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SOCIAL & CREATIVE

TALIA Policy Briefing n. 3

CASE STUDY: CO-WORKING

Project co-financed by the European
Regional Development Fund

CO-WORKING FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Co-work facilities or shared and/or temporary offices are spreading across Europe in response to a growing demand for flexible working spaces meeting the needs of independent professionals. The INTERREG-MED COWORKMED project, running from November 2016 through April 2018, is exploring this topic and its potential for the Mediterranean Space. The project defines coworking as follows:

"A coworking space is a physical space aiming to build and implement a dynamic community of users sharing a propensity to foster collaborative, open and sustainable relationships. Coworking spaces are actively managed to promote these goals, also by organising events and activities supporting mutual learning and exchanges and by developing new functional typologies and interactions with other services or centers."

At a recent international event, the Catalonia Coworking Day organised by project partner COWOCAT on June 29th, 2017, a range of participants from Spain, France and Italy discussed their different coworking initiatives. These range broadly in terms of scale (from ten to 1,000 workers), location (urban, peripheral and rural settings) and governance, but all share the key elements of bringing free-lance professionals together in an open working environment. The most advanced examples share a strong dimension of community, interdisciplinarity and shared values, projecting a new vision of work itself.

As COWORKMED proceeds to map the growing phenomenon of coworking and build a transnational cluster of coworking communities, it is useful to also consider the broader potentials of coworking for regional decision makers interested in social innovation and innovation policy in general. These aspects were explored in a TALIA International Seminar organised in conjunction with the COWORKMED event in Barcellona.

This Policy Briefing develops the key issues that emerged from that encounter as regards an emergent model of work and its implication for the socio-economic inclusion of young people as well as its impact on urban dynamics, closing with suggestions on how local and regional policy makers can maximise the potential impact of coworking in their territories.

THE COWORKMED PROJECT

COWORKMED develops a new model of entrepreneurship and social innovation by favouring cooperation and operational bridging between public actors, universities, training centres and "mainstream" clusters together with civil society. COWORKMED promotes co-working processes and their transnational organization as a lever of social innovation in Mediterranean.

COWORKMED is a Study Module project lasting 18 months, and brings together 10 partners from 5 Med space Member States under the leadership of AViTeM of the PACA Region in France with a total budget of € 600,000.

SPATIAL IMPACT OF “THIRD PLACES”

Two aspects of coworking are of particular interest for regional development, the first of which is related to spatial policies and urban regeneration. COWORKMED is in fact exploring the phenomena as part of the more general concept of “Third Places” as theorised by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg¹. Third Places are neither “home” nor “work”, and can include churches, parks, hairdressers, gyms, or any space where people can connect, exchange ideas and build relationships. Oldenburg argues that third places play an important role in urban regeneration – purposely providing interaction spaces to revitalise neighbourhoods and the city fabric, thus proposing an interesting role for coworking spaces in this light.

Coworking spaces can also be seen in a broader context of urban spaces that are neither entirely public nor private. In this sense, public policies promoting coworking can aspire not only to attract talent and provide new opportunities for youth, but also to mobilise collective energies for territorial innovation as a result. This concept can be extended to the public sphere to incorporate spaces that allow for individual engagement while being bounded by a shared purpose and governance structure, as is the case for the more advanced examples analysed by COWORKMED.



¹ OLDENBURG R., 1989, THE GREAT GOOD PLACE (THIRD PLACES), DA CAPO PRESS.

WHAT ABOUT JOBS?

Coworking also directly addresses broader issues related to jobs and work, a key issue given the high rates of youth unemployment in Mediterranean regions. While policy makers continue to aim to apply traditional development approaches for ‘job creation’, an increasing number of analysts predict the replacement of many of those jobs by advanced technologies such as robotics and artificial intelligence.

The more advanced forms of coworking seem to suggest an alternative path, typical of many approaches in social innovation, that paints a different scenario of what work is and how it is carried out, in part as a means to overcome the contradictions of the current situation. The implications of this can be highlighted by comparing aspects of the coworking concept to more ‘traditional’ approaches to job creation, as suggested below:

ASPECT	MAINSTREAM POLICY	COWORKING APPROACH
EMPLOYMENT	Encourage employers to hire by relaxing job protections and streamlining procedures.	Shift the emphasis to the production of social and economic value, both monetized and non-monetized.
INFRASTRUCTURE	Focus on the technical and physical infrastructures for business development.	In the context of austerity, focus on social infrastructures and collective governance of common resources.
CAPITAL	Mobilise financial and venture capital, focusing on startups.	Develop network capital, building on transnational relations and global networks.
PUBLIC SECTOR ROLE	Promote the role of intermediary institutions for business development.	Shift to orchestration of active players, with quadruple helix participation in common governance.
TERRITORIAL DEVELOPMENT	Concentrate development in ‘advanced’ innovation hubs and link them to global networks.	Valorise emergent innovation in small to medium sized cities and areas with a lower cost of living (and innovation).



Coworking can thus be seen as an instrument to carry forward in parallel with the more common approaches to job creation, allowing young professionals themselves to explore their own options for the future.

SOCIAL INNOVATION AND THE TALIA PROJECT

Social innovation is a term used to describe the entire process by which new responses (products, services and models) to social needs are developed in order to deliver better social outcomes, creating new social relations or cooperation.

Amongst others, social innovation relates to sectors as employment, public services, culture and leisure, and health (namely demographic challenges as the ageing population). A key role in promoting social innovation is played by the diffusion of social enterprises, “whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their owners or shareholders. It operates by providing goods and services for the market in an entrepreneurial and innovative fashion and uses its profits primarily to achieve social objectives.”²

The Interreg-MED programme includes Social Innovation as an objective of its work programme, identifying three sub-topics: Open Data, Social Enterprises, and Public Sector Innovation. The horizontal TALIA project (Territorial Appropriation of Leading-edge Innovation Actions) is coordinating the different projects active in this area together with those promoting Creative and Cultural Industries, all under the common objective of Innovation.



POLICY TIPS

As can be seen from the analyses carried out by the COWORKMED project, coworking can be a powerful tool to integrate into Innovation and Smart Specialisation strategies. For those interested, following are concrete suggestions of steps you can take to maximise the impact of coworking for your region.

1. Identify specific territories in your region – a rural district, an urban neighbourhood, etc. – where the introduction of coworking spaces can have the strongest impact.
2. Make a mapping of coworking initiatives already active in your region, and make contact with the responsables for these initiatives to build a regional working group.
3. Use the COWORKMED study results as a baseline on which to open discussions with your working group, to identify shared goals for your area and the possible role of the public sector.
4. Make a census of available public properties at all levels, from the municipality to the region, and identify, together with your working group, those spaces best adapted to host coworking.
5. Using COWORKMED case studies, develop governance guidelines for the management of possible coworking spaces in public properties and define the terms and conditions for concessions.
6. Identify on-going public actions and initiatives that could benefit from the competencies offered by coworking communities and the procurement mechanisms through which to promote engagement.

7. Get involved with the COWORKMED transnational cluster of coworking initiatives to benefit from network effects and the possibilities for the exchange of services across the MED sace.

Above all, contact the COWORKMED partner closest to your territory; for further information contact: Mr. Léonard Lévêque (AViTeM) Project Manager, l.leveque@avitem.org. In addition, learn how to learn from the pro-active engagement of your region's people and organisations in the Interreg-MED programme, and use the opportunities offered by the TALIA Project to connect with transnational social innovation activities to enhance and reinforce the effectiveness of your regional policies as a trans-local innovation ecosystem.

Want to stay up to date with activities and events related to creative and social innovation in the MED programme? Join the Talia project social networks as a Twitter follower at <https://twitter.com/MEDSocialcreat> and a Facebook fan at <https://www.facebook.com/SocialCreativeMED/>.



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