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**Stakeholder engagement to set up tourism offer:  
university-business collaboration in Marche Region**

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# Content

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS.....	5
LIST OF FIGURES.....	6
LIST OF TABLES.....	6
1. INTRODUCTION.....	7
1.1. Thesis overview.....	7
1.2. Background context.....	8
1.3. Theoretical framework.....	11
1.3.1. Stakeholder engagement theory.....	11
1.3.2. The role of Universities.....	13
1.3.3. Stakeholder engagement in rural areas.....	13
1.3.4. Focus on post disaster situation.....	15
1.3.5. Focus on tourism promotion.....	15
1.3.6. Focus on food tourism.....	16
1.4. Research Gap.....	16
1.5. Research Question.....	17
1.6. Methodology.....	18
1.7. Limitations and Contribution of the Study.....	18
2. MEDITERRANEAN DIET AS A LEVER FOR PLACE BRANDING: SOME INSIGHTS FROM THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE.....	20
2.1. Introduction.....	20
2.2. Theoretical framework.....	21
2.2.1. The Mediterranean Diet, Much More than a Diet: A Lifestyle Shared by Mediterranean Countries.....	21
2.2.2. The Development of Research on the Mediterranean Diet, from Ancel Keys to Modern Days.....	22
2.2.3. A Long Process towards an International Acknowledgement.....	23
2.2.4. The Food Pyramid.....	25
2.2.5. Mediterranean Diet as a Driver for Tourism.....	27
2.3. Case studies.....	29
2.3.1. Case Studies on Linkages between Mediterranean Diet and Tourism.....	29
2.4. Conclusions.....	33
3. THE ROLE OF FOOD AND CULINARY HERITAGE FOR POST-DISASTER RECOVERY: THE CASE OF EARTHQUAKE IN THE MARCHE REGION (ITALY).....	34

3.1.	Introduction .....	34
3.2.	Background context.....	35
3.2.1.	Geography and economy .....	35
3.2.2.	Promotion .....	36
3.2.3.	Gastronomic products.....	37
3.2.4.	The 2016-2017 earthquakes.....	38
3.2.5.	The aftermath of the earthquakes: demographics and economy.....	39
3.3.	Theoretical framework .....	39
3.3.1.	Post-disaster recovery approaches.....	39
3.3.2.	The role of community involvement in pre-disaster planning and post-disaster recovery.....	40
3.3.3.	Innovation in the aftermath of a natural disaster .....	41
3.3.4.	The role of food in post disaster recovery .....	42
3.4.	Methodology.....	44
3.5.	Case studies .....	45
3.5.1.	The background context .....	45
3.5.2.	Characteristics of the five e-commerce companies studied.....	47
3.5.3.	The people and groups involved.....	49
3.5.4.	The timing of the creation of the initiatives and trends in turnover .....	49
3.5.5.	Perceptions about community involvement.....	50
3.5.6.	The role of food and wine tourism in post-disaster recovery .....	50
3.5.7.	Long-term goals of e-commerce initiatives .....	51
3.6.	Discussion and Conclusions .....	52
4.	<b>REDUCING THE GAP BETWEEN ACADEMICS AND PROFESSIONALS IN GASTRONOMY TOURISM SECTOR: SOME INSIGHTS FROM AN ENTREPRENEURIAL DISCOVERY PROCESS IN MARCHE REGION .....</b>	<b>56</b>
4.1.	Introduction .....	56
4.2.	Theoretical framework .....	57
4.2.1.	The Local Contribution of Universities.....	57
4.2.2.	Relations between universities and industries .....	58
4.2.3.	Creation of bridges .....	61
4.2.4.	Co-creation in rural areas .....	63
4.3.	Background context.....	64
4.4.	Methodology.....	66
4.5.	Findings .....	69
4.5.1.	First group .....	69

4.5.2. Second group .....	70
4.6. Discussion and conclusions .....	71
5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS .....	73
REFERENCES .....	75
Bibliography .....	75
Websites .....	84

## **ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS**

CIISCAM Centro Interuniversitario Internazionale di Studi sulle Culture Alimentari Mediterranee

EDP Entrepreneurial Discovery Process

FAO Food and Agriculture Organization

HEIs Higher Education Institutions

ISC International Student Competition

ISTAT Istituto nazionale di statistica

LEADER Liaison Entre Actions de Development de l'Economie Rural

OECD Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

S3 Strategies for Smart Specialisations

SCS Seven Countries Study

UBC University-business cooperation

UNDP United Nations Development Program

UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNISDR United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 University of Macerata collaborations (Source: own elaboration).....	9
Figure 2 Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (Source: <a href="http://www.oldwayspt.org">www.oldwayspt.org</a> ) .....	26
Figure 3 Piceno Lab of the Mediterranean Diet Logo (Source: <a href="http://www.laboratoriodietamediterranea.it">www.laboratoriodietamediterranea.it</a> ) .....	30
Figure 4 Logo of Eco-museum of Pollica (Source: <a href="http://www.ecomuseodietamediterranea.it">www.ecomuseodietamediterranea.it</a> ) .....	32
Figure 5 Marche Region gastronomic products by category (Source: Qualigeo, 2018).....	37
Figure 6 Triple and Quadruple Helix model (Source: adapted from Carayannis and Campbell, 2009) .....	60
Figure 7 FOODBIZ Logo (Source: <a href="http://www.foodbiz.info">www.foodbiz.info</a> ) .....	65

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Summary of literature review (Source: own elaboration).....	17
Table 2 Data of the respondents – *all data for 2016 refer to the months of November and December (Source: own elaboration) .....	48
Table 3 Programme of the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process event of the FOODBIZ project (Source: FOODBIZ, 2019).....	68

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Thesis overview

This research project is the result of the collaboration between the University of Macerata, the Marche Region and the company Andreani Servizi. This thesis is an attempt to contribute in terms of research and development to these three subjects. Some conditions have influenced the drafting of this thesis, its implementation, improvement and change.

First of all, the University of Macerata is placed in a rural context in which it tries to collaborate and cooperate with several local actors that operate there, and this PhD fully expresses the results, being a collaboration between three subjects from different fields. Andreani Servizi has expressed its interest towards an academic contribution to develop a tourism branch of the company.

Moreover, the collaboration at local level has allowed the knowledge of external subjects that have become themselves case studies as they are represent potential assets for territorial development in line with the key issues of this thesis.

Finally, some events that occurred in the Marche Region, in particular the earthquake that hit the inner areas in 2016 and 2017, contributed to the choice of some cases rather than others.

This thesis is a collection of three papers and was designed on the basis of territorial needs that emerged during these years and tries to understand how the Marche Region can face the post-earthquake scenario, using food and wine tourism as a resource for local recovery and what role the University of Macerata could have in this development process.

The first paper is part of an article published during these three years of PhD: “Mediterranean Diet as a Lever for Place Branding: Some Insights from the Italian Experience” co-author with the supervisor of this research. It focuses on the Mediterranean Diet, the studies that have taken place on it and the recognition of UNESCO in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Following a historical excursus, the Mediterranean Diet is considered as a driver for the promotion of local tourism, in particular in the Fermo area, analysing, through a comparative case study, the case of the Piceno Lab of the Mediterranean Diet.

The second paper analyses the role that stakeholders can play in a post-disaster phase. In fact, following the earthquake that struck the Marche region in 2016, a number of e-commerce initiatives were launched for the sale of food and wine products in order to boost the local economy. The aim of this specific research was to understand if this type of initiatives are sustainable in the long term, if the involvement of local actors and the promotion of food and wine products can be useful for the

recovery phase. For this purpose, a qualitative research carried out through in-depth interviews with managers and owners of these e-commerce companies, is presented.

Finally, the third paper focuses on the third mission of universities and their relationship with stakeholders in the areas where they are embedded in a regional development perspective. Specifically, the concept of quadruple helix is investigated through data collected via a participatory approach, with the to understand the role that the University of Macerata can play in its territorial context.

## **1.2. Background context**

The Marche Region is located on the side of the middle Adriatic Sea and occupies about 9,365.86 km<sup>2</sup> of Italian territory; to the west the region is limited by the Umbrian-Marche Apennines, to the north by Emilia Romagna Region and to the south by the Abruzzo Region. It has a characteristic form of irregular pentagon and develops mainly longitudinally from north-west to south-east.

The Marche Region has been ranked by the Australian publisher Lonely Planet as the second best international region to visit in 2020. Below there is a description that contains some of the most evocative peculiarities of the region:

*Sandwiched between the Apennines and the Adriatic coast, this hilly region boasts a string of exquisite provincial towns. Probably one of the reasons for its great charm is to be able to explore calmly, and in relative solitude, majestic Roman ruins, towering Gothic architecture, massive medieval castles and sublime Renaissance palaces that house art collections among the richest in Italy. All enclosed between high wooded mountains and the tranquil Adriatic coast and seasoned with delicious gastronomic festivals (Lonely Planet, 2019<sup>1</sup>).*

Simply reading these words it is possible to evince the richness of the resources present on this territory that in the course of this thesis are described more in-depth.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see the website: [www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)



The University of Macerata<sup>2</sup>, a university with a humanistic vocation founded in 1290, is located in this territorial context. The University defines itself as entirely focused in the field of human sciences and social sciences and aware of the role it plays in building the future of the younger generations and in the relationship with the city and the territory. The figure below represents a small part of all the collaborations that have been started since about 10/15 years ago.



Figure 1 University of Macerata collaborations (Source: own elaboration)

Each relation represented an attempt to bring a contribution to the territory and an added value for the University, local businesses and citizens.

For the purposes of this dissertation there are some crucial cooperation activities that are worth to be mentioned.

In 2014, through participation in the Urbact programme under the “Gastronomic Cities” project<sup>3</sup>, the University of Macerata comes into contact with the Laboratorio Piceno della Dieta Mediterranea (Piceno Lab of the Mediterranean Diet), a local association located in the province of Fermo, whose objective is to enhance the Mediterranean Diet as an eco-system and lifestyle of a territorial community, through initiatives, meetings, events, which allow to rediscover the essence of a territory rich of culture and traditions. The collaboration with this association has led over time to the organization of the International Student Competition<sup>4</sup> (ISC) on Place Branding and Mediterranean Diet, focused on the knowledge and promotion of the Mediterranean Diet. The ISC is an experiential learning opportunity for university students from all over Europe. It consists of a full week of immersion in a stimulating and multicultural context with lectures in suggestive places, meetings and dialogues with local producers, visits to farms, tastings and cooking classes. Every

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see the website: [www.unimc.it](http://www.unimc.it)

<sup>3</sup> More details in the next chapter. See the website: [www.urbact.eu/gastronomic-cities](http://www.urbact.eu/gastronomic-cities)

<sup>4</sup> For more details, see the website: <http://www.laboratoriodietamediterranea.it/it/international-student-competition-2019>

day Social Media are used to contribute to the promotion of the Marche Region. Each of these activities is useful for the purposes of the final competition: students, divided into teams with mixed provenance, have to work to provide sustainable, original and innovative territorial action plans, based on the needs of the territory and the issues underlined by companies that have been visited during the lessons.

The objectives of the International Student Competition are:

- to understand the connections between gastronomy, events and promotion of a place;
- to understand the potential of food and gastronomy for sustainable development;
- to develop skills to handle the challenges of managing a tourist destination;
- to understand the potential of ICT for activities promoting the territory;
- to discover the Italian culture, lifestyle and culinary art.

In addition, in the last three years, the University of Macerata has been awarded with two European projects as coordinator. The first one, “The Wine Lab – Generating innovation between practice and research” project, co-funded by Erasmus+ (Knowledge Alliances) Programme, started on 01/01/2017 and ended on 31/12/2019. The project<sup>5</sup> addresses the problem of isolation and lack of learning and networking opportunities for small wineries located in disadvantaged areas.

The second one, “FOODBIZ – University and business learning for new employability paths in food and gastronomy” project, co-funded by Erasmus+ (Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices Strategic Partnerships) Programme, started on 01/11/2017 and ended on 31/10/2019. The project<sup>6</sup> aims at promoting acquisition of relevant skills and competences related to employability in higher education students through their active involvement in community learning activities.

These collaborations and projects are an example of how University of Macerata is fully involved and integrated in the local entrepreneurial fabric, careful to territorial needs and ready to act with the aim of co-create local development.

In 2016, the inner areas of the Marche Region were hit by the earthquake, causing architectural, cultural and economic losses. This caused a state of emergency at territorial level by mobilizing all actors in the area to help local businesses and people in the recovery phase after the earthquake. As regards the economy of the Region, after the earthquake, services, utilities and construction, public administration and agriculture have suffered major downturns, probably because these are the sectors that have been most affected by the earthquake. At tourist level, despite a worrying start that

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<sup>5</sup> For more details, see the website: [www.thewinelab.eu](http://www.thewinelab.eu).

<sup>6</sup> For more details, see the website: [www.foodbiz.info](http://www.foodbiz.info).

recorded a -72% of bookings for the year 2017 compared to the same period of 2016, also thanks to the tourism promotion campaign put in place by the Region, incoming flows remained constant.

### **1.3. Theoretical framework**

#### **1.3.1. Stakeholder engagement theory**

The concept of stakeholders in economic and business terms began to be studied around the middle of 1980. In 1984 Freeman defined an organization's stakeholder as "any group or individual who can influence or be influenced by the achievement of the organization's aims". This is a fairly broad definition compared to some that have been elaborated later by other authors, as it may potentially refer to multiple categories of stakeholders. Over time, the meaning attributed to the term is perfected, until it is defined as an individual who can bring new contributions, skills and critical resources to a company (D'Alessandro, 2005). Freeman, following various studies on the subject, in one of his publications, examines in-depth the concepts he has already dealt with and brings a more articulated meaning to the figure of the stakeholder, defining him as a participant in the human process of creating shared value. The task of a company is to integrate and manage the relationships and interests of all actors in the selected field (shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, communities) in order to ensure the long-term success of the company (Freeman & McVea, 2001). Stakeholder involvement in a company's decision-making processes becomes a strategic component as a result of the globalisation of markets and the emergence of new social and environmental challenges, and is also interpreted by many scholars in the literature.

Furthermore, in 1984 Freeman discussed engagement as a form of corporate governance, for which stakeholder access to the decision-making process is considered important and fundamental, strengthening the voice of their interventions. The concept of stakeholder engagement has been studied in different areas (political, economic, financial, social, etc.) by other authors, such as Deegan (2002), who developed the topic by observing how it can be considered a continuous learning by a company that is able to learn and improve thanks to the contribution of stakeholders; Krick *et al.* (2005) assert that an effective stakeholder engagement process not only enables leadership to be secured in a changing and complex environment, but also to develop systematic change towards sustainable development.

Power (2004) explores the concept of social construction on the basis of which the stakeholder is able to build and keep alive the image of the company. In this sense, the stakeholder is able to work in a group acquiring trust (Owen *et al.*, 2000) and strengthening a cooperation based on it (Greenwood, 2007).

Many other authors have dwelt on the topic, underlining, through various theories, how important involvement of actors is in order to acquire new inputs and improve performance both within the company and beyond, but always referring to decision-making processes. In fact, despite the presence of conflicting voices of different groups of stakeholders, the debate and dialogue generates new perspectives and ideas (Kavaratzis, 2012).

In 2007, the International Finance Corporation published a manual (Sequeira & Warner, 2007) in which it provides a definition of who stakeholders are and what they bring to society: people or groups that are directly or indirectly involved in a project or simply interested in it with the ability, moreover, to influence its outcome, both positively and negatively. They may be represented by local communities or individuals, national or local government authorities, politicians, religious, civil society organizations and interest groups, the academic community or other businesses. In this sense, the participation of the local community can also be seen as a practice of stakeholder engagement. This type of participatory approach, whereby citizenship is seen as a modern tool for development and improvement, is also called the bottom-up approach, as opposed to the top-down approach. The top-down approach directly descends from the normative managerial marketing gaze, which tends to subject places to the tactics and strategies of commercial marketing practices and aims to identify a set of stakeholders located at the top administrative level (usually national or local government bodies) and ascribes them the decisional capacity (Goulart Szejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017). By contrast, bottom-up approaches take their starting point in a specific domain, e.g. local region or a societal sector, engaging stakeholders as an important part of the methodology, and thus tend to include attention to local or sector-specific knowledge (Nilsson *et al.*, 2017).

While in a top-down approach, citizens and local communities are primarily treated as passive recipients or reluctant ambassadors of a largely ‘monolithic’ place branding strategy, a bottom-up approach empowers local communities who are able to articulate a vision for their place, thus giving them more autonomy in shaping more inclusive place brands (Goulart Szejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017).

A bottom-up approach therefore gives a voice to citizens, to local partnerships, so they can express themselves and participate directly and personally in the development guidelines of the territory, according to their vision, expectations and projects. In the literature there is a general tendency to accept this type of approach, this idea of development. Barke and Newton (1997) state that endogenous development is a process of local social mobilisation that directs the different interests expressed by the community towards the achievement of common objectives, with particular regard to the development of local capacities, in terms of work and skills, through a locally agreed strategic planning process. For this reason, community engagement is essential to the success of

development programs (Clarke, 1998). According to Ray (2000) “local development acquires an ethical dimension, emphasizing the principle and process of local participation in identifying and implementing actions and adopting environmental, cultural and community values in development interventions”.

### 1.3.2. The role of Universities

As mentioned above, the involvement of the academic sphere is also important for the development and growth of a territory. In the last 20 years, the university has changed the way it conceives its role in a territory, going beyond the ‘first mission’ of teaching and the ‘second mission’ of conducting basic research (Trencher *et al.*, 2013). With Clark in 1998 the concept of ‘entrepreneurial university’ is seen as an ‘engine of economic growth’ with both government and academic pro-entrepreneurial partners, a higher priority is the general opening up of the research and development processes of companies through new models of open innovation (Reichert, 2019). Furthermore, the Triple Helix model (Leydesdorff & Etzkowitz, 1998; Leydesdorff, 2000) has been developed, which consists of a collaboration between academia, industry and government. These three actors cooperate for the exchange of knowledge and the creation of value; they work together at territorial level in order to provide a contribution to the development of the territory. It is a balanced configuration, specific to the transition to a knowledge society, in which university and other knowledge institutions act in partnership with industry and government and even take the lead in joint initiatives (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

In contrast to the third mission where civil organisations are absent from many triple-helix or university discourses. One of the reasons for universities giving engagement and collaboration with external–industry–government partnerships (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2006): in the new role, universities may actively seek the participation of a broad range of non-specialists and civil society (Trencher *et al.*, 2013). The involvement of civil society brings to the evolution of the Triple Helix: Quadruple Helix. In this model societal based innovation users are seen as potentially being involved in a co-creational manner (Miller *et al.*, 2018). Such direct involvement of users in the innovation process is a necessary organizational counterpart to an open and user-centered innovation policy as it allows for a greater focus on understanding the underlying consumer needs (Foray *et al.*, 2012).

### 1.3.3. Stakeholder engagement in rural areas

This way of cooperating involving the local actors of a territory began to be observed in depth around the 90s by the European Commission with particular attention to rural areas. It is the

bottom-up approach characterising the Community instrument LEADER<sup>7</sup>, launched by the European Commission in 1991: a privileged approach for experimenting the new opportunities offered to the rural world. Before launching the programme in 1988, in the document *The future of the rural world*, the European Commission argues that “the diversification of rural economies must be based, more than in the past, on the enhancement of endogenous development potential” and that “rural development actions must be designed on the basis of local realities”. The aim is, in fact, to promote a local approach, based on integrated, multi-sectoral and innovative territorial strategies and a participatory approach that sees the involvement and cooperation between local partnerships and citizenship.

According to the Principles on Urban Policy and the Principles on Rural Policy, stakeholders are defined as persons or groups who are directly or indirectly affected by urban and rural policies, as well as those who may have interests in it and/or the ability to influence its outcome, either positively or negatively. They may include locally affected communities or individuals and their formal and informal representatives, national or local government authorities, elected representatives, regulators, agencies, civil society organisations and groups with special interests, end users, the academic community, utilities and other businesses (OECD, 2019).

A pooling of resources and capabilities across entities creates the ability to collectively accomplish what no individual actor can achieve independently. This demands the collaboration and engagement of government at multiple levels, and involvement of the private sector (for-profit firms and social enterprise) and third sector (non-governmental organisations and civil society). Building capacity underpins the implementation of rural policy. Long term capacity building makes rural communities more engaged in processes of development and more resilient to shocks (OECD, 2018).

Thus, cooperation offers the chance to reach both a critical mass in favour of network members and assets diversity. Diversity is useful to favour mechanisms of resilience which are deemed fundamental to regional development (Pasquinelli, 2013). In fact, successful organizations are often those that are able to effectively foster cooperation with stakeholders—understood as interdependent actions that benefit both parties or the relationship between them that partners receive more or less equal benefit from cooperation (Bundy *et al.*, 2018).

Thus, it is evident that stakeholders engagement and cooperation makes possible to gain knowledge about other stakeholders, acquire new skills and share ideas which, in turn, fosters understanding of

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<sup>7</sup> LEADER, an acronym for *Liasion Entre Actions de Developement de l'Economie Rural*, promotes the endogenous and sustainable development of rural areas. It is based on the so-called “bottom-up” approach and focuses on the LAGs (Local Action Groups consisting of a public-private partnership) which have the task of developing and implementing a pilot, innovative, multi-sectoral and integrated development strategy at local level (Verrascina *et al.*, 2015).

regional problems and allows for generation of new and innovative solutions (Nieżgoda & Czernek, 2008).

#### 1.3.4. Focus on post disaster situation

According to the United Nations International Strategy for Risk Reduction (2009) a disaster is defined as a “serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources”. After these events the disaster-affected territory needs an inclusive approach that seeks to proactively reduce the risk of disasters occurring and to minimize the negative consequences for human lives and economic activities (Becken & Hughey, 2013). Successful plans for local disaster recovery must necessarily involve all the local stakeholders of the affected area (Mileti, 1999). The involvement of local actors can help to improve the quality of decisions taken in post-disaster situations (OECD, 2013).

#### 1.3.5. Focus on tourism promotion

In rural areas, tourism is considered to be a strength that can lay the basis for new products and services to generate rural prosperity and well-being (OECD, 2018). It is the fastest growing business, which increase foreign investments and earnings (Daneshpour & Pajouh, 2014). It boosts the rural economy and, in particular, provides opportunities for rural communities to directly benefit from tourism by creating a value added commercial channel for local produce (Falak *et al.*, 2016). Within a rural area it is important to consider the people who live there on a daily basis. Local actors are stakeholders of a region who want their businesses to be successful and viable; their primary work is many times associated with tourism (Bitsani & Kavoura, 2014). In fact, tourism involves many local actors as there are relationships between several economic sectors in a territory: accommodation, catering, tourist accommodation, shops, tourist attractions, etc. However, also medium-small enterprises play a significant part in tourism development (Goeldner, 1980). The coordination of all these local activities is necessary for a territorial planning at marketing and communication level of the destination and its distinctive features in order to avoid conflicts within the place and to allow an exchange of different ideas (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2008). In general, for the tourist development of a territory and a long-term planning, the coordination and cooperation between local actors is crucial. In communities with successful tourism, cooperation, coordination and joint efforts are fundamental to solve problems that may prevent maintenance or growth of tourism (Goeldner, 1980). In particular, the involvement of public and private sectors is

important in the planning of a tourist destination in order to gather consensus and converge the strategies of companies and institutions towards the same goals (Presenza & Cipollina, 2010).

#### 1.3.6. Focus on food tourism

A tourist niche in rural areas is that of food and wine. There are local products that reinforce the perceived sense of “territorial identity” by local consumers and they are produced by small and passionate entrepreneurs (Belletti *et al.*, 2007). Since the maximum satisfaction from such specialties can only be gained in situ, visitors are willing to spend more and go directly to the place of production so as to enjoy not only the product but also the place of origin and everything that is around it (Sidali *et al.*, 2015). Consumers are fascinated by the cultural dimension of a product that involves the manner in which typical products express the mentality and life of the people living in a certain area (Rinaldi, 2017). This is confirmed by the fact that, in recent decades, food and wine products have been considered an attraction for many places and destinations, thus binding to them and being perceived as a form of brand identity (Lyn *et al.*, 2011).

However, although the relationship between food and tourism is at first glance evident, this needs to be integrated into a local economic development strategy in order to ensure an economic return for all actors involved. One of the strategies that allows this, is the connection between local stakeholders, people and institutions to create trusts, new linkages and more efficient exchanges (Hall *et al.*, 2004).

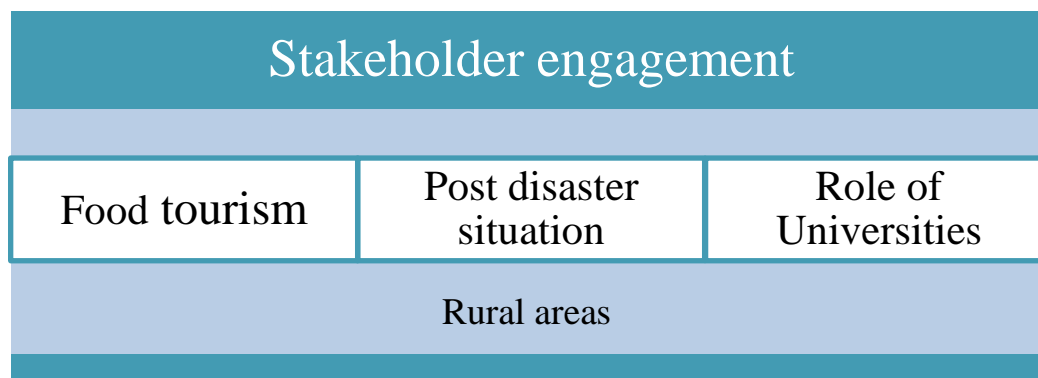
This literature therefore summarises the importance of involving all the actors who work in a territory: from the academic world to businesses, from citizens to local government. These stakeholders working together can ensure the development, improvement and management of a territory, even at the touristic level. This cooperation can be important and efficient, especially in rural areas, where those who live the territory on a daily basis are able to identify its needs and requirements, and then act on them. In addition, the focus was on the management of post disaster situations and the importance and connection between food and tourism as key sectors of rural areas.

### **1.4. Research Gap**

According to the literature review, better exposed and developed within each paper, it is possible to summarize the concepts as in the following figure:



Table 1 Summary of literature review (Source: own elaboration)



The basic literature focuses on the concept of stakeholder engagement and the importance of connecting all the actors who operate in a territory, in order to collaborate and cooperate for local development. The context in which this issue has been addressed is that of rural areas as it conforms to the territory in which the University of Macerata is located.

Three themes are introduced in a transversal way: the stakeholder engagement in a post-disaster situation, using food tourism as a driving force for territorial recovery and the role that universities could cover to help the local development.

This PhD thesis identified a precise research gap. Despite the literature on stakeholder engagement has been widely debated, the relationship between the three transversal themes is not deeply detailed. In fact, on the basis of the background literature, it seems that the role that food and wine tourism can play in a post-disaster situation has not been adequately codified and conceptualised. Furthermore, there are limited empirical evidences on the role that universities can have in these processes of rural development. The research tries to give some answers to this problem.

### 1.5. Research Question

In the light of the literature review and with respect to the needs and problems that emerged in the Marche Region context, this thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

#### *The Main Research Question*

What is the benefit of stakeholder engagement in a territory affected by a natural disaster? And what role does the University play in this process?

#### *Sub Research Questions*

1. Can the Mediterranean Diet be a driving force to increase the reputation of a rural destination?
2. Is food and wine tourism useful for the local recovery process after a natural disaster?

3. Do the post-earthquake e-commerce businesses represent a long-term sustainable activity for territory recovery?
4. What role can the University of Macerata play in local development?

## **1.6. Methodology**

The thesis aims to answer research questions using a qualitative methodology. In detail:

- In the first paper the study will take the form of a qualitative comparative case study to understand which actions are necessary to improve an association that aims to promote the Mediterranean Diet and use it as a driving force for local tourism.
- The second paper investigates the involvement of local stakeholders and the sustainability of post-earthquake e-commerce through qualitative interviews conducted with five e-commerce companies.
- The last paper tries to understand the role of the University for local development through a focus group that took place during an “Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP)<sup>8</sup>” event.

## **1.7. Limitations and Contribution of the Study**

It is important to set the boundaries for this study, given the scale and level at which the analysis will take place. The small number of interviewees and representatives from the selected organisations may raise concerns. However, time restrictions, geographical location and participation rates impacted volume of data.

The research was born, in part, in the light of some events that occurred in the reference context, the Marche Region. The post-disaster situation did not help in the collection of data, as it will be discussed in the second case study, since it is a difficult context to manage, without clear support and organization from the public sector. It was therefore not easy to find a substantial number in order to conduct the interviews. At the same time, in the last case study, the number of respondents depends on the people who participated in the event in which the focus group took place.

Therefore, overall, the results gained cannot be generalized.

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<sup>8</sup> The EDP is an “inclusive and interactive bottom-up process in which participants from different environments (policy, business, academia, etc) are discovering and producing information about potential new activities, identifying potential opportunities that emerge through this interaction, while policymakers assess outcomes and ways to facilitate the realisation of this potential” (For more details see: <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/entrepreneurial-discovery-edp>).

Moreover, the thesis does not claim to fill the gaps in the literature, precisely because the data collected cannot be generalized, trying to make a useful contribution in the issues addressed, through the analysis of some case studies.

## **2. MEDITERRANEAN DIET AS A LEVER FOR PLACE BRANDING: SOME INSIGHTS FROM THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Around mid-1950s, given the lack of thorough research and attention on nutrition, some researchers felt the need to find the causes for it and try to provide appropriate solutions. The American biologist Ancel Keys carried out several studies and researches that helped to discover the benefits that the diet followed in some Mediterranean countries and known as the Mediterranean Diet could have on health.

Mediterranean Diet is definitely more than a simple diet, as it can be described as a lifestyle shared and developed by different populations and cultures, based on the consumption of three main food elements, the famous trio grains, oil and wine, on eating on moderation, conviviality, traditions and on economic and environmental sustainability. In 2010, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized and confirmed the Mediterranean Diet as an “Intangible Heritage of Humanity”, which belongs to the Mediterranean region and in particular to Italy, Morocco, Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Croatia and Portugal.

According to recent cross-country research, food and cooking have become one of the main factors affecting tourists’ decision in their choice of holiday destinations, which led to a type of tourism called “food tourism”. In some cases, tourists plan tasting sessions of local food products and wine as the main activity of their holidays. The new trend therefore represents an opportunity to leverage the promotion of local food and non-food products and, especially when considering this, it should be encouraged and developed in every aspect, be it cultural, environmental, artistic and gastronomic ones.

The Mediterranean Diet can become a tourist “magnet” and a driver to build value offers, in which food and cuisine represent the expression of the culture and lifestyle of Mediterranean countries, in particular of Italy.

In the Italian region of Marche, in the town of Montegiorgio, the Piceno Lab on the Mediterranean Diet was established and started to develop its activities in 2014. It was in this small town that Ancel Keys first carried out his studies on the healthy benefits of the Mediterranean Diet and it is therefore an area recognized as of high scientific importance. In the latest years, the Lab has developed projects to promote and add value to the region and to the Mediterranean Diet, thus turning the area of Fermo province into an increasingly more attractive tourist destination.

In other Italian cities, the Mediterranean Diet is actually used to develop local tourism and several experiments have been carried out which led to rewarding results and acknowledgements.

The aim of this paper is to describe the main characteristics of the Mediterranean Diet, linking them to the drivers for the tourist promotion and economic development of a region.

## **2.2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.2.1. The Mediterranean Diet, Much More than a Diet: A Lifestyle Shared by Mediterranean Countries**

The Mediterranean Diet can be defined as a lifestyle developed in the countries of the Mediterranean region, thus going beyond the meanings usually given to the word “diet”; it is a much more complex concept, rich in tangible and intangible values and aspects. The Mediterranean Diet is a typical way of living that communities, groups and individuals have in common or that makes them different from each other.

The pairing of the two terms “Mediterranean” and “Diet” has become increasingly more interesting in the eyes of researchers and institutions: the Mediterranean Diet has become an increasingly popular social and cultural icon mainly in the Western culture. The term “diet” comes from the Latin word *dieta*, which comes from the Greek *diáita*, which translates as “way of living”, “lifestyle”. According to the Greeks, *diáita* was the research for balance and it was not just a matter of food but above all of human relations. There are many added meanings that can help understand how this “lifestyle” was lived:

- “place”, “home”. It is therefore the place where we feel home, in our natural environment, and where we feel free to live and experiment;
- “rule”, thanks to which we can “rule” our body and manage our behaviour.

Despite the fact that the Mediterranean Diet is nowadays a lifestyle adopted in other countries, when we talk about the original Mediterranean Diet we mainly refer to the lifestyle patterns followed in the countries of the Mediterranean region. The adjective “Mediterranean” does not refer only to its geographical meaning as it has a broader meaning: it is an idea, a concept, a land full of representations including myths and reality, a word incorporating traditions and innovations (Reguant-Aleix, 2012).

An important part of the variety and richness of the Mediterranean Diet is due to the urban dynamics developed in Mediterranean cities, made of products, techniques, traditions and habits: small towns but gathering a multiplicity of cultures, each one marked by its own experiences and features. Today, more than ever, those cities owe their visibility and that of the region they belong

to, to the Mediterranean Diet: a unique way of living that, on the one side, led local people to grow their self-esteem and develop a peculiar sense of identity, and, on the other side, helped to create a dialogue and therefore a better promotion of the manufacturing and service industry, thus improving the reputation of an area as a major tourist destination for travellers.

### 2.2.2. The Development of Research on the Mediterranean Diet, from Ancel Keys to Modern Days

For a strange coincidence in history, the Mediterranean Diet was “discovered” in 1951 by an American researcher, Ancel Benjamin Keys, who worked as a biologist and physiologist. Despite the fact that the dietary pattern was already widespread and known in the Mediterranean region, Keys made it famous, coining the definition “Mediterranean Diet” and acknowledging the importance it is given today.

He was not just among the first researchers to show the direct connection between dietary patterns and cardiovascular diseases, but discovered and devoted his personal and professional life to spread the lifestyle he was struck by. He studied the subject using an interdisciplinary approach, including sociology, anthropology, economics, agronomy and biology.

In 1951 Keys was invited by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to attend a congress in Rome on nutrition in Europe and nutrition conditions after World War II, resulting from the poor economic conditions and shortage of raw resources created by war. Here, he talked about his studies and compared them with those of a doctor from the University of Naples, Gino Bergami, an Italian physiologist, thus discovering a huge difference between the health conditions of an average American worker and a worker from Naples. The paradox was that the latter, even though not benefitting from the same economic conditions of an American worker, had a life expectancy far longer than the former. The diet of the Italian worker was mainly based on fruit and vegetables, in addition to bread, pasta, fish and very little meat, compared to the American’s. The evidence was that the man’s heart was clearly healthier thanks to those elements (Moro, 2014).

Those researches are part of the largest epidemiological study in history, the Seven Countries Study, that discovered the quality of the Mediterranean Diet.

The Seven Countries Study was one outcome of a prospective study started by Ancel Keys in Minnesota in 1947 including the following countries: former Yugoslavia, Italy, Greece, Finland, Netherlands, United States of America, Japan. Dr. Keys brought together researchers from all over the world to study their joint questions about heart and vascular diseases among countries having varied traditional eating patterns and lifestyles and to understand any connection between them.

As a result of some informal surveys carried out between 1952 and 1957, the first three stages of the study were developed:

- 1958-1983, epidemiological study on heart and vascular diseases;
- 1984-1999, epidemiological study on healthy aging;
- 1960-2000, was launched the Zutphen Study, a survey to collect yearly risk factor data for the inhabitants of the town of Zutphen, Netherlands.

The Seven Countries Study showed that high serum cholesterol levels, blood pressure, diabetes and smoking are major cardiovascular risk factors. Dr. Ancel Keys, together with his Italian colleague, Dr. Flaminio Fidanza, who helped him carry out several surveys and studies in the town of Montegiorgio, in the province of Fermo, as well as other colleagues involved in the SCS played a key role in the acknowledgment, definition and promotion of the diet they studied in Italy and Greece between 1950s and 1960s, today known as the Mediterranean Diet. Later on, Dr. Keys coined the definition “Mediterranean Diet”, in 1960, in his lab at the University of Minnesota.

Keys is still considered a great scientist who had a great influence on the way of studying and thinking of physicians and scientists, but above all on the way of thinking of entire humankind on one of the most important everyday-life problems, the way and what we eat, what we call “diet”.

### 2.2.3. A Long Process towards an International Acknowledgement

Since 1950s, studies and surveys have been carried out about the connection between health and the dietary patterns followed by people. In 1960, one of the first large-scale studies (Cresta *et al.*, 1969), analysing the elements of the diet followed in the Mediterranean region, was carried out. In 1970, Ancel Keys published his book *Coronary Heart Diseases in Seven Countries*, in which he analysed the different dietary patterns followed in the seven countries that had been included in the abovementioned Seven Countries Study and highlighted the differences among them.

In 1988, as a result of some international congresses, the first official documents were released by journals such as the “European Journal of Clinical Nutrition” and the “American Journal of Clinical Nutrition”, which discussed and highlighted the connection between the Mediterranean Diet model and the average life expectancy of the people following it.

In the same years, a parallel European research project called Multinational Monitoring of trends and determinants in Cardiovascular disease (MONICA) discovered a connection between nutritional habits and cardiovascular conditions, highlighting a decrease in the death rate of people who followed the Mediterranean Diet model (Dernini *et al.*, 2012).

In 1996, the first international Congress on the Mediterranean Diet took place in Barcelona during which the *Barcelona Declaration on the Mediterranean Diet* was written, a document stating objectives and goals for healthy eating and emphasizing its cultural and historical qualities. The

Congress is now held every two years and selected contributions are published as supplements by the journal “Public Health Nutrition”.

The First Forum on Mediterranean Food Cultures took place in Italy, in Lamezia Terme, in 2002: nutritionists and food anthropologists reached a new joint understanding of the Mediterranean Diet as a unique cultural heritage to be preserved among the people living in the Mediterranean region. In 2005, the Third Forum on Mediterranean Food Cultures was organized where the participants agreed a shared definition of the Mediterranean Diet: a concept going beyond the simple meaning of the word “diet” as it can be regarded as a balanced lifestyle, a life model in which daily exercise plays a key role.

In 2007, Italy, Greece, Morocco and Spain submitted a transnational application to UNESCO for the recognition of the Mediterranean Diet as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Almost four years later, on November 16, 2010, at the end of the long and complex application process managed by Professor Pier Luigi Petrillo, who was the author of the international report on the Mediterranean Diet, UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee recognized and included the Mediterranean Diet in the Representative List of Intangible Heritages of Humanity and as an heritage shared by four countries, namely Italy, Spain, Morocco and Greece. In November 2013, Cyprus, Croatia and Portugal were added to the group of countries that initially had proposed the inscription. Here following is the definition of this cultural heritage by UNESCO:

The Mediterranean Diet constitutes a set of skills, knowledge, practices and traditions ranging from the landscape to the table, including the crops, harvesting, fishing, conservation, processing, preparation and, particularly, consumption of food. The Mediterranean Diet is characterized by a nutritional model that has remained constant over time and space, consisting mainly of olive oil, cereals, fresh or dried fruit and vegetables, a moderate amount of fish, dairy and meat, and many condiments and spices, all accompanied by wine or infusions, always respecting the beliefs of each community (UNESCO, 2013<sup>9</sup>).

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<sup>9</sup> For more details, see the website: [www.unesco.it](http://www.unesco.it)



Furthermore, in 2010, UNESCO recognized as emblematic communities setting the example for the Mediterranean Diet the town of Pollica, in the Italian National Park of Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Monti Alburni, the town of Koroni in Greece, the town of Soria in Spain, and the town of Chefchaouen in Morocco; in 2013, the village of Agros, in Cyprus, the town of Tavira in Portugal and the Dalmatian islands of Brač and Hvar, in Croatia, were added to the list. Since their inscription in the list of UNESCO Intangible Heritages of Humanity, the emblematic communities started a close collaboration with each other to safeguard the Mediterranean Diet by setting up an annual calendar for meetings to be held.

In the designated countries, the consumption and compliance with the lifestyle connected to the Mediterranean Diet do not actually follow a set of standard requirements. The countries show some differences in the consumption of oil, wine or wheat, etc, and daily consumption of some other foods compared to others, which are certainly due to their different cultural traditions. An example is the feminine figure linked to wine as not in all the cultures women are allowed to drink wine. Dissimilarities in the habits of genders in the different countries are therefore something common as there are many factors affecting an area that are also an essential part of it. However, this does not imply that the those countries cannot represent the Mediterranean Diet in all its aspects as standards and rules have not been fixed but only simple habits have been identified for a healthy life (Turmo, 2012).

#### 2.2.4. The Food Pyramid

On November 3, 2009, during the 3rd CIISCAM (Centro Interuniversitario Internazionale di Studi sulle Culture Alimentari Mediterranee) International Conference “The Mediterranean Diet as a Model of Sustainable Diet”, the “Food Pyramid” was conceived by the Mediterranean Diet Foundation (MDF) and the Forum on Mediterranean Food Cultures: it was the result of discussions and dialogues on the evolution of the Mediterranean Diet by scientists studying the Mediterranean area and the representatives of international institutions.

The Mediterranean Diet can be explained using a pyramid chart like in figure representing the traditional model for foods to be eaten and the number of servings to be eaten each day/week. It is a model tailored to only a limited number of countries. Several pyramid diets for the Mediterranean Diet had been designed before this, but only for people living in Greece, Spain and Italy, according to their dietary habits. It would be incorrect or almost impossible to adjust the Mediterranean Diet pyramid to countries located in the Middle East and North Africa, mainly because they lack some of the typical foods used in the Mediterranean Diet as main ingredients.

The new Mediterranean Diet pyramid is meant as a food guide to all the people aged between 18 and 65 and takes into account the evolution of society and changes of the modern world; it highlights as vital elements daily exercise, the drinking of enough water, the consumption of local seasonal products, but above conviviality, sharing meals with others.

It is a diet characterized by a high consumption of unrefined cereals, fruit and vegetables at main meals. Daily consumption of olive oil is important, as it is the main added lipid. On the same shelf, there are spices, herbs, garlic and onion, which may replace salt thanks to their taste. At the centre of the pyramid olives, nuts and seeds represent the best food for a healthy, quick snack. Fish and seafood are recommended to be eaten less frequently while small quantities of eggs, poultry, legumes and dairy products (cheese and yoghurts) are to be eaten only a few times a week. The food pyramid shows a low consumption of red meat and meat products (only four times per month) and sweets (only on special occasions).

It is highly recommended a minimum amount of water of 1.5/2 litres per day and a moderate consumption of wine during meals, in particular red wine (3 glasses for men, 1.5 glasses for women), always in compliance with religious and social traditions.



Figure 2 Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (Source: [www.oldwayspt.org](http://www.oldwayspt.org))

Besides the abovementioned dietary guidelines, a healthy lifestyle is recommended with some key rules to follow (Dernini *et al.*, 2012):

- Moderation: in order to fight and prevent obesity, it is necessary to make moderate servings, taking into consideration a sedentary lifestyle.
- Conviviality: it is a very important aspect for the social and cultural value of a meal; cooking and sitting together to dine helps to create a sense of community.
- Cooking: it is an important activity requiring time; it can be done with family and friends to make it a relaxing and entertaining activity.
- Seasonality, biodiversity, eco-friendliness and local, traditional foods: all these are at the bottom of the pyramid to highlight how the Mediterranean Diet is compatible with the development of a sustainable diet model for present and future generations.
- Physical activity: it is an activity complementary to the diet and made on a regular basis (for example, 30 minutes a day) in order to keep a healthy weight.

#### 2.2.5. Mediterranean Diet as a Driver for Tourism

Despite of the fact that the Mediterranean Diet was recognized by UNESCO and other institutions as a cultural heritage to safeguard, we are slowly losing memory of it. It is therefore necessary to implement actions to promote the Mediterranean Diet and one way could be to turn it into a brand and a driver for tourism.

According to some statistical surveys carried out by the Italian Institute for Statistics, food consumption accounts for more than 33% of the money spent by tourists. This is the proof that food is becoming an essential element when choosing a holiday destination. “Food tourism” is a type of tourism that is actually becoming increasingly popular and its potential should not be underestimated, as it may help the promotion of a region that can exploit it.

The new habits of the average tourist and consumer therefore suggest that promoting a regional, traditional product or foods would certainly help to differentiate regions one from another, thus creating a niche “tourist attraction”. This type of tourism attracts those tourists who choose one place and not another thanks to its cultural characteristics that may turn the place into an attractive destination for other tourists. The product or experience offered can become a sign of identity, a “brand” to market for a type of tourism based on authenticity.

When a dish that is typical of a region is served, it certainly represents the culture, the environmental and economic conditions as well as the traditions of its place of origin and of the people who lived and still live there, which affected the processes of transformation and local nutritional habits (Sfodera, 2015). In order to make visitors understand all this, it is therefore necessary to go beyond the food theme, making them discover the peculiarities of a region that are not just food specialities.

Can the Mediterranean Diet become a driver for tourism in Italy?

Data collected by National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) show that 75% of the household expenditure on food of Italian families includes products belonging to the Mediterranean Diet, with a slightly higher percentage in Southern Italy compared to Northern Italy. This is a sign that families are willing to spend money for products included in the Mediterranean Diet. There is therefore a clear interest in the products of the Mediterranean Diet from the point of view of food consumption and it is worth understanding what relationship can be built with tourism (Barcherini & De Martino, 2015).

How it is possible to create a tourist offer connected to the Mediterranean Diet?

The starting point should certainly be improving the image of the Mediterranean Diet, as to make it immediately connected to Italy.

When taking into account the data on the increasing popularity of food tourism in Italy, it is clear that the promotion of the Mediterranean Diet as a brand, as a product identifying Italy, represents a great opportunity. However, in order to turn the Mediterranean Diet into a driver for tourism, a designed offer needs to be created, a tourist product including all the aspects characterizing the Mediterranean Diet.

What has been said so far has certainly to do with the Mediterranean Diet because it goes beyond dietary patterns and nutrition and because tourists are not attracted just by food, so it is worth going deeper into the matter.

The Mediterranean Diet can be described as including all the reasons that drive tourists to choose a particular destination: food, traditions, culture, wellbeing. All those are elements certainly representing Italy too, some of which (such as food and wine) certainly represent a competitive advantage over other countries.

The Mediterranean Diet, which represents a cultural experience linked to local traditions, is a tourist “magnet” and a driving force to build value offers, in which food and cuisine represent the expression of the culture and lifestyle of Mediterranean countries (Sfodera, 2015).

It is made of traditions, culture, wellbeing, natural simple food typical of a region and it has the ability to preserve, express and create valuable stories.

When a product, in this case a food product, is enriched with its cultural aspect, it starts to be perceived as a brand.

The Mediterranean Diet, when turned into a unique cultural experience connected to local traditions, can therefore become an important tourist “magnet” and a driver for value offers. The “marriage” between the Mediterranean Diet and tourism may represent the realization of what many foreign tourists really love about Italy, the “Italian lifestyle”.

The “Italian lifestyle” is a group of factors that may help to create a complete tourist offer: and experience-based, travel-based tourist offer combining events and food fairs as well as environmental and cultural elements, with consumers being a part of it, and the expression of a healthy and wellbeing dietary model.

However, to set off the Mediterranean Diet in Italy, the value of the food tourism market and more in general of tourism must be recognized, using what is available, promoting it and balancing resources for the good of future generations.

However, some research (Da Silva *et al.*, 2009) discovered a peculiar oddity: some countries (Iran, United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Canada, Australia and USA), which are not Mediterranean countries, seem to be closer to the Mediterranean Diet when compared to the countries designated by UNESCO, which in time have moved away from their traditional dietary patterns. The research wanted to observe the average food consumption of some Dutch students compared to Greek ones.

This means that if products that usually come from Mediterranean countries are imported and used, any country has the opportunity to know the basics of the lifestyle proposed by the Mediterranean Diet and turn it into a tool creating tourism inflow, focusing on the exceptional nature of the phenomenon in this case, as it is something non-traditional (Palma & Padilla, 2012).

## **2.3. Case studies**

### **2.3.1. Case Studies on Linkages between Mediterranean Diet and Tourism**

In this section we analyse two case studies that will help to understand how it is possible to turn the Mediterranean Diet into a brand to promote a particular region or geographic area and its characteristics.

The first case study is about an association operating in Italian region of Marche, whose aim is mainly to promote and spread the knowledge about the Mediterranean Diet, thus turning it into a driver for tourism. It is the Piceno Lab on the Mediterranean Diet, which the University of Macerata learned about thanks to the project called “Gastronomic Cities”: the University participated in the project as a part of the URBACT II program, which lasted from December 1, 2013 to March 31, 2015. The aim of the project was to transfer the good practices for the development of a cooking and food culture, implemented in the town of Burgos, to the four towns collaborating in the project: Fermo (Italy), Alba Iulia (Romania), Korydallos (Greece) and Hospitalet (Spain).

The attention was focused on the area of Fermo, more precisely on Montegiorgio, a town that played a key role in the discovery of the Mediterranean Diet. The town has a direct link with

Professor Flaminio Fidanza, who worked in close collaboration with the American physiologist Ancel Keys: in 1950s, they together started the research that later lead to the aforementioned Seven Countries Study. To carry out their research they involved Montegiorgio and Marche region, the Italian region that have the longest average life expectancy in Italy<sup>10</sup>. The Mediterranean Diet was therefore discovered and fully identified with the culinary culture, the lifestyle and the healthy environment of the valleys at the foot of the Sibillini Mountains (Siliquini, 2013).

The Piceno Lab on the Mediterranean Diet<sup>11</sup> is the fruit of the vision of some local experts and was established with the following purposes:

- promoting the foods that are the basic ingredients in the Mediterranean Diet, in particular with reference to the production chains related to fruit, olive and vegetable growing and herbaceous crops;
- developing synergies aimed at advertising the Mediterranean Diet;
- developing training courses for food service workers aimed at the acquisition of skills, good practices and traditions related to the Mediterranean Diet, in particular with reference to food cultivation, harvesting, preservation, processing and consumption;
- carrying out medical-scientific research on the adequacy index of Marche population to the Mediterranean Diet, on the cooking methods and the combinations of foods included in the Mediterranean Diet;
- promoting, informing and advertising the main characteristics and features of the Mediterranean Diet in the schools of any level;
- rediscovering, recovering and promoting old traditional dishes and recipes related to the Mediterranean Diet.



Figure 3 Piceno Lab of the Mediterranean Diet Logo (Source: [www.laboratoriodietamediterranea.it](http://www.laboratoriodietamediterranea.it))

<sup>10</sup> The MEV(i) 2017 report assigns to Marche region one of the lowest indices of avoidable deaths, both for males and for females, calculated as the average number of days per year extracted from longevity due to avoidable deaths with good primary prevention and secondary. At the first place in the national men's standings we can find Marche region followed by Trentino A.A.; in the female's one we can find Veneto at the first place followed by Trentino A.A. and Marche in third place. For further information see <http://www.mortalitaevitabile.it> (consulted: 25 November 2019).

<sup>11</sup> The first two founders were the journalist Adolfo Leoni with the hygienist Dr. Lando Siliquini, author of the book *Dieta Mediterranea, il Tempio della Sibilla*. Then, Paolo Fogliani, former Director U.O. of the Center for Diabetology and Clinical Nutrition in Fermo, added in the group, as well as Mario Liberati, a local historian.

The founding members of the Lab are people working in different industries: they are town mayors, health care professionals specialized in medicine and diabetology, tourist entrepreneurs and workers, psychologists, restaurant owners and chefs, historians and archaeologists, journalists and researchers.

The first event the Lab organized was the First “Fiera delle Qualità” (Fair on Qualities) in Montegiorgio, on November 30, 2014, held inside an Augustian convent. Other events were later organized involving local agri-food producers as well as regional and national conferences for the promotion of the Mediterranean Diet. The Lab also participated in regional fairs such as “Tipicità in the City”, and national fairs, such as Expo 2015, where it was hosted in the Slow Food pavilion.

Last but not least, it is worth highlighting the relation the Lab has developed with the University of Macerata, as already mentioned above. The dialogue between the two, which was developed as a result of the Gastronomic Cities project in 2014, led to a permanent collaboration with a group of stakeholders who have in common the fact of being members of the Laboratorio Piceno. Thanks to this close collaboration, in early May 2016, the first International Student Competition was held, with a new edition organized in 2017 in the areas of Fermo province (Campofilone, Fermo, Montegiorgio, Petritoli and Amandola). It is a competition among students aimed at developing the best communication strategies to communicate the genuineness of the land and traditions of Fermo area, using cutting-edge technologies. About 80 students and professors from Italian and foreign universities (Belgium, Czech Republic, Norway, Poland, Spain, Sweden) participated in both editions. Trattorias, restaurants, tourist resorts and B&Bs were involved as hosts for the participants. The competition week included lessons and conferences held by international scholars in several theatres, hands-on activities to know the area including visits to local food producers, entertaining and promotional activities based on the food and wine heritage of Marche region, tasting sessions, live cooking sessions, meetings and workshops with public and private local stakeholders, dinners with traditional dishes and folk events in old villages and towns.

It was therefore an event developed with the aim of studying the Mediterranean Diet and its benefits, studying place branding, becoming familiar with the region and learning how to promote it thanks to its food and wine traditions.

This case study is a model replicable in other places, in particular in those whose traditions and food culture can be identified with the Mediterranean Diet lifestyle.

Pollica, one of the seven towns recognized as an emblematic community of the Mediterranean Diet in the UNESCO list, is also a clear example of this. The town is located in the Southern province of Salerno, in the heart of Cilento area, and is actually regarded as the world capital of the

Mediterranean Diet as it was exactly there, in the fishing village Pioppi, that the American physiologist Ancel Keys lived and studied there for over 40 years. An eco-museum was established thanks to the Italian environmental organization Legambiente in collaboration with Pollica town council, the National Park of Cilento, Vallo di Diano and Alburni and other local stakeholders in order to tell and promote the special characteristics of the area linked to the Mediterranean Diet.



*Figure 4 Logo of Eco-museum of Pollica (Source: [www.ecomusedietamediterranea.it](http://www.ecomusedietamediterranea.it))*

The “extended museum” tries to link to each other all the tangible and intangible aspects included in the culture on which the Mediterranean Diet is based; it is a “territory characterized by traditional living environments, a very important natural, historical and artistic heritage that must be preserved, restored and promoted”. According to its creator, the archaeologist Huges De Vareine, the Eco-Museum<sup>12</sup> is based on three concepts very different from each other: heritage, territory and tourism. It is a cultural hub going beyond the physical building of a museum, as it includes the territory and the community thus leading visitors to have a first-hand experience of the Mediterranean Diet. Inside the Museum building there are rooms dedicated to Ancel Keys and his discovery, a sensory room and Key’s personal book collection. In addition to this, seven workshops are organized for both adults and children. Besides the activities directly linked to the Museum, a sustainable project for the promotion of tourism was implemented: there are trails (including some bike trails) inside the Park along which it is possible to observe indigenous and wild-growing plants used in the Mediterranean Diet. The Eco-Museum of the Mediterranean Diet is also a very creative hub for events: bills for events related to the Mediterranean Diet, meetings with specialized chefs; the participation in the week of the Mediterranean Diet; trips to UNESCO headquarters in Paris to spread the knowledge about the local excellences of Campania region; events organized in collaboration with the Italian association Slow Food; international events organized in collaboration with other emblematic communities of the Mediterranean Diet. Moreover, the Eco-Museum website

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<sup>12</sup> For further information see <http://www.ecomusedietamediterranea.it> (consulted: 25 November 2019).



is constantly updated with news about the activities organized, the events and the bills to which it is possible to participate and general news to promote awareness on the Mediterranean Diet.

Those two case studies therefore show that the Mediterranean Diet can become a tool through which a region can promote itself, involving all the local stakeholders operating in the food and wine industry and tourism industry more in general. It can definitely become a brand through which the story of a place is told.

## **2.4. Conclusions**

In the light of the foregoing arguments, the Mediterranean Diet, considering all its aspects, lifestyle characteristics, traditions, economic and environmental sustainability, can be directly linked to the countries of the Mediterranean area, their people and cultures. Italy in particular was the country where the first research was carried out to acknowledge and give a clear definition of this diet.

However, as it is a multidimensional concept including not only food, but also any aspect of reality, we have the privilege and opportunity to turn the Mediterranean Diet into a national brand, so that anybody can link it directly to Italy.

The identification of Italy with this brand can certainly boost tourism, above all in less-known areas of Italy that are not so often promoted on brochures and visited by tourists.

Tourism can be an essential tool to support the efforts made in Italy, both at political, social and economic level, to give greater national and international visibility to the Mediterranean Diet. It is also a way to relaunch the image of Italian tourism and of Italy more in general, without indulging on the clichés Italy is usually associated to. It is therefore essential to give credibility and support the tourism industry, making the most of all its potential.

In order to make this happen, however, initiatives and strategies must be designed and developed aimed at creating events that can promote and give value to all the aspects of the Mediterranean Diet, such as the creation of tours and travel packages including food and wine products, hospitality, culture and traditions, environment and any other aspect characterizing the region that is meant to be set off.

### **3. THE ROLE OF FOOD AND CULINARY HERITAGE FOR POST-DISASTER RECOVERY: THE CASE OF EARTHQUAKE IN THE MARCHE REGION (ITALY)**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

When natural disasters occur, they cause emergencies that are often very hard to manage, both economically and socially. According to the European Commission Staff Working Document 2017, “Overview of Natural and Man-made Disaster Risks the European Union May Face”, floods, storms and earthquakes cause the greatest economic damage. In particular, earthquakes can dramatically impact communities, infrastructures, the economy and the environment, in limited areas or across large regions. In the last twenty years, a number of major earthquakes caused important economic losses across Europe (Italy in 2003, 2009, 2012 and 2016; Spain in 2011; Greece in 2014 and 2016).

When these events occur, the whole economic fabric of a territory has to be restored by rebuilding infrastructures and buildings, but equally important, by focusing on the human resources rooted in the territory. In those cases, a strategy promoting sustainable development could be useful to face the emergencies and restore the economic and social life of the affected areas.

In a post-disaster situation, an excellent recovery strategy could be, not only identify actions for medium-to-long-term recovery, but also plan for ways to gain feedback on and evaluate these efforts, so that lessons can be learned for future prevention and planning strategies for the improvement and development of both a tourist destination and its member companies (Ritchie, 2009). In addition, a successful local recovery plan involves the members of the local communities (Mileti, 1999), because they are more familiar with the territory they live in and its features, can help in governing the conflict between citizens and administrations and can gather ideas and define development priorities (Wilson, 2009).

One of the sectors immediately affected by a crisis is the service sector, and when tourist destinations are struck by a natural disaster, local tourism-related businesses are very vulnerable to failure (Santana, 2004). Earthquakes are particularly devastating because, unlike such events as typhoons or hurricanes, they occur with no warning and tourism activities cannot be closed in advance (Ghimire, 2015). As tourists generally plan their trips in advance and travel a long distance from their home, the sudden disruption may leave them stranded without accommodations, meals, or transportation. To solve this problem, it is essential to have a tourism strategy that can be implemented even in emergencies like these.

In October 2016, the Marche Region in central Italy was hit by a series of devastating earthquakes that caused serious architectural damage, forcing thousands to abandon their homes and entire towns to be declared off limits, as well as very significant environmental damage, with major disruption of rivers, streams, and springs, lowering of land levels. The extensive disruption and resulting instability led to an economic recession. In response, the local, regional and national government as well as individuals and groups in the private sector set into action many initiatives. One of the first actions taken by communities, small enterprises, municipal governments, institutions and non-profit associations was to set up e-commerce companies to sell local food and wine products to support farms and businesses affected by the earthquake. Before this event, e-commerce activities in the Marche Region were not particularly developed. Thus, this disaster became the opportunity to make a virtue out of a necessity, the most immediate tactic for the resolution of several problems faced by local farms, shops and businesses.

This paper explores some of these initiatives undertaken by local actors and the importance of food and wine tourism in the recovery phase of the Marche Region. First, it sketches the distribution of economic activities pre and post-earthquake to provide the background context. Second, a brief review of the literature points to the importance of engaging local actors in the development of a territory and the role that food and wine tourism can play during the recovery phase. Third, it analyzes several initiatives in the post-earthquake period in the Marche Region aimed at setting up online sales of typical food products, to allow buyers to express their solidarity and support with concrete purchases. It looks at how community involvement and social support from outside can help the territory recover and assist in the development of the tourism sector.

## **3.2. Background context**

### **3.2.1. Geography and economy**

The Marche Region is located in central Italy, *bordered by Emilia-Romagna and the Republic of San Marino to the north, Tuscany to the west, Umbria to the southwest, Abruzzo and Lazio to the south and the Adriatic Sea to the east.* Its economy has long been based on the production of handicrafts, food and wine, and it is characterized by a high proportion of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), organized in industrial clusters that operate mainly in such traditional sectors as furniture, musical instruments, shoes, paper, leather goods and wine and food (Potter *et al.*, 2010). Their innovative activity is mostly informal and linked to the constant interaction between suppliers and producers (Ciffolilli, 2014).

According to the European Commission's Regional Innovation Scoreboard 2016, the Marche Region is a "moderate innovator," though innovation performance decreased strongly between 2014 and 2016 (-11%). The relative strengths in the regional innovation system were "employment in knowledge-intensive industries", "exports of medium and high-tech products", and "SMEs innovating in-house".

### 3.2.2. Promotion

The Marche Region rural development program for the period 2014-2020 views the rich historical and architectural heritage throughout the territory, some also known internationally and, much of it, in rural areas, as a prime resource to be valorized. The rural development program includes initiatives to increase the attractiveness of these areas for artistic-cultural tourism in order to bolster local and thus regional development (Regione Marche, 2017).

Nevertheless, for the most part, "The Marche region is hardly known outside Italy. One of the reasons might be the understated attitude of its population, which is characterized by being hard working, but less interested in promotion" (Potter *et al.*, 2010; p. 31). The paradox is that even though the Marche Region is home to excellent "Made in Italy" products known worldwide, such as Tod's or Church shoes, these brands are generally not known to be from the Marche Region (Rinaldi & Cavicchi, 2016a). As for tourism, in 2015, the Marche Region recorded 2,384,750 tourist arrivals and 12,735,174 overnight stays (Regione Marche, 2015), compared to 113,400,000 arrivals and 392,800,000 overnight stays throughout Italy (ISTAT, 2016).

Tourist demand in the Marche Region is strongly seasonal, mainly linked to seaside holidays. In fact, fully 68.4% of tourists (both Italian and foreign) come to enjoy the seaside, while far fewer visit to see the cities of art (16%) or enjoy the mountains (9.5%). The main reason for choosing the Marche Region is the expectation of finding a hospitable environment (47.3%) and a good quality/price ratio for the goods and services offered (32.5%); other reasons indicated are its reachability and local mobility (31.4%), a varied cultural offer (21.7%), a quality food and wine offer (21.2%), entertainment opportunities and good organization (Pennacchioni, 2016).

The regional government's promotional campaign, like those of other Italian regions, seems to be mainly based on the so-called "Marche" brand, a plural representation that seems to encompass the numerous excellences. However, promotion of coastal and mountain areas seems fragmented and fails to propose activities that connect these two territorial areas. In addition, "various and different isolated initiatives in the Region over the years have probably lacked the consistency of message that should characterize long-term communication campaigns" (Pennacchioni, 2016). This aspect

could be a disadvantage for the Region, since it is not able to communicate a single message that differentiates it from other more famous Italian regions such as Tuscany or Umbria.

### 3.2.3. Gastronomic products

In the food and wine sector, the Marche Region does not have one specific product that characterizes the territory, but a bundle of typical products of the local tradition, which are also common to other Italian regions in central Italy, and thus it is difficult to identify one key product representative of the Marche Region. The Marche Region has 16 gastronomic products registered as PDO, PGI or TSG and 21 such wines; in the whole of Italy, there are 299 such gastronomic products and 526 wines (Qualigeo, 2018).

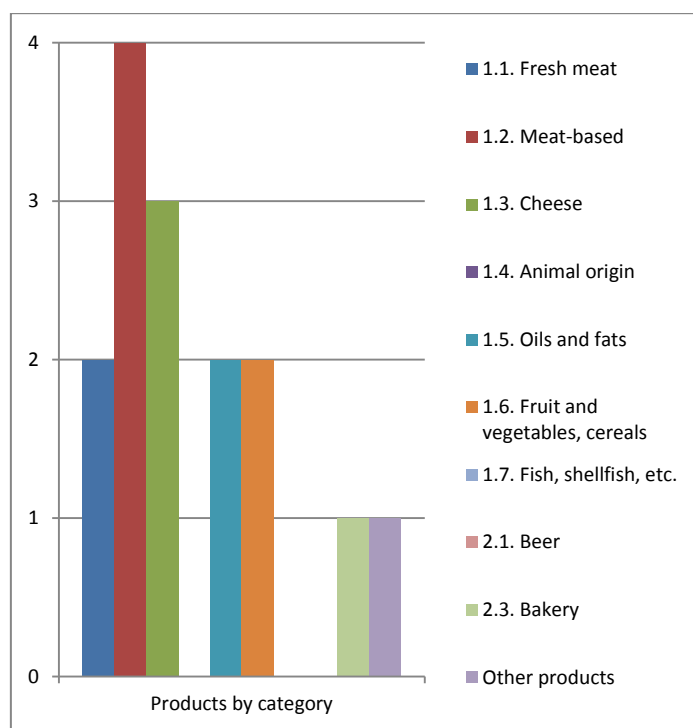


Figure 5 Marche Region gastronomic products by category (Source: Qualigeo, 2018)

Among the most important products are Ciauscolo PGI, a soft, spreadable variation of traditional salami, Lenticchia (lentil) di Castelluccio di Norcia PGI, Oliva Ascolana del Piceno PDO and Olio Marche PGI. These products are very famous locally but not well known outside the Region.

In addition to these certified products, there are 152 other products registered by the Marche Region, some of which are very well known locally: Mele Rosa of Sibillini Mountains (a kind of apple), the Pecorino of Sibillini Mountains (a local sheep's cheese), the Cicerchia of Serra de' Conti (a cereal), the Fabriano Salami, the Lonzino di Fico (a cake) and the Mosciolo of Portonovo (a particular kind of mussel). The Slow Food Association has launched specific projects to promote

these products, establishing ten presidia for the preservation of the products and economic development through their production and sale (Slow Food Association, 2019).

In addition, in order to enhance and protect the many excellent agricultural and food products of the territory, for some years the Marche Region has been using the regional brand “QM – Guaranteed quality from Marche Region”. The QM brand, after having obtained approval from the European Commission in 2005, became fully operational in 2006 with the publication of the first production specifications. Currently, over 1,500 producers are part of the “QM circuit,” with more than 60 certified products, 15 approved specifications, 2 transposed regulations and 5 authorized control bodies (Regione Marche, 2017).

Though the Marche Region is little known abroad, it offers a very attractive bundle of gastronomic products, a great many of which hold certifications of origin and quality, and counts a significant number of stakeholders involved in promotion of their food and wine products and related tourism.

#### 3.2.4. The 2016-2017 earthquakes

Between August and October 2016 and then in January 2017, a series of devastating earthquakes hit the Marche Region, Lazio and Abruzzo, causing great personal suffering, destroying whole cities, forcing the population to leave their homes and live in temporary solutions in other cities or even regions. It was a terrible shock in human and economic terms, destroying the historic and social fabric of the inland part of the Region.

In the Marche Region, the first strong earthquake struck on August 24, causing a state of emergency in the municipalities of Acquasanta, Arquata, Montegalzo, Montemonaco, Montefortino, Amandola and Castelsantangelo sul Nera. On October 26 and 30 there were three other strong earthquakes, causing the collapse or severe damage of many public and private buildings and infrastructures, in particular in the provinces of Macerata, Fermo and Ascoli Piceno. Thankfully, those last two earthquakes did not cause victims. Fully 42% of the Marche Region (3,978 km<sup>2</sup>), was affected by earthquakes. The national government designation of the “crater” zone of earthquake damage indicated 131 municipalities, 80 of which are in the Marche Region. In addition to those 80, another 90 outside the official crater reported damage.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, the Italian government provided temporary housing for 31,714 people in 2,896 hotels (Regione Marche, 2017). About one billion euros were allocated to the Region by national and international bodies such as the European Union, the Italian Government, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism, the National Autonomous Roads Corporation and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development. This money has been invested to rebuild schools and health facilities, restore public works, protect the

environment and deal with hydrogeological instability, help businesses start again, repair roads, restore buildings and sites important for the cultural heritage and promote the territory and tourism. In each municipality inspections have been carried out, rubble have been removed and emergency housing modules, stables and barns have been built and occupied. Three years after the earthquake they are starting to renovate houses and buildings. All these reconstruction works are still underway and the estimated time for their completion is at least 10 years.

### 3.2.5. The aftermath of the earthquakes: demographics and economy

Some data about population and economic activity in the Marche Region can help fill out this sketch of the background context. During 2017, the demographics of the Region underwent no unusual changes: there was a 0.4% decrease in the population. Compared to 2016 data, the economy of the Region in 2017 showed a higher share of employment in manufacturing and a lower share in services, utilities and construction, public administration and agriculture, probably because these are the sectors most affected by the earthquakes. However, despite this, 2017 saw a slight increase in in-house innovation by SMEs and in collaboration between them and other companies (European Commission, 2017).

Regarding the tourism sector, the Marche Region Councillor for Tourism and Culture stated that “the 2017 tourist season has been difficult, conditioned above all by the earthquake that hit the Region [...]. Despite a worrying start that recorded a -72% of bookings for the year 2017 compared to the same period of 2016, thanks to the tourism promotion campaign put in place by the Region, incoming flows remained constant. In the period January-September 2017, there were over 2 million arrivals (1,670,167 Italians and 348,532 foreigners), over 11 million and 400 thousand visitors (9,388,645 Italians and 2,037,588 foreigners). Compared to the previous year, there were - 4.89% arrivals and -0.10% of tourist overnight stays”.

## **3.3. Theoretical framework**

### 3.3.1. Post-disaster recovery approaches

The United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (2017) defines a disaster as a “serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic and environmental losses and impacts.” Natural disasters intimately affect processes of human development, and put economic growth at risk. In fact, the

development choices made by individuals, communities and nations can pave the way for unequal distributions of disaster risk (UNDP, 2004).

A natural disaster is followed by a phase of reconstruction of the damaged urban fabric. Recovery is the process of the restoring or improving the livelihoods and health, as well as economic, physical, social, cultural and environmental assets, systems and activities of a disaster-affected community or society, aligning with the principles of sustainable development and “build back better” to avoid or reduce future disaster risk (UNISDR, 2017).

It is very important for a community exposed to hazards to learn resilience, the ability to resist, absorb, accommodate, adapt to, transform and recover from the effects of a hazard in a timely and efficient manner, also through the preservation and restoration of its essential basic structures and functions through risk management (UNISDR, 2017). Resilience implies an ongoing process of adjustment, adaptation and renewal, which incorporates processes and actors at a variety of scales; it is not viewed as a return to normality but as a dynamic capacity to adapt (Halkier & James, 2017). The United Nations Development Program and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development published official reports analysing approaches for dealing with post-disaster situations, based on the direct experience of countries often hit by floods, hurricanes, earthquakes or other such disasters (UNDP, 2004; OECD, 2013). Their experts studied the reconstruction phases of some cities affected by natural disasters, identifying the approaches used to face the problems and analysing the actions and strategies implemented to rebuild infrastructure, culture, tourism and agriculture. In particular, they noted that because the tourism industry comprises many individual businesses, many of them small or micro businesses, from a wide range of sectors, as well as international, national, regional and local public sector organizations, an integrated approach to crisis and disaster management is required. In fact, as others have noted, local or regional plans need to be integrated with national level disaster and crisis strategies (Ritchie, 2004).

### 3.3.2. The role of community involvement in pre-disaster planning and post-disaster recovery

“Successful plans for local disaster recovery must necessarily involve the community” (Mileti, 1999). Stakeholders who will be affected by post-disaster decision-making have the opportunity to provide input to reduce conflict and aid the development of a plan that reflects local needs (Smith & Wenger, 2007). Such a bottom-up approach gives voice to citizens and local partnerships so they can directly participate in defining the development guidelines of the area, in accordance with their vision, expectations and projects.

According to the 2013 OECD report based on the earthquake experience in Abruzzo, community engagement and greater involvement of all stakeholders proved to be essential to improving the



quality of the decisions made in post-disaster situations. The report gave four reasons for engaging the community and working with members:

- community engagement can help in governing the conflict between citizens and administrations which is often amplified by the natural disaster (Wilson, 2009);
- it can facilitate overcoming the tension between short-term recovery decisions and long-term effects;
- community engagement can be a way to identify or strengthen leadership that can catalyse the development efforts;
- community engagement is useful in order to gather ideas and to define development priorities, because local people know the context in which they live.

When a community is economically dependent on tourism-related activities, there is the need to maintain a positive image of attractiveness for its survival and prosperity (Santana, 2004) through collaboration between different organizations, government departments, emergency personnel, media organizations and other stakeholders (Ritchie, 2004). In his model, Ritchie stressed that, before and during a disaster, emergency organizations are primary stakeholders, together with tourist organizations (including National Tourism Agencies, DMOs and industry associations) and tourism businesses; Ritchie suggested that after the disaster it might be useful for tourism organizations and businesses to take the leading role. In the aftermath of a natural disaster in such a community, cooperation between these stakeholders can be an excellent solution for managing what has happened. Other researchers reason that such a bottom-up approach empowers local communities to articulate a vision for their place and gives them more autonomy in shaping more inclusive place brands (Goulart Szejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017). In order to get involved and work together, the community needs to have a global vision of what its destination has to offer and work on this, to create a destination brand that is attractive to tourists.

In a post-disaster situation, those responsible for developing a recovery strategy need to think ahead about medium-to-long-term recovery, but also plan for ways to gain feedback on their efforts and evaluate them, so that lessons can be learned for future prevention and planning strategies. (Ritchie, 2009).

### 3.3.3. Innovation in the aftermath of a natural disaster

In their analysis of the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City, Bernan & Roel (1993) wrote that ‘crises bring about marked regressions as well as opportunities for creativity and new options’, because they create an opening for disruptive innovations. Even in non-crisis situations, innovation can be a form of creative destruction, in the opinion of Abernathy and Clark (1985). They stressed that the

essence of innovation is the use of new concepts in technology to forge new market linkages and meet the needs of the client and the surrounding reality.

More specifically, regarding the tourism sector, Hjalager (2002) stressed that in many cases, innovation can be attributable to the category of Niche in the Abernathy and Clark model, because it often tends to challenge collaborative structures, but not basic competences and knowledge. This is the case of the activation of small-scale tourism activities in connection with agriculture as well as the establishment of new marketing alliances, for example with specialised tour operators in order to access new customer groups. It is important to note that these effects tend to take place over a significant period of time and they require an organizational environment and managerial skills that support the pursuit of such goals (Abernathy & Clark, 1985).

The collaboration of tourism enterprises with emergency or disaster managers, to restore and rebuild tourism destinations affected by crises or disasters, provides an opportunity for change and transformation that can be viewed as positive in the long-term, especially if learning results from such collaborations (Ritchie, 2009).

#### 3.3.4. The role of food in post disaster recovery

Local food and wine often expresses the identity of a local community, consumers and producers alike. It is principally chosen because it forms part of ordinary food habits, and is mainly marketed through traditional, short distance circuits (Brunori, 2007). Food and wine can connect people of various ages, cultures, religions and social backgrounds; production of these resources is one of the oldest activities contributing to local development and growth (Cavicchi & Stancova, 2016). Typical products have a collective dimension, in the sense that producers collaborate with shops, distributors and other actors in the area.

The sale of local food and wine provides revenue for an area's producers, but its value does not end here. Regional leaders can exploit the uniqueness of the area's typical food and wine in defining the distinctive attractiveness of their area and developing its "brand," not only to improve marketing of local products abroad but also to promote food tourism in their area. Thus the branding and promotion of local products and destinations can serve to position local economies in a global world and support place development in a sustainable way (Rinaldi, 2017). In fact, a clearly defined gastronomic identity and heritage can be exploited in crucial processes of differentiation and rejuvenation, helping to convey a unique sense of place (Henderson, 2009). The benefits accrue not only on the regional, but also on the local level, as the promotion or 'valorisation' of culinary heritage can boost independent and collective initiatives in a process through which local action enhances the development of rural tourism (Bessi re, 1998).

In this context, local agricultural production and traditional food and wine can be used to promote the recovery of local identity and culture and help reinforce community pride. In particular, food and wine tourism is one of many tools a territory can use to drive sustainable development in post-earthquake recovery.

A successful collaboration can be formed when the food networks and tourism actors care about the best interests of the community, want to support it and create a brand image for it.

The case of the post-earthquake period in Christchurch, New Zealand, exemplifies how food can be fundamental to promoting resilience within the community. The community created spaces for sharing food and through this, socializing. The supply of local food can be used as a means of engaging communities in promoting resilience as well as supporting the idea of sustainable communities. Some entrepreneurs have been involved in order to promote community resilience. Berno, commenting on Morris' 2014 analysis of Christchurch, wrote: "ever since the earthquakes, there has been a real shift in public perception about where our food comes from, and now there is an unprecedented opportunity with so much land available for growing to become a truly food resilient city. Christchurch is uniquely placed to be a world leader in this area" (Berno, 2017, p. 153).

Of the many laudable post-disaster initiatives undertaken by individuals, food networks and tourism actors, some in response to the 2012 earthquake in Emilia Romagna and the 2016 earthquake in Amatrice, are particularly interesting.

The Emilia Romagna Region is famous for the production of Parmigiano Reggiano, which ranks among the top ten Italian quality foods in terms of turnover. The May 20, 2012 earthquake not only caused the deaths of 7 people and left about 5,000 homeless, but it also caused extensive structural damage to the Region's dairies and the cheese maturing warehouses; about 20% of all the 40 kg forms of Parmigiano Reggiano in the Region fell to the floor and were broken into pieces. Local producers and other people of the Region responded with novel initiatives. The night of the earthquake, writing on her laptop in her truck, the only safe place to sleep, one local cheese producer wrote an email to her 200 contacts and clients: "Everything has collapsed. We saved over 40,000 pieces of Parmigiano Reggiano. Please buy the pieces." Her appeal went viral and, within a month, she had received 15,000 responses from all over the world, which, unable to meet the volume of offers, she forwarded to other cheese producers in the area as well (Il Fatto Quotidiano, 2015).

In another initiative, Chefs Igles Corelli and Massimo Bottura, members of the *Cheftochef* association, which promotes Emilia Romagna's gastronomy throughout the world, raised funds from well-known restaurateurs to help the lesser-known ones affected by the earthquake, who

faced greater difficulty in restarting. In a second phase, they worked for the long term objective of trying to encourage customers to dine at these lesser known restaurants. Furthermore, to promote the use of Parmigiano Reggiano and to keep consumers aware of the situation in the earthquake zone, chef Bottura publicized an adaptation of the traditional “Risotto cacio e pepe” (risotto with cacio, a sheepmilk cheese from Tuscany, and pepper) a simple and tasty recipe that can be made in any home, calling for Parmigiano Reggiano instead of cacio.

Amatrice, in the Lazio Region, famous for its traditional “Pasta all’Amatriciana,” was devastated by the earthquake of August, 24, 2016, with 237 dead and most of its buildings levelled. A few hours after the quake, the food blogger Paolo Campana invited restaurateurs to add two euros to the price of each dish of pasta they served, one euro to be donated by the customer and the other by the owner, for efforts of the Italian Red Cross to aid Amatrice. Over a thousand Italian restaurants participated. All told, 528 million euros were collected through this initiative and others promoted by groups such as SlowFood (which solicited donations to the city of Amatrice), Confesercenti, the national federation of small and mid-sized businesses, which organized 94 benefit culinary events, and Eataly, which hosted the Amatriciana festival in Rome (La Repubblica, 2017).

These initiatives not only helped the people and businesses in the areas in their recovery from the earthquake, but also helped publicize their typical product and dish making consumers aware of the link between these items and the place of production or origin.

### **3.4. Methodology**

In light of the literature review outlined in the previous section, it is valuable to investigate post-disaster dynamics that may have affected local communities after the 2016 and 2017 earthquakes in the Marche Region and, in particular, the role of food as a “facilitator” of community engagement and empowerment.

Furthermore, it is important to investigate the medium-to-long-term strategies implemented to provide sustainable opportunities for the affected destination and its business players, in particular some initiatives related to the promotion of the territory through e-commerce sales of food and wine.

In this paper, a multiple case study design was used to produce detailed descriptions of the bottom-up phenomenon in the Marche Region. The case study method “is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, audio-visual material, documents and reports and provides a case

description and case-based themes” (Creswell et al., 2007; 245). Multiple case studies can be used to predict either contrasting results for expected reasons or similar results in the studies (Yin, 2003). In this way, the author can clarify whether the findings are valuable or not (Eisenhardt, 1991). When the case studies are compared to each other, the researcher can also provide the literature with an important influence from contrasts and similarities (Vannoni, 2015).

Thus, for this case study we spoke with representatives of five e-commerce companies created in the Marche Region crater after the earthquakes. The total number of such typology of companies is not clear, as neither the official data of Marche Region nor press releases agree on the boundaries of this phenomenon emerged after the earthquake (from 20 to 100 companies reported). However, our research has not been able to identify all the firms or projects because a database listing all the activities, projects or companies does not exist. Five out of 30 companies identified and contacted for an interview provided their availability.

Qualitative interviews were carried out to obtain general data and information on the activities, such as their organizational structure, turnover, mission, and the time of their foundation. The answers were compared to understand the differences between the five companies.

A second part focused on three specific research questions related to issues raised in the literature:

Q1. How would you evaluate the initiatives for post-earthquake recovery and the level of involvement of local actors and communities?

Q2. To what degree have food and wine tourism been useful for this process?

Q3. Do you think your company and its initiatives are sustainable?

The interviews lasted between 30 and 40 minutes, then were transcribed and the data assembled and coded. During the coding of the data, categorisations were made of what emerged from the responses. The data were organized, rearranging the affirmations and comparing the answers, noting similarities or differences between them. Once this was done, the data was interpreted and divided into the categories below. No difficulties were found during the interviews or during the analysis of the results. The only limitation occurred before starting, because it was not easy to identify e-commerce firms in the crater area, and, when contacted, most did not choose to participate in the study.

### **3.5. Case studies**

#### **3.5.1. The background context**

In the immediate aftermath of the August and October earthquakes, no initiatives were undertaken to encourage tourists to visit the mountainous interior of the Region, especially the earthquake

zones along the Amatrice-Visso-Norcia axis, where over 6,400 quakes of magnitude 2.3 or more took place between August 2016 and August 2018. Considerable areas of the Sibillini Mountains Park were deemed unsafe for hiking, as they were prone to landslides and falling rocks. The intense damage made extensive rural areas and many ancient city centers entirely unsuitable for tourism, as many villages had to be abandoned, and numerous hotels, restaurants, bars and agritourisms were forced to close. Many roads were also ruled off limits because buildings alongside them were at risk of collapse, or because of diverted streams, damaged roadbed, or unsafe bridges. Because damaged barns and stalls were dangerous and unusable, the unusual cold of the winter of 2016 meant considerable losses to farmers, with the death of their cattle, sheep, and pigs from the cold. Often the farmers themselves lived in tents or campers, near their condemned home. It was hardly a situation that would attract vacationers. The coastal areas, instead, which were farther from the epicentres and suffered little or no damage, were promoted in campaigns to inform tourists that they were open for the summer season.

Immediately after the earthquake, despite the climate of fear, uncertainty and desperation, the population reacted by creating associations, volunteering, and cooperating with public and private institutions and many economic actors in the area to bring life back to normal and to keep the territory from being abandoned. They joined forces to work together on reconstruction. Local people, as well as concerned parties outside the crater, launched many initiatives for the revival of the economy in general and in particular of tourism and agriculture in the Marche Region, running fundraising campaigns, promoting the sale of local food and wine products, holding charity events and opening websites to promote tourism in the Region.

In the period immediately following the earthquake, private businesses or associations, as well as public institutions, created e-commerce websites or expanded existing ones to support the local food economy. In some cases, e-commerce firms contacted local companies affected by the earthquake, asking them if they wanted to sell their products online, generally opting for items with long shelf life and easy maintenance. Some were created by local and regional entities, but also had the support of national and international associations such as Slow Food, Incibo.it, Legambiente, Coldiretti and many others. People from all over Italy and the world showed their solidarity and sensitivity to those who suffered because of the earthquake by buying typical products from the affected areas, especially during the Christmas period. They purchased IGP products (indication of geographical protection, which shows the quality or reputation of the product is linked to the place or region where it is produced, processed or prepared) such as the lentils of Castelluccio di Norcia or ciauscolo (a traditional salami), as well as other types of meats, many kinds of cereals and grains, red and white wine, a liqueur made from star anise, egg-based pasta of local companies, cheeses,

honey, jams, olives and olive oil and other delicatessen specialities. In addition, they bought typical handcraft local products, such as woolen yarns and lavender.

The e-commerce websites offered simple shipping of the products, as well as delivery of beautifully arranged baskets or boxes of these products, as gifts for Christmas and other occasions. There was a lot of response especially in the first period, as mentioned above, and from all over Italy people bought these products.

In this context, two observations are in order. First, no one product was promoted as the symbol of the area affected by the earthquake. Instead, in an effort to help as many producers as possible, all the typical food and wine products of the region were sold. Second, it was not easy for consumers to find these e-commerce sites because there was no central list.

To do this, the people involved in the e-commerce initiatives contacted many local companies affected by the earthquake asking them if they were willing to sell their products. Then, they selected the products that were easiest to sell (those with long shelf life and easy maintenance) and organized them for sale.

### 3.5.2. Characteristics of the five e-commerce companies studied

Five local initiatives were analyzed:

- Via Terra. This project started a year after the earthquake in Amandola, in the province of Fermo. As the project was only launched at the end of 2017. The project is a social enterprise that involve seven stakeholders: the leaders are CARISAP and Cacuum (a youth association in the town of Amandola) that work in collaboration with Copagri Ascoli-Fermo (Agency of Rural Development), the Municipality of Amandola, the OPEN Association, the local branch of the National Confederation of Crafts and Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Fermo, and the Co-Work cooperative society. They generally select local farms on the basis of the quality of their production, without neglecting the care for the environment and the territory. The customer can know the farmers, their history and their activities, order products and receive them at home.
- DajeMarche. The idea of DajeMarche ONLUS Association began to emerge a few days after the last strong earthquake on October 30, 2016. It flashed across the mind of a graduate in architecture, who wished to meet the needs of shopkeepers, artisans and groceries in the town of Tolentino. He asked for the collaboration of graphic designers, computer scientists and photographers in the creation of a website, and about 100 people replied to the call. About a month after the earthquake, 150 commercial activities located between Tolentino and the neighbouring towns of San Severino, Camerino, Visso, Muccia, Pievetorina and

Pievebovigliana were included in the e-commerce initiative. The site listed the products of these businesses, took orders, obtained the products, packaged and shipped them to customers, then sent the earnings to the businesses. The project was entirely carried on by volunteers with the aim of helping all the companies that suffered earthquake damage.

- MYmarca. This company based in Macerata has been active since before the earthquake. The owner and two employees run a website and have a point of sale for food and wine products as well as handcrafts of all kinds, all typical products of the Marche Region. The main goal of the company is to promote the Marche Region; however, after the earthquake, with the help of the branch of Confartigianato in Macerata, MYmarca decided to help many suffering farms by selling their products online.
- #uniamoci. The University of Macerata, in collaboration with Playmarche Ltd, the university's spin-off company, launched the project immediately after the earthquake of 26 October with the help of its substantial network of stakeholders in the field of tourism and cultural heritage. The aim is to make available this wealth of knowledge and contacts in order to support the small businesses affected by the earthquake.
- MarcaCamerino. An employee of Elios, a University of Camerino spin-off company, wishing to help the retailers of the city of Camerino, which was seriously damaged by the earthquake, involved some young people eager to help their town in this project.

Table 2 Data of the respondents – \*all data for 2016 refer to the months of November and December (Source: own elaboration)

<b>Name</b>	<b>Via Terra (Company 1)</b>	<b>DajeMarche (Company 2)</b>	<b>MYmarca (Company 3)</b>	<b>#uniamoci (Company 4)</b>	<b>MarcaCamerino (Company 5)</b>
<b>Business name</b>	Social cooperative	Non-profit Organization	MYmarca of Emanuele Conforti	Ltd.	General partnership
<b>Approach</b>	Bottom-up	Bottom-up	Bottom-up	Top-down	Top-down
<b>Timing</b>	Post-earthquake (2017)	Post-earthquake (2016)	Before earthquake	Post-earthquake (2016)	Post-earthquake (2016)
<b>Turnover</b>	2016*: €0 2017: €0	2016*: €300,000 2017:	2017: €300,000	2016*: €10,000 2017: €35,000	2016* & 2017 (until Easter period): €75,000



	2018: not able to define it	€140,000	2018: €350,000	2018: €25,000	
<b>Stakeholders</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A municipality</li> <li>- Some associations</li> <li>- A local agency of rural development</li> </ul>	Volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Owner</li> <li>- Two employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- University of Macerata</li> <li>- PlayMarche (spin-off of University of Macerata)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Elios (spin-off of University of Camerino)</li> <li>- Volunteers</li> </ul>

### 3.5.3. The people and groups involved

Two of these initiatives were supported by local universities, which, acutely aware of the conditions of the population, decided to help businesses affected by the earthquake. As can be seen in Table 1, #uniamoci (C4), had the help of the University of Macerata, while MarcaCamerino (C5) was assisted by the University of Camerino. The latter also involved young people who wished to help the retailers of their town.

In the case of Via Terra (C1), the idea was fostered by a group of professionals, some associations, companies and a local agency for rural development, in collaboration with a town government, and thus the initiative involves volunteers as well as public institutions.

The DajeMarche (C2) project involved volunteers without previous specific experience in the field of e-commerce, who do not belong to any association. They only had computers and the essential technical skills and decided to collaborate with each other motivated by their strong sense of belonging to their land. MYmarca (C3), instead, has a strong background in e-commerce and the employees are professionals in this field.

### 3.5.4. The timing of the creation of the initiatives and trends in turnover

Another interesting fact is that DajeMarche, #uniamoci and MarcaCamerino (C2, C4 and C5) started just after the earthquake in October 2016, in order to face the emergency by providing commercial support to companies affected by the earthquake, selling their products online and helping to expand the visibility of small enterprises in the earthquake “crater”. The same can be said for MYmarca (C3) which, despite being active even before the earthquake, set the objective of “*selling and promoting 100% Made in Marche products through both territorial and virtual actions.*” The only exception is Via Terra (C1), which was launched after the emergency ended

(November 2017), with a long-term vision. They explain that, in addition to the sale of food and wine products, their main aim is to contribute to the creation of employment in the surrounding territory, as many people have lost their jobs in the aftermath of the earthquake.

The turnover data clearly show that sales decreased significantly after the period of emergency. In the beginning, these initiatives received extensive media coverage and consumer demand was high, motivated by a sense of solidarity and the desire to help the populations hit by the earthquake by buying local products. The coincidence of the start of these enterprises near the Christmas season may also have influenced their sales success, as buyers took the opportunity to give these products as gifts.

#### 3.5.5. Perceptions about community involvement

All the interviewees believed that it is important to involve local people and associations, because, living and operating in the area every day, they have a better perception of the local issues and potential than do external actors. According to two of the e-commerce companies, the community can contribute *“not only from an organizational point of view but also in the promotion of this kind of initiative.”* In fact, #uniamoci (C4) considered the role of the community to be significant. As they stated, *“thanks to word of mouth, the communities contributed by promoting this kind of initiative even in Tuscany, in northern Italy and in Germany as well.”* In this case, many products were bought by companies as Christmas gifts for their employees; even some charitable associations decided to help, ordering products to be distributed to needy families.

DajeMarche (C2) said, *“Without the help of citizens, even in the delivery of products, the success of this initiative would not have been possible.”* According to Via Terra (C1), the involvement of local actors and citizens is fundamental: *“the success of a company in an area affected by the earthquake is an aspect that also involves the local community as well as the entrepreneurs themselves.”*

The MarcaCamerino (C5) initiative prized community involvement and initiatives, as the participants live in in this earthquake-struck area every day and are more aware of the difficulties to be faced and the things that need to be improved: *“Local communities are closer to the reality”*. However, according to them, *“it is also necessary to involve public institutions that, thanks to the role they play and the importance they have, could better manage this kind of initiative, which otherwise may be ruined by personal selfishness when left in the hands of the community alone.”*

#### 3.5.6. The role of food and wine tourism in post-disaster recovery

Food and wine products are very important assets throughout the entire e-commerce sector; in this geographic area there are many food and wine products that could be a driving force for the

economy and tourism sector. There is enormous potential to be exploited, perhaps even too much, as there is such a variety of products that tourists probably cannot identify the Marche Region with a single product, unlike other Italian regions, and thus feel a bit disoriented.

As revealed in the literature and the opinions of the interviewees, the Marche Region struggles in making itself known outside regional and national boundaries and exploiting its potential, because *“it is not a branded territory like Tuscany,”* as MarcaCamerino (C5) affirmed. According to #uniamoci (C4), *“food embodies history, culture and lifestyle that many visitors and food & wine experts appreciate and search for, especially when they come to these places”*.

DajeMarche (C2) also confirmed that the Marche Region has very beautiful landscape and rich gastronomic offerings, *“you can go from the mountains to the sea in less than 100 km, buying local products such as wines, lentils, chickpeas, cheeses and cured meats that are the pride of the Sibillini mountains area and enjoying the best dishes of Marche’s gastronomic culture”*.

As some of them said, the Marche region can rely on a wide variety of typical local food and wine products that could help build a stronger economic future for the Region. The Via Terra (C1) interviewee underlined the link between tourism, and food and wine production and exploitation, saying that *“this project was designed to facilitate and implement tourism and the exchange of goods/services in the food and wine sector,”* which is also confirmed by MYmarca (C3), according to whom *“it [the link] is an instrument to make the territory known outside its boundaries and to send a message of continuity and life in these damaged areas; food and wine tourism is important to promote a territory.”*

Thus these interviewees believe that this is a very useful tool for the revival of the Region’s economy. As confirmed by DajeMarche (C2): *“food and wine tourism is one of the new industries that could raise the destiny of our region, and in a broader perspective of our nation.”* In their opinion, therefore, this instrument can help make the Region known with all its excellence and peculiarities and assist the companies in recovering from the earthquake.

### 3.5.7. Long-term goals of e-commerce initiatives

Three of these e-commerce companies plan to create a tourism offer based on the sale of a single product, and involving accommodation facilities, restaurants and many operators in the tourism sector, organizing visits to the companies affected by the earthquake as well as experiential activities, such as truffle hunting, cooking lessons, boat trips, nature walks, and outings to taste local wines, beers or cheeses. One interviewee would like to develop stronger networking among companies and propose a quality label for the typical meat of the Marche Region and for the production of handicrafts (for example, shoes and musical instruments), a field in which the Region

excels. #uniamoci (C4) would like to involve other producers and *“create a physical space suitable for occasions to display and sell the products.”* Daje Marche (C2) planned to develop a network of similar websites and export it to other regions of Italy. As ViaTerra (C1) said: *“This project is part of a broader strategy. The latest data on e-commerce led us to think that it is essential to adopt this system in the short-to-medium term, therefore it is not enough to sell the single product: we need to build a complete offer that helps the promotion and growth of the territory.”*

Nevertheless, it seems that the e-commerce projects analyzed in this work are not characterized by strong features of innovation. For example, the MarcaCamerino (C5) project and Daje Marche did not extend their efforts to other activities beyond the sale of products online, and soon had to close. Furthermore, during the interviews and in line with the observations noted above, other e-commerce companies expressed the desire to expand their offer beyond the sale of food and wine products.

### **3.6. Discussion and Conclusions**

The analysis of the interviews confirms that community engagement is useful in order to gather ideas and define development priorities, because members of the local community know the context in which they live (Wilson, 2009). Most members these e-commerce companies belong to the communities hit by the earthquake, and knowing well the challenges of this period, desire to help the local populace and economy. Their bottom-up approach demonstrates how valuable it is for local communities to articulate a vision for their place, and exercise their autonomy in shaping more inclusive place brands (Goulart Szejnberg & Giovanardi, 2017). Communities have a desire to get involved and to repair what has been destroyed.

However, evidence from this study clearly demonstrates that coordination and cooperation among local actors are needed. As #uniamoci (C4) stressed, in the Marche Region, the various support initiatives are often fragmented; the person interviewed expressed that hope that a union of forces could amplify the effects benefits for the economy and tourism in the crater areas. However, some of the interviewees reported that local people are not willing to share their ideas and experiences, and they felt that this reluctance slowed the recovery process. They noted that there are initiatives supporting the recovery but little cooperation among them. In fact, many e-commerce initiatives were started with their own gain in mind, instead of working toward a collective gain.

This tendency to eschew collective goals was articulated in a 2016 study in which local actors were asked to voice their attitudes about the Marche Region, fellow entrepreneurs, and the tourist potential of the Region. The author noted that “one of the founding features of the spirit of the Marche Region is a certain closure with respect to the outside world, which also has the sense of

proud belonging to its own land, thus distinguishing itself for its individual sacrifice and passion for the goods and excellence of the qualities of the Region. It seems that the different territories of the Region compete with each other instead of seeking organizational and promotional synergies” (Corinto, 2016).

From the analysis of the interviews, it emerged that when there was solidarity-motivated demand for the product, the commercial activity grew, but after this period of solidarity and emergency, the demand decreased and the products lost their appeal. In two? of the cases analyzed, this saturation phase caused the closure of the activity.

It seems that in order for these businesses to continue to operate, they also need to improve the managerial skills of their staff, and obtain support of local and regional governments, as community involvement alone or solidarity-motivated customers are not enough to keep them solvent. In addition, as one of those interviewed noted, it is crucial to come up with innovative ways to keep tourists and customers attracted to the Marche Region and its products, now that the initial phase of emergency and solidarity are past and people tend to forget what happened.

Rinaldi asserted that the promotion of local products and the branding of products and destinations are effective tools for positioning local economies in a global world and supporting place development in a sustainable way (Rinaldi, 2017). In this context, e-commerce sites selling food and wine tourism could play a key role in the Marche Region and boost the economy of this area.

Tourism has great potential to truly change the Marche Region’s economy after the earthquakes. In particular, if post-earthquake e-commerce initiatives, as well as long established food and wine producers could expand to incorporate tourism featuring the excellent food and wine of Region, this might not only help face the post-earthquake recovery phase but also prove to be sustainable in the long term. In fact, the MarcaCamerino (C5) e-commerce initiative, which focused exclusively on online sales of food products on behalf of the Camerino merchants did not prove to be viable, with the drop in sales after Easter 2017. Similarly, DajeMarche, after 2 years, has since gone out of business. Instead, it is essential to build a complete tourism offer around the sale of the product, drawing together lodging, meals, tour guides, transportation offers, entertainment and recreation options, lessons and cultural activities and other aspects, as suggested by some authors in the literature. In fact, the other e-commerce companies are seeking to expand their offer with other initiatives such as the creation of a tourist offer based on the product they sell.

One possible contribution to reviving the Region’s economy could be to improve tourism offerings by engaging different sectors and companies in collaborations to provide a holistic offer combining

culinary, historical, artistic, cultural, and recreational aspects. The aim would be to offer something that tells the story of the Region, that makes it known in a global way. This would require the creation of a long-term strategy for cooperation among operators. Thus, for example, in parallel with the sale of the single product, businesses could offer experiential activities such as a visit to the company where the product is made, combined with stops in the village and the surrounding area to see the treasures of art and architecture, savour the local cuisine, and enjoy the opportunities for walking, riding or other activities.

Another approach could be to create a regional brand around a food or wine product, in such a way that consumers would think of the Region when they think of the product. Some assert that food provides a direct connection with landscape, and tourists can recognize the origins of food (Cavicchi & Stancova, 2016). In this regard, for example, chef Massimo Bottura suggested “the Sibillini truffle.” Thus, for example, this prized food could be integrated into the holistic tourism approach, for example, by offering hiking and culinary itineraries in the Sibillini National Park, with dining at local restaurants or agritourism businesses that feature truffle dishes.

In some cases, the bottom-up approach seen in local initiatives could benefit from top-down assistance by the Marche Region government. One suggestion would be for the regional government to create a single portal to showcase the e-commerce firms that have been created. In this way, potential tourists and customers could easily find the various online offers in one place, rather than navigate the disorienting hit or miss reality of current browsers. Another idea could be for the Marche Region or a local association to collect the products of all the companies damaged by the earthquake, thus creating a single e-commerce. It is necessary to organize a unitary long-term offer that shows tourists these elements: local excellence and the willingness to engage and cooperate.

Well before the 2016 earthquakes, a study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (Potter *et al.*, 2010; 34) had urged closer collaboration between “agricultural and tourism industries to exploit entrepreneurship opportunities throughout the Region, taking advantage of the natural scenic resources of Marche.” In this post-disaster scenario, there is more need than ever for closer collaboration among public and private actors to promote rural tourism that can help the population create jobs and stimulate the economy.

The media visibility enjoyed by the Marche Region because of the earthquakes has made it better known internationally, and could be exploited as part of strategies to attract many more visitors. Foreign tourists in particular are interested in places of historical, cultural and environmental

interest, and the Marche Region is especially richly endowed with such attractions, especially in the inland areas (Regione Marche, 2017).

So, despite all the problems to be taken into account and despite the fact that the Marche Region is not well known, the local communities are aware of the strengths of their land and culture, and in response to the earthquake have demonstrated the desire to create a network and learn from each other to help the growth and promotion of their Region.

## **4. REDUCING THE GAP BETWEEN ACADEMICS AND PROFESSIONALS IN GASTRONOMY TOURISM SECTOR: SOME INSIGHTS FROM AN ENTREPRENEURIAL DISCOVERY PROCESS IN MARCHE REGION**

### **4.1. Introduction**

In a globalized world, universities are often called upon to play a greater role as stimulators and facilitators of knowledge transfer within business and society (Cavicchi *et al.*, 2013).

Collaboration between government, academia and industry is considered to be of critical importance in University Technology Transfer in enhancing regional economic and social development. The interplay between these three institutional spheres forms the crux of the well-established Triple Helix Model (Miller *et al.*, 2018) of universal innovation that can assist students, researchers, managers, entrepreneurs and policymakers to understand the roles of university, industry, and government in forming and developing “an innovative region,” capable of self-renewal and sustainable innovation. In this way, the university is moving from a secondary, albeit important societal role in providing higher education and research, to a leading role on a par with industry and government as a generator of new industries and firms (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2017).

According to the European Commission (Foray *et al.*, 2012), the traditional, joint-action management model of the triple helix, based on the interaction among the academic world, public authorities, and the business community, needs to be extended to include a fourth group of actors representing a range of innovation users, obtaining what is called a quadruple helix.

This role of facilitator becomes more complex when a rural area is involved. In fact, rural areas are distant technically, economically and culturally from the main urban centres of activity (Ward *et al.*, 2005).

The University of Macerata, located in a rural area, is able to make a tangible contribution by transmitting knowledge to the local entrepreneurial reality and initiating collaboration in local activities and initiatives.

The European project “FOODBIZ – University and business learning for new employability paths in food and gastronomy” has organised a series of events involving local food and wine tourism stakeholders, and, in doing so, has further strengthened this relationship between academia and business.

This paper explores the role that the university can play in the process of collaboration with local stakeholders. First, a brief review of the literature points to the importance of university-business



cooperation in developing knowledge and generating innovation, and the role of the universities in rural areas. Second, it describes the position of the University of Macerata, analysing the case study of the European project FOODBIZ. Third, an Entrepreneurial Discovery Process focus group was developed to envision the kind of physical form the collaboration between the academic world and the business world might take on.

## **4.2. Theoretical framework**

### **4.2.1. The Local Contribution of Universities**

The role of universities at the international level has been constantly evolving, moving from a first mission of teaching into one combining teaching with a second mission of research, a revolution that is still ongoing (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). In the last two decades, a third mission has emerged in the interactions between universities and the rest of the society (Molas-Gallart *et al.*, 2002), as universities engage with external stakeholders in their innovation systems. Although this role has been an integral part of university management and leadership in the last two decades, it is now part of a broader strategy and a priority (Reichert, 2019).

Regional engagement has perhaps become more important to universities now than any time before (Charles, 2003). In fact, it is precisely at the regional or national level that most of the collaboration takes place, although there is increasing international competition for students and researchers as well as large investment in international research cooperation (Davey *et al.*, 2011).

Moreover, although the growing influence of technology has made distance significantly less of an issue, universities find themselves at the centre of regional innovation ecosystems. Academics seek out and initiate their own cooperation with businesses, which are generally medium to large in size and localised, while businesses tend to initiate their own cooperation with academics or higher education institutions, even within their region or country. The constant importance of proximity has made universities a reference point for regional innovation systems (Davey *et al.*, 2011).

Universities can thus become institutions anchored in local economies. How, therefore, can the university be seen to be occupying a “proactive” role and not just a “passive” one in the regional development process?

According to the 2007 OECD report on universities and regions, entrepreneurial innovation is closely, though not exclusively, linked to the research function of the university as it is capable of creating knowledge and know-how (Reichert, 2019). Human capital development is directly linked to the teaching function, and community development is linked to the public service role of

universities. The university can make an important contribution to the institutional capacity of the region through the commitment of its management and its members to local civil society.

In this way, universities are acquiring a new image as a hub of knowledge production. The knowledge creation they facilitate in their learning environments and through their own research and innovation activities becomes central to the circulation of ideas and know-how (Reichert, 2019).

Knowledge development capabilities are key to national and regional innovation systems, and universities are considered part of these systems, alongside firms, R&D laboratories, training agencies, and other actors (Freeman, 1987). As the role of universities in bolstering knowledge communities and shaping innovation cultures has become more widely recognised, regional engagement and innovation capacity have become core themes in university mission statements (Huggins & Johnston, 2009).

It is therefore evident that the loci of scientific knowledge has moved from the “ivory tower” towards entrepreneurial science, in a progressive interplay of cognitive opportunities, institutional rearrangements and normative change (Miller *et al.*, 2018). In this context, universities can play a key role in the development of the cultural and political determinants of socio-economic success through, for example, the development of networks of civic engagement, and in the wider political and cultural leadership of their areas (Charles, 2003).

To put into practice this type of engagement, a number of strategies and mechanisms are being developed, including a series of regional partnership experiments that provide new opportunities for universities and their regional partners to forge closer links.

#### 4.2.2. Relations between universities and industries

As mentioned above, cooperation between the academic world and the business world offers a source of innovation with potential impact on economic and social development, in particular, an important engine for the creation of knowledge societies (Galan-Muros & Davey, 2019).

The first two missions of the university, education and research, are the primary areas in which university and business cooperate. Cooperation in research, for example through joint R&D, consulting to business, and mobility of staff, is the most prevalent area across Europe, closely followed by education through curriculum co-design, curriculum co-delivery, mobility of students, dual education programmes, and lifelong learning. However, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and businesses in Europe also cooperate in the areas of valorisation (commercialisation of R&D results, academic entrepreneurship, and student entrepreneurship) and management (governance, shared resources, and university support), although to a far smaller degree (Davey *et al.*, 2011).

There are various forms of cooperation that can fully emphasise and exploit the type of relationship that has developed between these two worlds.

The University-business cooperation (UBC) is understood as any sort of interaction between HEIs and business for mutual benefit (Davey *et al.*, 2011) and is considered an essential driver of knowledge-based economies and societies. This means that UBC not only helps individual organisations to address some of their most pressing challenges, such as the need for funding and innovation, but it can also have a significant impact upon the regional economy in which they operate, for example, in the social and economic issues currently faced by European countries, such as high unemployment rates, lack of competitiveness, ongoing economic and social problems or increased competition (Davey *et al.*, 2011). This form of cooperation can connect policy areas such as innovation, higher education, enterprise, entrepreneurship, social development, globalisation and economic recovery, among others.

So who are the protagonists of this type of cooperation? At the organisational level, UBC stakeholders include the Triple Helix of university, business and government (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000).

The concept of the Triple Helix of University-Industry-Government relations initiated in the 1990s with studies by Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff. It represents a shift from the domination of the industrial-governmental dyad to a triadic relationship between university, industry and government in the knowledge society (Ranga & Etzkowitz, 2015).

This balanced configuration is made up of three actors who, guided by the transfer of knowledge, collaborate in joint initiatives. The creative process guiding this model allows for a continuous evolution that leads to the promotion of innovation through the birth of new technologies, new businesses and new types of relationships (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). As shown in fig. 1, the Triple Helix focuses on the “overlapping” spaces, cross-cutting the boundaries of the institutional spheres. This means that each actor has the ability and possibility to encompass multiple functions, both individually and collectively. For example, capital can come from a variety of universities, industries, governments and other sources. It is an “open” concept of innovation, a triple helix with three primary actors and multiple secondary actors that can be replicated worldwide as a universal innovation model (Etzkowitz & Zhou, 2017).

Ranga & Etzkowitz (2015) listed three factors that define the Triple Helix system:

- Components. It is composed of university, industry and government, each with a wide array of actors. Stakeholder groups of HEIs can be classified as internal/external, individual/collective, academic/non-academic stakeholders, namely, faculty, staff and students, but also the government or other substantial supporters the main stakeholders

(Disterheft *et al.*, 2015). Business stakeholders are the managers and entrepreneurs within businesses engaged in UBC. Government stakeholders include both federal and state governments that may provide funding for UBC (Rampersad, 2015).

- Relationships between components. They are defined as the type of structure or collaboration that links these actors (technology transfer, collaboration and conflict moderation, collaborative leadership, substitution, and networking).
- Functions: the competencies of the system components that determine its performance. This function is realized with the techno-economic competencies and with entrepreneurial, societal, cultural and policy competencies that are embedded in what we call the ‘Triple Helix spaces’ of knowledge, innovation and consensus.

However, this type of triple helix system seems to be missing an important part, as in recent years the levels of innovation, GDP and employment expected from this type of system have not been achieved. To address this challenge, a complex network of quadruple helix stakeholders is needed, a more open and co-creative system that involves the stakeholders of innovation users at the social level (Miller *et al.*, 2018).

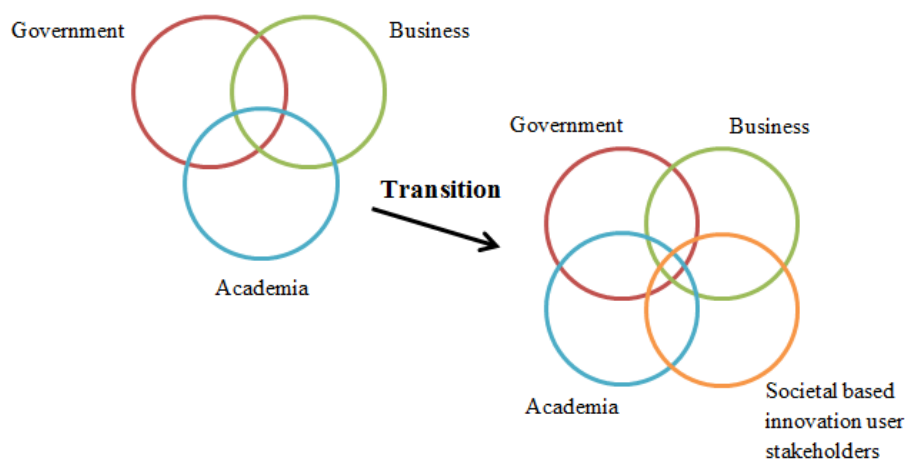


Figure 6 Triple and Quadruple Helix model (Source: adapted from Carayannis and Campbell, 2009)

The quadruple helix therefore contains the following four sub-systems (Carayannis & Grigoroudis, 2016):

- the Education System refers to academia, universities and higher education systems;
- the Economic System consists of industry/industries;
- the Political System formulates the direction in which the country is heading in the present and future (political and legal capital);

- Civil Society combines two forms of capital: social capital, based on the culture of traditions and values, and information capital, based on the media.

The most important constituent element of the quadruple helix, apart from an active civil society, is the resource of knowledge, which circulates between social sub-systems and hence affects innovation and know-how in a society. According to the guiding principles proposed by the European Commission concerning the Strategies for Smart Specialisations (S3), the Quadruple Helix Innovation models allows for a greater focus on understanding latent consumer needs, and more direct involvement of users in various stages of the innovation process (Foray *et al.*, 2012).

In this way citizens would not only be involved in actual development work, but would also have the power to propose new types of innovations, which then connect users with their stakeholders across industry, academia, or government (Carayannis & Grigoroudis, 2016). In turn, academia, government and industry would be responsible for supporting citizens in such innovation activities, for example by providing tools, information, development forums, and skills needed by users in their innovation activities.

The inclusion of this fourth helix involves some changes, in that end users are now seen as potentially involved in a co-creative way throughout the innovation process, rather than simply passive end recipients; they are representative of the needs of society by providing an open and no longer closed innovative approach such as the triple propeller. Moreover, the involvement at the social level leads to potentially shorter development times, thus also decreasing the costs of production of innovation by universities, industry and government (Miller *et al.*, 2018).

According to the Lambert's Report (2003) "*companies and universities are not natural partners*". This lack of affinity has resulted in tensions and conflict, which are likely to increase in a quadruple helix context due to the increased involvement of the societal based stakeholders often with diverse agendas. It is therefore necessary to put in place ways of cooperation that facilitate this collaboration between partners of a different nature, in order to co-create.

#### 4.2.3. Creation of bridges

First of all, relational skills are important elements for starting a collaboration from which to draw knowledge. De Silva and Rossi (2018) proposed three facets of relational capability that may influence a collaboration, thus knowledge acquisition and co-creation:

- structuring capability, which refers to the ability to devise a mutually acceptable type of framework for both parties as to how the relationship is expected to be carried out;
- alignment capability, which refers to the ability of the two parties to align their goals, objectives and routines/practices;

- communication capability, which denotes the ability to maintain dialogue with the partner by promoting effective and efficient communication. Dialogue implies interactivity, deep engagement and the ability and willingness to act on both sides. It is difficult to envisage a dialogue between two unequal partners. So, for an active dialogue and the development of a shared solution, the actors must become equal and joint problem solvers.

Interactions and collaboration between different groups of actors, especially entrepreneurs, researchers and users, are one of the key characteristics of entrepreneurship and innovation activities. The requirement to involve a great range of stakeholders in major policy decisions is one of the important implications for innovation policy (Mieszkowski & Kardas, 2015).

In the 2109 European University Association Study on the Role of Universities in Regional Innovation, Reichert argued that there are a series of institutional measures which, by developing themes of common interest among the different actors, aim to create spaces for sharing in order to generate processes of co-creation and innovation. Some examples are joint labs, co-funded by universities and companies, joint research infrastructures and other innovation spaces for multiple users, appointments of professors of practice or recruitment of professors on business-sponsored chairs, and long-term strategic partnerships with companies.

For co-creation to emerge, and for the translation between academic research and its application in innovation processes to work smoothly, bridges have to be built between the knowledge, problems and challenges that emerge from the business context and those that emerge from academic knowledge (Reichert, 2019).

But what exactly does co-creation mean in the university-business collaboration?

We can define co-creation as “a management initiative, or form of economic strategy, that brings different parties together (for instance, a company and a group of customers), in order to jointly produce a mutually valued outcome” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). In fact, the term “co-creation” was initially used in marketing to define the relationship between producers and buyers, in which the customer participates in the innovation process and thus becomes co-innovator (Payne *et al.*, 2008). Over time, the research has moved from co-creation between business and customer to co-creation of increased value, determined in a social context by a wide array of actors (Perks *et al.*, 2012).

Universities and enterprises are closely related in this process of co-creation. The aim of co-creation is to generate new knowledge, both from the university and the company in order to jointly define and solve problems (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Independently, these two actors would not be able to produce new knowledge because the challenge they are trying to address requires that their knowledge bases be combined in an innovative way (Perkmann & Salter, 2012).

#### 4.2.4. Co-creation in rural areas

Historically, rural areas have been characterised by uncertain and often contradictory modes of decision making, influenced by heterogeneous stakeholder groups marked by distinctive set of values and ideologies (Holmes, 2002). Furthermore, in general, rural enterprises are widely spread out (Garrod *et al.*, 2006). The lack of training and business planning is recognized as a major problem, due to limited time, finances, personnel, skills, and experience. This issue is particularly significant in rural regions, whose economy is often driven by myriad SMEs with low levels of knowledge (Potter *et al.*, 2010). Universities could be an aid instrument in this, playing an important role (Cavicchi *et al.*, 2013). The problem is that until the 1970s, the dominant population trend across Europe was urbanization, the concentration of populations in larger urban centres, driven by the concentration of employment there. Consequently, rural areas experienced depopulation, particularly the loss of younger and more economically active people (Ward *et al.*, 2005).

Therefore, networking between rural stakeholders and universities appears to be a sustainable solution to help rural regions deal with globalisation and the requirements of the knowledge economy. Especially in the smaller and often less developed regions, universities offer a unique heritage of knowledge and thus are vital for the success of particular policies and projects (Rinaldi & Cavicchi, 2016b).

According to Rinaldi *et al.* (2011), HEIs can be crucial for the development of rural networking activities in at least three ways: to provide scientific knowledge that valorises and enhances the cultural and social characteristics of the area; to conduct dialogues between local actors and to involve stakeholders in planning; and to provide courses and lessons in order to update and extend the knowledge of local operators.

It is therefore clear that co-creation and interaction between research, local government and stakeholders is necessary in order to build a comprehensive picture of the rural region. This cooperation allows policy makers to analyse strengths and weaknesses, define opportunities and threats, and develop successful initiatives (Rinaldi & Cavicchi, 2016b).

Also, according to the principles of the European Commission's Community-led local development guide (Soto & Ramsden, 2014), consultants, universities and other external experts can all help to provide a broader view and assist with the analysis of the data and writing a rural development strategy, but it is important to have a genuine dialogue with and among local citizens at each of the key stages in the design of the strategy.

### 4.3. Background context

In the Marche Region, rural areas account for 95% of the regional territory and host 81% of the population (Cavicchi *et al.*, 2013). In this context, it appears that the regional economy must speed up the restructuring process in order to become more knowledge-intensive and innovative. In order to do so, the role of research organizations and collaboration among universities and industries could become a key focus area in the Region's future economic policy (Potter *et al.*, 2010).

With regard to this problem, in recent years, the University of Macerata has collaborated with businesses and the local economic and social fabric through projects, initiatives, activities and spinoffs. Rinaldi *et al.* (2018) listed the key initiatives that the University has created locally to support the development of creative and cultural industries, food and tourism culture and to promote entrepreneurship.

Rinaldi *et al.* stated that the UNIMC goals with reference to the third and fourth mission are:

- Promotion and support of youth entrepreneurship through multiple initiatives, ranging from education and consciousness raising about the potentials of self-entrepreneurship, to the creation of university spin-offs and start-ups.
- Strengthening relations with the area and local businesses.
- Creation of culture for innovation and entrepreneurship among students, doctoral students, graduates, research fellows and researchers.
- Promotion of projects that involve the area and stakeholders.
- Creation of synergies between university and high schools of the Marche Region and other Regions that have specialisations in science and technology.
- Promotion of incubators.

In this way the University of Macerata fully embraces the generative, absorptive, collaborative and leadership roles through which universities can support and enhance capacities needed for designing and implementing S3 (Kempton *et al.*, 2013), namely generative, absorptive, collaborative and leadership. UNIMC is generative because it is not limited to research, but welcomes opportunities to work with networks and collaborations. It plays an absorptive role in that it helps actors absorb the supply of innovation and research, and avoid the "innovation paradox". It is collaborative by being present to the local community, continuing to develop and build relationships with stakeholders in each sector. UNIMC shows leadership in all these processes, co-creating a shared vision based on the uniqueness of the location (Rinaldi *et al.*, 2018).



In this context, the present research explores the results of a recently concluded European project at the University of Macerata's Department of Education, Tourism and Cultural Heritage: "FOODBIZ – University and business learning for new employability paths in food and gastronomy" co-funded by the Erasmus + (Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices Strategic Partnerships) programme of the European Union.

Partners in the project, which began on November 1, 2017 and ended on October 31, 2019, were four universities -- Università di Macerata (Italy - Coordinator), Uniwersytet Ekonomiczny w Poznaniu (Poland), Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management (Croatia), and Goeteborgs Universitet (Sweden) -- and four companies: the Laboratorio Piceno della Dieta Mediterranea (Italy), the European Cultural Tourism Network AISBL (Belgium), Associacio IGCAT (Spain), and Svinesundskommittén (Sweden).



*Figure 7 FOODBIZ Logo (Source: [www.foodbiz.info](http://www.foodbiz.info))*

This project sought to help university students acquire important employability-related skills and competences through their active involvement in the community learning activities described below. Specifically, the programme was organised to enable them to: a) learn in context; b) establish links with enterprises and other stakeholders in the local area; c) understand the economic strengths and opportunities of the area in relation to agro-food and food tourism; d) reflect about their own competences, motivations, and ambitions; e) contribute to community development and job creation. FOODBIZ supported innovation and creativity of the students and other participants through a regional partnership to promote co-creation of knowledge among students, business players, researchers/universities, other stakeholders concerned, and policy makers for local development in the field of agro-food and food tourism (<http://foodbiz.info/en/>).

To meet the objective of forging bonds between the academic world and local businesses and stakeholders, during the three years of the programme twelve events were organised, three for each academic partner: Italy, Sweden, Poland and Croatia. Generally the actors involved were local entrepreneurs operating in the agro-food and tourism sectors, public administrations, policy makers, local citizens and local start-ups. They and the students were active protagonists in every kind of activity carried out, which often used participatory methods such as Open Space Technology. In

Italy, the three events involved students in the Economics and Marketing of Agri-food course in the Cultural Heritage and Tourism degree programme, together with local stakeholders. The events were:

- an Experiential Learning Workshop during which participants worked together to taste products and imagine marketing opportunities for them;
- a Problem-Based Workshop, during which students met with representatives of local food and wine enterprises to discuss problems of the agro-food sector, especially communication and branding, and propose solutions;
- an Entrepreneurial Discovery Process event on the value of tourism and food and wine resources for the promotion of the area.

Participants in the first event expressed strong interest in the project, since the enogastronomic sector is very developed in the Marche Region, and indicated willingness to be more involved in these kinds of activities. They commented on the lack of synergy between students, enterprises and other stakeholders, and encouraged the university to strengthen this relationship locally.

The second event greatly strengthened the relationship between academia and business, as students were active and involved in the needs of entrepreneurs and the latter welcomed with interest their suggestions and criticisms.

At the end of these two events, the organisers from the University of Macerata defined three key themes on which to work to initiate a creative process of innovation to meet the needs and solve the problems that had emerged:

- Internationalisation
- Professionalism in hospitality
- Rural Branding

These three themes are aspects on which local entrepreneurs and the academic world need to focus in order to make the area a more welcoming and professional place. During the third event on Entrepreneurial Discovery Process, focus groups discussed the three key themes and discussed steps for future cooperation to be continued after the close of the project.

#### **4.4. Methodology**

The main objective that the university set itself in the organization of this event was to understand what role it could play in the development and innovation of the agro-food sector in the local area.

The method used is the one that develops during an EDP focus group.

The term Entrepreneurial Discovery Process refers to the discovery and pursuit of strategic assets in which to invest within a territorially constrained socio-economic system. This method whereby stakeholder interaction is used to open up new domains of technological and market opportunities and to inform government decisions, is based on strong and sound logic, according to the EU Smart Specialisation Strategies platform (Gianelle *et al.*, 2016).

EDP can be defined as “a process in which the entrepreneurial actors are discovering and producing information about new business and innovation activities and the government is collecting, assessing and transforming this knowledge into policy action” (Foray *et al.*, 2012). A core part of this action revolves around activities aiming to implement, test, and optimize the EDP. The EDP approach embeds many of the concepts of Participatory Action Research methodology in its planning, development, and follow-up process (Santini *et al.*, 2016). According to Gianelle *et al.* (2016) one of the most recurrent participatory models and analytical tools used for EDP is the focus groups method. Santini *et al.*, in their exploratory study, defined the EDP focus group as a set of sectoral events, aimed at generating innovative ideas through interaction between business, public and research sectors.

A focus group is “a discussion conducted by a trained moderator among a small group of participants in an unstructured and natural manner. The main purpose of focus groups is to gain insights by creating a forum where participants feel sufficiently relaxed to reflect and to portray their feelings and behaviour, at their pace and using their language and logic” (Malhotra & Birks, 1999).

The stakeholders involved in the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process focus group are those belonging to the quadruple helix (Gianelle *et al.*, 2016).

Based on the guidelines on the organization and management of a focus group, the planning of the event began.

E-mail invitations and registrations forms were sent to:

- the list of stakeholders with whom, during the three years of the project, the university had established a relationship;
- students of the Department of Education, Tourism and Cultural Heritage.

In addition, the event was open to anyone wishing to attend, thanks to communication through social channels.

A section of the registration form asked the registrant to indicate a preference for one of the topics discerned previously in the Experiential Learning Workshop and the Problem-based Workshop, namely, Internationalism, Professionalism in Hospitality, and Rural Branding.

The event was held at the University, with the plenary session in a single classroom, and the focus groups in two different classrooms. The event took place as follows (table 1):

*Table 3 Entrepreneurial Discovery Process programme event of the FOODBIZ project (Source: FOODBIZ, 2019)*

<p>On-site registration of participants</p> <p>Assignment of participants to focus groups according to the preferences they had expressed in the registration</p>
<p>Introductory Plenary Session:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- FOODBIZ project presentation;</li> <li>- Showcase of regional initiatives which involve FOODBIZ</li> <li>- Organisational tips: programme of the day;</li> <li>- How the Focus Group works;</li> <li>- Explanation of the topics chosen (why these and not others, on which basis, which perspective) according to the specific location (regional/local profile).</li> </ul>
<p>Clustering of focus groups</p> <p>Attendees split into the focus groups. By design, each focus group included students, researchers, stakeholders and policy makers.</p>
<p><i>Coffee break</i></p>
<p>Start of the focus groups</p> <p>For each group, insights from the field are provided</p>
<p>Plenary session: presentations by the groups.</p>
<p>Plenary session: summary of the working day and closing of the event</p>

According to the preferences indicated, two groups were formed:

- Internationalisation & Rural Branding
- Professionalism and hospitality

There were a total of 32 participants in the two focus groups, of which: 14 higher education students, 1 PhD student, 4 food producers and professionals, 3 policy makers, 1 dean of a local agriculture studies high school, 7 local stakeholders/start-ups, and 2 citizens.

Each group was led by a moderator who worked to stimulate a dialogue as relaxed and creative as possible between the participants, and a rapporteur who took note of what emerged. At the end of the event, two reports were produced and sent to participants a few days later. They constitute the findings of this research.

The research questions of this study were therefore:

- What physical form can the collaboration between the academic world and the business world take?
- What role does the university play in this process?

## 4.5. Findings

### 4.5.1. First group

The focus group on “Internationalization and Rural Branding” highlighted a series of issues related to branding and communication activities about the destination Marche and its excellence.

#### Image and brand

According to participants, *the image of the Marche region as a tourist destination lacks uniformity and clarity, and thus is not yet ready for an extremely competitive market. An analysis of the resources, assets and potential of the Marche Region would make it possible to identify the characteristic features of its identity and uniqueness. Once identified, the power of this image could be strengthened and exploited in the market. Having a coherent image of the destination is, without doubt, a priority.* In addition, participants also suggested that the offer be diversified, exploiting “the plurality of the Marche Region”.

Participants spoke about the creation of a solid brand image of the Marche Region and, consequently, the need to *develop its communication, to create through storytelling, a strategy of promotion of the product as part of the identity of the Marche region.*

#### Study of the market

Participants called for *a thorough study of the market* and a subsequent segmentation of the consumer profiles to which the offer can be directed.

#### Training

Participants expressed the need for greater and more specific training for professionals in the sector, in particular *figures involved in territorial promotion, territorial development strategies and communication, such as, for example, tourist guides.* In addition, they saw the need to *focus on more specific training for those figures who subsequently approach the international market.* They saw *the study of languages* as the first step in attracting foreign customers.

#### The figure of the Marche manager

Some participants brought up the idea of a “Marche manager”, a public/private body to promote the Marche Region. *The figure of the Marche manager should have a 360° view of the territory, considering both the private aspect (local companies) and the government aspect. This body in*

*charge* of managing cultural and touristic aspects should promote continual dialogue between the various local realities, and *should be super partes*.

#### Cooperation and networking in promoting the Marche Region

Looking at the supply side of the issue, participants said that *for rural areas, the importance of events* (seasonal festivals and itineraries for visitors) *should be taken into consideration* to enhance “the visitor’s experience” and improve the perception of the destination and its excellence. In this context, there was a *call for greater cooperation between local producers* who still see very high conflict of interest in uniting forces to promote the product as a specific resource of the area.

Two winning ideas for promoting sustainable rural tourism and achieving a greater share of the foreign market were the exploitation of food and wine tourism and the creation of a network. The role of the university was proposed as central. *An increasingly solid dialogue between universities and businesses is expected, as well as an increasing specialisation of degree courses, starting from those designed to meet the specific needs of the territory.*

#### 4.5.2. Second group

The focus group on “Professionalism and Hospitality” highlighted two main themes: the importance of training professionals for the tourism sector and of networking among local actors.

Regarding training, the most important points were:

- the need to *train students of hotel and tourist institutes, as well as university students and operators in the sector how to provide optimum hospitality, in terms of knowledge of foreign languages and knowledge of the area, its resources, typical products and recipes*. A special focus was the importance of interpersonal relationships, especially humanity and empathy in dealing with visitors;
- the proposal to *create new professional figures to support companies in communication and marketing*;
- the provision of *professionalizing courses* also within the university.

The following points emerged about the creation of a network:

- *the university takes on a facilitating role among the various local operators*. The presence of a neutral reality could foster consultation among the parties and, might help operators leave behind absolute self-reliance and move toward mutual assistance and collaboration;
- idea of a collaborative network to bring back into practice the traditional concept of “*lu’ rajutu*”, the exchange of favours that happened, for example, when farmers in an area took turns helping each other out with the harvest. This *spontaneous relationship of exchange of favours could be triggered between operators in the agricultural and tourism sectors*;

- the network would promote regional food and wine itineraries drawing together such aspects as the local culture, eno-gastronomy, art, and nature so that visitors could enjoy all the richness of experience that the area has to offer.

It would therefore be advisable to *create a regional network that brings together in a single database, in a single integrated system, the realities that already exist, including networks*. This multilingual application would showcase the participating activities. The network creation would have three phases:

- Phase 1): activities to convince operators of the importance of the network and to get them involved. There should be work to define *the identity of the territory* and to create *self-awareness, so as to develop a sense of community and to promote active citizenship*, also with the participation of the communities;
- Phase 2) Multi-level training (as discussed above). Operators of hotels, agritourisms, bed and breakfasts etc. would adhere to a shared “Decalogue”, a quality standard for reception services that improves the “presentability” of companies;
- Phase 3) External communication work, aimed at getting to know the network.

In the development of these processes and activities, the *university could constitute a network and showcase platform between all the realities present in the territory*.

#### **4.6. Discussion and conclusions**

Both focus groups spoke of the need to create (where absent) or improve the local development strategy through closer cooperation among local actors.

The main needs that emerged from the focus groups were:

- greater investments in the training of operators and students in the commercialization of the area;
- greater awareness of the identity the Marche Region, of its unique and typical characteristics, in order to promote it more effectively;
- creation of a “Marche Manager”, a private/government entity with a comprehensive view of the area and its private and government players, who would facilitate exchange between them;
- networking should be ideally managed by a ‘neutral’ organisation not involved in market competition, perhaps the university, and should have a regional dimension, including already existent networks.

This Entrepreneurial Discovery Process event offered an example of how local actors, rather than simply being passive end recipients, can represent the needs of the areas and engage in a co-creative way throughout the innovation process (Miller *et al.*, 2018). They pointed to the need to identify the university as a place of transmission of knowledge, a “neutral” actor that can facilitate dialogue between the area stakeholders. They expressed a positive judgment on the relationship that was being created locally, even if it was still in its initial stages. The Entrepreneurial Discovery Process method provided an informal setting to foster sincere exchange and dialogue about their problems and needs, from which emerged a concrete suggestion for how the university could be more practical and get out of the “ivory tower,” and a proposal for future collaboration that would help companies acquire knowledge and know-how.

In this way, as mentioned above, the university could find itself at the centre of a regional innovation ecosystem, within which knowledge can be generated and transmitted. This ecosystem can be a resource for the area. The University of Macerata is moving in this direction, to be a point of reference that promotes initiatives, collaborations and dialogues among local economic and social stakeholders, an ecosystem of knowledge.

This initiative of co-creation is even more important given that it concerns a rural area where the climate is uncertain and contradictory, made up of local stakeholders with different and heterogeneous ideas (Holmes, 2002). Rural areas are often particularly complex because they are characterized by interconnectedness, complicatedness, uncertainty, ambiguity, pluralism and conflict, and societal constraints (Cavicchi *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless, when HEIs function as facilitators in rural areas, they have the opportunity to help solve these problems by offering new perspectives for addressing some long processes, for example, that of value creation for the area.

The role of the University of Macerata in implementing the Smart Specialisation Strategies and supporting the local area also emerged in this project, as foreseen by Rinaldi *et al.*, (2018).

As these projects and the innovation of knowledge are in constant evolution, it is hoped that the insights reached through these events will be exploited to improve what university and local stakeholders have built in these last three years in order to create a network of local actors who work together for the development of the area.



## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This PhD thesis tried to demonstrate how stakeholder engagement, at the local level, is important for territorial development. In the light of the events that have affected the internal areas of the Marche Region and following the interviews carried out, it is possible to confirm that the collaboration of local actors is useful for sustainable development even in the event of systematic changes within a territory (Krick *et al.*, 2005). In particular, in the case of post-disaster situations that require a continuous process of adaptation and renewal by the local social and entrepreneurial fabric (Halkier & James, 2017), the community and stakeholders engagement is useful in order to gather ideas and to define development priorities, because they know the context in which they live (OECD, 2013). The interviewees confirmed that the activation of some initiatives and the organization of certain activities was possible only thanks to the involvement and collaboration between all the actors living in the territory, from citizens, entrepreneurs, local government to universities. However, during the reconstruction phase, the need for greater coordination from the public sphere in order to achieve success emerged. They need managerial skills and professionalism, qualities that the community alone can not always have (Abernathy & Clark, 1985). It is therefore a good idea that all local actors will be involved, but that they will also be guided by a person who is able to coordinate and at the same time collaborate with others. In doing so, it is also necessary to have a long-term strategy, in fact, as already mentioned in the literature, long term capacity building makes rural communities more engaged in processes of development and more resilient to shocks (OECD, 2018).

The lack of a long-term strategy, in the case of the Marche Region, has led to the closure of some e-commerce companies that, focused only on the sale of food and wine products, have not thought to renew the sales offer in order to continue to keep the attention alive. Without a doubt, food and wine products have been considered an attraction for many places and destinations (Lyn *et al.*, 2011) but, as demonstrated in the first study presented, around the sale of food and wine products, it is necessary to “sell a territory”, describing its peculiarities, proposing a unique offer, a tourist product full of all the aspects that characterize it (Sfodera, 2015). Only in this way the Marche Region will have the opportunity to make itself known and to promote its natural, culinary, cultural and historical resources. In this sense “the Mediterranean Diet, when turned into a unique cultural experience connected to local traditions, can therefore become an important tourist “magnet” and a driver for value offers. The “marriage” between the Mediterranean Diet and tourism may represent the realization of what many foreign tourists really love about Italy, the “Italian lifestyle”

(Vandecandelaere & Abis, 2012). This can also contribute to the revival of the economy of the Marche region following the earthquake.

In this context and during the last few years, the University of Macerata has been fully involved in order to contribute to local development. In this thesis, this is described by the collaboration with the Piceno Lab on the Mediterranean Diet and the organization of the International Student Competition, which in the last 4 years has attracted about 120 students from all over Europe to the territory of Fermo, with the aim of raising awareness of the Mediterranean diet and the entire local context; by the e-commerce #uniamoci, still active, launched after the earthquake in order to help local companies to promote themselves and start again.

As foreseen by Rinaldi *et al.*, (2018) the role of the University of Macerata supporting the local area emerged in these projects and in many other collaborations and activities.

During the focus group that took place within the Entrepreneurial Discovery Process event, it emerged the need for some local stakeholders to have a *super partes* body that acts as a facilitator at the local level in order to allow for greater cooperation and collaboration, identifying the University of Macerata as a 'neutral' organisation not involved in market competition and able to do this.

With this thesis we have therefore tried to answer a question of research aware of the fact that this is a study that needs to be developed more in depth and implemented. It could be interesting to:

- monitor the development of activities that in the long term will be implemented in order to promote the Marche Region involving all local actors;
- understand how the e-commerce companies launched in the aftermath of the earthquake have renewed their offer to ensure long-term sustainability;
- and finally, verify what form can assume the collaboration between the university, the local business fabric, citizens and local and regional government.

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