

Can Social Innovation and Proximity Save Our Cities?: Reflections on the “Accelerator for the Local Economy” Case in Milan

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Abstract

The disruptive effects of the knowledge economy paradigm based on technological innovation and creativity is still growing: even during the pandemic crisis, creative and digital competences are sought in diversified entrepreneurial sectors, in particular commercial services that are developed in urban contexts, increasingly intertwined with craft and digital manufacturing, new media, design, art and fashion. Local administrations in Europe and in the Italian context are looking for possible development models and strategies to support the diffusion of these initiatives: fostering the development of SMEs based on proximity-based business models and showing a new sensitivity linked to the themes of social impact of their activities.

According to this background, the teaching case aims to discuss the background of an urban project that incorporates the social innovation and proximity-based entrepreneurial approach in its objectives. This case study is named “Accelerator for the local economy” (tr. *Acceleratore per l'economia di territorio*), funded by a National Government Fund¹ and promoted by the Municipality of Milan in cooperation with a group of local partners (*included the BU Luiss Hubs*).

The project has been implemented with a view to improve entrepreneurship, skills, and the creation of job opportunities in peripheral areas – a response from the Milan municipal administration in tackling urban marginality and the ongoing economic crisis resulting from the harmful effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The case presents evidence of how social innovation-based approaches in entrepreneurship can tackle the aforementioned issues through new entrepreneurial approaches and place-based strategies (Mulgan, 2019; Barca, 2019; Geometta et al., 2005). Describing how urban policies can be delivered accelerating SMEs proximity features, inspired by innovative entrepreneurial practices sought during the COVID-19 economic crisis. The discussion will benefit the description of different business use cases that we can consider as good practices in supporting businesses and workers in the long phase of a proximity-based urban transition and reorganization that the COVID-19 is still imposing.

1. <http://www.funzionepubblica.gov.it/articolo/dipartimento/19-02-2020/avviso-fondo-innovazione-sociale>

What Do We Mean By Social Innovation?

The relationship between social innovation, open innovation and entrepreneurial action has recently been conceptualized by a number of scholars. Among various streams of the debate devoted to the social innovation concept we must acknowledge how this has been prevalently debated and operationalized in the fields of social research, co-production and public management, and less applied in the stream of literature connected to intertwined aspects of entrepreneurship, social business and open innovation. The same gap is given by the nature of the social innovation processes and outcomes, often results of the work of *social impact makers* individuals, as well as groups, institutions and organizations where boundaries are often blurred and hardly defined. According to the main stream of thoughts in social innovation literature we can define it as:

- *Part of intra/entrepreneurial processes*, seeing as central both the role of entrepreneurs and organizations aimed at increasing the social impact and sustainability of production processes (Phills et al., 2008).
- *Practices for social inclusion*, formalized thanks to the representation and change of social groups through internal and external processes of organizations, movements and policies (Moulaert et al., 2010).
- *Tool for co-production/co-design of policies*, functional to the meeting of interests between different actors, to the creation of public and / or shared value between formal and informal groups, social categories and organizations, functional both for the design of policies and as an institution building tool to foster social cohesion through bottom-up approaches (Murray, Grice & Mulgan; 2009)

The diffusion of the concept of social innovation in urban development policies on a European scale has been highlighted by a series of relevant studies in the field of policy analysis (Moulaert and Mehmood, 2019) with some critical perspectives on the use of this paradigm in terms of effective governance in terms of policy implementation (Swyngedouw, 2016) Regarding the European union, the social innovation concept has also become crucial in European policy agenda setting, in such a way that social innovation has been included among the most relevant fields since the 2020 Agenda². The European Commission has included a clear reference to social innovation concept within the 2014-2020 EaSI (Employment and Social Innovation) program³, with the aim of supporting the development of adequate, accessible and efficient social protection systems and labor markets and facilitating reforms, promoting decent work and adequate working conditions, a culture of prevention for health and safety in the workplace, a healthier work-life balance, good governance for social goals, including convergence, as well as mutual learning and social innovation. The Em-

2. <https://ec.europa.eu/eu2020/pdf/COMPLET%20EN%20BARROSO%20%20%20007%20-%20Europe%202020%20-%20EN%20version.pdf>.

3. <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1081>.

ployment and Social Innovation (EaSI) program has been confirmed in the 2021-2027 ESF+ (European Social Fund) program with an endowment of 676 ML euros. Aimed at promoting a high level of sustainable and quality employment, guaranteeing adequate and dignified social protection, combating marginalization and poverty and improving working conditions.

Can Proximity Save Our Cities?

The Project and the Municipality Approach on Economic Development

The Municipality of Milan has identified the creation of an “accelerator for the local economy” as a tool to support the development or revitalisation of economic activities rooted in neighbourhoods and urban communities, with the aim of creating job and business opportunities for the middle class, as well as of engendering widespread social benefits, with particular reference to the suburbs of the city. As already presented, such policies are formulated within the national framework of the *Fondo per l’Innovazione Sociale* (Social Innovation Fund); this somehow frames the scope of possible policy choices to address the social problem in question. In this sense, the path dependency typical of policy decisions is exacerbated by the nature of public calls for tenders and calls for proposals for the assignment of resources to political and social actors that have already successfully operated in a similar domain.

The Municipality of Milan – leader of the partnership and responsible for carrying out the project – has developed significant experience in the social innovation sector in recent years, due to the development of programmatic and operational tools to respond to the emerging social needs of the urban community.

In particular, the *Economic Innovation and Business Support Department* has introduced a series of initiatives based on the combination of innovation and social inclusion aimed, directly or indirectly, at the most fragile segments of the population and / or the most problematic neighborhoods of the city:

- redevelopment of buildings and disused spaces owned by the municipality converted into spaces for social innovation, training and digital manufacturing 4.0;
- activities to support, incubate and accelerate innovative startups with a high social impact;
- provision of innovation incentives in suburban neighborhoods through the experimentation of reward-based loans (or *pay by results*);
- granting of funding for the creation and establishment of local businesses with the aim of revitalizing the economic and social context of the suburbs; creation of a network of digital manufacturing laboratories (fablab and makerspace), with the aim of promoting generalized access to 4.0 technologies, spreading innovation skills, promoting entrepreneurship and creating employment in the manufacturing and artisan sectors, with particular reference to reintegration of young unemployed, unemployed and Neet.

These interventions have led to significant results in terms of the creation of new businesses, the survival rate of the financed businesses and the jobs created, obtaining important acknowledgments at national and international level.

The innovative feature of “An accelerator for the local economy”, is to use methods to support innovation (e.g. acceleration paths, smart planning, and horizontal and experiential learning) to promote a knowhow-based widespread and proximity economy (Boschma, 2005), with particular reference to the craft, light manufacturing, and neighbourhood retail sectors (Futureberry, 2019). The general objective of the project is to transform the Milan suburbs⁴ into a lab in which to vali-

4. For a mapping of the Milan suburban area, see the publication series edited by the Department of Architecture

date these intervention models to make them scalable and replicable in other urban and peri-urban contexts, with a view to generating social benefits through cohesion and inclusion. Starting from this goal, the Municipality of Milan has identified three policy goals, i.e. three territorial economic dimensions to be accelerated:

- *growth and reskilling of people, combining entrepreneurial culture, traditional skills in the craft, manufacturing, and trade fields, “hands-on” experiential methods, and use of digital technology*
- *support for the birth, growth, and regeneration of companies* capable of staying on the market, developing innovation skills, and creating opportunities for medium and low-skilled people⁵;
- *support for the territorial rooting* of companies to maximise the impact on social cohesion generated in the contexts in which they operate.
- *match between vacant funds / ground floor* offers with entrepreneurial initiatives based on the promotion of proximity economies, accompanied by place making approaches.

Urban SMEs in the retail sector, as well as craft and small manufacturing businesses, represent in this case a privileged target due to their capacity in steering proximity as the key element for an offer calibrated on a neighborhood scale, as vehicles of systemic innovation in sectors usually considered at the margins of political agendas. Given the small size of these activities and their economic turnover, the role of urban and local policies becomes decisive in preserving urban economies in their entirety. In this sense, it is therefore necessary to rethink policies and services for traditional innovation and in a place-based perspective. These companies can in fact become “places of innovation”, platforms where job opportunities for individuals and populations with different skills grow, where their birth and growth in peripheral areas may represent a goal for public administrations that through them aims at tackling social exclusion and regenerate neighbourhoods and local communities. In the vision of an urban economic development that is sustainable and capable of supporting processes of “collective Intelligence” and construction of multi-faceted links of proximity to produce well-being, wealth and opportunities for individual fulfillment.

and Urban Studies of the Polytechnic University of Milan, and funded by Fondazione Cariplo, “LaCittàIntorno”, available at: <https://lacittaintorno.fondazione cariplo.it/download/>.

5. As to the skills hierarchical framework, see OECD (2017).

A Glimpse on What the Pandemic Crisis Has Meant For SMEs Businesses: National Trend and Territorial Distribution in Milan

Italy has been hardly hit by the Covid-19 impact, both on the health and economic fronts. At the time we worked for this project, Istat data estimated a significant contraction in GDP for our country (-8.9%) with the recovery estimated for 2021 as only partial, not allowing a return to pre-crisis levels (+ 4.0%) in a short term period. More in detail, as regards the estimates made on the future trends of the national economy, according to an Istat (2020) report, “38.8% of Italian companies (equal to 28.8% of employment, about 3.6 million employees, and at 22.5% of the added value, about 165 billion euros) denounced the existence of economic and organizational factors that put their survival at risk among 2020 and the early 2021. Consistent with this perspective, the study conducted by Cerved (2020) has predicted a loss in turnover for Italian companies between 270 and 650 billion in the two-year period 2020-2021. Taking this as a reference, a fall in revenues of about 470 billion has been framed, and even assuming a recovery of the economy in 2021, with an increase in revenues of 17.5%, this seems to be able to return to the pre-crisis situation. (as also highlighted by Istat above) in relatively short terms According to these data, the most affected activities, in terms of contraction in turnover, are in descending order in terms of impact: hotels, travel agencies and tour operators, non-hotel accommodation facilities, production of trailers and vehicle outfitting, car and motorcycle dealerships as well as air transport. With reference to the specific urban context, the rapid affirmation of ‘working from home’ methods – largely enclosed under the broader ‘remote working’ label – has generated a consequent crisis of commercial services which, until the pandemic, heavily relied on heterogeneous city populations and users, guaranteed by huge flows of home-to-work mobility (Bartik et al., 2020). According to a survey by ‘CISL Lombardia’ (Corriere della Sera, 2020), before the emergency 13% of the employees in Milan (154,000 people) were already working occasionally from home (ibid.). This could affect up to 543,000 more workers by the end of the emergency. According to 2020 ‘Confcommercio di Milano’ estimates (Confcommercio Milano, Lodi, Monza and Brianza, 2020), retail sales closed due to the block imposed by the COVID-19 healthcare emergency are suffering a loss of 4.9 billion euros in turnover: -40% compared to a normal situation (4.2 billion in Milan and the Metropolitan City alone). The discontinued commercial activities were over 22,700, with approximately 123,000 employees. The situation of smaller companies (up to 9 employees) is particularly critical as these make up 65% of the total commercial activities closed in the Metropolitan City of Milan, and in the Provinces of Lodi, Monza, and Brianza. With the expected business recovery trend, the risk of definitive cessation of activity (estimated at 30 April 2020) was set at around 25%, equal to approximately 3,700 companies. According to a forecast by ‘Dataroom’ from the national newspaper ‘Corriere della Sera’ (2020) (based on ‘Fipe’, ‘Federalberghi’ and ‘Federmoda’ data appraisal), Italy is expected to produce 180 billion less this year. Out of those, 23 are due to the lack of contribution of the Milanese metropolitan area, in particular linked to the crisis induced by the pandemic in the service macro sector. The failure to carry out fairs, expos and public events, combined with non-arrivals and cancellations for hotels, and the drastic drop in purchases in the retail sector, results in a loss in turnover that exceeds ten billion euro (estimated between February 2020 and February 2021). These add up to the 11 billion lost by the entertainment sector (ibid.).

To briefly represent the impact related to the SMEs target in the municipality of Milan, we want to present here some elaborations of data from the Milan Chamber of Commerce referring to January 2018 and January 2021.

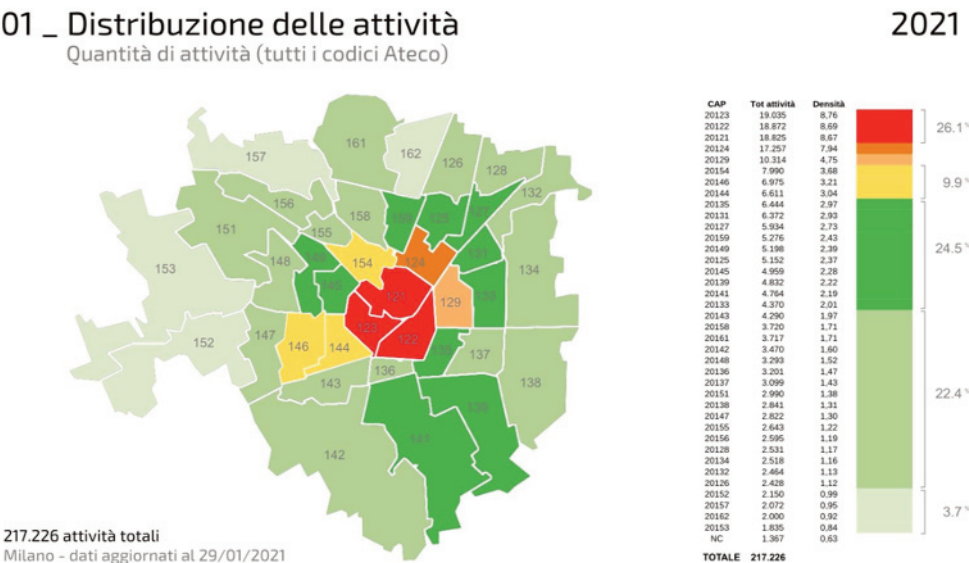


Figure 1. This map shows the way in which all the companies present in the area of the Municipality of Milan are distributed and concentrated. The companies of all Ateco sectors that were active on 29/01/2021 were considered. The map's evidence shows that over 26% of these are concentrated in the immediate center of the city, a percentage that is close to 50% considering the areas immediately adjacent to the 3 central ZIP codes. Apart from a few rare exceptions, we can consider that the density of activities starts from the center and gradually decreases, moving outwards, in an almost homogeneous way and with bands represented by concentric circles. The outermost circle of the entire outskirts of Milan offers about 1/4 of all activities with a slight inhomogeneity represented by the extreme western part of the city.

02 _ Attività Ateco selezionate

Quantità di attività e loro variazione 2018-2020

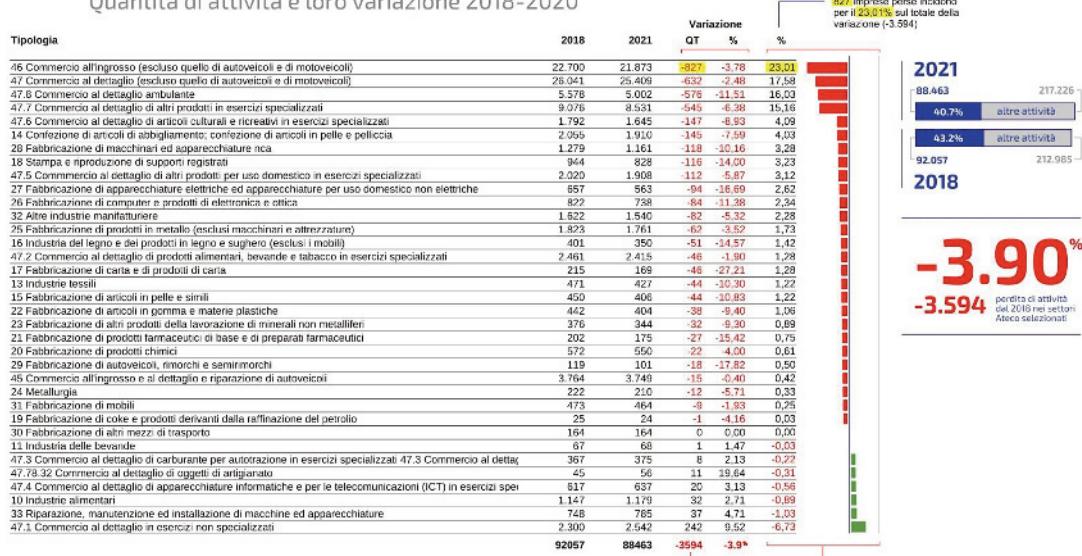
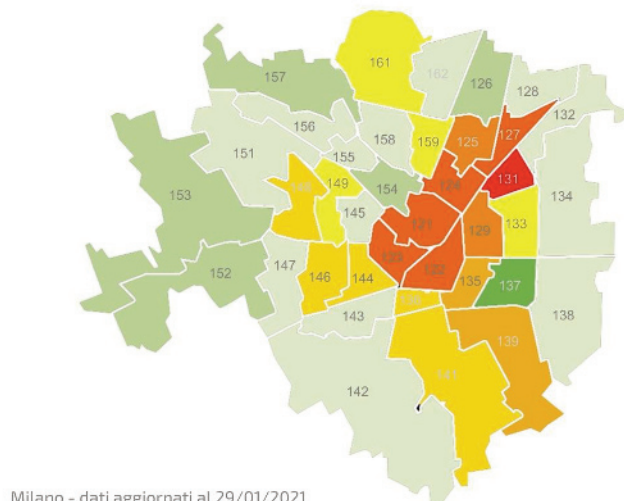


Figure 2. Negative balance in the presence of activities in the Milanese entrepreneurial ecosystem, with particular reference to the 38 ATECO sectors selected in the trade, crafts and manufacturing sector (2018-2021). The table presents a selection of Ateco sectors (as per the chamber sample provided) and for each of them indicates the number of active companies in 2018 and 2021 in the related activity codes. This selection was also used as a reference for some subsequent maps and includes about 40% of the entire total of companies present in Milan. The table has been sorted to highlight the change in the amount of business and shows an average decrease of 3.9% which makes the relationship between the termination and the opening of new businesses negative. Some of the consolidated sectors with the largest number of businesses (retail and wholesale) suffered a loss of 632 and 827 activities respectively, corresponding to -2.5% and -3.8%. In general, the activities of the Ateco selection lost in the three-year period of reference are 3,594. Among these, the greatest incidence is given by the losses found in the first 4 Ateco sectors (46, 47, 47.8, 47.7, all related to trade) which contribute negatively with percentages between 15 and 23% each.

04 _ Variazione quantità di attività Trend 2018-2021



Milano - dati aggiornati al 29/01/2021

2021
Settori Ateco selezionati

CAP	2018	2021	variaz qt	Variaz %
NC	498	717	219	30.54
20137	1.661	1.578	17	1.01
20152	1.051	1.044	-7	-0.67
20154	3.935	3.927	-8	-0.20
20126	884	971	13	1.34
20157	1.130	1.105	-21	-1.89
20153	827	806	-21	-2.61
20143	1.634	1.597	-37	-2.32
20138	1.266	1.227	-39	-3.18
20156	1.239	1.200	-39	-3.25
20147	1.284	1.238	-46	-3.44
20128	1.178	1.128	-49	-4.26
20134	988	936	-52	-5.56
20155	1.324	1.269	-55	-4.33
20159	1.657	1.501	-66	-3.50
20151	1.353	1.258	-60	-4.62
20162	1.053	981	-52	-5.26
20132	1.134	1.070	-64	-5.98
20142	1.575	1.509	-66	-4.27
20145	1.830	1.742	-68	-3.80
20149	2.027	1.950	-77	-3.95
20159	2.447	2.363	-84	-3.55
20133	2.115	2.026	-89	-4.39
20161	1.731	1.640	-91	-5.55
20144	2.780	2.671	-112	-4.19
20148	1.659	1.541	-118	-7.66
20136	1.565	1.445	-121	-8.37
20146	2.030	2.098	132	4.72
20141	2.221	2.078	-143	-6.88
20139	2.455	2.307	-149	-6.46
20135	2.852	2.653	-199	-5.90
20129	4.345	4.152	-193	-4.85
20125	2.654	2.450	-204	-8.33
20121	7.023	6.805	-218	-3.20
20123	8.527	6.305	-222	-3.52
20122	5.897	5.671	-226	-3.99
20124	8.233	6.900	-233	-3.88
20127	3.629	3.394	-234	-6.69
20131	3.279	3.016	-263	-8.72
TOTALI	92.057	88.463	-3.594	-3.9%

Figure 3. Reduction of selected entrepreneurial activities in absolute terms (2018.-2021). This infographic shows the concentration of companies, however, considering only those identified by the Ateco sectors selected as representative of the trade, crafts and manufacturing sectors. Even considering the selection, it can be seen that the largest number of active companies is concentrated in the central area characterized by the 20121, 20123, 20124 and 20122 Zip Codes. Almost 1/3 of all activities reside in these 4 areas. Considering 2 additional areas bordering the central ones, the concentration of activities approaches 40% of the total amount, leaving the remaining companies distributed over 32 areas. It's interesting to see how in these central and semi-central areas the impact of the COVID-19 crisis was greater than in many of the outlying areas of the city.

Framing the Proximity Concept and Policy

In order to be fully understood, the following reflections require us to start from the concept of “proximity economy”: that is, the economic value produced by the activities that develop in the area at a pedestrian distance from where you live or work, and optimize time and the energy dedicated to their survival. Until the last century, the local economy responded to a constant growth of its antithesis, that is a “mobility economy”, strongly based on the development of road and rail transport systems, and on the delocalization of production and commercial activities at a low cost compared to urban centers. Traditionally, the urban economies of mobility contribute to real estate initiatives mainly interested in the exploitation of the rent, then leaving to the public actor the burden of infrastructural interventions aimed at supporting the arrival of these new entrepreneurial activities, waiting for positive effects in economic terms. relating to the residential construction sector, mobility, and a general growth in consumption on a local scale.

The experience of the lockdown, with its limitations to urban mobility, has shown us a new importance of the issue of proximity applied to urban everyday life, linked to neighborhoods and their ability to respond to the needs of citizens, prompting us to reflect on a future of city that does not develop on a center-periphery axis, but with a plurality of centers, each with its own specificities. In this sense, the “15 minutes city” approach, already relaunched by the mayor of Paris *Anne Hidalgo*, promotes the idea that every citizen can have access, within a short perimeter and within 15 minutes, to six fundamental functions: living, working, supplying, caring, learning, enjoying (Graells-Garrido et al. 2021). From a perspective of the economic and social structure of cities and neighborhoods, neighborhood trade certainly represents a fundamental service for citizens and the quality of life in neighborhoods in a logic of proximity (Williams and Hipp, 2019).

In the definition given by the Futureberry research⁶, we can define proximity business (or neighborhood business) as “activities mainly aimed at the retail sale of products, which employ an area contained, generally never exceeding 250 square meters”. According to the research, these realities on the one hand are particularly involved in neighborhood life, and on the other hand they bring innovative requests regarding the offer, the design of the spaces, the additional services offered, the relationship with customers and the “methods of communication” (Futureberry, 2019). Due to the new regimes production forces imposed by social distancing and limitations to travel, the awareness of the importance of neighborhood shops, easily accessible and capable of offering consumers something more than the mere economic transaction, is now recognized: personalization of the service, informal dimension and “of trust” between seller and customer, contribution to sociality outside the domestic sphere. With these characteristics, local businesses stand out from large-scale distribution and standardized digital commerce. The recognized value of these companies and these services is linked to the functioning of services with important social implications for the construction of relationships and community bonds.

6. Conducted on the behalf of the Department of Economic Development of the Municipality of Milan.

With these objectives, in the light of the analysis on the targets discussed above, it will be necessary to describe multiple levels of policy on which to address the project accompanied by the description of specific business use cases. From an observation of the strategies and some entrepreneurial practices being tested, we have selected three possible approaches:

- Supporting widespread skills to intercept urban consumption patterns and in the development of commercial and artisanal services active in the digital market-place;
- Designing collaborative paths of acceleration and local experimentation through new technologies;
- Manage placemaking paths aimed at coordinating and enhancing the spatial dimension of local economies.

Intercept Urban Consumption Patterns to Develop Commercial and Artisanal Services in the Digital Market-Place

The emerging growth of mobile commerce and e-commerce has been made possible by recent trends in technological innovation in the retail market, which includes a wide range of self-service and support services for retail and neighborhood services. Where digital and ICT tools allow an improvement in performance both on the supply side and on the demand side of commercial services and their link with craft and manufacturing activities. E-commerce transforms management by stimulating new business models and exchange formats, where new professional figures make these transformations operational (think of the numerous Amazon employees who work shifts in the distribution chain inside the warehouse, before the product enters the last mile). Consumers are reaping the benefits of increased convenience and price competition through loyalty marketing systems, mobile websites and new payment platforms, which continue to transform the consumer experience and efficiency of retail operations.. Digitalization and ICT tools, including geo-localization (location tracking for an offer of selected and customized products and services), electronic sales via digital devices, and new delivery and collection services adapted to the customer, contribute to a multi-channel shopping experience that allows shoppers to search for retailers that offer a seamless online and offline experience. This new vision of services therefore provides for the presence of different ways of interacting with consumers by providing for the presence of combined methods of engagement: online, in street outlets, click and collect, mobile applications, electronic solutions in stores, and a customer service offered through different modalities.

Among the proximity business cases on issues related to the digital commercial and artisan offer that could interact with the aforementioned policy framework, 4 specific initiatives were selected, based on their relevance and / or their particular characteristics:

Cecina Delivery: is a web platform active in the territory of the municipality of Cecina (province of Livorno), through which the inhabitants can connect with local merchants and order their products. The related deliveries are made through the Public Assistance service, a fundamental asset of the project, which involves numerous institutional partners such as Cassa di Risparmio Volterra, Confesercenti, CNA, Confcommercio, and, finally, the Public Assistance of Cecina. Initially, the service was launched for grocery stores, then expanded to supermarkets and, finally, to non-food stores, increasing the offer, to meet customer needs and offer support to different businesses in the area. The implicit benefits of the initiative include the promotion of the economy of individual neighborhoods, through the connection of local and citizen exhibitors. This initiative was chosen for its strong local character and for the large number of institutional partners involved, which highlights the importance of a collaboration between public and private for the implementation of valuable and successful initiatives.

Fasedue: is a free digital showcase for local businesses, born during the lockdown, which, through interactive maps or navigation by neighborhoods and product categories, connects citizens and

neighborhood shops. With Fasedue, retailers can “exhibit” products, promotions and related information through the use of ad hoc cards to get in touch with the customer. A peculiar element is the community that has been created around the service. This initiative, in fact, is distinguished by its “birth from below”, thanks to a heterogeneous group of citizens sharing the same practical needs, and for this particular characteristic it has been included in this list. Also in this case, the aim is to help the economy of individual neighborhoods and to connect local exhibitors and citizens, also through the sharing of digital services.

Tuscan Collections is a B2B platform of Tuscan artisan artistic productions, aimed at bringing together operators and professionals of the sector of different types (eg architects, journalists, buyers, ...). In addition to providing a digital showcase aimed at promoting Made in Tuscany art, this also allows the creation of orders and customizations of artistic products. The macro-areas included are: Furniture, Lighting, Home decoration, Table and kitchen, Contract (customized design and supply solutions), Gift and lifestyle items and, finally, Unique and made-to-measure pieces. This initiative was selected for its regional characterization and for its peculiar range of action that involves the entire artistic artisan production chain. The platform aims to support the regional artistic production fabric, giving visibility to Made in Tuscany artistic activities, increasing information about it and providing for the possibility of making purchases on the platform itself.

Quxqu is a platform born in Bergamo to support local craft services. The project is inspired by the French initiative *Lulù dans ma Rue*, a neighborhood newsstand project with free access to find support in small work tasks related to the domestic economy. The platform collects a set of services for the community (e.g. homework help, shopping, help with the computer, keeping company, cleaning the house, cooking lunch, ...) in which they are communicated in advance and in a transparent way the fees required for the various tasks, supporting the work at the neighborhood level. The activities are regulated with a payment receipt and insurance coverage for those who carry out the service. This associative network makes it possible to connect supply and demand for services, promoting the local economy and well-being, giving new life to neighborhood relationships based on mutual trust. Each neighborhood has a manager who selects a trusted and motivated person to take part in the initiative. This project was chosen for its strong local character, evident from its motto “the neighborhood for the neighborhood”. The Quxqu project was born from the meeting between neighborhood needs, from the desire to improve the trust relationship on a neighborhood scale, to the advantage of those who have problems of time and / or loneliness to support both small craft activities and micro-work tasks conducted by workers and businesses struggling to support a digital offer of services.

Designing Collaborative Paths of Acceleration and Local Experimentation Through New Technologies

As we have seen, new digital technologies have led to the emergence of new ways to support the competitiveness of businesses on a local and / or national scale. In particular, new tools and services have been brought to light as preparatory to support the competitive advantage of companies, especially small and medium-sized companies, providing those tools that are useful for bridging the size gap, compared to larger commercial realities. Today more than ever, even following the Covid-19 emergency, small local businesses need to use and share digital services that can allow them to get in touch with their customers and offer them more efficient and effective services. and finally, to survive in an increasingly digital and competitive market. Similarly, in the current scenario, driven by innovation and digital transformation, it is necessary to create and / or strengthen local innovation ecosystems, too often neglected, to ensure that they can express their potential, generating greater well-being for the local community, promoting initiatives that can create benefits for all the actors involved.

Among the proximity business cases on issues related to paths of acceleration and local experimentation through new technologies with the aforementioned policy framework, 3 specific initiatives were selected, based on their relevance and / or their particular characteristics:

Balduina's, an initiative developed in the Roman quarter of Balduina. It is an associative network of citizens and businesses at the neighborhood level that wants to respond to the social, economic and environmental needs of the reference area. Its interlocutors include citizens, neighborhood businesses (currently 72) and startups. Its key points are: - the network of neighborhood businesses that have decided to take part in it - the neighborhood Marketplace (online showcase of participating companies that connects them with customers) - the Welfare Point (created to support the development of the neighborhood, offering quality services within everyone's reach including: support relating to microcredit and subsidized finance, management of relations with the PA, search for public tenders, staff training and marketing, ..., through the participation of specialized consultants. Finally, the Neighborhood Fund is peculiar, set up to raise funds aimed at improving the quality of life in the neighborhood with social and environmental initiatives. This fund is set up thanks to small percentages on sales in the Marketplace and through collections relating to the services of the Welfare Point. The goal of this initiative is to create a new idea of the neighborhood, supporting its economic and social development, to the benefit of both citizens and businesses.

Vicini e Connessi (tr. Neighbors and Connected) (as part of the Digital Solidarity macro-project, sponsored by the Department for Digital Transformation of the Italian Government). This initiative offered local and proximity shops the opportunity to sell their products and services through online commerce platforms, portals and other digital tools; receive IT support and assistance; make home deliveries; promote and enhance proximity trade, also through communication and advertising actions. The aim is to promote local activities, favoring the digitization of small and medium-sized Italian businesses.

Torino City Lab, can be considered as a real acceleration service for the local economy context in the city of Turin. In short, this initiative aims to identify and create a place to test innovative ideas, evaluating their feasibility and impacts, with the aim of promoting environmental and social sustainability on an urban scale. It is a real “innovation laboratory” spread on a city scale that sees the participation of the Public Administration and a multitude of public and private partners. This year, in particular, the platform-initiative will promote the co-development and testing of 4 projects: Autonomous Cars, 5G, Robotics, Drones, for the creation of autonomous mobility services and innovative urban services. The official sponsor is the Municipality of Turin with a set of local partnerships of economic stakeholders. Among the benefits of this project, the promotion of innovative solutions for urban living and the growth of the local innovation ecosystem.

Managing Placemaking Paths Aimed at Enhancing The Spatial Dimension of Local Economies

Placemaking is another topic of great importance: i.e., multifunctional approaches to the planning and management of public spaces and their interaction with private spaces, with particular focus on land use practices (Tricarico et al., 2020). Placemaking approaches have the task of promoting, inspiring and creating spaces that are useful to people in carrying out their daily activities and change urban contexts accordingly (Landry, 2012). Further, placemaking can be considered an emerging form of territorial policy for cultural animation, defined as the creation of creative places in which artistic and cultural organizations integrate place-based development initiatives with their work of community revitalization, mixing culture with land use, transport, economic development, education, housing, infrastructure and public safety strategies. Therefore, placemaking can be interpreted both as a process and as a design philosophy capable of directing regeneration initiatives through three distinctive characteristics:

1. Change the nature of a place and involve the local community and actors, who have an interest in its future, in the process.
2. Embrace multiple objectives and activities that intersect with the main functional responsibilities of the local government, depending on the particular problems and potential of the area.
3. Develop forms of collaboration between the various stakeholders, which may vary according to the sectors included in the strategies and the public and private resources deployed.

Among the proximity business cases on issues related to placemaking and enhancement of the spatial dimension of local economies, four examples where selected focusing on urban regeneration projects for commercial and artisanal spaces:

CasaNetural, an initiative aimed at bringing people together to implement ideas and projects on the issues of social, cultural and creative innovation at the headquarters of Netural Coop, a social enterprise committed to enhancing the Matera area. The projects implemented in this “house”, located in the territory of Matera (Basilicata), mainly concern the creation of a co-working, co-living space and the foundation of a School of Community Knowledge (where the master craftsmen transfer their competences to local citizens). Furthermore, this is referred to as the «Professional Dream Incubator», providing advice for the development of creative projects. This project supports the development of the local economy and innovation and constitutes a creative example of urban regeneration of spaces, at the service of innovative projects.

Popup Lab, a social laboratory of practices and models for urban regeneration policies, implemented in various Italian municipalities. In particular, the initiative provides for the recovery of spaces no longer used, to transform them into places of value creation and sharing (mainly commercial, cultural, craft and recreational activities), with the aim of revitalizing the private commercial fabric and space public, through the collaboration between different public and private actors. This format was born in 2004 and has been replicated in 12 different Italian municipalities (Castelfranco di Sotto, in the province of Pisa, and Empoli, Campi Bisenzio, Cascina, Quarrata,

Monteverdi Marittimo, Castelnuovo Magra in the Province of La Spezia, Montecatini Terme, Rosignano Marittimo, up to involving provincial capitals such as Prato, Livorno and Grosseto). Through “calls for ideas” innovative projects are encouraged, working to promote the economy and local development. Furthermore, real placemaking services are created, through the creation of aggregation spaces starting from disused places.

Elephant Park, a project for the regeneration of urban spaces in the Elephant Park area (London) which includes different types of initiatives aimed at creating new homes, jobs, economic opportunities and investments. For compliance with sustainability standards, this initiative will be implemented in its entirety by the end of 2025. As part of its various constituent projects, the initiative aimed at creating a new creative and retail hub, available with temporary use renting contract, a flexible solution to enhance the experimentation of proximity-based independent shops. In particular, an area is planned for 50 new shops, bars and restaurants, made accessible at affordable prices, and workspaces for 20 startups, through the reuse of 38 shipping containers. The official Sponsor is the Southwark Council, and also in this case, the goal is to promote development, entrepreneurship, and, therefore, the local economy, leveraging the tools and principles of placemaking.

Meanwhile Space, a London-based social enterprise aimed at transforming unused places into temporary production spaces for start-ups and small businesses. The project, also developed thanks to some specific policies of the English government, was implemented in various locations in the city of London, with various experiments underway also in other English cities. The goal is to promote the economy and well-being of the urban area of reference, supporting local development (involvement of residents, enhancement of the territory) and entrepreneurship (start-up incubation). By exploiting the principles of placemaking, this initiative aims to create spaces for aggregation starting from places that are no longer in use. In particular, in the urban reorganization process, Meanwhile Space plays the role of intermediary between the owner of the disused space and the potential tenant. Furthermore, this project also generates value for the local communities involved, as well as for businesses, through new services, structures and activities available. As part of the initiative, the “Open Doors” project was launched, aimed at extending the format to various locations in the United Kingdom, outside of London. In particular, this project focuses on the possibility of making unused spaces in the high street available to the community for a temporary period. The use of these spaces is made available free of charge to individuals and organizations both for craft, commercial and small manufacturing activities, as well as in care services and workspaces oriented to local communities, to test their ideas, develop projects and contribute to social change in the streets of the various localities involved. Therefore, the goal is to act as an intermediary between property owners, with difficulty in renting their premises with communities, entrepreneurs in a nutshell and professionals looking for space.

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