Fostering Open Innovation among SMEs through Social and Eco Innovation

Open-Alps

WP4- XPA

Contents

1. Introduction

The aim of this report is to highlight the role and the contributions that the social and environmental dimensions of innovation may deliver to the OPEN ALPS project.

The main goal of the OPEN ALPS project is to foster the spread of open innovation practices among SMEs located in the Alpine Space. Such a task requires entrepreneurs and top managers leading those businesses being induced to change their *modus operandi*, by ideally opening the doors of their firms to interested third-actors (i.e. professionals). This way – by sharing with them internal information regarding products, production and management processes, certifications and patents – entrepreneurs are expected to benefit from a fresh view and perspective and to identify new solutions to problems affecting their businesses.

While the technical feasibility of the project will be addressed through the creation of a web-based platform facilitating the connection between *innovation seekers* and *innovation solvers*, a major challenge may be hidden within a cultural issue. Turning to an open innovation approach implies decision makers breaking the long-standing, traditional assumption that *innovation requires control*. Inducing such a behavioral change requires entrepreneurs leading the firms being given strong and persuasive arguments as well as incentives in order to accomplish acceptable results. A large amount of literature suggests entrepreneurs being typically characterized by a strong *need for autonomy* (Sexton and Bowman, 1985). How can this attitude be mitigated for inducing knowledge sharing with potential competitors? Are the potential upsides predicted by the open innovation paradigm a strong enough argument? How can trust be established among actors involved in the open innovation processes?

In this report we advance a – at least partial – solution to such questions by suggesting a process in which trust is gradually developed among actors involved in the process of knowledge sharing by means of a third-party institution acting as network facilitator and by centering the first stages of the interaction on social and environmental activities.

To do that, we took in consideration three main items which the OPEN ALPS project is made of: *SMEs*, *Open Innovation* and *social (intended as Corporate Social*

Responsibility - CSR) and eco innovation. The innovativeness of the OPEN ALPS project is confirmed by the scarcity of best practices combining those three dimensions simultaneously. Thus, we led our analysis by focusing on three distinct projects combining – in turn – the elements mentioned above.

The first experience, the "CSR Manager Network" shows how open innovation attitudes can be induced among managers around social and environmental innovation topics.

The second experience reported, the "Executive Master for SMEs Alumni" demonstrate how open innovation can be induced among entrepreneurs and managers leading small and medium enterprises.

The third experience, the "Manifattura Project - Green Innovation Factory" is a recent initiative particularly interesting as a case of *green open innovation* between SMEs, although it does not particularly stress the second aspect of innovation linked to CSR practices, that is social innovation.

The choice to present three different cases combined with a in-depth analysis of the CSR managers perceptions towards social and environmental innovations answers to the willingness to prove the more comprehensive picture about the different elements considered by the OPEN ALPS project.In the light of the issues and opportunities emerged from these three experiences, the last section of the report provide a set of insights that will be useful for planning the next steps of the project.

2. The "CSR Manager Network" experience

2.1. Goals and structure of the Network

The CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) Manager Network was established in 2007 by ISVI – the *Italian Institution for Business Values*. The idea came as follow up of a field research that led by a team of researchers from ISVI one year before aimed at detecting the impact of CSR managers' characteristics on corporate sustainability reports.

One of the main implications of such a research was the absence of a national institution gathering CSR managers to help their professional development.

The CSR Manager Network was established by ISVI as attempt to fill this gap. Its main purpose was to constitute a place where individuals professionally involved in CSR projects and practices could share their experience both in terms of best practices and major challenges and issues. Specifically, the CSR Manager Network was given a two-fold role:

✓ External role: being the main Italian institution representing CSR professionals among public and political institutions and promoting an awareness campaign about relevance of CSR topics for the business community.

✓ Internal role: sharing knowledge about a relatively-new professional field by means of three main tools:

1. Workshops restricted to CSR Manager Network members. They require physical presence (held in Milan). A specific CSR related topic (i.e. work-life balance; implementation of eco-friendly practices) is identified in advance as main subject. Depending on members' familiarity with the topic identified, workshops could be designed in three different ways:

a) best practice presentation from a non-member guest speaker, providing his/her experience about the topic selected;

b) members' presentation – on a voluntary basis – on how his/her business dealt with the selected issue and how solutions were identified;

c) working groups about the topic selected and plenary discussion.

2. Web-based knowledge sharing. A mailing list coordinated by ISVI staff was created to facilitate continuous interaction among members.

3. Creation of the CSR Manager Network group on Linkedin. Such a group was created as a spontaneous initiative of the members, without any stimulus from ISVI staff.

Along these three channels, new knowledge was created and spread among members in two ways:

I. by means of formal applied research activity performed by ISVI researchers. For example: a major research project focusing on a specific dimension of CSR is approved every year and presented in a dedicated public event. Indeed, in-depth case studies showing best practices of members' organizations in the CSR field are made available to the whole network;

II. by means of informal relationships arisen among members as consequence of continuous interaction which facilitated the spur for joint initiatives, projects or just ongoing comparison.

III.

2.2. Why is it an Open Innovation project and motives leading to join the Network

The CSR Manager Network's experience presents the features of a typical open innovation initiative.

First, it crosses the boundaries of a single organization. Individuals and actors involved in the process belong to different – sometimes even competitor – businesses. Full control over internal ideas is given up in favor of benefits coming from external insights which may add further value to the extant business model.

Second, the item transferred among participant actors is knowledge. The creation of such an open innovation platform allows for new knowledge to be created and disseminated among members for improving existing practices.

Third, the continuous flow of internal and external information is intended to enhance the process of value creation. Compared to the so-called closed innovation paradigm – which is headed to maximizing value appropriation by excluding others to firm's internal knowledge, thereby maximizing the share of the total amount of value

available – the open innovation paradigm benefits from the multiplication effect on firm's share deriving from an increase of the total value created.

Interviews and discussion that we had with staff as well as members of the CSR Manager Network highlighted the main motives which led the latter to join.

A first set of reasons is that at that time in Italy the CSR manager was a quite new professional profile. Such a novelty implied an almost total absence of managerial discipline suggesting which kind of issues and responsibilities a CSR manager should be in charge of. Specifically, one of the main challenges faced by CSR Managers turned on how internal commitment toward CSR topics could be effectively stimulated.

A second expectation of Network's members was to learn new technical skills and tools for creating and managing CSR policies within their companies.

A third motive which led their decision was the need for an ongoing comparison among peers on increasing institutional and cultural changes which – in turn – were generating new risks and opportunities.

2.3. Factors triggering open innovation

Over the last two years the CSR Manager network experienced a significant growth both in terms of new members and internal interaction, reaching now more than one hundred managers form major companies and independent professionals in the CSR field. During the brainstorming session that we had with the ISVI management team, which is responsible for running the CSR Manager Network, and network members we were interested in detecting the factors which made it possible to overcome potential conflicts and risks of opportunism and inducing individuals to share their knowledge with others. In this session, we encouraged participants to recall the main steps which led to the creation and development of the Network and asked which were – in their opinion – the drivers for the inception of open innovation within the network.

As result of the session, two main factors emerged. Specifically, they were referred as *the relevance of the network facilitator* and the *low conflict contents of social and eco innovation*.

With regard to the first factor, the importance of the role played by ISVI – especially in the first two years from the creation of the network – emerged as key for encouraging

members assuming a proactive behavior headed toward feeding the network with their own experience rather than just expecting knowledge to be delivered to them by a sort of central, overarching entity. Specifically, the network facilitator emerged as a key-role for engendering trust among members by leveraging on a set of features which reduced members' perception about downsides of open innovation.

The first feature of the network facilitator is that of being *authoritarian*. ISVI is basically run by academics personnel, which enhanced members' perception of being connected with cutting edge knowledge in that specific field. Being in touch with a university oriented organization ensured participants about the quality and innovativeness of the solutions discussed and the notions delivered within the network.

The second feature was related to the *non-competitive nature* of ISVI. Since the very beginning, ISVI was perceived as a third party institution, not interested in "stealing" members' knowledge to its own advantage. The non-competitive positioning of ISVI acted as a sort of guarantee of being embedded in a sort of "neutral" territory, in which nobody could be favored over the other members.

The third feature was related to its *responsibility over the ethical code* within the network. By leveraging on its ethical respectability, ISVI was expected to prevent any possible opportunistic behavior from other members and – if it would have been the case – applying punishment actions such as exclusion.

The second factors which made initial interaction possible was related to the contents at the core of the network. In traditional open innovation activities, one major issue is – from a cultural perspective – encouraging participants giving up a protective attitude toward their knowledge allowing it to be transferred to other institutions (though usually protected by patents). Evidence from the CSR Manager Network is that such initial process may occur in faster and more effective way as long as knowledge is shared about topics and issues which offers no – or scarce – incentives to opportunistic behaviors. In the open innovation terminology, it means focusing on value creation rather than value appropriation activities. By their very nature, social and eco innovation-related contents are conceived as tools for enhancing value creation for society and for the environment in which value appropriation assumes a second-order priority. Such a balance between the two dimensions of value provide a strong incentive to network members which see the

opportunity risk significantly reduced by the low appropriability of the knowledge shared.

The two factors combined allowed reciprocal trust to emerge in the first stage, triggering interaction and open ways for innovating. Moreover, a specific dynamic that needs to be underlined is the modality that the two factors assume in the latter stage of the network development. Specifically, the network made a step up in class when the network facilitator began to leave its pivotal role favoring independent relationships to hold the knowledge sharing process, enhancing their responsibility as well as their commitment. As consequence of that – on the basis of the trust thereby created – network members started to interact even on more "competitive" levels like technology and market positioning, exceeding just social and environmental issues, fostering the full potential of open innovation to emerge.

3. The "Executive Master for SMEs Alumni Path" experience

3.1. Goals and structure of the Network

The "Executive Master's in SMEs and Competitivity" is a Master's program held by ALTIS-Postgraduate School Business & Society of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore of Milan.

This program is designed to foster the skills necessary to manage the processes of growth and organisational and technological innovation, internationalization, relations with banks and the generational shift in small and medium-sized enterprises. In particular, the program aims at developing the competencies needed to contribute to the strategic positioning of a small/medium enterprise and to plan and carry out strategies of innovation, optimizing the related processes and procedures.

At the conclusion of the fourth edition of the program (2010-2011), some participants expressed their favors for the creation of a community of alumni, aimed at strengthening the ties with the University and within the participants, at promoting the development of profitable relationships, and at fostering an extension of professional training. Therefore, in 2011, ALTIS launched the "Executive Master for SMEs Alumni Path", a program which represent a privileged meeting place where entrepreneurs can strengthen their relations and exchange ideas, with the support of teachers and experts; entrepreneurs are, indeed, accompanied by teachers expert in specific subjects, who can help them addressing operational issues of their companies.

The Alumni path aspires at fostering the maintenance of the "positive tension" in the management of company experienced during the period of the master, by meeting regularly with colleagues, professors and experts, encouraging a continuous training, as well as the maintenance of the Master Program subjects, in order to identify possible answers to their critical business issues.

The program has a focus on various topics, like human resources management, internationalization, marketing and sales, financing for SMEs and generational shift, which are addressed under an innovation-centered perspective.

The program is structured with four sessions of training and workshops in-class, divided into moments of plenary sessions and group work, with a dedicated on-line

platform, provided with discussion section, additional readings, presentations, reference books and teaching materials. A substantial innovation from this program derives from the fact that the topics of the workshops are identified through a dialogue among participants, teachers and network staff.

3.2. Why can it be considered an OI practice

The "Executive Master for SMEs Alumni" experience present the features of a typical open innovation initiative.

First, it involves heterogeneous firms in size, geographic location and areas of belonging: from fashion to electronics, from design to IT, from food&beverage to renewable energy.

Second, this initiative aims to create a community that contributes to the enhancement of the entrepreneurial activities and skills even once out by the program, through sharing of common values and ideas, through study, training and common activities.

Third, this initiative encourages the exchange of experience and the networking among Alumni, as wells as with the faculty of ALTIS and with the organizational structures, through selected initiatives proposed directly by the participants themselves.

Fourth, also in this experience the item transferred among participant actors is knowledge. ALTIS organizes challenging opportunities for continuous education for the Alumni community, by investing in the academic role of the University, as well as thanks to important and privileged contacts with the business world. By promoting active debates among participants, with top managers, professors and entrepreneurs, and by fostering work groups on innovation themes, the Alumni path plays a fundamental role in the diffusion and sharing of cross-sectional knowledge.

Furthermore, interviews and discussion that we had with staff as well as participants of members of the "Executive Master for SMEs Alumni Path" highlighted the main motives which led to the constitution of the program.

The most widespread reason is relate to the opportunity of continuous training, which is reputed by entrepreneurs crucial for the development of their businesses.

Secondly, participants considered relevant the opportunity of benchmarking with other entrepreneurs, even if operating in other industries.

Participants include as other and less important reasons for joining the program the opportunity of consolidating relationships, in a professional as well as social perspective, and the possibility of getting feedbacks on their activities.

3.3. Conditions fostering knowledge sharing among SMEs managers

In October 2012 the second edition of the "Executive Master for SMEs Alumni Path" has started, registering the enrollment of a large part of the participant (21 on 33) to the 2011-2012 edition of the "Executive Master for SMEs", so that the percentage of participants is significantly higher in comparison to the previous edition (14 on 33).

We conducted a survey among the participant of both editions in order to assess the factors which have the most relevant impacts on fostering knowledge sharing among SMEs.

First, we asked to consider the importance of knowledge sharing among entrepreneurs, evaluating 7 items on a likert scale (1 to 5). From the analysis of the answers it emerges that entrepreneurs consider knowledge sharing important as a tool which allows to find a solution to organizational problems (4,18) and as a tool to strengthen relationships with other entrepreneurs (4). Other positive characteristic of knowledge sharing are recognized in the possibility of implementing best practices in their firms (3,64), an improvements of business processes (3,55), and the opportunity to identify new business opportunities (3,09), while the possibility to solve technical issues (2,55) or to start joint projects with other entrepreneurs (2,82) are less important.

The interviews tried to identify the main subjects which could stimulate knowledge sharing among SMEs, considering the workshops organized by the "Executive Master for SMEs Alumni Path". Not surprisingly the themes which have been stimulating debates and sharing of experiences and knowledge are Strategy and Marketing & Sales, while Finance and Human Resources Management have been less appreciated under this perspective.

At the end of the "Executive Master for SMEs Alumni Path" the participants were asked to assess to what extent they considered sharing knowledge and practices from

their companies with the other members of the program. The 50,9% of the interviewed admit to have been moderately sharing internal information about their companies, while the 39,5% stated to have been sharing significant elements, and the 9,6% stated to have been sharing all kind of information, practices and experiences. Conversely, we asked to assess to what extent the other participants have been sharing knowledge and practices with the members of the program. As a remarkable outcome, the participants show the perception that the others have been sharing significant information more than they actually did (82%). Summarizing, the participants consider that the Alumni path has been able to foster a significant knowledge sharing among participants (90%), and that they have been able to take considerable advantages from this experience, from important (57%) to very important (29%).

Another element of analysis was the evaluation of the positive and negative factors which have been influencing the propensity to share internal information and practices. First, looking at the factors with a positive influence, there is a clear agreement on the need of sharing and comparing experiences with other entrepreneurs (4.30/5), and of the managerial relevance of the issues discussed (4.11). Slightly less important were the trust in other participants (3.78), the opportunity for a professional training (3,67) and the role of the network facilitator as a guarantor of discretion (3,44), while was considered less positive the limited scope for opportunistic behaviour (2,97).

Secondly, participants were asked to state to what extent they believed that the certain factors could have had a negative impact on their willingness to share knowledge and practices of their company. In general, the answers about limiting factors do not underline the presence of any substantial obstacle to the share of knowledge. However, the answers highlight that the presence of entrepreneurs belonging to different sectors has been estimated as a potentially negative factor (2,27), because it somehow limited the commonalities between the participants, as well as entrepreneurs' reluctance to discuss their points of weakness (1.91). Other elements were not considered significantly able to influence negatively the sharing of knowledge, like the protection of internal information (1.64), the risk of opportunistic behavior by the other participants (1.64); the little confidence in comparing with others (1.73), and the misalignment of the chosen issue (1.82).

After considering the factors affecting the development of knowledge sharing, we investigated the themes that could stimulate or limitate the disclosure of substantial informations among the participants. the analysis of the data suggested us that most of SMEs, however the will of sharing experiences with other entrepreneurs, at the moment is more likely to share informations on generical issues, like Communication Policies (4.36), Business Organization (4.27), Internationalization Models (4.18), and Governance systems (3.45). on the contrary, there is a slight reluctance in fostering the disclosure of issues concerning critical themes, like technical Innovation (3.00), and of themes related to Corporate Responsibility, including Corporate Social Responsibility (2.36), Compliance with regulations (2.00), and Environmental sustainability (1.91).

Furthermore, when interrogated about the issues where it is preferable to maintain greater secrecy, entrepreneurs put in evidence Research and development (2.90), Balance sheet data (2.60) and Legal Issues (2.30). There is a lighter discretion on procedures (2.10) and Financial instruments (2.10), and a really openness to themes related to Growth Strategies (1.60), Internazionalization (1.60), Marketing (1.50), and Human Resource Management (1.80).

3.4. The role of the network facilitator

The analysis of the "Executive Master for SMEs Alumni" experience put in evidence that the facilitator has a central role in the development of the network and in its effectiveness.

First of all, the network has been inspired directly by some participants of the "Executive Master's in SMEs and Competitivity", who were looking since the beginning for an opportunity of strengthening their ties with the University and with the other participants, as well as of developing professional relationships and extended skills. Therefore, with objectives clearly stated, ALTIS has been able to structure the program in the most feasible way, and to define its role considering needs and expectations of the participants.

From the analysis of the survey it emerges that expectations of participants about ALTIS' facilitator role have been fulfilled. In particular, participants generally appreciate the role of ALTIS in promoting and facilitating interactions between participants (4.38), through

the implementation of the described mechanisms, and the capacity of fostering the participation of all the members in the discussion (4,21), which helped in the creation of trust and disclosure among participants. Furthermore, another element that has been appreciated is the involvement of participants in the definition of the main themes, in the individuation of invited speakers, and in the planning of the different workshops (3,89).

As already stated, the role of the network facilitator as a guarantor of discretion (3,44) represents one of the elements which had a positive influence on the participants' propensity to share internal informations and practices.

Finally, if we consider the possible evolution for such a network, it is possible to recognize four main areas of activities where network facilitator could be involved in:

- Resource and energy mobilisation: the network could become a means of mobilising internal energy and resources for advocacy -short and long term goals
- Communication: the network could promote an organic communication with other bodies related to open innovation, providing access to information otherwise not easily available;
- Promotion of co-ordination and linkage building: the network could strengthen its role, co-ordinating activities, and facilitating more systematic communication, sharing of information, experiences and ideas even in informal contexts;
- Influencing Public Policy: the network could apply a political strategy for dealing with institutions, providing support, protection and solidarity to its participants.

4. The "Progetto Manifattura - Green Innovation Factory" experience

4.1. Goals and structure of the project

The "Progetto Manifattura - Green Innovation Factory" is an initiative promoted by the Autonomous Province of Trento. The project concerns the restoration of the historical Tobacco factory in Rovereto in order to host a cluster of startups, firms, research and education centres, and public administration's services.

The objective is the creation of a working environment that fosters innovation and cooperation between participants in order to become a benchmark for the clean tech industry. The project focuses on sectors of green building, renewable energies, green technologies and management of natural resources.

This choice was driven by the willingness to address sectors deep rooted in the real economy, taking into account the peculiarities of the local territory. In fact, the region Trentino Alto Adige is characterized by successful experiences within the field of the green economy due to a particular attention towards the topics of social, environmental and economic sustainability. Therefore the project distinguishes itself from other incubators or local development projects for the creation of an innovation community very specialized in some sectors.

Besides the restoration of the buildings the project Manifattura offers a wide range of services both to startups and firms.

The offer is organized in different formula according to the firm's needs. The *Greenhouse Program* specifically address startups by providing the following services:

- ✓ the lease of furnished working spaces;
- ✓ consultancy services and training programs;
- ✓ access to information about markets and technologies trends;
- ✓ promotion of the firm;
- ✓ know-how sharing;
- ✓ coaching to find investment opportunities.

Startups are supported since the concept design till the growth and consolidation of

the business for a maximum period of two years. The entrepreneur has the chance to confront with two coaches (one junior and one senior) with periodical monthly meetings. As a part of this program, the entrepreneur can also attend the *Green Academy*, a training program in partnership with the University of Trento, treating the topic of entrepreneurship and management. The Academy is also open to outsiders.

The *Greenhouse Program* offers also the opportunity to be in touch with international networks. In particular for those firms interested in the North-American market, it is possible to participate to the *Green House International program*, in partnership with ACTION (Association of Clean Tech Incubators of New England- Boston). The entrepreneur can attend online courses, workshops and international events concerning clean tech.

For those firms that succeed in passing through the incubation phase, the project proposes a different formula, called the *Innovation Factory Program*, specifically designed for supporting firms in reinforcing and expanding the business.

The range of services offered are:

- ✓ specific information points;
- ✓ facilitations for buying technical plants;
- ✓ consultancy for the access to public incentives;
- ✓ opportunities of research;
- ✓ advanced coaching.

The project started in 2009 and in June 2014 the number of firms in the *Green House Program* was 20 and the number of firms in the *Innovation Factory Program* was 18. Almost all participants are SMEs, but the last year the project started to attract also bigger firms.

4.2. Why is it an Open Green Innovation project and motives leading to join the project

The paradigm of open innovation is characterized by the cooperation and networking between different actors of the economic system as a mean to create added value for all the networks participants. The last years have been interested by a debate about the relationship between innovation and environmental sustainability: the shortage of resources and a grounded awareness for environmental sustainability have led firms to integrate environmental concerns into their business model, thus generating the so called *green open innovation*.

The Project Manifattura presents all the peculiarities of a green open innovation initiative.

First, aspects related to environmental sustainability have driven not only the decision to focus on specific sectors of the green industry, but also the restoration of the historical buildings in terms of optimization and reduction of energy and water consumptions, utilization of renewable energies, waste management and the flexibility of the spaces. In fact the entire project respects standard of the international certification LEED, with half of the buildings carbon neutral and the recycle of 75% of waste material.

Second, the project has promoted a cooperative approach between participants. In fact, firms were directly involved during the restoration phase by asking them to provide suggestions or ideas in order to taking into account their specific needs. In this way spaces have been projected to be flexible and adaptable, with a particular attention to fostering knowledge sharing for example through open spaces, modular offices, an auditorium for conferences and a public area. This enabled to align the restoration project to the industrial vision, connoted by the willingness to create a working environment adaptable to firm's needs that fosters creativity and sharing of experiences.

Third, knowledge sharing is facilitated through the organization of workshops, training programs, virtual communities and public events. In fact, there is a high commitment of the leading staff to create the best conditions and opportunities for the firms to be known internally and externally. One example are the *green drinks* an informal monthly public session where entrepreneurs are invited to presents their business. They

represent an opportunity to be well-informed about industry's trends, competitors, but also a chance to catch up investors, other firms and research centres for future collaborations.

In 2013 the staff interviewed entrepreneurs of firms settled in the Manifattura. The interviews highlight the main factors that convinced firms to take part in the project.

They can be gathered into two categories:

- ✓ tangible services and
- ✓ intangible services.

The first group refers to all the physical goods necessary for the firm's activity, such as an office, a meeting room, the internet service and so on. The second category, which is the most appreciated, interests all the services that contributes to the growth and consolidation of the firms.

In particular participants underlined those kinds of reasons for joining the Manifattura:

- ✓ to develop the business idea;
- ✓ to reach new markets and discover new opportunities;
- ✓ to have the chance to gain entrepreneurial and management competences, thanks to coaching and training programs;
- ✓ to be informed about sector trends;
- ✓ to catch up with investors, possible project's partners and funding opportunities;
- ✓ to have access to international networks and markets.

4.3. Factors triggering green open innovation

Since 2011, when the first Manifattura's spaces were restored, the number of firms participants has constantly grown, both in terms of startups and more consolidated firms.

The first factor that still plays an important role in fostering green open

innovation is the cooperation with the local technological consortium Habitech, which nowadays has its headquarter within the Manifattura's buildings. The consortium was created in 2006 by some firms, research centres and public agencies with the aim to leverage the local economic development through the green economy. It is conceived as a connector between different actors within the green building, the renewable energy and sustainable mobility sectors. The approach adopted since the beginning was the promotion of cooperation among its members in order to facilitating the matching of different specific know how to create innovative solutions for the housing and mobility sector. The competences acquired through the years by the Consortium are precious resources for the growth of the firms of the Manifattura projects. The Consortium, in fact, has been contributing over the year to the spread of the green open innovation culture within the region and has helped to build a fertile ground for the development of startups within some specific green sectors.

The second factor that triggered green open innovation was the fact that the staff of the Manifattura Project played an important role of network facilitator between the different actors involved. Through a series of initiatives the project still keeps on promoting an open working environment. All the initiatives, with the exception of the coaching programs specifically dedicated to firms participants, are public.

Firms are invited to catch up with internal and external speakers through the participation of workshops, national and international conferences, informal meetings and social communities. For example the staff created a discussion group on Linkedin where everyone interested in green economy's topics can join the community and propose events and topic of interests.

The network's facilitator role is strengthened by the fact that the staff has high-quality working and research competencies within the sectors considered. Almost all the members of the board gained experience concerning startups and green economy. Therefore the project is perceived as authoritarian and this facilitates the establishment of a trust relationship, where participants are encouraged to give up on the classical paradigm of *closed innovation* on behalf of a cooperative attitude.

5. Feedbacks on SMEs' managers and entrepreneurs perceptions on social and environmental issues

5.1. Literature review on SMEs and CSR

For a clear comprehension of the importance of CSR for SMEs it is important to run a short but significant review of theoretical contributes on how to engage SMEs in CSR mainstreaming (Perrini, 2006).

The European Union (EU) has contributed to the global debate on CSR, providing a definition of CSR: ''a concept whereby companies decide voluntarily to contribute to a better society and a cleaner environment'' and ''a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis'' (European Commission, 2001).

CSR implies that organizations should integrate economic, social and environmental concerns into their business strategies, their management tools and their activities, going beyond compliance and being more proactive. In this sense, the EU interpretation of CSR is consistent with some of the most recent academic literature, even as we recognize many other particularly interesting, academic definitions of CSR that emphasize its voluntary nature.

Thus, SMEs' CSR has received relatively little attention (Grayson, 2004; Thompson and Smith, 1991) and there is a small body of literature on SME experiences in industrialized countries and a very limited amount of literature in developing countries (Luken and Stares, 2005). According to several authors, research on the relationship between CSR and SMEs differs significantly from the research on enterprises, for a number of distinctive characteristics, like size, legal form, sector, orientation towards profit, national context, historical development and institutional structures.

The intangible assets of reputation, trust, legitimacy and consensus are all aspects of social capital (Spence et al., 2003, 2004), the basis of the long-term performance of SMEs (Perrini, 2006). This literature provides SMEs with guidance and tools to implement and report on their CSR policies, processes and performance effectively, based on their social capital.

At present, managers and practitioners are obviously also crucially involved as summarized in a vast array of recent reports highlighting a strong calling for additional interest in socially responsible managerial tools for SMEs (Raynard and Forstater, 2002); practitioners are recognizing the strong influence SMEs have on their surrounding communities, so that specific tools for managing SMEs' social capital are needed, as reported by the United Nations statement ''CSR represents not just a change to the commercial environment in which individual SMEs operate, but also needs to be considered in terms of its net effect on society. If CSR, as critics believe, introduces social and environmental clauses resulting in protectionism by the back door, it imposes inappropriate cultural standards or unreasonably bureaucratic monitoring demands on small businesses, and then the net effect on the communities will be a reduction in welfare. On the other hand, CSR offers opportunities for greater market access, cost savings, productivity and innovation to SMEs, as well as broader social benefits such as education and community development" (Raynard and Forstater, 2002).

5.2. Analysis

So far, since we don't have evidence about a well-established practice including simultaneously the key factors of the Open Alps Project (Open Innovation; Small and Medium Enterprises; Social and Environmental Innovation), we have been dealing with them by analyzing three well established practices which couple them in turn.

Specifically, with regard to Open Innovation and Social and Environmental Innovation we explored the case of CSR Manager Network, with regard to Open Innovation and SMEs we explored the case of the Executive Master for SMEs Alumni; finally concerning the relationships between open innovation, SMEs and environmental innovation we considered the case of the Manifattura Project in Rovereto

In order to complete our analysis we consider the last relationship between the elements of the OPEN ALPS project, that is the linkages between SMEs and social and environmental innovation. With regard to this topic we considered to rely on the perceptions collected from a selected group of SMEs Managers and Entrepreneurs, including the participants to the Executive Master for SMEs Alumni.

5.2.1. Social Innovation

We investigated the perception of SMEs and Entrepreneurs on Social Innovations, considering a set of limited but meaningful items derived by the analysis of literature.

In particular, one of the main typologies of Social Innovation activities pursued by firms is related to the implementation of Work-life Balance procedures and policies, a theme of growing importance for firms worldwide.

A large number of SMEs affirms to be interested in policies for the improvement of "workplace quality", with more than 76% of respondent considering this theme important. Looking at practices, we have registered that projects promoting "socialization among employees" have been implemented by 53% of firms, whereas 38% is not interested, and 9% has a negative judgment on these policies.

The implementation of "Gender Policy", indeed, reveals a composite scenario, with different situations. First, women occupy apical roles only in the 35% of the interviewed firms, with the majority of firms (67%) having women only in bottom positions. Furthermore, if we take a look to the policies explicitly implemented for favoring women ""work-life balance", we can see that the most of firms has implemented part-time options (62%) and flexible working hours (69%), whereas really a few have intervened on important issues, like firm nursery (8%), telecommuting (22%), and psychological support (23%).

Another theme related to Social innovation is "Benefit Policy", suitable for understanding the rate of innovativeness of the firm/entrepreneur. In this case, we registered a generically low rate of innovativeness, as practices are implemented randomly. For example, an in-house gym for employees is relatively present (25%), as well as health insurance (23%). Scholarships (15%), Partner Rewards (12%), and additional Welfare benefit (8%) enjoy instead a scarcer interest.

Thus, from these surveys it emerges that social innovations are at present an additional item for firms, pursued only when consistent with legal or market requirements, but still considered not of primary importance for the development of the firm.

5.2.2. Eco-innovation

The analysis of Eco-innovation has been pursued firstly by the assessment of the

reason which could lead firms to the introduction of Eco-innovations.

Under this perspective, a personal interest of the Founder/CEO results substantial, as most of firms assign a great relevance (70%), followed by Legal Requirements (58%). Stakeholder's pressure is fairly important too, as almost 40% of firms want to keep under control eventual requests on this theme.

Conversely, data point out that SMEs do not really recognize Eco-innovation as a tool for reducing costs, as only the 34% consider this motivation relevant, and that public incentives are not really effective for inducing eco-innovation, with only 20% of firms considering this option.

When interrogated about the expected benefit of the adoption of Eco-innovation tools, most of the SMEs are mainly interested in the opportunity of attracting a large number of potential customers (55%), by exploiting the growing sensitiveness to Ecology and to related themes. Under this perspective, public opinion appears to have a considerable impact on SMEs, as a substantial part of the interviewed (45%) assess to be interested in Eco-innovation in order to manage reputational risks.

Eco-innovations is considered, indeed, relatively important for developing and sustaining relationships and partnerships with public institutions (23%), as well as with NGOs an local communities (21%), while a scarce impact is attributed to the possibility of attracting high skilled HR (10%), and even less in improving economic performances (6%), coherently with previous considerations on Eco-innovation's motivations.

With regard to practices, a very small number of firms (7,6%) has already implemented Eco-innovation tools, but there is an interesting number of firms (23%) currently working on the development of such practices within one year. Furthermore, a quarter of the interviewed (25%) affirms to be at the moment verifying the feasibility of the introduction of eco-innovation practices, even if they are not still able to define precisely a development plan, whereas a substantial number of SMEs (40%) has not implemented nor considered any option n this track.

Furthermore, in order to have a more specific insight on the aspects of Eco-innovation more related to the general track of innovation in SMEs, we focused on two substantial elements, Research & Development processes, and patents.

Thus, we investigated the relevance of Eco-Innovation within the activities of R&D,

asking to SMEs which percentage of their activities are dedicated to Environmental themes, and, more specifically, to Eco-Innovation. We verified that only a particular group of SMEs (7,9%) are dedicating the most of their R&D activities to Eco-innovation, because these firms consider it an opportunity for gaining a competitive advantage upon other firms. A third of the interviewed firms (29,8%) affirms, indeed, to have designed or recently implemented R&D programs related to environmental issues, but that these programs are still considered collateral to firm's core business. Finally, even in this case we registered that the majority of SMEs have not activated any program or activity of research related to Eco-innovation, mostly because these are not consistent with the core business (38,5%), but also because they have no interest in doing it (22,8%).

Furthermore, consistently with the analysis of R&D Activities, we interviewed SMEs about the number of patents held related to Eco-innovation. The results confirm what previously stated, which is to say the existence of a small but proactive minority of firms engaged in this issue. We registered, in fact, that there is a group of firms (6,5%) which has already registered a patent related to Eco-innovation, with a another relatively small gropu working on it (10,4%). The remaining firms, instead are not engaged in this possibility (54,6%) or even exclude to consider it in the future (24,9%).

As a final point of discussion, we investigated the percentage of firms' profits attributed to the implementation of Eco-innovation activities, in order to assess the practical consequences of this kind of activities. Almost the majority of firms (46,8%) affirms to have realized no profits thanks Eco-innovation activities, as they have not implemented nor experienced any similar activity. A smaller but even significant number of firms (36,7%) consider that a Eco-innovation activities have on their profits a slight impact, as no more than one third of their profits are eco-derived. By conclusion, the number of environmentally proactive firms which affirms to derive the majority of their profits by eco-innovation activities is higher than in the previously registered items (14,9%), probably because of the high profitability of such innovations.

6. Questio

6.1. Description of the platform

QuESTIO is an important tool set up by Lombardy Region for individuating and mapping all the private and public bodies who offer to the market services like research, technological transfer, and support to technological transfers.

It is aimed at promoting cohesion and cooperation among different innovation players, by fostering a better visibility, by generating virtuous mechanisms of innovation, and by empowering the research system and the related technological transfers.

In particular, the platform has been launched in order to obtain a detail map of the state-of-the-art of research and technological transfer all over the territories of Lombardy Region; in order to create and promote a network of research and innovation in Lombardy, and in order to develop appropriate solutions for financing these activities.

The platform QuESTIO pursues his goals by collecting, managing and sharing informations about the innovation players, according a double perspective. First, QuESTIO offers a platform of knowledge, through which it is possible to individuate and explore all the research/innovation initiatives; secondly, it offers a system of indicators for classifying and comparing the different initiatives according to the required characteristics.

The public of this tool is composed by public bodies, which can pursue it for the diffusion of knowledge among other organizations, as well as for the individuation of those initiatives which could be useful for public activities; by research/innovation players, which can promote the visibility of their activities and find opportunities for collaboration with other players/institutions; by firms, which can get in contact with other firms or bodies in order to develop joint initiatives or to exchange knowledge.

QuESTIO is, therefore, an instrument institutionally deputed for promoting meeting and cooperation between innovation producers and innovations seekers, whose primary goal is to foster an exchange of knowledge able to create a positive and dynamic loop.

6.2. Goals of The Platform

QuESTIO is configured as a tool for the identification and mapping of centres (excluding individuals) that provide the market with at least one of services of research, technology transfer, and support to R&D.

The system is aimed at:

- promote cohesion between the different innovation actors, acting on the visibility of the centres;
- generate virtuous circles of innovation and improvement of the system of research and technology transfer.

It was designed by the Regional Department of Handicrafts, New Economy, Research and Technological Innovation and currently followed by the Regional Department for Integrated Planning - Structure, University and Research of the Lombardy Region, with the aim of:

- obtaining a thorough mapping of the state of scientific research and technology transfer at all levels in the Lombardy region;
- enabling and threw solidly bases, creating a real 'network' of research and technological innovation in Lombardy;
- acquiring the equipment necessary to implement innovative forms and appropriate for the funding of research and technology transfer.

The system was recently expanded to include those services more auxiliaries to research and technology transfer real who gravitate around them such as logistical and administrative departments, observers / scenarios / Tables design / technology monitoring, consulting, project management and technical-scientific organization of events etc.

- QuESTIO pursues its objectives collecting, managing and publicizing information related to the actors in the innovation system. In this context, it is at the service of its stakeholders according to two features that offer different but complementary perspectives and are tightly integrated to create an instrument by which the user - at various levels - can receive constantly updated picture of the diverse community active in the services covered by the system:

- repertoire of skills to identify "who does what" in terms of research and innovation regardless of the region. This function provides the user with a description of the skills profile of each CRTT allowing the identification of areas of interest on the basis of specific characteristics and needs;
- system of indicators that analyse CRTTs' activities to know in depth "how" any work centre. This is a large set of indicators, mainly quantitative, suitable for comparing the activities mapped in QuESTIO. In particular, it provides a representation of the centres along three dimensions: scientific capabilities (mainly based on bibliometric indicators), technology transfer capacity (the ability to tap into skilled human resources and leverage the skills to create innovation with impact on the industrial system) and capacity economic and management (ability to achieve economically the results of research and technology transfer, propensity to invest in technology and training).

6.3. Why can it be considered an OI practice

QuESTIO is unique not only for its size (regional / multi-regional), but especially in relation to the aims and stakeholders. In fact, it is designed for three types of stakeholders / users:

1. the Region,

2. the CRTTs,

3. businesses and their associations (and more generally those users who want to learn more about the capabilities of those who offer research and innovation).

For the regional administration system is an instrument of active policy on innovation. In particular QuESTIO represents:

- a tool made available to the different actors in the innovation system, that is the precursor to the creation of a knowledge base more widespread and shared, and favor the process of technology transfer and continuous improvement;
- a tool for the identification of CRTTs that operate in the region, nationally and internationally of the available expertise, activities and services, of the industries affected by the activities of research and innovation, and of the networks of

collaboration between the CRTTs and businesses, or among CRTTs;

- a source of knowledge and information about the status and development trend of the research and technology transfer in order to be able to drive with data depth regional policies for research and innovation;

- a tool for the selection of excellent CRTT that the region could involve in their processes of defining strategies and projects within research, technology transfer and innovation;

- a tool for the introduction of new funding policies for research and innovation (e.g. actions to reward excellence, to evaluate projects associated with calls, to enable innovative financial instruments such as vouchers for research and technology transfer) in order to drive the demand for industrial services research and innovation to the excellent centres present in the region;

- a flexible and adaptable tool, depending on the policy pursued, so that the criteria for analysis and evaluation from time to time can be adapted to the needs of a specific regional policy, and in this way to respect the nature and mission of the actors from time time selected.

For centres that provide services mapped by the system QuESTIO is:

- a tool for external visibility to the business, which makes the system a marketing tool to promote their services research and innovation, and in particular, the factors of excellence of the Centre;

- an instrument of visibility to other centres operating in research and innovation in general and the scientific and technical community as a lever for the development of partnerships and networks and for the recruitment of personnel;

- a tool to access the actions for funding research and innovation provided by the Lombardy Region or other institutions;

- an indispensable element of participation to be counted in all the stakeholders of the Region on the politics of research and innovation;

- a tool that can be used internally to CRTT for self-assessment of their abilities, for

benchmarking and continuous improvement;

- an opportunity to stimulate internal organizational changes;
- an instrument with limited membership costs and flexibility of use;
- an instrument necessary to for CRTT to participate in regional tenders related to R&D.

For businesses and end-users the system is a tool for:

- having an overall view of the system offering regional / multi-regional in order to facilitate the use of sources of innovation;
- identifing CRTT with skills and performance standards appropriate to their needs through a process of identifying customizable to suit your specific needs;
- getting in touch with the CRTT selected;
- allowing future use of new funding instruments of the Region of belonging, based on an incentive to firms in the demand for research services.

Thus, the system is intended primarily as an instrument of transparency and encouragement of research and innovation to the market, reducing information asymmetries that often restrain the collaborations between both producers and users of knowledge. It adopts a web portal for both the collection and the query of data in order to properly manage the consistent informations

strategic aim is to provide a tool with great potential for improvement of the innovative dynamics at regional / multi-regional. related to individual operators of research and innovation and to enable quick and flexible use.

Summarizing, QuESTO operates through its peculiar features, as an institutional meeting place between the operators of the innovation system. The

7. Regional Policies for Eco and Social Innovation

7.1. The governance of eco-innovation support at the regional level

Regions are one of the backbones of the public sector in Europe, and are now facing new challenges such as fiscal crisis, the updating of welfare systems and the restarting processes of sustainable economic development. Regions have been called

upon to respond to some of the current grand challenges, by becoming engaged in the implementation of policy actions in a number of fields. Eco- and Social- innovation is thus becoming a subject in which regions are becoming increasingly interested. However, the policy responses that currently exist at the regional level vary considerably, starting with the way in which regions are currently governing and organising their policy action in favour of eco-innovation.

In this context the ECREIN+ project was launched by European Union, in collaboration with 11 regions from 8 countries, to facilitate the exchange of good policy initiatives implemented at the regional level to support eco-innovation and eco-businesses.

The main idea was to understand how regions can better support the policy cycle when it comes to the identification of targets, the design and choice of policy tools, and the assessment of the effectiveness of these tools. Regions, in fact, can take on four different types of roles in the support of eco-innovation, depending on their competences and the local institutional framework: play a role as consumer (e.g. energy and implementation of energy saving activities, green public procurement); be local producers and supplier of services & utilities (e.g. heating and energy solutions); play a role as regulators, setting standards and local laws; play a role as a motivator and facilitator, inspiring and supporting the adoption of eco-innovative practices.

Eco-innovation policy in a broader understanding aims at creating favourable conditions for innovative activities and not only at the establishment of new technological paradigms or scientific breakthroughs. The turn to eco-innovation in regional policy is complemented by a discovery of the region as an appropriate unit for innovation policy design and delivery. According to both policy paradigms, regions are regarded as starting points for European and national eco-innovation policies and for regionally designed measures, in which top-down as well as bottom-up approaches both pursue growth-oriented and balance-oriented policy targets.

7.2. Types of regional governance schemes in ECREIN+ regions

As a complex policy challenge, support for eco-innovation requires a coordinated approach, most notably between innovation, research and environmental policies. Implementation of eco-innovation policies has to be done in close collaboration between

different measurements and the levels of policy delivery following a common vision and a set of objectives and a strategy shared by all concerned stakeholders (Huber 2008).

In order to understand how eco-innovation policy action is governed, a survey among EU Regions put in evidence that the governance of eco-innovation policy action within regions is highly fragmented, among several regional services. Further, regions seldom have a specific service or person responsible for the oversight of eco-innovation related actions. This can be considered to be normal to the extent eco-innovation is a highly cross-cutting theme which touches upon a number of 'traditional' policy areas such as the environment, health, housing and territorial planning, innovation, economic development. legislative competences of regions are often limited, whereas, regions generally have higher responsibilities when it comes to providing funding and planning for eco-innovation related programmes or policies.

Furthermore, the cross cutting nature of eco-innovation has, indeed, different organizational locations and almost never a dedicated office or specific organizational label. This characteristic is very relevant because it may generate dispersion or difficulty in integrating strategy and actions related to eco-innovation thus building many organizational silos and niche that sporadically face eco-innovation matters. Also the creation of specific agency for boosting innovation and economic development is increasing, as through the creation of "task specific" organizations.

7.3. ECREIN + Regional platforms: an example of innovative eco-innovation governance at the regional level

The ECREIN+ methodology was built upon the implementation of regional eco-innovation platforms by partner regions. Platforms were drawn from the experience from the ECREINetwork project. They generally include representatives of both the private and the public sector, able to deal with issues regarding the development of innovation, eco-innovation, eco-businesses' operation and specific difficulties of SMEs. Each contact partner was in charge of the leadership of its platform, as well as of the organization of biannual meetings with their platforms.

Regional eco-innovation platforms established as part of the ECREIN+ project proved to be a very useful instrument in the organisation of regional policy action in favour

or eco-innovation. Platforms provide a means for regions to gather relevant private and public stakeholders around the same discussion table. This provided the opportunity to steer regional efforts in support of eco-innovation, and provided input to the ECREIN+ project during its lifetime. A number of partner regions will keep their regional platforms even after the project has reached its end.

Despite the fact that platforms were built using a similar a approach, regional platforms in reality took on diverse forms. This depended on the type of institution supporting it, but also on the local context. Some platforms are already institutionalized and autonomous, while others are very concentrated on the regional territory, and are functioning as a laboratory for the design of common policies, or focused on the dissemination of information.

7.4. Regional strategic frameworks for eco-innovation

Regional approaches to the promotion of eco-innovation also vary. To a primary level, eco-innovation may be promoted through a dedicated framework or overarching strategy; to a secondary level, it can be promoted, without a structured strategy of reference but only through specific actions and sectorial targets, for instance belonging to environmental, or entrepreneurial or research sector. Except for few cases, respondent regions privilege the latter.

Regions have not adopted a specific eco-innovation development strategy. Eco-innovation instead is sometimes referred to within broader regional innovation strategies, or European cohesion funds operational programs. However, given the high level of fragmentation of eco-innovation governance and the high number of stakeholders usually involved in the implementation of eco-innovation support policy action, it would appear that the adoption of strategic guidelines specifically focused on eco-innovation would be essential.

We can refer to some examples of how regions define their strategic guidelines in favour of eco-innovation: the Uppsala Region in Sweden has no specific strategic framework for eco-innovation; it is comprised in a more general and comprehensive regional development strategy and also in organizational terms eco-innovation is pursued both by environmental strategy plans and enterprises strategy plans; the Ile de France

Region in France covers innovation through its Regional Innovation Strategy, which deals with innovation as a whole; the Rhône Alpes Regional Council does not have a dedicated strategy for eco-innovation, but adopts actions/tools implemented by services in charge of the environment, health and energy.

The analysis of current eco-innovation strategic frameworks in ECREIN+ partner regions raises a significant question regarding the relevance of adopting an exclusively focused eco-innovation strategy vs. integrating eco-innovation into regional economic or generic innovation development strategies. As shall also be seen in the section on existing policy instruments, while eco-innovation can be promoted by the use of generic innovation, environmental protection or economic development strategies, it is nevertheless important for regions to develop strategies exclusively aimed at supporting eco-innovation. This is mainly due to the fact that the eco-innovation process requires taking into account needs, dimensions and issues that are not always present in traditional innovation, technological or economic development processes.

7.5. Implications from Regional Policies

As demonstrated by the ECREIN+ project, eco-innovation needs are increasingly finding a reflection in the regional innovation agendas. This is well in line with the expectations of the European Commission which defines eco-innovation as an essential tool in the pursuit of resource efficiency, competitiveness and job creation1. Furthermore, eco-innovation is called to be at the core of the regional innovation strategies as a cross-cutting requirement across all sectors.

Existing regional policy responses in support of eco-innovation vary considerably, starting with the way in which regions are currently governing and organising their policy action in favour of eco-innovation. The diversity of eco-innovation support governance schemes is linked to the diversity of political-administrative responsibilities among European regions.

The governance of eco-innovation policy action within regions is highly fragmented among several regional services, and among different stakeholders. Regions seldom have a specific service or person responsible for the oversight of eco-innovation related actions. This can be considered to be normal to the extent eco-innovation is a highly cross-cutting

[1] European Commission, 2011, Regional Policy Contributing to Sustainable Growth in Europe 2020.

theme which touches upon a number of 'traditional' policy areas such as the environment, health, housing and territorial planning, innovation, economic development.

Regional eco-innovation platforms established as part of the ECREIN+ project proved to be a very useful instrument in the organisation of regional policy action in favour or eco-innovation. Platforms provide a means for regions to gather relevant private and public stakeholders around the same discussion table.

Regions have generally not adopted a specific eco-innovation devel](opment strategy. Eco-innovation instead is sometimes referred to within broader regional innovation strategies, or European cohesion funds operational programmes. However, given the high level of fragmentation of eco-innovation governance and the high number of stakeholders usually involved in the implemenation of eco-innovation support policy action, it would appear that the adoption of strategic guidelines specifically focused on eco-innovation would be essential.

Eco-innovation policy support can come in a number of shapes and forms. This diversity of approaches is illustrated by the policy goals of the different types of the instruments being implemented by public authorities. While some policy initiatives are designed based on a sectoral apporach (e.g. environmental goods and services sector), other policies my taken on a technology-based (e.g. electric vehicles), processes-based (e.g. environmental management) or target-based approach (e.g. SMEs).

Regional authorities can use several types of instruments to promote eco-innovation. The choice of policy instruments implemented by regions must be made on the basis of regional priorities, targeted outcomes and local economic/environmental trends.

Regions can use traditional 'innovation' support policy instruments (or generic innovation support instruments) to support eco-innovation. However, more effective eco-innovation policy instruments are designed specifically to take in to account the specificities of this particular type of innovation (environmental dimension, additional risks, social impacts).

8. Recommendations, suggestions and conclusions

Open Alps is a project aimed at encouraging the adoption of Open Innovation practices among SMEs, by breaking the traditional assumption that "innovation requires control and protection", and overcoming the difficulties related to the fact that SMEs can belong to different industries and have really different cultures.

Furthermore, there are potential opportunity deriving from the social and environmental domains, which are relevant for every social actor (included SMEs), and which may constitute a more fertile ground for an Open Innovation system to be established, as these are non-competitive domains, since they focus on value creation rather than value appropriation.

The key factor considered under this perspective are the Open Innovation paradigm, the Small and Medium Enterprises domain, and Social and Environmental Innovation.

Analyzing different practices which partially include the considered elements, we focused on the fundamental role of the network facilitator, putting in evidence that it could be the appropriate vehicle for promoting Open Innovation, with respect to the following conditions:

- The facilitator has a long standing relationship based on trust with each member of the network;
- The facilitator is a third party with regard to the members (not a competitor);
- The facilitate fosters a progressive degree of autonomy of the network.

Thus, at an initial stage, even leveraging on non-competitive, value creation-oriented issues like society and environment may constitute a suitable initial step for encouraging SMEs toward OI.

Furthermore, our analysis put in evidence that OI can grow if adequately supported by public institutions, both at national and at regional level. In particular, the implementation of dedicated platform encouraging knowledge sharing, enhancing debate on crucial issues, and connecting actors working on related fields, can represent an opportunity for accelerating OI processes and fostering a positive loop. Consequently, the adoption of systematic and interconnected policies from Regional and local institution can

work as a powerful stimulation of OI among SMEs, obviously if implemented with the necessary instruments for granting participants the conditions required for a successful knowledge exchange.