

An opportunity to develop support to young entrepreneurs in the agri-food sector: The Mediterranean Innovation Partnership

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Abstract

The capacity to achieve and sustain innovation and youth empowerment depends on the ability and joint work of multiple and interconnected actors: governments, civil society, private sector, research institutions, universities and Technological Transfer Office, Innovation Support Organization (ISO), individual entrepreneurs and others. Ecosystems are composed of various players (public sector, educational sector, business support organizations, finance and more), each of them ready to play its part in supporting young entrepreneurs and turn their ideas into sound and sustainable businesses. For this purpose, the MIP Network aims at bringing opportunities to ISOs and other ecosystem players to better support youth entrepreneurship in the agri-food sector, following three main axes of action: knowledge sharing, capacity building and cooperation.

The framework

Young entrepreneurs often come up with brilliant, innovative and radical business ideas that have the potential to contribute to regional growth and that can provide solutions to the global challenges that the world is facing. However, transforming these ideas in solid businesses is not an easy feat. It requires young entrepreneurs to prove the concept, to prove the technical viability of the proposed solutions, to prove the capacity to deliver the solutions to the target markets, and, last but not least, to prove that they can build a scalable business model. They cannot do all this alone. They require the capacity to lean on

entrepreneurial ecosystems that will support them in the process of achieving overall validation as well as in launching and sustaining the business all along the journey.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems are composed of various players (public sector, educational sector, business support organizations, finance and more), each of them ready to play their part in a coordinated way, taking into consideration the missions and the specific roles that these can play. In their mission, their attention is mainly focused on the entrepreneurs' needs and challenges that they are most likely to face and that pose a threat to their success.

Recent literature¹ and practical experience emphasize how young entrepreneurs, who face specific critical challenges in setting up sustainable businesses, can hardly find the support that they need to test their ideas and to transform them into viable companies. This is because those organizations that are aimed at serving them, are lacking some critical skills and lack the ability to work in an ecosystemic way which would yield higher impact. They face higher challenges with respect to older generations of entrepreneurs because they lack life experience, they generally do not have savings and money to start a business, they lack legitimacy, they lack business skills and they cannot rely on established networks.

Innovation Support Organizations (ISOs) are defined as structures where entrepreneurs and innovators find the proper space to turn their idea

¹ Among others, cfr. Antonelli A., Petruzzella D. (eds) (2021). *Innovation in the Mediterranean agro food sector. Actors, policies and prospects in a developing ecosystem*. MIP Report 2021. Valenzano: CIHEAM Bari.

into sound and sustainable businesses, by accessing the proper mix of entrepreneurship support services. An ISO is an aggregator (namely, clusters, technology parks, business incubators, technology transfer offices, seed accelerators, business angels and early-stage investors, etc.), which connects ecosystem players and enablers at local, national and international levels with the mission to foster innovative entrepreneurship. Hence, ISOs are actors of the ecosystem who have a direct support role to innovators and entrepreneurs and that provide services to enhance the chances for them to act, test and implement, allowing them to have a higher chance of them becoming the actors of change that will bring along benefits for us all.

ISOs are therefore set to put in place the Entrepreneurship Support Value Chains that are coherent with the needs of the entrepreneurs and coherent with the ecosystems where they operate. Again, this is not an easy feat, and ISOs in the Mediterranean basin suffer from a set of problems related to the economic conjuncture and the political instability in which they operate, that makes it harder for them to organize and equip themselves with the proper tools, processes, methodologies that can organically respond to the needs of younger entrepreneurs.

Youth entrepreneurship and the impact of COVID-19 in the Mediterranean region

After almost two years, the pandemic has been gradually mitigated in certain countries thanks to lockdowns and the dissemination of vaccines. However, before the crisis, millions of young people had to take in several lockdowns, supply chain disruptions, decrease of salaries and job prospects, closure of schools and universities, increasing levels of violence and stress... Even though financial support measures were taken, the challenges experienced got exacerbated by the crisis.

Difficulties in finding formal employment; gender gaps but also lack of financial support and the rigidity of administrative processes could be mentioned. They have prevented young entrepreneurs from unveiling their full potential. For example, in Egypt, second largest fastest growing startup ecosystem in MENA, with a population of more than 100M people it is essential to create new dynamics in the job market to provide enough jobs that are adapted to the skills and needs of Egyptian youth.

Youth entrepreneurship could enable youth to create their own place in the economic sector, while adding social purposes and mitigating societal and global challenges such as water management or clean energy. Moreover, creating opportunities for youth is essential to counteract social unrest and decrease the risks of radicalization in poor or excluded areas. By creating role models, it incites others which ultimately will have a positive impact on the economic growth, job innovation and creation and the development of practical and soft skills amongst the next generation.

The network

Acting upon the common will to deliver improved services to young entrepreneurs is the spring that has set in motion joint collaborations with ISOs and other international organizations, paving the way to create the Mediterranean Innovation Partnership, a network aimed at bringing opportunities to ISOs and other ecosystem players to better support youth entrepreneurship in the agri-food sector.

Established in 2016 and coordinated by CIHEAM Bari, the Mediterranean Innovation Partnership (MIP) is the first Mediterranean Network for youth entrepreneurship and technology transfer in the agrifood sector. The partnership is composed of relevant governmental bodies, Innovation Support Organizations and International Organizations operating within the

agri-food sector in Albania, Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia. At present, over 60 ISOs have become active part of the network as well as renowned international organizations like ICARDA (International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas), EMUNI (the Euro-Mediterranean University), UNIMED (Mediterranean Universities Union), BusinessMed (Union of Mediterranean Confederations of Enterprises) and INSME (International Network for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises)².

The services

Implemented by the MIP coordination team based in CIHEAM Bari, the annual action plans are jointly decided through a concerted effort with the members themselves. The participatory process that takes place annually has resulted in the establishment of actions that are geared towards knowledge creation, capacity building and networking. Specifically, the following actions are currently being undertaken:

The Mediterranean Innovation and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems' Observatory

The MIP coordination team has launched the MIP Observatory on Youth Entrepreneurship in the agri-food sector as a means for gathering, analyzing and reporting on data and trends about the main features characterizing youth empowerment in fragile and vulnerable areas of the Mediterranean region. This activity will allow the MIP to be most effective in the delivery of its services and to better contribute to the development of the regional entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystems. Through the Observatory, the MIP has the opportunity to understand the state of art of the ISOs in the MIP countries and to dress a list of capacity building, networking and cooperation actions aiming at supporting youth entrepreneurship. It is a very important tool, gathering the strong and weak points in the MIP

countries necessary to dress the action plan aiming to answer the ISOs requests. The main output of the Observatory is the annual report on Youth Entrepreneurship, which analyses the trends of the entrepreneurial ecosystems in the MIP Countries.

Capacity building

As expressed before, ISOs in the MIP countries have a need to strengthen their operations of entrepreneurial support. Therefore, the MIP network has set up a capacity-building center that supports the qualification of ISOs through the deployment of online and offline knowledge-building actions. These activities have the goal to empower ISOs to enhance local entrepreneurial mindset and culture, which is the primary basis to foster the creation and the growth of enterprises. Capacity building is realized through the deployment of training programs for ISO managers and staff members, and through the organization of the MIP Web Academy, a set of webinars geared towards transferring global best practices in the field.

Entrepreneurial ecosystem empowerment

The coordination effort necessary to ensure that regional and local ecosystems are empowered and functioning in support of the development of the private sector needs to take into account the proximity and localization factors. Indeed, although different ecosystems may present similar challenges, the organization of the local players follows different rules, which are dictated by the economic, political and cultural statuses of the places where they are embedded. The MIP network acknowledges therefore the fact that while some services can be designed to respond to common needs, others need to be tailored to specific territories and countries. To this end, the MIP network organizes bespoke country meetings aimed at strengthening the local system

² To find the complete list of MIP members, please visit mip.iamb.it

at regional and local levels and at creating the opportunity for dialogue among the innovation actors/players.

Collaborative projects

Finding opportunities to collaborate among the ISO members is vital to sustain the network and to actively provide means for transformation of the local ecosystems to enhance their qualitative levels of support to the young entrepreneurs of the Mediterranean Basin. To this end, the MIP coordination team is heavily engaged in working with its members to design, apply and run projects that focus on the creation and development of ISOs and on the establishment of networking opportunities that may have an impact on the growth of companies.

What's next?

The MIP network is a new actor, but it springs from decades of activities that CIHEAM Bari has been implementing in the Mediterranean region. Over these years, CIHEAM Bari has assessed repeatedly the need expressed by the local ecosystem players to be more open towards their neighboring partners and to gain that level of mutual trust that would allow them to increase their visibility and the chances of success for innovators and entrepreneurs. The key word in this sentence is "Trust". Without trust, no partnership will be impactful and successful. By implementing the activities decided in a participating way, the MIP network aims at establishing trust, and from there spinning out opportunities for growth for both, the ISOs and the entrepreneurs they serve.

The MIP Network is an open network. A network that is willing to engage with members and outsiders to establish trust, opportunities and growth. A network that you can easily join and to which you and your organization can contribute to shaping by providing inputs and by contributing to the constant dialogue that ensues among all the members. To join, just get in contact with us.

Annarita Antonelli, holds the University Degree in Economics and a Master of Science in Agrofood Economics and Agricultural Policies obtained at IAMM of Montpellier (France). Since 1997, she is involved, as a consultant, in CIHEAM Bari activities and cooperation projects in Mediterranean and African countries, focusing on rural development strategies, territorial development, enhancement of market linkages of smallholders, and vulnerable groups' inclusion in rural areas. At present, her research interests comprise social innovation in agriculture and more generally innovation and knowledge transfer ecosystem, capacity building and developing tools for the inclusion of marginalized groups in governance of food and agricultural policies. She is also engaged in setting up supporting measures for favouring enterprise culture among young people, especially in rural contexts and in the agrifood sector.

Giordano Dichteri is a private sector development expert with wide experience in designing and sustaining innovation and entrepreneurship support organizations worldwide. He is the founder of the consulting firm H&D Partners and member of the MIP coordination team since 2021. A trainer, coach and networker by vocation he has dedicated his career to support regions in enabling and enhancing entrepreneurial ecosystems and in providing support to allow businesses to grow and succeed.

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