

Formal Networks among Tourism Enterprises: Peculiarities of the Italian Solution

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Abstract

The globalization of markets creates the need for partnerships among enterprises. Business aggregations improve efficiency and competitiveness, mitigating SMEs' size disadvantages. However, networks are not always naturally established and therefore sometimes need to be fostered. Among networks, formal networks subject to law are also perceived as safer and more reliable from third parties' perspective. These factors find full expression in the Italian social and business scenario. This study examines tourism entrepreneurship, analysing the 'business network contract' or *Contratto di Rete d'Imprese* into this specific economic sector. This contract created in Italy and in continuous evolution is a model of formal aggregation used to bind entrepreneurs to a formal network.

Keywords: Tourism network, Business network, Cooperation, Business network contracts, Tourism entrepreneurship, SMEs.

JEL classification: K12, L14, Z31

Introduction

There is a growing interest in the role of business networks among small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). This phenomenon is linked mainly to their development and efficiency-boosting strategies while trying to mitigate their size disadvantage. Indeed, networks put in place co-operative strategies among firms working together in a mutually beneficial way. This process is made up of relationships and transactions, among same sector firms or among complementary industries, which is the precondition to market competitiveness (Porter, 1998). Moreover, according to Tremblay (1998) networks play a role in lowering

transaction costs and in exploiting external economies of scale and scope.

It is interesting how business networks can assume different forms and have been analysed from different perspectives (e.g. Street and Cameron, 2007). Among those perspectives, research has distinguished between vertical and horizontal alliances. The former include those among producers of different sectors and/or producers and their suppliers or distributors, while the latter are formed between partners operating in the same business sector (e.g. Magun, 1996). Another classification distinguishes formal networks from informal networks (Vasiliska et al., 2014). In the first case, relationships are based on law enforcement and formalised through a contract, while in the second case relationships are supported by social mechanisms and benefit from the trust of partners.

The concept of business networks is becoming increasingly popular in the tourism sector in a growing number of countries. When talking about tourism networks, one refers to a wide range of cooperative behaviours among organisations linked through economic and social relationships (Hall et al., 2000) which provides benefits for the local community involved (Novelli et al., 2006). Cooperation among local actors represents a way to be more competitive within the tourism market (Bruwer, 2003).

Moreover, among economic sectors, tourism is the one with the highest number of inter-organizational relationships (Bickerdyke, 1996), this requires the active involvement of diverse firms and public organizations. Relationships among those actors play a crucial role in achieving competitive advantages in the tourism market (Pavlovich, 2003). Indeed, networks provide a wide range of positive externalities stimulating partnerships and cooperation (Gibson et al., 2005). Many scholars underline how collaborative networks have increased in importance, becoming crucial in the coordination between tourism policies and their related actions. Some authors (e.g. Crouch and Ritchie, 1999; Dollinger, 1990) noted that collective actions have a great impact on tourism development. Similarly, Jamal and Jamrozky (2006) highlighted that various stakeholders take part in tourism destination management, although no one individually controls the decisional processes entirely. On the same topic, Merinero-Rodríguez and Pulido-Fernández (2016) emphasized that relationships are the core element for understanding a tourism destination system.

Although tourism networks are based on the connections among different actors, entrepreneurs play a central role in the evolution of a destination (Koh and Hatten, 2002). This is in line with entrepreneurial literature suggesting that enhanced performance may be achieved when experienced members work together (Littunen and Tohmo, 2003). Therefore, the more experienced network's actors are in tourism, the greater the benefits (Telfer, 2001). Russell and Faulkner (1999) suggested that entrepreneurs determine the evolution of a tourism destination. The type of activity they carry out depends greatly upon the levels of entrepreneurship in addition to the environmental conditions and the stage of the destination's development (Russell and Faulkner 2004). This requires firms involved in a tourism network to have common tourism goals. Consequently, as Crouch and Ritchie (1999) pointed out, competitive advantage depends on tourism actors having a common vision more than from the endowment of tourist resources at destination.

Collaborative networks can be derived from agreements among entrepreneurs that intend to share economic benefits (Bucklin and Sengupta, 1989; Goldhar and Lei, 1991; Ohmae, 1989; Thorelli, 1986). Networks may include both an informal structure of personal relations and a formal structure of business connections (Ireland et al., 2002). Both informal and formal networks have been analysed in the tourism industry (Chathoth and Olsen, 2003). According to Strobl and Peters (2013) in a tourism network formal relationships are naturally associated to liability and safety. The respect of formal rules should thus encourage cooperative actions dissuading entrance to a network by entrepreneurs who could have different tourism goals. Therefore, the authors emphasized that while informal relationships are important in forming alliances, they contribute to the formation of formal partnerships. The latter are related to contractual relationships, which are perceived as safer due to their legal character. In this regard, Vernon et al. (2005) showed that tourism cooperation involves various stakeholders working interactively on common problems or issues through a formal approach.

Many scholars dedicated attention to examining the nature and formation of networks, strategic alliances, and partnerships in tourism (Gulati, 1999; Stokes, 2004; Ziakas & Costa, 2010). The forms of cooperation have been investigated from various perspectives, including territorial, static and dynamic aspects, impact on destination developments, evolution and transformation of partnerships (Czernek,

2013). As a consequence, there is a debate in the literature facing the advantages of formal networks vs informal ones.

In spite of such different approaches, a number of authors (e.g. Shaw, 2004) have claimed that research on SMEs and entrepreneurship in tourism has substantial gaps. In particular, research is still inadequate in regard to the analysis of forms of cooperation among tourism SMEs based on specific kind of formal business partnerships, above all when a business aggregation is determined by some country's peculiar factor.

Although tourism industry is predominantly made up of SMEs and micro businesses, networks and voluntary memberships seem to be a low priority for tourism entrepreneurs. A possible solution to solve this problem arises from the Italian experience where law and domestic regulations provide incentives for enterprises to create formal partnerships in order to develop collaborative strategies.

The research objective of this study is to present the special model of aggregation chosen in Italy, which is called 'business network contract' (*Contratto di Rete d'Imprese*). This kind of contract is the latest instrument to business partnerships made in Italy. A civil, business and fiscal innovation applied to the main economic sectors in Italy. This model appears as a good practice system which can be adopted by other countries.

Based on these arguments, this article is set out as follows: first of all, an extended literature review on tourism entrepreneurship is followed by an analysis on the benefits of partnerships in supporting SMEs activities. Afterwards, the paper focuses on the reasons behind the Italian solution and its peculiarities; last but not least, the paper analyses networks among tourism entities in Italy; in the last section the conclusions are presented.

Partnerships within a tourism network

In an era of globalized and highly dynamic relationships, networking plays a key role in the competitiveness, management and planning of tourism destinations (Hall, 2008). According to Wood and Gray (1991) cooperation in tourism is a form of voluntary joint action in which autonomous stakeholders interact sharing rules, norms and structures. Edwards et al. (2000) stated that collaborations and partnerships consist of a set of different institutions with diverse focuses, operational scales, history and funding. Among the of interaction, Wang and Fesenmaier

(2007) listed competition, economic conditions, technology and problems, which lead potential partners towards shared solutions. The same authors identify some organizational factors, including leadership, convener attitudes, competence, communication and human and financial resources.

Successful cooperation in tourism is determined by some crucial factors, such as the perception that benefits will affect all partnership members, the recognition of interdependence, the coordination of skills, and the sharing of a strategic plan (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Waddock, 1989). Other scholars highlighted that a cooperative optimization can be achieved when the participants of a network act to reach common goals (Bruwer, 2003; Hall et al., 2000; Meyer-Cech, 2005; Novelli et al., 2006.) Reid et al. (2008) affirmed that effective tourism cooperation partnerships needs efficient management structures, flexibility and explicit guidelines and requires that decisions should be taken to promote the goals of partnership.

While the heterogeneity of relationships provides several opportunities for a network, the manner in which the linkages are formed and maintained can also pose some problems for management. Constraints that affect networking include low levels of collaboration, deficiency of leadership, and the lack of trust among different actors within a network. In particular, two issues appear critical: how to mobilize the various counterparts, and how to develop cooperative behaviours and coordination mechanisms in interaction (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). Therefore, opportunistic behaviours and power imbalances can cause negative effects on the network structure and goals performances.

Sheehan and Ritchie (2005) list different private and public stakeholders in a tourism network, based on their levels of salience, which can be differentiated according to their potential to cooperate in management strategies. In particular, entrepreneurs intend to obtain several advantages in terms of transaction costs, reputation, value, increased market power and profits while lowering costs of production. Networks provide enterprises with access to knowledge transfer, resources and markets (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005), operating as strategic tools for exchanging and sharing information (Gulati, 1998). Therefore, a tourism network can be considered as a system of alliances involving the environment, institutions, symbols and routines that facilitate the activities of entrepreneurs (Brunori and Rossi, 2000).

A range of studies have highlighted the significance of business networks of small firms within a destination (Telfer, 2000; Tinsley and Lynch, 2001). In this regard, it should be noted that tourism is dominated by SMEs, a characteristic that leads to certain challenges for the sector (Buhalis, 1999; Smith, 2006). From this perspective, networks offer SMEs the opportunity to operate in an increasingly competitive business environment, mitigating their size disadvantage (Bieger, 2004). Such networks can take a variety of forms, but the main characteristics generally include the operations of firms, inter-firm networks, and public-private interfaces.

Arndt and Sternberg (2000) revealed in their study that small firms are most likely to cooperate with others in their vicinity, highlighting the relevance of spatial proximity and networking. By networking and sharing knowledge, small firms are able to internalize assets and competencies that large firms typically internalize through economies of scale (Tayler and McRae-Williams, 2005). Novelli et al. (2006) emphasized that the creation of tourism business networks can be viewed as an innovative opportunity to support tourism SMEs and contribute to destination development. In such a framework competition and cooperation sit side by side. As an example, then, accommodation establishments can cooperate to market their destination, and may even form business networks to aid this process while they compete for tourists (Shaw, 2004).

Although the tourism industry is predominantly made up of SMEs and micro businesses, entrepreneurship remains a critical factor in tourism development (Russell and Faulkner, 2004). Indeed, it has been noted that entrepreneurs often do not have a particular interest in developing collaborative strategies since they are atomistic in nature (Braun, 2002). Furthermore, voluntary memberships and networks seem to be a low priority for tourism SMEs (Braun, 2005). However, in certain cases local culture may be conducive to the formation of entrepreneurial networks (Molinari and Buhalis, 2003). Then, as the case of Italy shows, entrepreneurial cooperation can be fostered by binding entrepreneurs in a tourism business network through the establishment of formal rules and contractual relationships.

The institution of a tourism network can occur due to initiatives promoted by private or public stakeholders, each with different preferences, strategies and contrasting interests. The literature has identified a large number of different reasons that can determine

cooperation in a tourist region, but there are also some country-specific factors which can stimulate entrepreneurial cooperation. These factors often concern trade agreements and legal determinants arising from foreign and domestic regulations. This is the case of Italy, where law provides incentives for enterprises to create formal partnerships in order to gain benefits in their operations and businesses.

The Italian solution: business network contracts

Nowadays, in Italy formal aggregations such as cooperatives, temporary business association (ATI), associations, joint-ventures and consortiums become old-fashioned when compared with business network contracts or *Reti d'Impresa*. If chosen, any of those listed options would represent for the companies involved a deep change in their own administration, process and identity, while in almost all cases, joining a business network contract would mean just to take part actively in another shared project.

Indeed, since 2009, *Rete d'Impresa* is the latest made-in-Italy instrument to business partnership. A civil, business and fiscal innovation that Italy is beginning to export abroad. This kind of aggregation is useful and applicable to all the main economic sectors including tourism where it is becoming an interesting phenomenon especially in one of its specific declinations.

In Italy, it is important to be aware of possible misunderstanding when talking about networks. In fact, there are three types of networks, they all coexist, responding to different needs. The three kinds of networks are: *Rete di Scambio*, Information Sharing/ R&D Business Networks; *Contratto di Rete d'Imprese*, Business Network Contracts; and *Rete Soggetto*, Business Networks with Legal Personality.

The most common of the three, also among tourism enterprises and bodies, is *Contratto di Rete d'Imprese*. It is a model of partnerships based on a binding contract among enterprises - called *retisti* - which take actions on certain shared goals. The number of possible members goes from two to infinity. The companies involved maintain their individualities and brands, working together as if the network was a limited company under a common name, guided by an external management body, and having in common a bank fund (figure no. 1).

Asero V., Skonieczny S. 2017. Formal Networks among Tourism Enterprises: Peculiarities of the Italian Solution. *Eastern European Business and Economics Journal* 3(1): 48 - 66.

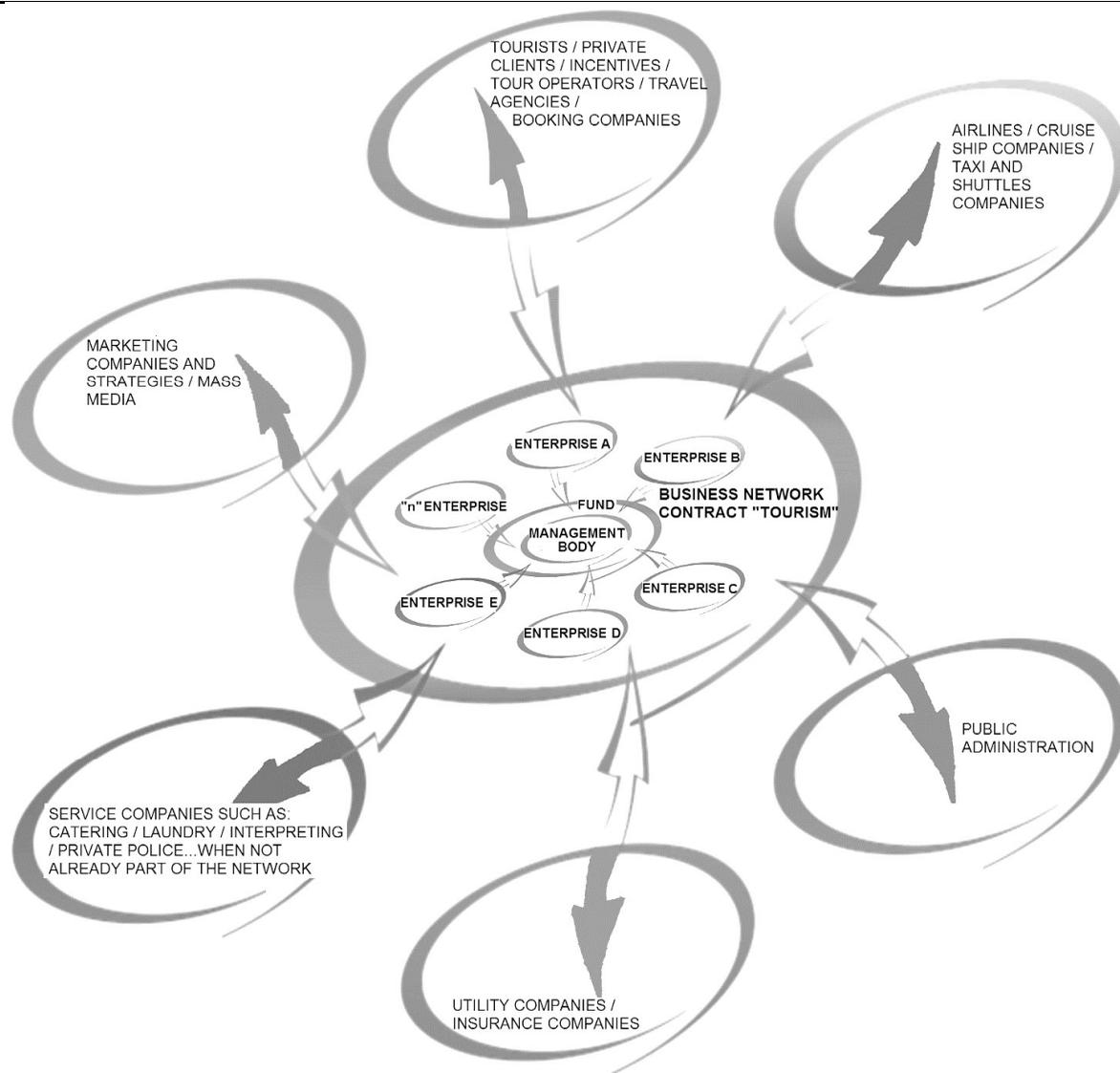


Fig. 1. Example of a Business Network Contract in the tourism sector

Italian government agencies are marketing this solution through favourable legislation and tailor-made policies. They are making of it a measure helping micro and small businesses to develop smarter technologies, take advantage of internationalization policies and be able to lower the prices of goods through a virtuous mechanism (Camera di

Commercio di Firenze, 2015). If analysed, in addition to all the favourable measures made to promote *Reti d'Impresa*, the *Reti* system appears to be formal but flexible, binding but not rigid.

Companies linked by a network contract can be of very different sizes and located in the whole national territory. Also foreign companies can join a network contract if they have a seat or branch in Italy.

The agreement can be formalized in several different ways but usually Italian entrepreneurs prefer to consult a lawyer to write the contract that would be signed by a public notary. Since April 2014 it is also possible to file a standard contract online to the official government authority.

By law any business network contract has to least list the adhering companies and its strategic goals, have a common action plan, and list the duties and rights of the members, its length, new membership conditions, and voting rules.

It is interesting to stress how network contracts can be vertical or horizontal. The 2015 Italian Institute of Statistics' (ISTAT) survey showed how vertical network contracts are the most common.

Just to give an idea of the constant growth of the business network contracts and business network with a legal personality it is possible to compare the data of the last four months. On 3rd October 2016, in Italy, there were 3114 business networks, the enterprises involved totalled 15704; by 3rd February 2017, the number of business networks has increased to 3386 while the total number of enterprises involved was 17343. Of the 3386 business networks only 475 have a legal personality (Data from the Enterprises Register, Italian Chambers of Commerce).

The tourism business network contract

Data highlight how *Contratto di Rete d'Imprese* is the most common of the three, and is also the one that will be further analysed here.

The legislator drew up the contract to enhance the innovative capacity and competitiveness of firms in local and global markets. This implies the possibility of reaching goals and taking advantage of different means that are otherwise precluded to a single company, such as access to specific financial aid measures, simplified administrative procedures, public call for bids, and cost sharing for strategic activities.

As it is also shown in Figure 1, *Retisti* have the possibility to: share customer data, general and specific information; develop new business ideas/ opportunities; share suppliers, workers and consultants; improve

Asero V., Skonieczny S. 2017. Formal Networks among Tourism Enterprises: Peculiarities of the Italian Solution. *Eastern European Business and Economics Journal* 3(1): 48 - 66.

pricing; sign conventions; make joint purchases; request export/internationalization support; carry out lobbying; and offer all-inclusive and modular packages.

From the ISTAT (2015) survey on the issue, which considered data since 2010, it is possible to notice how 74.1% of the enterprises involved in a business network contract are located in the same region and that 89.9% of them are composed of a group with less than 10 enterprises. 45.8% of the enterprises joining a network have less than 10 employees and 41.8% have between 10 and 49 employees. Companies joining a network contract result to be also more innovative than their *non cooperative* competitors. CSC-ISTAT (CSC 2016) elaborated the ISTAT data from the 2015 ISTAT survey.

Table 1.
Number of
enterprises
joining a
Business
Network
Contract in the
tourism sector
(2011 - 2015)

From 2 to 3 enterprises	29%
From 4 to 9 enterprises	24%
More than 10 enterprises	47%

Source: ISTAT, Italian Institute of Statistics, 2015

In the tourism sector, 66.4% of the enterprises joining a network contract are in accommodation services while 33.60% are in food services. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, tourism networks are also among the most multi-sectoral networks in Italy. In fact, in a tourism business network contract it is possible to find enterprises belonging to food cultivation, food processing and/or trade among members. For example, wineries usually grow grapes, sell wine and other local products, and own a B&B or hotel inside the property as well as a restaurant.

The business network contract phenomenon is not all about data. Also, the sociological aspects rooted behind the Italian entrepreneurs' attitude to bind themselves to a business contract aren't to be neglected. Indeed, they could reasonably obtain the same results through a simple, costless, gentleman's agreement.

The main reasons encouraging enterprises to prefer tourism business network contracts are the Italian cultural need for formality when dealing with the public administration and other official bodies and entities, such

as banks. As mentioned before and also on another aspect of the same factor, the aggregation formality gives companies more power when sitting at the same table with the planning administration, when trying to obtain specific improvements, or when fighting competition from bigger companies or similar business categories. Moreover, a written and binding contract ensures the same quality standards and levels of offer, by binding each company not only to the contract but also to a common vision, mission and disciplinary framework. As already said, by law the contract has to have only a few requirements and companies are free to define specific clauses. For example, only the contract can establish the criteria for new admissions and for those who wish to exit the contract. In this way, the binding effect of private ruling balance the frequent mistrust of Italian entrepreneurs for their peers.

Moreover, the favourable national and regional legislation and policies play also an important role. Specific facilitations and tax breaks provided only to business network contracts are very tempting nowadays. Indeed, regions and other local authorities publish announcements reserved for business network contracts, enabling them to obtain advantages such as free exposition stands at international events and fairs. Last but not least, *Retisti* are given access to specific financial aid measures, simplified administrative procedures, and simplified procedures for access to finance, bank packages focused on business network contracts, European Union funds, Italian funds and allowances. At a National level, one of these measures was issued in 2012 (Law n. 134). Its goal was to support the Italian tourism sector through the creation of business network contracts. In that same year, the funds available to support tourism business network contracts amounted to eight million Euro (Tripodi, 2012). This was not just a sporadic measure.

In November 2015, to mention just one more recent initiative, the Italian Ministry of Culture and Tourism published an official announcement also specifically designed for tourism business network contracts and ATI. The announcement attributed also eight million Euro, to: assist integration processes among enterprises belonging to the tourism sector; reorganize the industry; and encourage investments to increase the competitiveness of national tourism. Moreover, 50% of this measure was in the form of non-refundable grants. In April 2017, a Sicilian regional measure will assign to the winning local SMEs sums aimed to internationalize and market their activities, where 80% of the funds are in the form of non-refundable grants. Also in this case, formal

business networks will receive preferential treatment from the institution. Being a network will mean, for example, receiving up to 800,000 euros, eight times more than a single enterprise.

When two or more tourism companies create a business network contract they immediately have the possibility to participate in international events and initiatives, for example international travel exhibitions, have the mass media visibility for free and when not included in the favour measure, and the possibility to share the costs of their participation.

From another point of view, they can create packages, including logistics and a common registered brand. Subsequently, they could share the marketing campaigns costs or the creation of fidelity cards, Apps and similar, these are all actions that SMEs cannot usually afford alone. Moreover, the sharing of ideas, databases, professionalisms and experiences create the conditions to identify and also acquire different market shares.

All the above mentioned social, legal and fiscal aspects made the creation of business network contracts very interesting to Italian companies.

This in no way implies that being provided with opportunities and instruments always guarantee the success of a project. In a business network contract, one of the most important factors for success is the mutual understanding that individual success depends on the success of the group. For example, the network, and therefore each of its members, could also earn from the selling of new and specific network's products, from the most elementary gadgets to more complex meta products and technological Apps. It would therefore be in the interests of the single company to market the common network items.

Such dynamics are also valid in terms of knowledge sharing. Independently from the will of the author/s, knowledge and processes created by one of the enterprises (or by a sub-group of enterprises) of a business network contract can also create advantages for the others. These spillover effects happen because of the cooperative processes activated by formal aggregation, and benefit from the trust among members. This could be the case of an e-booking system created by one of the members with the aim of using it to offer the more complex and reciprocally more advantageous range of products of the network as a whole (Bramanti, 2013; Camera di Commercio di Firenze, 2015).

Conclusion

This study shows that in the institution and management of tourism networks' formal partnerships have important implications for a destination's development (Dredge 2006). On this specific topic, the case of the Italian business network contracts shows that entrepreneurs are willing to bind themselves to formal business networks.

A business network contract can be viewed as a 'solution', with its own peculiarities, to build a network in different economic sectors, and not only amongst tourism entities in Italy. Furthermore, the Italian example represents a good practice system which can be adopted by other countries. In this regard, it is interesting to notice that Italy is making a conscious effort to market and export the model.

This paper discusses the importance of networking, highlighting that successful tourism networks require a high level of cohesion among diverse stakeholders. Relationships and collaborations within a tourism network improves tourism policies and their related actions, while limiting conflicts among stakeholders. Moreover, advantages based on networking also sustain the idea of the importance of cooperation among enterprises. Then networks can be seen as a great opportunity for the success of businesses and destination management. Alliances promote the exchange of information, knowledge-sharing and the quality of services as well as allow entering new markets and sharing risks. Therefore, an appropriate integration of tourism enterprises and entrepreneurship are critical for networking challenges.

In a business scenario, tourism networks represent models of cooperative relationships among enterprises (Vellas and Becherel, 1999). Indeed, cooperative networks originate positive externalities for the enterprises involved, create value and increase innovation (Go and Pine, 1995). Strong interactions reinforce entrepreneurial cooperation, encouraging further businesses in the long run. However, as this study has discussed, networks may need to be fostered in formal forms since they are not always naturally established.

The study confirms the efficacy of business network contracts as an instrument to bind small- and medium sized tourism companies on formal networks. Managerial implications and benefits for SMEs are quite evident, if the Italian economic and business scenario is considered. Firstly, it should be noted that members of business network contracts have usually developed other forms of aggregation before joining a

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network contract, such as joint ventures or informal agreements. This could confirm the idea that informal relationships are used as preparatory to contractual ones, which are perceived as safer due to their legal character (Strobl and Peters, 2013). Secondly, as ISTAT data show, companies who decide to bond themselves to a business network contract are usually more efficient than companies of the same kind, size, and location operating on the market independently (Accetturo et al., 2013). Indeed, small and micro companies operating together in this kind of aggregation have also more opportunities to use innovative technologies, create economies of scale, penetrate new markets, putting themselves at the same level of bigger and/or big companies (Wooldridge, 2002). Finally, this study suggests the need for further research aimed to investigate factors that affect the formation of formal tourism networks, in order to identify the specific conditions that determine cooperative optimization at regional and local levels, and to explore the experience of other countries where the model has been adopted.

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