted in an increasing attention on both entrepreneurial attitude and innovation adoption in agriculture, which are particularly relevant for newly-created businesses such as startups.

As a matter of fact, agriculture and food technologies are gaining momentum worldwide, owing to the enormous potential they imply in terms of sustainable food production and provision and protection of rural areas. Ranging from big data applications for farm-related decisions to more efficient robotics farm functions, from e-grocery online stores to biotechnologies, High-Tech AgriFood sector encompasses a wide range of technology-based solutions and practices to make healthy food more affordable and accessible for people, by protecting at the same time the biodiversity of rural areas.

Due to its growing diffusion, High-Tech Agrifood is becoming another "buzzy word", widely depicted as the "panacea" to support local development in rural areas.

Inserted in the theoretical framework of the Economic Geography of Innovation with a specific focus on the role played by innovative startups in spurring development, the research is finalized to explore narratives about the "startup effect" in the Italian AgriFood sector, in addition to scrutinizing the relations among AgriFood startups, rural milieux and local entrepreneurial ecosystem.

As a result, the chapter is organized as follows: the first paragraph includes an in-depth examination of the newly-established paradigm of Smart Village, in addition to exploring the role of innovation, technology adoption and entrepreneurship in rural areas, with a specific focus on startups; the second paragraph synthesizes the methodological perspective and scrutinizes the overall evolution of AgriFood tech market in Italy as well as the AgriFood innovative startup distribution in the country; the following paragraph is based on the analysis of results deriving from the chosen multi-method qualitative approach to explore narratives and the related discussion; finally, the last paragraphs include suggestions for further researches and final remarks.

STARTUPS AND TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN INNOVATION FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT: BEYOND THE (APPARENT) OXYMORON

The current digital revolution across the globe has not implied an even distribution of Web access possibilities, by fostering new kinds of socio-economic polarization as well as shaping new inequalities (Graham, 2011; Philip et al., 2015; Riddlesden & Singleton, 2014). Furthermore, the growing diffusion of smart technologies has been fostering new kinds of clusterization, based on technological infrastructures concentration, mostly in urban areas. As Graham and Marvin (2001) put it, this is the result of "splintering urbanism" which has been at the core of urban theories such as the Florida's creative visions underpinning the idea that city is the innovative milieu par excellence.

As far as rural areas are concerned, Roberts et al. (2017) underline how they are often described as passive, regarded as the antithetical pole of a dialectic where urban areas are, on the contrary, active and fully inserted in global networks. Due to the pervasiveness of the current digital Revolution and as ICTs become an integral, sometimes invisible, aspect even of rural areas, several researches have increasingly

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