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Melanie Sara Palermo

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Social Capital and Engagement in Networking: the Case Study of Caseifici Agricoli Open Day

Melanie Sara Palermo

Ph.D. student in Education, Cultural Heritage and Territories, Department of Education,
Cultural Heritage and Tourism, University of Macerata, P.le Bertelli, 1, 62100, Macerata
(MC), Italy

Email: m.palermo2@unimc.it

Abstract

Considering the importance of social capital and stakeholder engagement in networking, the article analyses these aspects considering an Italian network of farms. The farms' members of "Caseifici Agricoli Open Day" (Dairy Farm Open Day) share common values and participate in the Open Day event. These companies guarantee local products and have an important role in preserving biodiversity and traditions, educating consumers, and promoting local culture. The questionnaires administered to the farms (in May 2020) show that this network is characterised by bonding social capital at the internal level and bridging and linking connectedness at the external level; however, the former aspect is indagated here. The study shows that the possibility to increase social capital is among the main reasons to enter the network and get tangible and intangible benefits, such as visibility, increased bargaining power, exchange of ideas and techniques, and get reciprocal help. The study also demonstrates that farms differently perceive their engagement in the event, which influences the outcome of the event. In conclusion, social capital is important and can be a booster for strengthening the network. Due to the main themes of sustainable practices and social capital in rural areas, the study is of great current interest.

Keywords: Social Capital, Farms, Stakeholder Engagement, Dairy Sector

Introduction

In recent years, many fields of studies have understood and analysed the value of social capital, recognising it as a booster of innovation and development at different levels (Claridge, 2018; European Commission, 2013; Hofferth and Iceland, 1998; Arrighetti et al., 2001; Sabatini, 2004; Iturrioz et al., 2015; Pretty, 2003; Rust et al., 2020). The involvement of main actors and stakeholders of communities is crucial in planning and implementing development strategies at economic, environmental, and social levels: only a sufficient stakeholder engagement can ensure that this development will occur. Assuming these facts, the study is relevant for several reasons: first of all, development is considered at different levels; then the crucial and current feature of sustainability is taken into account; moreover, the centrality of farms reveals a great care and preoccupation for the health of consumers and for the preservation of the Earth, intended as a wide set of natural resources with whom the man

interact and relates to in a reciprocal and balanced way; another aspect is the social one, in fact farms are considered as social actors rather than mere economic actors, they are seen as part of wider social networks and as interacting with other actors pursuing the same aims and scopes, that is to manufacture agri-food products in a sustainable way; finally, the network can grow only if the single farms work for the creation of several local communities of responsible consumers. This latter aspect emphasizes the role of the farms as well as those of the end users.

The aims at indagating the importance and role of social capital and stakeholder engagement in “Caseifici Agricoli Open Day” (which means “Dairy Farm Open Day”), a network of farms that wants to promote the dairy tradition and the territory through the dairy sector. The network has been chosen for its mission and the values shared by participating farms, as well as for the contribution that sustainable milk production can give in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established by Agenda 2030: small dairy farms have a crucial role in food safety, environmental protection, sustainability, social framework, and local promotion (FAO et al., 2020). Thus, the study pays attention to the issues of sustainable production and practices from a different perspective: the one of social science, to highlight the importance of social studies in sectors like business and farming. In fact, network and strong social capital may contribute to the preservation of human, social, and cultural capitals of rural areas.

Furthermore, the importance of the study resides in the fact that small dairy farms perfectly fit the current need for sustainability in nutrition, both considering the demand side, who ask for food safety, health, and good nutrition; and the point of view of policymakers: food safety is a priority for the World Health Organization (WHO) and it is also part of SDGs by the United Nations (UN); the problems of malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies, and overweight and obesity should be overcome through the promotion of healthy lifestyles denoted by the use of natural ingredients, both in high-income and middle/low-income countries (FAO, 2016, 2017; FAO et al., 2020). At this regard, building a sort of “food community” characterised by a strong connection between farmers and consumers, thus the presence of “relational goods” (Fonte, 2010), can have great importance.

In addition, the dairy sector is among the leading sub-sector of the primary one: milk production has increased worldwide in the last years (852 million tonnes in 2019, +1.4% from 2018) (FAO, 2020); Europe is among the main milk and cheese producers, confirmed by the high number of PDO (Protected Designation of Origin), PGI (Protected Geographical Indication), TSG (Traditional Speciality Guaranteed) products at European level: Cheese category is the second for recognised products with 191 PDOs- 50 in Italy-, 53 PGIs -9 in Italy-, and 7 TSGs (European Commission, 2020); regarding Italian TAPs (Traditional Agri-food Products) labels, 503 out of 5,266 TAP labels are cheese (MIPAAF, 2020). So, indagating the dairy sector is important to understand specific dynamics to reflect upon them and improve working and production conditions.

In conclusion, the case study investigates the social capital and the importance of stakeholder engagement in the organisation of an event promoting sustainability in food production and consumption. The research has been done through a quantitative analysis.

The paper is organised as follows: first of all, the concepts of social capital and stakeholder engagement will be outlined, then the case study “Caseifici Agricoli Open Day” will be presented, thus the methodology, and finally the results will be described and discussed.

Social Capital

As stated in the introduction, the study aims at understanding the importance of social capital in the case study.

Social capital refers to “features of social organisations, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate action and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995: 2), thus it increases the access and efficiency of information – in this process, confidence is the key because information without confidence cannot be transformed into knowledge (Fisher, 2013) - and the efficacy of taken actions, it reduces costs and encourages the cooperation necessary to create value (Fukuyama, 1995). Differently from human capital, which refers to individuals, social capital refers to relationships (Woolcock, 2001) and the resources to whom members get access by taking part in these relationships (Portes, 1998). These members may be already related or not, at this regard it is essential to remember the position of Granovetter (1973), who underlined the strength of weak ties: in fact, relationship with non-related individuals are more heterogeneous and provide more reciprocity than strong ties of kin (Hofferth and Iceland, 1998). Being formed by social relationships, social capital and its evolution are affected by time (stability and continuity), interaction (more interaction, more social capital), interdependence (level is lower if they have other sources of support), closure (unique features owned only by members) (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). Of course, in the literature also the complexity of social capital has been highlighted, such as the importance of the context and the actors involved, so their expectations and objectives (Coleman, 1988; Sabatini, 2009).

The main characteristics of social capital are presented below.

Trust

In relationships trust encourages cooperation, individuals can trust each other, thus no monitoring body is needed, and no further expenses for controlling should be paid for. On the other side, however, we have to consider the time that building trust requires (Pretty, 2003). Although many authors have tried to clarify the relationships between trust and social capital, it is still unclear, but we can say it is mutual: social capital generates trust among members, at the same time trust among them allows for the creation of social capital. For some authors, it is a source; for others, it is an outcome (Hatak et al., 2016); in other cases, trust is considered a measure of social capital (Woolcock, 2001). Moreover, trust is the element that transforms social relationships into social capital and information into knowledge (Rust et al., 2020). Because of the time needed and the engagement that trust requires, a trusting relationship should comprehend longevity, consistency, and regularity of contact (Fisher, 2013). Finally, trust is one of the key elements differentiating the ties of community and society (Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft): in the first case, we have direct relations denoted by roles, values, and beliefs based on shared experience and trust; in the second case, we find indirect relations with impersonal roles, traditional values, and less shared values (Tönnies, 1887). Depending on the level of trust, relationships can be distinguished into norm-based trust and maxim-based trust: the latter are based on trust, rather than on sanctions applied if norms are violated, and ties between components are strong (Hatak et al., 2016).

Reciprocity and Exchanges

Reciprocity increases trust and strongly contributes to the creation of maxim-based trust relationships, people are more willing to enter a network if they know the relationship is reciprocal. Exchanges are meant both as knowledge and goods (tangible and intangible

resources), this helps create a long-term commitment of people (Hatak et al., 2016; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Portes, 1998).

Common rules, norms, and sanctions

Sharing values and rules means that all the members are more committed to the mission and objective of the network. Thanks to norms, people have more confidence to enter a group because of the expectation that the others will follow the rules (Rust et al., 2020); this aspect encourages trust in the network and reciprocity.

Three dimensions shape social capital: relational, structural, and cognitive (Iturrioz et al., 2015; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). The relational dimension is composed of trust, reciprocity, commitment, and shared values, so the kind of relations people have developed; the structural dimension is the pattern of connection between actors and the configuration of linkages; the cognitive is composed of values, beliefs, common vision on benefits, the system of meaning, and expectations. The relational dimension strongly influences trust (more trust, more willingness to be engaged in social exchange), which is one of the key elements of social capital, as we have seen before.

The relations which compose the social capital can be built between similar people or not, can involve formal institutions (thus creating a hierarchy) or not: in this regard, three types of connectedness have been identified, namely bridging, bonding, and linking (Pretty, 2003).

Bonding connectedness is exclusive, it consists of relationships and solidarity between similar groups of people, henceforth it creates strong connections, fosters knowledge exchange, gives access to new markets and ideas, and creates lobby groups; bridging connectedness is inclusive, it implies a connection between diverse people, thus represents diverse interests (Arnott et al., 2021).

The main differences between bonding and bridging connectedness are summarised in the table below.

Bonding social capital	Bridging social capital
Within	Between
Intra	Inter
Exclusive	Inclusive
Closed	Open
Inward looking	Outward looking
“Getting by”	“Getting ahead”
Horizontal	Vertical
Integration	Linkage
Strong ties	Weak ties
People who are alike	People who are different
Thick trust	Thin trust
Network closure	Structural holes
Public-good model	Private-good model

Table 1: Distinctions between bonding and bridging social capital (Claridge 2018: 1)

Even if this distinction is clear from a theoretical point of view, it should not be forgotten that social relationships are very complex; thus, it is not easy to find highly pure bonding or bridging relationships, often they have some characteristics of bonding and some of bridging

connectedness (Claridge, 2018). In this regard, Geys and Murdoch (2010) considered the different connectedness that a network might present, explicitly distinguishing between internal and external relations. By integrating these approaches, they created a matrix: a network can be placed in one of the corners depending on the internal and external connectedness.

External	Bridging- Bridging	Bridging- Bonding
	Bonding- Bridging	Bonding- Bonding
	Internal	

Figure 1: Integrating internal and external approaches to bridging and bonding (Geys and Murdoch 2010: 531)

The third kind of connectedness (linking) has been introduced by Woolcock (2001) and relates to ties between individuals and groups in a hierarchical relationship. The vertical dimension is here introduced, implying the presence of formal institutions: the capacity to leverage resources, ideas, and information from them is one of the main functions of linking social capital (Woolcock, 2001), the vertical dimension implies forms of power and influence (Arnott et al., 2021).

Considering the overall complexity of social capital and the efforts that building it requires, we can state that it is an investment, thus resources and benefits must be attentively considered before entering networks. The reasons to enter a network, thus to build social capital and count on it, can be different and the context has to be considered: the reasoning “one size fits all” cannot be applied when talking about social capital (Claridge, 2018), moreover it should be considered that it is untransferable in space and time (Hatak et al., 2016).

Let's consider Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). It should be noted that they are more willing to build networks, because of economic reasons and to be more represented at a formal level, in this way it is easier to present their own needs to other economic actors, it is easier to face competition in the market, specifically considering that bigger companies have more resources (Spence and Schmidpeter, 2003). However, in most cases, the problem of SMEs owner-managers is the lack of time that impedes them to be engaged as they would like to be in order to grow and increase their competitive advantage (Spence and Schmidpeter, 2003).

Considering farmers and rural areas, social capital increases the access to information and knowledge among farmers (Fisher, 2013), it is stronger in rural communities than urban ones as interpersonal relationships are perceived as strong, as well as mutual obligations (Hofferth and Iceland, 1998). Moreover, it is an opportunity for their development (European Commission, 2013) as villages' small size encourages interpersonal relations peculiar to *Gemeinschaft*. Finally, networking allows farmers to share experience and knowledge, develop ideas to face specific common issues, and make them feel stronger because they are part of a larger unit, thus they may get an increased bargaining power (European Commission, 2013).

Stakeholder Engagement

The concept of cooperation is based on the engagement of members of a network that can be measured considering the goal, the communication, the nature of the relationship with

stakeholders, and the consequent engagement approaches (Lugt, 2005). The eight levels and their features are summarised in the table below.

Level	Goal	Communication	Nature of relationship	Engagement Approaches
Remain passive	None	None	None	Stakeholder concerns are expressed through letters, media, websites, ...
Monitor	Monitor stakeholder s' views	One-way (stakeholders -> company)	None	Media, reports via targeted interviews
Inform	Inform and/or educate stakeholder s	One-way (company -> stakeholders, no invitation to reply)	Short or long term-relationship <i>"We will keep you informed."</i>	Letters, brochures, reports, websites, conferences, speeches, press releases, media advertising, lobbying
Transact	Work together on a contractual basis (one partner directs the objectives and provides funding)	Limited two-way (setting and monitoring performance according to terms of the contract)	Set by contractual agreement. <i>"We will do what we said we would"</i>	'Public-Private partnerships', Private Finance Initiatives, Grant-making, cause-related marketing.
Consult	Get information and feedback from stakeholder s about decisions made internally.	Limited two-way (company asks questions and stakeholders answer)	Short- or long-term involvement <i>"We will keep you informed, listen to your concerns, consider your insights, and provide feedback on our decision."</i>	Surveys, focus groups, workplace assessments, one-to-one meetings, public meetings, workshops, standing stakeholder advisory forums, online feedback, and discussion.
Involve	Work with stakeholder s, understanding and considering their concerns in	Two-way or multi-way (company-stakeholders). Learning takes place on both sides, they act individually	One-off or long-term engagement. <i>"We work with you, understand your concerns, develop alternative</i>	Multi-stakeholder forums, advisory panels, consensus building processes, participatory decision making processes.

	decision making.		<i>proposals and provide feedback about how your views influenced the decision-making process"</i>	
Collaborate	Partner with or convene a network of stakeholders to develop mutually agreed solutions and a joint plan of action.	Two-way or multi-way (companies-stakeholders) Learning, negotiation, and decision-making take place on both sides, they work together.	Long-term <i>"We will look to you for direct advice and participation in finding and implementing solutions to shared challenges."</i>	Joint projects, voluntary two-party or multi-stakeholder initiatives, Partnerships.
Empower	Delegate decision-making on a particular issue to stakeholders	Stakeholders have a formal role in the governance of an organisation or decisions are delegated to them	Long-term <i>"We will implement what you decide."</i>	Integration of stakeholders into governance structure.

Table 2: Levels of stakeholders engagement (Krick et al., 2005:97)

As we can see in Table 2, the approaches change according to the level of engagement, each one having its features, thus its pros and cons. Written responses are usually characterised by low response rate but stakeholder can easily express their opinion without the need to attend meetings; telephone hotlines are a fast method to get information and solve issues, calls may also be anonymous, but it is difficult to verify the real identity of the interlocutor; one-to-one meetings offer the opportunity to get a better knowledge of stakeholders, their needs, and expectations, but they are not easy to carry on, moreover are very costly in terms of time and resources; online engagement mechanism overpasses the issues related to the distance but stakeholders should meet the technical requirements; investigating reports are demanding in terms of time and the output of the report should be very clear; in the case of focus groups representatives should be chosen carefully, they may be very useful but quite difficult to organise; public meetings are helpful for disseminating information, sharing opinions, discussing issues; surveys can be general or focused on specific issues, made through different channels; stakeholder advisory or assurance panels are suitable to address long-term issues, stakeholders can represent a group or be there as individuals; multi-

stakeholder forum can be a one-off or ongoing dialogue with different functions (simple reporting or decision making); multi-stakeholder alliances, partnerships, voluntary initiatives, joint projects need a formal structure and a governance process.

As the social capital, also for the stakeholder it is not easy to delineate a precise border between one level and the others, thus collocating a network in a precise level of engagement. In fact, several tools of engagement can be used simultaneously and the goals of the network, as well as those of the active involvement of network's components, can be multiple and diverse. Moreover, different stakeholders or members of the same network can be engaged differently. In conclusion, we can assess that there is no "one size fits all", and the perception of the engagement may also vary according to the respondents.

Case Study: Caseifici Agricoli Open Day

The network "Caseifici Agricoli Open Day" (Dairy Farms Open Day) consists of 80 farms located in Italy. These farms share common values: the respect for animals and for the environment, the practice of extensive farming and agriculture, the importance they attach to natural and artisanal production of cheese and other products, the refusal to use chemical products on their land and/ or in feeding the animals. Every year, these farms participate in the main event "Caseifici Agricoli Open Day", whose fourth edition was held in September 2021. It is the core product of the network and it lasts two days; during the Open Day farms are opened, and consumers can visit the adherent farms: they can touch the animals, know the history of the company since its foundation, see how cheese is made and live a unique and authentic experience in the rural landscapes of Italy. Besides the event, farms collaborate and exchange ideas and opinions throughout the entire year, benefitting from the tools of the network. "Caseifici Agricoli Open Day" event is held in all the farms which are part of the network: the dislocation is a key aspect of the initiative as it differentiates the Open Day from most agri-food events and fairs.

The one to get the idea of such a network and the derived event has been Eros Scarafoni, an entrepreneur and owner of Fontegranne, a dairy farm in Belmonte Piceno (Fermo Province), in the Marche region, located in the centre of Italy. Eros Scarafoni aimed at promoting the almost unknown small dairy farms located in rural and internal areas, so that consumers can discover the nearest ones, thus learning something more about the territory they live in, the rural traditions, and their culture. The network, and above all the event derived, are great opportunities for discovering, showing, knowing and tasting all together with the beauties of the everyday life of a farm.

"Caseifici Agricoli Open Day" network is coordinated and promoted by Studium Design, a graphic design agency specialised in promoting and marketing agri-food products, in collaboration with some producers' associations. All the partners aim to valorise the artisanal products made by farmers, do training for producers, and create a network among the different realities of milk transformation practiced in Italy.

Apart from the objectives listed before, "Caseifici Agricoli Open Day" network wants to actively involve people caring for environmental issues and those who are interested in knowing rural realities and the process of cheese production, to show them what is the everyday life of a dairy farm. Another aim is to create a touristic movement around the "dairy culture" promoting all the surrounding sceneries and their tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The Open Day promotes the rural landscape in its integrity as a destination of rural, culinary, cultural tourism, always considering the aspect of sustainability. Moreover, it also educates consumers on food, showing them the benefits of a short and sustainable supply

chain and allowing them to see how cheese and other products are made. The educational aspect is not to be under-evaluated: apart from safety and health issues related to the origin of food, it is important to notice that all over the world people, and mainly children, are confused about where the food comes from, in some cases, they do not even know if a specific food comes from animal or plants.

Regarding the farmhouses that can apply for it, it is needed a brief discussion about what a dairy farm is.

In this study, the focus is placed on small dairy farms, generally intended as commercial activities involved in the primary sector that produces milk and have small dimensions considering turnover and working staff. Suppose we want to have a more specific frame. In that case, we can consider at European level FACEnetwork (Farmhouse and Artisan Cheese and dairy producers European network) Association, established in 2013 to represent and defend the interests of the farmhouse and artisan cheese and dairy producers at national and European level (FACE Network, 2013). FACE network represents two types of microenterprises: farm cheese and dairy producers (at least 51% of the milk processed comes from their livestock), and artisan cheese and dairy producers (they collect milk from local farmers and process it). In both cases, their products are locally recognised as based on traditional methods; the difference is thus the origin of the milk.

If we consider the Italian legislative framework instead, it is possible to find a clear definition of the farm (art. 2555, art. 2082 c.c.), the farmer (Decreto Legislativo 29 Marzo, 2004, n. 99, 2004; Decreto Legislativo 27 Maggio 2005, n. 101, 2005), the connected activities run by farmers (R.D. 16 Marzo, 1942, n. 262, n.d.). To be considered a dairy farm, some conditions should be simultaneously present:

- it must be a small enterprise, with less than ten employees and an annual turnover lower than 2 million euros,
- it must be run by a farmer (defined by article 2135 of Civil Code),
- the farmer must pursue the agricultural activity of milk-livestock farming,
- cheeses and milk derivatives must be produced using only or mainly (at least 51%) the milk of animals grown in the farm.

As it has been underlined before, the present study relates to dairy farms that breed animals and use only its milk to produce dairy products, henceforth the product is 100% local; so it is simply not possible to talk about the dairy farm as defined by the Italian legislative framework presented, also the concept of “small” cannot be taken into consideration here.

If we consider the organisational aspects, this is a virtual network of dairy farms located in Italy. Even if the governance system is not rigid (it is not divided among specific bodies), the roles are clear and the network is successful, thanks to the communication and the strong values at its basis. All the farms have the same role: they benefit from the tools made available by the coordinators, they can take part in surveys and/ or discussion on specific themes depending on their willingness, they take part to the Open Day event. They are involved in the same way in the planning, organisation, and realisation of the event, they are free to organise their Open Day and have only to assure the minimum services requested by the organiser, that is to say, the visit to the farm and the tasting of cheeses. The participation in the network, thus in the event, can bring benefits to the farms at different levels (Moscardo, 2007):

- economic: increase of income and employment, even if occasional;
- touristic: improvement of destination image, decrease of seasonality;

- physical: construction and availability of new facilities and infrastructures, regeneration of peripheral areas;
- sociocultural: the event is a social opportunity for locals and it improves social networks;
- psychological: events may increase the sense of community and pride.

In general, events may also allow a regional community development, by enhancing skills, representing support for other regional products, and contributing to the development of partnerships.

Research Method

The research has been carried out through a questionnaire administered online to the companies of the network. Although the farms that were members of the network were 80, as the research has been carried out in May 2020, some companies still did not confirm their participation in the event, thus could not answer the questionnaire. However, 40 out of 65 companies meeting the questionnaire's criteria did it. After an initial pretesting phase, the questionnaire was administered online, mainly through self-administration; only in a few cases were questionnaires administered by phone call and/or video call. In these cases, respondents gave more detailed information and/or arguments to explain their answers; however, these details are not considered in the discussion of the results because standardisation would be compromised.

The questionnaire, mainly composed by closed questions, was divided into different sections aimed at understanding the importance that the social capital created through the network has for the farms and their engagement in the network and in the planning and organisation of the network's activities, such as the Open Day and its success.

The first aspect has been investigated by asking them which are the reasons why they took part in the network, and questions about other relationships they have developed in the years: if they participate in consultation tables, collaborate with other private actors to improve the range of products offered to customers, the link they have with the territory and other local stakeholders (private and public bodies, such as schools, universities, ...).

The second aspect has been measured through questions aimed at understanding the level of engagement perceived by companies and their involvement in planning, organising, and realising the event: they had to assess their agreement on certain statements using a Likert scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree), so that a score could be given to each assessment according to the responses. Moreover, they were asked to indicate through which channels they are involved.

For the analysis of this aspect, a strong reference has been made to the levels of stakeholder engagement individuated by Krick et. al (2005): use of tools to monitor members' satisfaction, if the company is informed about the activity of the network and it receives practical indication for the organisation of the Open Day through different channels, if it works together with the coordinators upon agreed terms, if it is asked for opinions and indications and if it is actively involved in important decision-making processes, whether companies are autonomous or not concerning some aspects of decision-making, and which tools are used to involve them in planning, organising, and realising network's activities (evaluation schedules, dedicated phone number, individual meetings, online tools favouring discussion and engagement, possibility of writing reports, participation to focus groups, public meetings, questionnaires and/ or surveys on specific themes, involvement in advisory and/or monitoring committees, discussion groups, engagement in other associations or joint projects).

Regarding the initiative's success, the main issue faced is how to measure the success of an event held in many farms located in rural areas, whose aim is not to attract visitors by far places, but mainly local visitors from near towns, provinces, and/or regions. The number of visitors has not been considered a good index to measure the success because of the following reasons: there may be a few visitors, but if they are interested in the event, they are worthier than hundreds of visitors; if they are local, it is more likely that they will become loyal consumers after the event; a few visitors transformed in "ambassadors" are more valuable than many visitors that do not care for the company, the territory, and so on. The local aspect is also linked to the concept of community and trustworthiness. Also in this case, the coefficient to measure the success has been created by their agreement or disagreement on certain statements indicating the benefits that the company gets from participating in the specific event "Caseifici Agricoli Open Day" in terms of increased incomes, customers loyalty, the motivation of company' personnel, strengthening of the brand, visibility in local, national, and international market, and protection and/or valorisation of the company's story and its heritage of knowledge.

Results and Discussion

Social capital

The results and their discussion derives from the theoretical framework outlined before, the features of the network described in the presentation of the case study, and the answers to the questionnaire.

We can assess that "Caseifici Agricoli Open Day" network is a member-focused network, characterised by relation-specific reciprocity and maxim-based trust in which the resources included are many, as well as emotional and social support.

Considering the three dimensions of social capital, this network has strong relational and cognitive dimensions: trust, reciprocity, shared valued, beliefs, and common visions are fundamental.

The outcomes of the research confirm the theoretical framework outlined before about the importance of social capital for farmers: the networks they are part of are useful as they allow farmers to be more represented at formal level, to share experience and knowledge, to develop ideas to face common issues, and to feel them stronger as they become part of a larger unit. A clear sign of intangible benefits, such as reciprocal help and support, is the continuous expression of ideas and doubts and opinions that farmers share with each other during the whole year. Moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, which has represented a period of crisis, this exchange has increased and many of them have benefitted from seeing how others were facing common difficulties in production and commercialisation of product. As the network is denoted by maxim-based trust relationships, according to the distinction made by Hatak et. al (2016), there are no monitoring bodies and no sanctions are applied if norms are violated; and relations between members are direct. Considering that building trust requires a lot of time, as well as the longevity, consistency, and regularity of contact that it needs (Fisher, 2013), it can be understood why the network is growing slowly (farms were 64 in 2018, 78 in 2019, 79 in 2020, 80 in 2021). However, many factors have had a negative impact on its growth, among these the uncertainty and the economic and social framework due to the Covid-19 pandemic in the last two years.

According to the distinction made by Pretty (2003), it can be assessed that "Caseifici Agricoli Open Day" network is characterised by bonding social capital, as only farms with specific features can enter it. Hence, ties between members are strong, the network is exclusive and

there is no vertical dimension: all the farms have the same power. Even if it may sound strange that we talk about bonding social capital in a virtual network, it is important that the participating companies strongly share the same values, beliefs, and expectations and attentively consider the features they must have to take part in the initiative. If we consider instead the integration of internal and external relationships (Geys and Murdoch, 2010), “Caseifici Agricoli Open Day” network can be considered a form of bridging and/or linking social capital: as stated in the presentation of the initiative, there are many partners (association, public institutions, universities, tourist offices, ...) that share the mission, values, and objectives of the event. Thus, the network is a bridging-bonding network if we refer to the scheme designed by Geys and Murdoch (2010) (see Figure 1).

Apart from the social capital generated by the event, many companies declared they are part of other networks with the actors of the territory: cultural institutions, wineries, schools, parks, municipalities, food associations, tourism organisations, and other companies. The reasons why they participate in these networks are several, mainly to get access to services and knowledge otherwise not available (37%), to enrich their services by those offered by local actors (37%), to help promote the territory and create a territorial brand through consultation tables (39%). Moreover, 53% of them permanently collaborate with other private actors to wide or improve the range of products offered to customers, so they collaborate with wineries, experts, restaurants, take part in events, sell experiences in other companies with whom they share values and beliefs.

The data shows the importance of social capital among the reasons to participate in the network: 53% stated they participate to get the possibility of collaborating with other companies, 79% to benefit from promotion and communication, 68% to exchange ideas and techniques with, as well as support, other farms, and 48% to help and being helped by others. In conclusion, it can be assessed that the data confirm the importance of social capital, as well as the peculiarities emerged from the short theoretical analysis about SMEs and farmers: social capital allow them to be more represented, to face competition, to get access to resources otherwise not available for them, to get an opportunity of development, to share their experience and knowledge (Fisher, 2013; Hofferth and Iceland, 1998; European Commission, 2013).

Stakeholder Engagement

A key aspect of the network is the engagement of participating farms, which helps to measure their active involvement in the network’s life and in the organisation of the event, which is the core outcome of the network.

In the questionnaire, companies had to reply to a set of questions based on the engagement approaches individuated by Krick et al (2005) (see Table 2), aimed at understanding the kind of communication between the coordinators of the event and the farms, the channels used, the nature of the relationship, thus understanding what levels of stakeholder engagement denote the network.

In reference to the engagement approaches individuated before (monitor, inform, transact, consult, involve, collaborate, empower), the questionnaires show that farmers have different perceptions, however the most assessed levels are “inform” (4.22/5), “monitor” (3.65/5), “empower” (3.4/5), “transact” (3.17/5), and “consult” (3.14/5). The levels of engagement with the lowest score are “involve” (2.68/5) and “collaborate” (2.62/5). In fact, the questionnaires showed that farmers’ satisfaction is monitored through questionnaires and interviews, they are informed about the organisation of the event and get practical

information about it, and they are asked for opinions and indications. So, they are not actively involved in decision-making processes (the active engagement got a score of 2.7/5), and the aspect of being autonomous in some aspects of decision-making got a high score (3.43/5), indagating the engagement level of "empower". In fact, the maxim-based trust relationship demands members to share common values and beliefs, but farmers are free to run their companies as it is better for them unless they violate the values of respect for the animals and environment, or the artisanal production. Moreover, let's specifically consider the event held in September. The compulsory activities, the day, the graphic style of promotional material are decided by coordinators (thus the participants do not have any decisional power on them). However, farmers are free in organising their own Open Day: they can decide which activities they want to practice, they can plan a specific program of the day, the laboratories, the prices of each activity, if they want to host experts and hold small seminars or conferences linked to nutrition and the dairy sector, and so on. The channels and engagement approaches are represented in the Figure 2 here below.

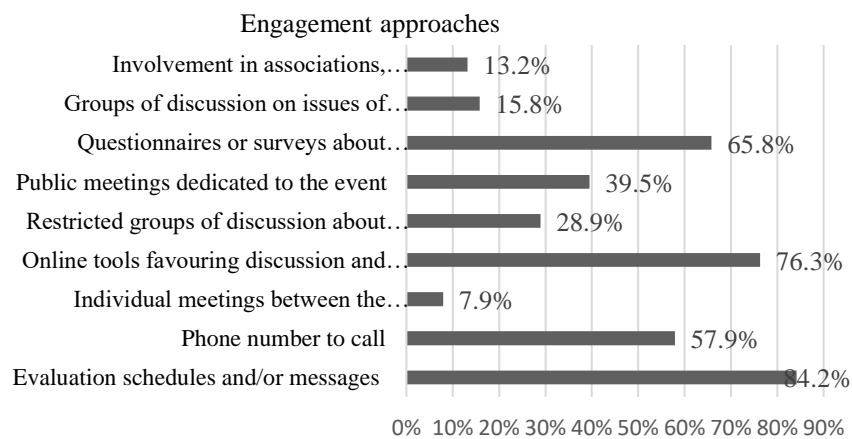


Figure 2: Engagement approaches of "Caseifici Agricoli Open Day" (respondents: 45).

Data show the direct and close relation among participating farms and between them and the coordinators: they can rely on evaluation messages, online tools, questionnaires, as well as phone calls

and public meetings. If we consider the channel and tools used and compare them to the engagement approaches reported in the previous paragraph, the related levels of engagement are those of monitor, inform, and consult.

Generally, companies believe that they are well involved and are satisfied with this level of engagement, some of them suggest creating some meetings among the participants, public presentations of the event to which public authorities can participate, and individual meetings to know the single realities and farmhouses better. Others noticed that an increased engagement would take them time, so it would not be possible for them to be part of the network anymore: as stated by Spence and Schmidpeter (2003), the problem of the SMEs is the lack of time which impede them to be engaged as they would like to be, so a too demanding network would be counterproductive, also considering that many companies are also part of other networks.

Most of them are satisfied with being informed and consulted, but it could be interesting to support them in the organisation: meetings about hospitality, organising an event, and online

marketing could be organised. Also giving them support and consultation within the dairy sector can be a further improvement: this underlies the intangible resources that may be developed. Providing them with the possibility of consultations would help them with such issues.

It is interesting to notice how, even if for the organisers the engagement of members is the same, they have different perceptions according to the value they give to the partnerships and collaborations made at the national level and their “background”. For example, the coordinators encourage companies to involve ONAF (National Organization of Cheese Tasters) in a professional tasting during the Open Day; those who followed this suggestion have a different perception of the network in which they are, compared to those who did not organise the guided tasting.

So, more than stakeholder engagement, it is interesting to observe the self-engagement of companies in the event: their engagement is related to the success, measured in the perception of benefits that the companies have from participating in the event. The benefits (and their score) are summarised in the table below.

	SCORE (out of 5)
BENEFITS TO THE COMPANY	2.66
A general increase in income due to sales of products during the year	2.06
Customers’ loyalty	2.84
Increased motivation of the company’s personnel	3.18
Strengthen of company’s brand	3.30
Increased visibility in the local market	3.12
Increased visibility in the national market	2.09
Increased visibility in the international market	1.30
Protection and/or valorisation of the company’s story and its heritage of knowledge	3.42

Table 3: Benefits that the company gets from participating in the event (respondents: 45).

The highest benefits are related to the company’s personnel, strengthening of the brand, and increased visibility, mainly concerning the local market. A key aspect is the immaterial benefit of protection and/or valorisation of the company’s story and know-how.

The relation between the coefficient of engagement (mean of the values of agreement with the engagement statements for each company) and that of success (mean of values assessed by each company for the benefits they get from participating in the event) is directly proportionated: the more companies feel involved in a network, the more they feel they get benefits from it; cooperation is not possible if it is only one-side cooperation, it should actively involve the actors that have to understand the mission of the network, its values, and core principles, and have to represent them and communicate them to final consumers.

The engagement and the benefits derived from being part of a network are like a mirror, a deep understanding of the values and the objectives make farmers feel more engaged and to their best to contribute to the network’s improvement, at the same time, the highest is their contribution, the highest is the perception of the benefits they get from being part of the network.

Conclusions

The study carried on by analysing “Caseifici Agricoli Open Day” network confirms the importance of social capital, considering rural areas and SMEs, that can access material and immaterial resources by participating in a network. At this regard, the reasons why farmers enter the network are significant: to get access to services and knowledge, to enrich their services by those offered by local actors, to help promoting the territory and creating a territorial brand through consultation tables, getting the possibility of collaborating with other companies, to exchange ideas and techniques with other farms, and to benefit from reciprocal help. These reasons show the strong immaterial benefits that entering a network can offer and the richness that increasing social capital represents for companies.

The study has demonstrated the difficulties of defining something as complex as social capital: boundaries among people are not easy to trace; however, the network studied is bonding at the internal level and bridging considering the external level. This means that members are similar, they share common values, beliefs, experiences, and are linked by strong ties, while the stakeholders and the actors with whom the network relates are diverse, so the system is open and inclusive. Moreover, the network is denoted by maxim-based trust relationships, and as building trust requires time, thus stability, continuity, and longevity, so no sanctions are applied and there is no monitoring bodies: members trust each other. This aspect may partly explain the slow growth of the network.

The analysis of the engagement, based on the seven levels distinguished by Krick et. al (2005), has shown that the perceived engagement of farms is different, but the reasons for self-engagement have not been analysed in the study. The engagement levels which got the highest score are inform, monitor, empower, and transact. This aspect is confirmed by the analysis of the media used and by comparing them to the ones peculiar of each level of engagement: questionnaires shows that the most used channels are questionnaires, surveys, evaluation schedules, and online tools to favour discussion among members.

An interesting result is that the perceived engagement is directly proportionated to the initiative's success, the latter being measured considering the benefits that the participation to the network brings to the farm.

The network “Caseifici Agricoli Open Day” shows the importance of social capital and stakeholder engagement, both national and local. Furthermore, the more the network grows, the more people will discover farms and get educated to sustainable consumption of food, to food safety, and to discover their cultural roots.

However, to have a complete framework of the social capital created by “Caseifici Agricoli Open Day”, it would be interesting to develop further research concerning the role and importance of other partners, such as institutions, schools and universities, associations, public administrations, and so on, thus indagating the vertical dimension of the linking social capital. Deepen research would also be useful considering the stakeholder engagement, both considering the resources that the network will make available as it grows and the perception of farms over time.

Finally, “Caseifici Agricoli Open Day” network may preserve and develop human, social, and cultural capitals of rural areas, considering the distribution of economic activities, the sustainable use of natural resources, and the social relations implied; all these aspects guarantee a development characterised by a relational perspective, fundamental in social capital.

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