



Innovation and networks in rural areas. An analysis from European innovative projects



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A B S T R A C T

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Innovation is a central factor for the development of rural areas, both in terms of diversification and increased competitiveness, also related to new structures of governance. The creation, adoption or adaptation of innovations is particularly complex, requiring the right combination of local knowledge (often tacit and implicit) with expert knowledge (often more explicit and formalised), as well as the support of extensive networks.

This paper analyses a number of innovation projects in several European rural areas, through the data collected via in-depth interviews. It examines the projects' contributions and the role played by stakeholders in each stage of the projects. On the one hand, some findings suggest that innovation is particularly common in food production, as well as in the environmental and energy sectors. On the other hand, these projects tend to rely more heavily on large networks, in which the presence of public actors is often critical.

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1. Introduction and main aims

The present work aims at examining the role played by different actors (public and private) in the launching, implementation and development of innovative projects in rural areas through the analysis of a number of case studies selected with a cross-European approach. In order to do this we will study which internal features of the projects, analysed in terms of actors, organisations and processes, explain the success of innovative projects. Particular attention is paid to the conditions responsible for the eventual success or failure of the prevalent innovation system (as shown by the case studies).

Innovative projects in rural areas are not isolated initiatives. They are part of the wider global processes involved in economic and social development (Ward and Brown, 2009). Development depends on the combination of a number of factors. Following Marshall, factors such as 'organisation' and 'knowledge' are often considered more relevant than traditional production factors such as land, labour and capital. These factors are at the base of the local external economies which, in turn, define the socio-economic dynamics of local systems, to a large extent through the creation, adoption, development or introduction of innovations in local

productive – and innovative – systems (Lundvall, 1992; Lundvall et al., 2009).

Other factors are equally important for the dynamics of local systems, for example geographical and environmental considerations, available resources (especially those with a strategic character, both physical and institutional), social capital (networks of social, economic and/or institutional actors and their strategies, networks of relationships both within the region and with the outside), and the organisational structures created by the socio-economic actors for regional development (Hermans et al., 2002).

Social, economic and institutional actors play a key strategic role in the dynamics of local systems by prompting and articulating development processes or by combining available resources in one way or another. In addition, they determine the framework for development policies and institutional systems, the mechanisms to improve the transfer of knowledge and the implementation of innovation towards territorial development (for example, through the implementation of their own projects) (Kangasharju and Nijkamp, 2001; Bruckmeier and Tovey, 2008; Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008; Buciega et al., 2010).

Socio-economic actors play a crucial role in economic and social development. This is particularly true for rural areas, because the socio-economic context is often characterised by a very limited access to resources (physical, human and financial). In addition, the performance of local networks depends to an extent on the degree of articulation between their territories and their wider region. Finally, networks of local actors also play a key role in mobilising

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resources (local or external) for the development, adoption and implementation of different types of innovation in the productive system of rural areas. In order to make this possible, the system set by actors must in itself be innovative. In other words, it is often necessary that actors start-up an innovative system for mutual interaction, but this in itself is not sufficient enough to push towards the creation of innovative productive systems capable of generating employment and wealth.

The main aim of this paper is to address the role played by actors in rural areas, by providing an initial overview of innovative projects arising from local innovation systems and the importance of networks. The key elements for our theoretical framework are presented in Section 2, with special regard to the creation, development and consolidation of actors' networks, and their integration into local innovation systems. As we shall see, these local innovation systems are the optimum framework for efficient development and the best performance of the actors' networks in the promotion of innovation in rural areas. We also introduce some key concepts, such as the importance of knowledge transfer through these actors' networks.

Section 3 briefly presents the methodology followed for the analysis of the case studies. We shall present some ideas which, arising from the analysis of social networks, will guide us in the study of the actors' role. In spite of the difficulties, as we shall see in Section 4, it has been possible to collect sufficient useful information to gain a global insight into the structure of the actors' systems in several case studies. Section 4 presents the main results and their discussion, including the characterisation of case studies in terms of activity's type; the time-scale of projects; the role of individual factors and knowledge transfer in the development of projects; as well as the role played by funding and other non-economic factors, including their impact in aspects such as job creation, job quality, knowledge transfer and so on.

Section 5 presents the analysis and discussion of the role played by actors in these innovative initiatives (stressing the key role played by the public actors and their support during the initial stages of developing innovative projects), a characterisation of actors' networks through the analysis of their growth during the implementation and development of the project, the interaction and interdependence between actors, and the impact of the project on them. We also include an example of an innovative project. Section 6 summarises the main conclusions.

2. Theoretical framework: from local innovation systems to actors' networks

2.1. Innovation systems, knowledge, actors and networks

We define an 'innovation system' as the group of elements which, by themselves and via mutual interaction, have an effect on the introduction, the adoption and the development of different types of innovation at a given spatial scale (local, regional, national or international). The production and transference of knowledge, along with the position and strategies followed by the actors participating in the innovation system, play a central role (Mothe and Paquet, 1998; Cowan, 2005; Asheim et al., 2011). In fact, actors appear as a crucial element in the four pillars on which innovation rests, i.e. firms, framework (including new governance models based on the cooperation between private and public actors), technological and educational institutions.

Local context is an essential factor in innovation; this includes geographical proximity (which seems to be increasingly less significant) and institutional proximity (always bearing in mind all the actors involved in the process), which is becoming increasingly critical for innovation at the local scale (Tremblay et al., 2003;

Keune et al., 2004; Young, 2006). In this sense, the need of a successful combination of innovation, organisation and territory has already been pointed out (Storper, 1995, 1996; Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008). Because putting actors together in a given geographical space is not enough (Markusen, 2000), the creation, development and/or consolidation of networks for their interaction become crucial. These networks, which must act as the foundations of innovation systems, should combine local and non-local scales, and private and public organisations. In this regard, innovation systems tend to be territorially based, collective learning systems in which innovation and knowledge networks play a fundamental role (Asheim et al., 2011).

Innovation at the local level partly refers to the dynamics of local knowledge and to the ways in which non-local knowledge is transferred to local systems: 'Innovations occur if actors combine knowledge they have at their disposal or if they use knowledge they gather from other resources' (Dammers, 1999). Innovation, however, is not a linear process arising from formal knowledge, but a social process involving a multitude of actors and their formal and informal relationships (Camagni, 1991), in which the role played by each of them depends on social, institutional and even personal variables. Thus it is not enough to detect some level of innovation in an area or case study without also understanding the social process associated with local innovation systems (Waters-Bayer et al., 2006). In this social process the role of actors at the local level is very important since they tend to impose their notions of, for example, rurality (Murdoch and Pratt, 1993), which could involve a different balance of power in the management of the processes of change (Lawrence, 1997). Local elites, as key actors for the local economy, also possess some degree of control over knowledge (Ward and Jones, 1999); their influence in decision making has already been analysed in certain Spanish rural areas (Esparcia, 2010). In general, we may say that local (and regional) actors are not a passive, but a very active element in the governance of territorial innovation systems (Guillaume and Doloreux, 2011).

The competitiveness of a region could be directly influenced by the local actors' ability to generate, access, understand and transform knowledge and information based on collective and interactive learning (Maillat and Kébir, 1998; Camagni and Capello, 2002; Asheim and Gertler, 2005; Niosi, 2010). This involves internal as well as external social networks. The role of local actors has been analysed in several works, which also explain the relationship between innovation processes and the dissemination of knowledge as the innovative 'milieu' (Camagni, 1991, 2003; Crevoisier, 2004), systems of innovation at the national and regional scales (Cooke, 1998; Lundvall et al., 2002; Malerba, 2002, 2010), and the Triple Helix (Leydesdorff, 2000; Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz, 2000; Leydesdorff, 2005; Viale, and Pozzali, 2010). Two key elements stand out in all these models: networking and multilevel governance (control of the processes of generation and dissemination of knowledge), whose close relationship is determinant for the evolution of innovation systems. In this context, the crucial importance of the actors' network capacity to build a local system permeable to innovations becomes clear (Cappellin, 1998, 2000, 2007). At the same time different actors at different scales are responsible for developing those critical interactive processes of promoting, creating and/or managing the formal and tacit knowledge needed for the good performance of local systems and especially by processes involving innovations in the local economy (Rubenson and Schuetze, 2000; Gertler, 2003). Trust, friendship, solidarity, leadership and so on, are key elements for a solid social capital supporting networking processes and territorial governance, the two critical components for the creation and/or adoption of innovations by the local system (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008).

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