https://doi.org/10.31410/ERAZ.2024.553

Innovation in the Marche Region's Tourism Sector: The Case of Inside Marche Live

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Received: August 27, 2024
Accepted: December 30, 2024
Published: April 5, 2025

Keywords:
Business models in tourism;
Network of tourism businesses;
Impact indicators

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Abstract: *The Marche region is situated in what is known as the Third Italy, right at the heart of the Italian Peninsula. This geographical area has traditionally served as an incubator for entrepreneurship within the framework of the industrial district model. The economy continues to rely heavily on manufacturing for export purposes. The tourism sector, while predominantly characterized by family tourism along the Adriatic Sea coast, has also seen some emerging activities in farm and rural tourism in the inland areas. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 unexpectedly catalyzed local initiatives among tourism operators. The halt in economic activity provided an opportunity for approximately thirty companies to utilize their newfound free time to devise a new model for collective cooperative tourist offerings. The work studies the Inside Marche Live initiative developed by tour operators with the aim of creating a network of tourism businesses to promote inbound tourism in the Marche region and facilitate outbound tourism by Italians. In particular, the work delves into the analysis of this initiative as a relevant case study in terms of strategic collaboration and plural resilience in tourism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Marche region is located in Central Italy, in the area that Bagnasco (1977) calls "Third Italy" or "North-East-Center". This area, between the industrialized Northwest and the less developed South of Italy, sees many SMEs clustered in specialized industrial districts (Corinto & Curzi, 2017; Dunford & Greco, 2005). On the one hand, the Marche region expresses economic development linked to numerous industrial districts spread throughout the territory (Becattini, 1987; 1990; Fuà & Zacchia, 1983; Fuà, 1988); on the other hand, it largely presents rural dimensions and related sociocultural elements (Anselmi, 1990). Thus, a socioeconomic pattern emerges that combines high levels of both material and immaterial well-being (Censis, 2002).

Becattini (1987, 1990) defines light industrialization as the main feature of Central Italy's development, with an intense presence of SMEs spread throughout the region and often agglomerated in industrial districts. Scholars have since long underlined that the origins of these districts lie in a combination of urban and rural values (among others, Becattini, 1987; Becattini et al., 2001; Fuà, 1988). Indeed, in the Marche region, family businesses often manage both manufacturing enterprises and agriculture. According to Conti (1996), the limited average size of urban centers is an expression of a society in which urban residents have long based their way of life on close contact with the nearby countryside. Tourism activities are another important factor in regional development. They are intensively concentrated along the Adriatic Sea coast. Consequently, in recent times, it has been the area of agritourism and rural tourism that has expressed significant

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expansions in offer capacity, in a framework of integration between agriculture and non-agricultural industry (Corinto & Curzi, 2017; Corinto, 2014; Salizzoni, 2012).

The region's economic environment continues to be dynamic, but significant changes in consumption trends worldwide, global crises and pervasively impactful geopolitical phenomena pose crucial challenges for public and private players. As a result, there is an emerging need for new strategies, on multiple levels, especially in terms of market positioning, resource attraction, risk management and partnership development. It is well known how, during the dramatic crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many sectors – including tourism – came to a standstill. The most fragile enterprises painfully exited the market, overall generating a huge impact not only economically but also socially. Other enterprises managed to keep going and, among them, some used the halting period to reflect on how to deal with the situation by developing strategic and resilience-oriented thinking, based on a new awareness of risk scenarios. In the dramatic standstill, some tourism operators in the Marche region took the opportunity to share such reflection, leading to the development of a new model of collaborative tourism offerings within the Inside Marche Live association.

The work presents an analysis of this initiative, undertaken to establish a network of tourism businesses capable of promoting inbound tourism and facilitating outbound tourism for all Italians, not just Marche residents. The initiative, the first of its kind within the local private tourism sector, has garnered attention from the regional administration and is expected to serve as an important example for future advancements in the regional tourism sector. The Inside Marche Live association is now tasked with coordinating thousands of tourist activities, expanding the number of partners, improving the quality of offerings, certifying them, fostering relationships with public bodies, and brainstorming innovations for the tourism sector. The work aims to give voice to this case of strategic collaboration, in order to contribute to the understanding of the factors that, in tourism, lead bottom-up aggregative processes and enable the evolution of collaborative contexts toward cross-sector profit-nonprofit-public interactions oriented to the co-creation of plural value.

2. THEORETICAL CONTEXT AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As early as 2000, Bramwell and Lane (2000) emphasized the growing awareness about the relevance of involving a wide range of stakeholders in tourism planning and management. For collaboration to take place, there needs to be stakeholder involvement developed through processes of interaction, within a context of shared references by the parties. In the effective definition provided by Wood and Gray, "collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain" (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 146). According to this definition, the development of collaboration requires the convergence of several elements: the existence of a specific problem area; orientation of each actor to the problem area; spontaneity of the individual's aggregative drive; interplay between actors according to a framework of shared references; vision toward evolutionary outcomes; and plural dynamism, given that true collaboration never represents an empty box but always involves actions and decisions aimed at evolving the problem area according to predefined objectives (Wood & Gray, 1991, pp. 146-149). Although in tourism studies the centrality of collaboration issues has emerged with great prominence over time, in practice one still observes (beyond mere intentions and statements of aggregation) widespread contexts characterized by enormous opportunities for cohesion and convergence and, at the same time, by difficulties of coordination and substantial fragmentation. Thus, the need to better understand what fosters and hinders the creation and development of collaborative networks emerges strongly.

Conceptually, there is a broad consensus on the importance of collaboration. However, it is necessary to extend the areas of empirical investigation to capture what, in practice, drives the players out of the confines of their own business to operate as parts of a network and, at a high level, to operate in the perspective of a value proposition of public relevance – which means, in the context considered here, in the perspective of territorial tourism development. It is very important, as pointed out by Hall (1999), to recognize the need for further studies regarding the implications of networks in terms of public interest and public policy dimensions. The issue of balancing interests on multiple levels appears as particularly pivotal. As indicated by Thomson and Perry (2006, p. 26), it is a matter, for the parties and the network, of effectively managing the tension between "self-interest" and "collective interest" (Thomson & Perry, 2006, p. 26). Successful collaboration requires the achievement of a very delicate and dynamic equilibrium between individual needs, of the participants, and plural needs, of the network. It is not easy for the different actors to maintain constant and adequate focus on both dimensions, to make a win-win approach habitual and pervasive, and to nurture a plural projection toward shared evolutionary outcomes (Giusepponi, 2021).

A crisis emerges in studies as an event that can trigger the initiation or intense evolution of a collaboration, seeking ways out, new arrangements, and forms of resilience. Crisis puts different actors in front of new risk scenarios that lead them to strongly perceive the fragility of individuality and to try to overcome uncertainty in the strength of unity (Azadegan & Dooley, 2021). A transformative approach is sought in the crisis, an approach addressed to "resilience thinking" (Sakurai & Chughtai, 2020, p. 586). The success of the aggregative drive is always fostered by the quality and scope of leadership resources available. Many scholars focus on these resources as key elements in promoting and nurturing collaborative processes (among others, Ansell & Gash, 2012; Huxham & Vangen, 2000; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Mandell & Keast, 2009). Necessarily, especially in crisis conditions, leadership in collaborative contexts can only be plural and proactive (Wooten & James, 2008; Walsh, 1995; Weick, 1988). Inclusive leadership is crucial both to make differences among actors a strength of the network and to enable timely processes for identifying and resolving any conflicts arising from the different positions of actors. Gray, leveraging precisely the valorization of differences, defines collaboration "a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can explore constructively their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible" (Gray, 1989, p. 5).

Responding to the need for empirical investigations in the field under consideration, this work delves into the analysis of a specific case of collaboration in tourism. This case is significant for addressing, on this topic, issues mainly related to: crises as events triggering the impetus toward collaboration; awareness of context risks and opportunities, and orientation toward collaboration; needs and risks of multi-level interest composition; role of leadership and other factors in the equilibrium of collaboration.

This study represents only a contribution, in response to a call for research that should be considered permanent given the enormous dynamism and multifaceted nature of the theme in empirical contextualizations. Within the limits of its scope of analysis, the study allows for immersion in an emblematic experience and is designed for debate, reflection, and comparison with other cross-sections of reality.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The Marche region has a high potential to attract tourists – due to a wide and varied natural, cultural, artistic and historical heritage – but is still far from the levels of tourism observed in other

Italian regions and is considered by many as largely unexplored. Building on this observation, the work is developed around questions about bottom-up development trajectories of regional tourism and, in particular, about the potential of collaboration between private operators – not only as a facilitating factor for the actions of operators themselves but also as a driver of regional tourism development.

With the aim of formulating empirically founded responses to these questions, the work focuses on investigating the Inside Marche Live initiative as an expressive case study of aggregative dimensions in the observed region, thus as a relevant case study from an exploratory perspective, within a field of research that still lacks defined boundaries (Yin, 1994, 2009; Stake, 1995; Zainal, 2007). In this perspective, indeed, the case study is a powerful means of investigating "a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). To delve into the specific context and significance of Inside Marche Live, board members of the association were involved as experts through interviews and the content they expressed was processed on the basis of a qualitative content analysis in order to extract meanings (Schreier, 2012; Khan & VanWynsberghe, 2008).

Specifically, four association board members were interviewed between October 2023 and May 2024, as experts on the purpose, role and impact of Inside Marche Live. The Authors sincerely thank the board members interviewed: Marco Cadeddu *(Esatourgroup)*, Renzo Fazi *(Break in Italy)*, Emanuele Piunti *(Movimondo)*, Stefania Stefanelli *(Greenwich Viaggi Turismo).* They, by generously sharing their experiences and reflections, provided important resources and insights to increase knowledge on the topic analyzed here. The two authors conducted together all four interviews. Each interview lasted about thirty minutes. The interviewees are referred to here as board member A, board member B, board member C, board member D according to the time order of their interviews, an order intentionally not mentioned here.

The interviews, which were individually developed in-depth, efficiently gathered content of high significance (Berry, 1999). Kvale's method has been adopted, by posing the interview as a free dialogue based on empathy, with development directed by the researcher-interviewer, consistent with the set and emergent cognitive goals (Kvale, 2006). To address the research objectives and formulate coherent responses, the Authors processed data and information collected through multiple sources, following the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). These sources not only include direct interviews, but also previous studies, media articles, reports on regional tourism, and reflections shared by the authors. All these sources were used to better understand and enhance the case study, which was discussed as an emblematic cross-section of reality and "not as a local application of an abstract model" (Anderson et al., 2003, p. 9).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION: INSIGHTS FOR REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE

4.1. Context and Ongoing Paradigm Shift

The contents of the interviews reveal a context of profound change that has fostered collaborative processes within the association and has led to an evolution of the association's strategic orientation. On the one hand, the positive trend of incoming tourism in the Marche region (thus internationalization of regional tourism) is underlined. In particular, board member C focuses on how incoming tourism has grown in recent years, and on how it represents a sector with great value in terms of regional economic development and convergence of value to the region. She/he

notes the need to give recognition to incoming tourism in the Marche region and to support related operators as strategic to the area. She/he highlights that in Italy incoming tourists are massively directed to very classic markets and that more public efforts to support flows toward "Italy to discover" would be desirable.

In the perspective of effective incoming management, emphasis is placed on the centrality of unity among operators. For example, board member D argues that this unity is crucial to achieving important results, considering the small size of operators in this attractive regional context. Specifically, she/he says that in an international context, the Marche region is touristically young and unstructured, and that therefore proposing an organization capable of uniting experienced and specialized professionals makes the tourism offer definitely attractive and well implemented.

The pandemic period is identified as a phase of radical paradigm shift and reinforced perception of the need for collaboration both among private operators and between private operators and public institutions. In this regard, board member A vividly recalls that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all tourism businesses were halted, facing a very particular moment in global history. She/he notes how the pandemic, in all its dramatic scenario and in the operational standstill it generated, freed up time for reasoning, for dialogue. She/he highlights that some tourism operators have thus begun to meet online frequently, to discuss with each other, to try to protect themselves, to engage in dialogue with public institutions, in the uncertainty of such a difficult moment. Furthermore, she/he notes that the need to collaborate was obviously there also pre-pandemic, but before people could not find the time to engage in collaboration because they were overwhelmed by everyday commitments. Before there was a physical office approach, then the pandemic radically changed the way of working. Digitalization has certainly expanded opportunities to develop and nurture relationships and to work with stakeholders in all parts of the world.

Similarly, board member B remembers the halt in business caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, recalling that in February 2020, with the closure and cancellation of bookings, the industry came to a complete standstill. Subsequently, some tourism operators in the Marche region met online and decided to collaborate. They thus obtained positive feedback from the Region, which was very close to the operators and supported them with important aids, in addition to the national ones. It was at this stage that Inside Marche Live's mission strongly evolved in the sense of a common shared commitment and thus of territorial promotion; the association then advanced in that direction by creating the website and curating through social media important moments of debate.

4.2. Evolving Strategic Orientation of the Association

As stated in the association's website, «Inside Marche basically aims to contribute to the enhancement of the Marche region, from a tourism perspective and beyond, through the knowledge, communication, promotion and marketing of individual and specific territorial peculiarities» (Inside Marche Live, 2024a). This is a mission that also emerges highly from the interviews. Board member D first precisely emphasizes the orientation of Inside Marche Live toward developing greater competitiveness for tourism in the Marche region. She/he highlights how the association is strongly geared to provide support so that this region fully expresses all that it can offer. From the words of board member A, vision and enthusiasm emerge regarding the fundamental contribution that the association can give in a relational, collaborative and innovative perspective. She/he emphasizes how the orientation toward developing empathy and trust among actors is crucial and highlights that today the approach to service has changed a lot, but the need to devote attention and time to

the development of empathy remains. In particular, she/he emphasizes that extra attention makes a difference in strengthening relationships and that passion is key in this work.

Board member B specifically delves into how the association's aims have evolved. In particular, she/he focuses on the evolution that occurred in 2020, during the pandemic period, pointing out that the association, which began with union purposes, is now geared toward territorial promotion. In fact, as stated on the association's website, Inside Marche Live, which was born in the year 2015 with the purpose of category and labor protection, «to date, [...] contributes to the sociocultural development and enhancement of individual and specific territorial peculiarities through activities of: collaboration, promotion, marketing» (Inside Marche Live, 2024b).

Fundamentally, the need to develop a system of relationships, debate, and coordination among tourism operators emerges strongly, supporting an increasingly broad, consolidated and cohesive, and therefore an increasingly relevant network, both in terms of global value creation for the territory and as a reference for public institutions. Board member C focuses on what, through the operators, Inside Marche Live can do for the territory. She/he talks, for example, about opportunities for developing road tours and presentations of the Marche region. She/he also highlights, however, how getting the different actors to agree is not easy. In this regard, She/he believes that the regional public institution can play an important role in promoting and supporting the aggregative initiatives of operators.

Therefore, the cohesion and the terrain for discussion enabled by Inside Marche Live appear to be oriented both toward the objectives of supporting tourism operators and toward objectives of enhancing the territory from a tourism perspective. These are closely interconnected spheres, in the context of a win-win approach. Moreover, the contents of the interviews show how, for aggregation to succeed, collaboration with public institutions is indispensable in both perspectives, as they are inescapably interconnected.

4.3. Public-private Collaboration in Tourism

From the contents of the interviews, it emerges how, for successful aggregation, collaboration with public institutions is indispensable in both of the interrelated perspectives indicated above (regarding support for tourism operators and enhancement of the territory). Inside Marche Live certainly turns out to be both a bottom-up initiative and a reality that needs the involvement of public institutions in order to fully express itself.

Board member A reflects on how it might seem that enterprises are slightly waiting for what the regional public institution does and points out, «we have acted regardless, we believe in developing something that creates value; however, we need public support to be able to make a contribution, we need a favorable overall environment for which the public institution is fundamental».

Likewise, board member D believes that enhancing the offer – in the qualitative and quantitative aspects – and strengthening the relationship with public administrators represent absolutely complementary dimensions. She/he focuses on the need for Inside Marche Live to continuously interface itself with the public administration and the need to always work in a coordinated and timely way in order to make the right choices. She/he reflects on how operators have tight time frames (even small changes need to be handled right away), and at the same time need to take into account the guidelines and timelines set by the public administration, which are quite difficult for those who have to act in the field as quickly as possible. Therefore, she/he believes that coordination

and collaboration with the Region and the Municipalities, as public bodies, are fundamental and are to be actively sought out because all operate with difficulty in fragmentation.

The relevance of public-private collaboration is considered not only from the perspective of Inside Marche Live but also from the perspective of the public side. In this regard, board member B notes how tourism is evolving rapidly and how public entities need to approach new tourism trends in a timely manner. She/he then focuses on the association's connection with public institutions, in particular with the Region, illustrating how essential this connection is both for coordinating activities in the territory (for example, promotional activities) and for having the resources and space needed for incisive interventions. However, she/he believes that these are not easy relationships, not only because the actors obviously cannot agree on everything, but also because the association is not always involved in the occasions for concertation in which it would like to participate, believing that it can bring important added value. Analogously, board member C focuses on the desirability and need for a unified public-private collaboration strategy, pointing out, however, that coordination between actors is often difficult even in the short term.

4.4. Opportunities and Success Profiles

Fundamentally, the importance of relationships in the perspective of offering high-quality services and operating successfully in the tourism sector is widely emphasized. The interviews reveal the relevance attributed to Inside Marche Live in developing networks and innovation, public-private collaboration, to steer regional incoming tourism toward a coordinated development, favorable both for operators and in the perspective of territorial enhancement.

The pandemic period is widely recalled as a pivotal period that members directed toward a strategic unity, fundamental in the interaction with public institutions. In that phase, in which habits were completely disrupted, the associates were able to enter into new, then established, dimensions of proximity and contact between associates themselves and with other actors in the field. As highlighted by board member A, during that period, members got to appreciate how the association connects with so many stakeholders, and this prompted them to continue investing in it even when they resumed activities after the COVID-19 pandemic. Board member A highlights that, in general, the association has made it possible to shorten the distance between actors, enabling important results to be achieved, and particularly reflects on the intense promotional activities carried out in Inside Marche Live by participating in trade fairs together with the Region. «We put all our professionalism to grow the quality of tourism service in general» she/he says.

Board member C stresses that access to major European fairs and events which also have windows to foreign countries is very important for incoming tourism operators, as they must know about opportunities early on. She/he believes that collaboration in this regard is certainly strategic. More generally, she/he believes that the unity of operators allows for greater capacity for action, that more voices allow for greater incisiveness and that, therefore, Inside Marche Live represents an important interlocutor to be listened to. Similarly, board member D defines, on the whole, the picture of a reality that has been able to express an effective network and a good example of associationism, a reality recognized by the regional public institution as an important interlocutor and also rewarded with other acknowledgments at the national level (for example, on national sector newspapers). Board member B, among other aspects already mentioned above, underlines the important contribution of Inside Marche Live in the perspective of digitalization, toward an e-commerce site dedicated to Marche tourism. This is Marche Connect, a digital platform that

will include numerous tourism products concerning the Marche region (both B2B and B2C) that will be linked to the regional digital system.

4.5. Risk Factors

On this point, too, the views of the interviewees are very convergent. Risk factors are associated with the possibility of tensions among associates – due to individualistic drives that cannot be excluded a priori – and complexities of maturing the interrelationship with public actors in the perspective of a full and integrated co-creation of public-private value.

In the first regard, that is with reference to relations among members, the possibility of tensions is seen as existing but remote at present. In particular, board member D, with reference to possible risks in the life of the association, focuses on possible dimensions of individualism, because in the case of pushing the interests of one or a few to prevail, problems could obviously arise, as in any association. However, she/he points out that to date no such difficulties have arisen in Inside Marche Live, despite the increase in the number of members in recent years. She/he points out that the operators who are members of the association are very diverse and believes that this diversity has so far greatly helped the success of the association and the value of Inside Marche Live as a good example of associationism. She/he also highlights that so far the association has had very strong leadership, and the vision of having to all work together for the good of the territory and the association, regardless of the political views of individual members. Similarly, board member B, reflecting on how hard it is to develop collaboration from the bottom-up, observes in Inside Marche Live a leadership that she/he describes as very involved and effective. Board member C likewise observes that Inside Marche Live has so far internally expressed very effective leadership and a great equilibrium among participants. In the same perspective of the unified orientation, board member A remarks that risks of tension between colleagues may arise, however, she/he stresses that by taking care of respect everything proceeds for the better.

Regarding the evolution of the association toward the role of a full-fledged technical interlocutor of public institutions, in particular the regional public institution, a path is observed that has been started to date but is still largely to be covered. Board member D believes that the existence of the association is important for the regional public institution which has the possibility of relating to the most expressive interlocutor of Marche region's realities. She/he emphasizes the association has obtained important recognition from the regional public institution, which during the pandemic period provided the support strongly requested by the association itself. Moreover, at a general level, board member D believes that further steps need to be taken so that the role of Inside Marche Live can evolve toward that of a fully-fledged technical interlocutor, involved in the concertation tables to share its expertise in the perspective of creating value for regional tourism. In the same dimension, board member B considers it desirable for the association to be invited to important concertation tables, to participate in the development of plans for tourism in the regional territory. She/he believes, however, that the conditions necessary to enable the expected developments in the prospects outlined above have not yet been realized. She/he underlines that the association today has project-based relations with the regional public institution, while the main associative intent is precisely to create a stable concertation table together with public actors, trade associations, and other types of associations, in order to share a coordinated promotional plan well in advance. Also for Board member A, full public-private collaboration is certainly desirable but is not yet adequately developed, as it needs a ground of cohesive vision. Similarly, Board member C, likewise emphasizes the opportunity and need for a unified strategy of public-private collaboration, but also reflects on how coordination among actors is often difficult even in the short term.

4.6. Future Perspectives

The central role attributed to nonprofit alliance dynamics emerges, both in fostering the bottom-up process of aggregation among tourism operators and in advancing the dialogue process in the perspective of co-creating value with public institutions.

In particular, board member D considers it desirable that the collaboration expressed by Inside Marche Live will continue and strengthen and that, in an evolutionary perspective, it contributes to the organization of the territory – considering as allies all the subjects that operate in it – and to the definition of a varied and complete tourism offer, so as to boost the movement of tourists in the Marche region, in every sphere – also trying to develop collaboration with trade associations such as Chamber of Commerce.

Similarly, board Member B believes that it is also very important to extend consultation among the different professional categories involved in tourism, and to promote synergies through coordination because, in the interaction with politics and public administrators, the more voices the better. As indicated above, she/he thinks that it is very demanding to develop collaboration from the bottom, between operators, and between associations; however, she/he believes that Inside Marche Live, with the effective leadership it expresses, could play a key role in fostering such collaboration. Analogously, reflecting from an evolutionary perspective, board member C focuses precisely on the central role of associationism. On the one hand, she/he observes that Inside Marche Live has so far expressed very effective leadership internally and a great equilibrium among participants – as pointed out above. On the other hand, she/he reflects on the need to take further steps toward major projects, the implementation of which requires significant human and financial resources. As indicated by board member A, the development of a cohesive vision is a central step in fostering synergies between actors and public-private collaboration. Furthermore, she/he believes that universities can play an important role in helping to develop such a vision and public-private conjunction.

5. CONCLUSION

As indicated above, the analyzed case study is significant in addressing relevant issues concerning the topic of bottom-up collaborative processes that drive cross-sector profit-nonprofit-public interactions oriented toward the co-creation of collective value in tourism.

It is very interesting to observe how the *crisis* due to the pandemic, with the paradigm shift it generated globally, created the conditions for enhancing the impetus toward collaboration. Crisis emerges as a disruptive event that triggers the drive for collaboration and lead to the evolution of the association's strategic orientation. However, it should be considered that it was possible to exert this cohesive momentum due to a pre-existing terrain of contact, communication and exchange among tourism operators, a terrain that proved particularly fruitful at the time of change, providing a source of resilience.

The period of dramatic global difficulties, on the one hand, made businesses and other actors perceive, with exceptional proximity and consequent disruptive awareness, the broad and multifaceted *contextual risks* to which tourism is subjected and, on the other hand, made them realize, with extreme immediacy, the *advantages/opportunities of unity and coordination* of actors' action, against the fragility of fragmentation. In fact, a territory, in order to be recognizable and touristically attractive on a large scale – that is, in relevant socioeconomic dimensions – cannot prescind from a vision,

mission, strategy and communication converging toward a coordinated offering, designed for tourists to enable them to have complete experiences in and through the territory itself.

In the aggregative process considered here, this coordination requires multi-level interest composition concerning the following spheres of relationships (each entailing different sets of interests): among individual businesses participating in the collaboration; between individual businesses and the nonprofit context; between the nonprofit context and the public institutions involved; between individual businesses and such public institutions. This is a dynamic equilibrium, the pursuit of which may, more or less, drive toward unity and plural dimensions, depending on the space-time context in which one moves. At certain times the drive is perceived as more urgent, but it must be considered that, in order to exercise it effectively, the necessary levers must be steadily attended to. This delicate quest naturally also involves risks of tensions; however, an emphasis on ways to contain and counter them emerges from the case.

First, it emerges how crucial an *aggregative leadership* around perspectives of value co-creation is. A balanced composition of interests, in fact, can only be achieved through a deep sharing of the network vision by the actors involved, driven by the non-pressing but pervasive action that cohesive and proactive leadership can enable. Another important factor in leading a balanced composition of interests lies in the diversity among network participants, diversity understood as an element of strength, as the ability to capture different nuances of the same problem and to imagine different solutions to compare. Furthermore, it emerges that the system of values is central in originating equilibrium. These values are synthesized in the case study mainly as respect among actors, as an attitude to harmoniously reconcile the pursuit of individual value with the pursuit of collective value, to generate sociocultural and economic outcomes over the entire territory, which benefit everyone in a win-win perspective – not idealized but centered on a non-divisive concreteness.

For all actors involved, there emerges the need to be prompt, the need for constant training, in terms of communication and connection with other relevant stakeholders in the tourism system of the territory. There is a necessity for these actors – private and public – to increasingly converge toward common objectives, jointly projecting collective impacts and favorable conditions for individual operators in a coordinated plan. Advancing the networking process through public-private coordination is certainly non-banal. It requires, for both parties, openness to new approaches. However, this represents a central challenge and a potential engine of enormous growth in sociocultural and economic value for the territory.

This study provides only one contribution to the understanding of what in tourism drives bottom-up aggregative processes and enables the evolution of cross-sector collaborative contexts. Within the confines of its area of analysis, the work makes it possible to immerse oneself in a significant experience and is conceived for discussion, reflection, and comparison with other experiences. The main issues addressed through the case study and outlined in this conclusion correspond to research domains that could be usefully enriched by further contributions through insights concerning experiences of collaboration developed in other territorial contexts or in other sectors of the same territory.

Authors' contribution

This work is the result of a research project jointly undertaken by Gian Luigi Corinto (GLC) and Katia Giusepponi (KG). GLC wrote the section *1. Introduction*. KG wrote the sections: 2. *Theoretical context and conceptual framework; 5. Conclusion.* GLC and KG co-wrote the sections: *3. Research design and methods; 4. Findings and discussion: insights for reflections on the future.*

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