



ORIGINAL PAPER

Does Innovation foster development in small developing countries?

Manuela Mece¹⁾

Abstract:

This paper focusses its research on HUB opportunities for small business innovations in small regions of a developing country. In developing countries/societies there is no real attempt to understand how innovation happens in the first instance or how the demand for and supply of innovations emerges in its context. The expectations of societies and industry are shaped from classical innovations – inventions, therefore societies are reluctant toward process innovation which is the dominant form in this case. In many societies, innovative products and those who create them are without a theoretical identity which is ethically biased.

In order to understand better how innovation contributes to the welfare of places, researchers need to broaden the scope of contexts, economic sectors, and actors that they consider as potential sites and creators of innovation. Research that aims to comprehend the full spectrum of innovation should include specificities of places that are not necessarily orientated toward intensive use of high technology. By capitalizing on their geographical and social contexts, some entrepreneurs are able to contribute to their communities in various ways currently unacknowledged and unappreciated by economist. These contributions include satisfying genuine needs in the community, offering improved productivity of employees, developing skills, and generating social cohesion.

Keywords: *Small Business, Innovation, HUB, developing countries.*

¹⁾ Prof. Asoc. Dr., Albanian University, Dean of Faculty of Applied and Economic Sciences, Albania, Phone 00355692027810, Email: m.mece@albanianuniversity.edu.al.

1. Introduction

Innovation Hubs are an interesting pillar supposed to create the organic link between Innovation and Industry, mostly entrepreneurship of young inventors.

The concept is broadly supported by developed economies and lately the new EU countries like Poland, Check Republic, Slovakia, Croatia and Serbia are turning their attention towards Innovation Hubs as the instigator of technological innovations for small projects; nests for job creation for youngsters; connecting point for HEIs, Businesses and Governments; conveyers of change for professional groups and partners of local governance. Lately, even big corporates like Microsoft, Johnson&Johnson, are supporting the idea of Innovation Hubs as drivers of change and promoters of young professional engagement and employability.

The rise of co-working spaces is at once a social and economic phenomenon, especially in the new era of digital start-ups and internet economy. Among the younger generations, spending productive time in co-working spaces has become a new need - and norm. Some governments believe this development will ease the problem of youth unemployment worldwide.

In developing countries/societies (but not only) there is no real attempt to understand how innovation happens in the first instance or how the demand for and supply of innovations emerges in its context. In many societies, innovative products and those who create them are without a theoretical identity. Explaining the relation between commodities and geographic areas Molotch (2002) suggests a way forward by arguing that goods are mirrors of the location in which they are produced.

Various models of such hubs and the hosting organization generates a landscape of creative hubs that is far from homogeneous. Some hubs are built on the principles of independence with a "Do-It-Yourself" flair. These hubs emphasize the importance of community and collaboration. Meanwhile, at the opposite end of the spectrum we have hubs operating off the back of venture capital funds providing them with more resources to invest in buying or renting properties and setting up flashy workspaces. So the overall objective of this paper is to stimulate a favourable environment at a public regional university that enables young people to develop their mindset from employees to employers, and to prepare them to improve skills and knowledge to create jobs.

2. Literature Review

The stipulation of Innovation

Innovation is widely seen as the key to regional and local economic advantage Barkham, (1992); Chandra and MacPherson, (1994); MacPherson, (1992); Simmie, (1998); Suarez-Villa, (1991). Every region demonstrates a variable innovative capacity which shape in a way its economic destiny: those regions that have developed a competitive advantage (natural & human resources or technology) or have attracted and supported innovative capacities will prosper; those that cannot languish de Mece · (2015)

Empirical studies document how innovative activities cluster in space and seek to explain why some places are more innovative than others and how, in turn, economic growth is related to innovative milieu Feldman, (2000). Probably the most inclusive definition of innovation is that it is "the creation and exploitation of new ideas" Kanter, (2000). These scholarly definitions of innovation imply quite a broad term (as they do not mention if the innovations engage technology or markets), economists in Western

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developed societies usually use the term 'innovation' to mean 'technological innovation' and in their empirical work are more concerned with manufacturing activities [Nijkamp et al (1997) and a few others include the business services sector too].

In fact, the theoretical concept of innovation has been developed referring to a limited range of economic activity – mostly those associated with use of a certain level of technology thus excluding other sorts of economic activities, especially in labour intensive sectors or regions where the technology has limited sources to advance. A blunt conclusion will be that those economic sectors predominantly populated by men in terms of ownership and employment are the ones that fall comfortably within these dominant definitions of innovation. Current understandings of innovation reflect, moreover, the concept's origins in and linkages to a historical context, namely that of the 20th century industrial complex that characterizes OECD countries.

For at least the past decades, technological innovations in the telecommunication, automotive and manufacturing sector, have been the driving locomotive of economic development and wealth creation.

Innovation Hubs and innovation property

Industry relies on Hubs to access excellent technological and entrepreneurial knowledge, as they very often cannot afford the investment and skills needed to operate them even if a public grant is provided. Competence offered in Hubs ensure support on industrial value chains by housing the complex large-scale research.

The establishment of an Innovation Hub varies from the development priorities and funding opportunities. They can be aligned to local government when the local priorities are set toward specific development of certain industries; within technological or science parks and within HEIs.

Open Society Foundation has financially and technically supported forms of Innovations Hubs in Southeast Europe. In Albanian this Innovation Hub project is called Ofiçina and is hosted in one leading high school – Technical Institute “Harry Fultz”. This is a strategic initiative focused in supporting Albania’s transition to a knowledge-based economy. Its mission is to invest in, incubate, and help develop a new-technology industry in Albania by promoting entrepreneurship; helping early-stage high tech start-ups thrive; bringing commercially viable technologies and business to local and global market and last but not least supporting employment of youngsters in a growing ICT industry. Innovation Hubs are responding to the raising demand for digitalization and automatization of the industry (labor market demand) and to the specialization of youngsters graduating with STEM degrees (labor market supply). DIH (2022).

As Innovation implies scientific knowledge, governments feel the obligation and responsibility to disperse it as the knowledge has “public” properties. Following this logic, the government goes further and finance the innovations. But the transactions go beyond the Social Responsibility of the government for the dissemination of knowledge and the usefulness of the innovation. Government – sponsored innovations have been instrumental to the creation of whole new industries and many innovations within existing industries. The Internet and the WEB, both tenets of the information superhighway that gave birth to thousands different companies all over the world grew out of government sponsored research Afuah (2003). In financing innovation, governments accomplish education objectives for part of the workforce, spurs private ventures to invest in related invention or commercialization activities and last but not

least innovation projects can enjoy the economies of scale that come with large innovative projects.

My own research (empirical) of entrepreneurial ventures in Albania, specifically those emerging from women groups, have raised some questions referring to innovation and its perception in geographic and gender context. Many of the entrepreneurs I have met in the course of my life, as a development professional, academic or consultant, particularly but not exclusively women, saw their businesses as innovative in the sense that they brought economically viable, new ideas to a place and created significant positive change in that place – and above all they created the Margin to take the Risk for starting the venture. In other words, they were capable to identify and satisfy an unmet need.

However, various scholars and policy makers (national government or intergovernmental agencies) who shape local economic development (LED) policies would exclude these businesses from the category ‘innovative’ because these businesses serve primarily to local markets, or they do not employ a well-defined workforce - in terms of skills/profiles and because they hardly use any new technology.

The broad definitions of innovation like those of Kanter and Feldman can introduce ambiguity such that it becomes difficult to know what is and what is not innovative. Referring to the even broader definition that innovation usually means Change both in the organizational and economic sense any model that seek to understand the phenomenon (cause of Change) is multidisciplinary Afuah, (2003). Additionally, innovation entails dealing with new knowledge - collecting information and turning it into new products or services, which are undoubtedly the core activities of many small businesses taking place in rural areas or small towns.

By recognizing these activities as innovations policy makers can go beyond simple acceptance to quick alterations in approaches to local and regional economic development.

Innovation and LED – Local Economic Development

Various scholars have placed particular emphasis on the ways that local knowledge and social networks can enable access to resources within a specific location for those who are perceived to be innovators (for example, Amin, (1999); Amin and Thrift, (1997); Harrison, (1994); MacLeod, (1998); Maillat and Lecoq, (1992); Pamuk, (2000).

Places that are ‘institutionally thick’ are meant to have abundance of resources, and a distribution system characterized by well-defined and coordinated structures. Thus, local legal framework as well as the co-operation among actors within a particular business community, shape the distribution of capital and information to innovators and from innovators to the market. This creates wealth and ensures the distribution of it in the society.

Embracing a notion of innovation that is related and inspired by the location and that does not necessarily highlight technology over all else requires an understanding of economic development and related initiatives that differs from those that currently seek to promote innovation. Indeed, as a development professional I support LED that seeks to develop people and places more generally, rather than advancing a neoliberal, capitalist development agenda. Gibson-Graham (1994). The majority of LED approaches have focused on innovation, traditionally understood, as

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part of their remit to position the local economy advantageously within a global, neoliberal project. For a related discussion see Sheppard, (2002).

In fact, other approaches to LED have been suggested and implemented though not explicitly linked to innovation. LED initiatives usually tend to meet local needs and the transformative power of these initiatives could be enhanced by the kind of reconsidering innovation. Specifically, LED efforts would benefit from a perception of innovation process that is sensitive to where the innovation is taking place and who the innovator is. Alternative approaches to LED (those that focus on local well-being broadly construed) are consonant with recent thinking in the urban planning literature on what makes good cities. Although, as Fainstein (1999) notes, some authors emphasize outcomes (the substance of the good city) whereas others emphasize process (the planning and political processes that constitute the good city), all stress the importance of the inclusion of marginalized groups. I hope that the argument about innovation contributes to this literature by specifying how the positionality of certain citizens affects their ability to enhance local economic development and hence to contribute to creating 'the good places.' The broader definition of innovation supported in this article is embedded within a concept of LED that embraces the needs and contributions of all people (Mece, 2015).

3. Methodology of the research

In order to understand better how innovation contributes to the welfare of places, researchers need to broaden the scope of contexts, economic sectors, and actors that they consider as potential sites and creators of innovation. Research that aims to comprehend the full spectrum of innovation should include specificities of places that are not necessarily orientated toward intensive use of high technology. By capitalizing on their geographical and social contexts, some entrepreneurs are able to contribute to their communities in various ways currently unacknowledged and unappreciated by economist. These contributions include satisfying genuine needs in the community, offering improved productivity of employees, developing skills, and generating social cohesion. Because these contributions are extremely important to the economic and social well-being of the regions, and in order to understand the relationship between innovation and context, research should seek explicitly to study all or more economic sectors. Recognizing that innovations can occur in any place and in any economic sector should mean recognizing that innovators come in various forms of personification. Because of context, gender, age, and race divisions in the labour market, there is a strong relationship between social context and certain economic sectors of innovation. Women, for example, are more likely to start businesses in retail and service industries than in other sectors, therefore their innovation is more related to the sector. Research needs to explore the processes that link social identity, geographic context, and innovation in order to appreciate fully how innovation affects places.

The Innovation Hubs are strategic initiatives focused in supporting labour intensive sectors or economies towards the transformation into knowledge-based economies. These types of projects achieve the following objectives:

- They become laboratories of new ideas & inventions for youngsters and others that need to test their idea prior of the commercialisation.
- They are hubs of information dispersion as the access is free to every member of community.

They can generate income through the ideas which can be tested in customised

clients before full commercialisation.

The most significant contribution such projects offer for the hosting organisation (university, corporation, or local government) is the entrepreneurship acceleration and job creation. The perceived risk of young entrepreneurs is confronting the market; therefore, the innovation hub serves as a mini environment for testing the idea and helping it thrive and the new technologies and business ideas directly impact job creation for youngsters.

Partnerships are eminent for Innovation Hubs as they define the mission of such initiatives.

Innovation Hubs are generally placed near Local governments or Universities.

The reason of such associations derives from several preconditions of local development. To execute successful large-scale transformations, local governments need to focus on three critical actions that have been shown to produce inclusive political policies. First, the local government needs to engage the entire city's community to create consensus and buy-in around the vision of a modern, innovative city.

In other towns like Korce, Elbasan, Vlore the local government offered office space to host start-ups for a period. Additionally, various projects supported from institutional donors or framework programs have strengthened and revitalized the capabilities of several business leaders. Regional development agencies, Chambers of Commerce, National Employment Service offices and Universities have offered skill development programs, provided new start-ups with expert mentors to help them create technical proposals, financial plans, or marketing strategies. These project hubs also served as accelerators. The local governments have channelled modest budgets to select and fund innovative companies specifically led by youngsters.

While many municipalities, privatized their public utilities, there is a case of Medellin (Capital of Colombia) that converted the Enterprise of Public Utilities - EPU into a multinational corporation. EPU believes that community ownership has strengthened its operations because the city's inhabitants have become proud of "their" company's contributions to the city's economic development and culture and, as a result, are more inclined to buy into its projects. EPU has funded huge projects throughout the city, including the Planetarium, the Botanical Gardens, the Museum of Water, a children's interactive museum, libraries, urban parks, and the 16,000-hectare Arví Park just outside the city limits.

Innovation Hubs in Universities are upstretched to another level aiming the support of cross-faculty interdisciplinary strategy themes through internal and external collaboration. Study programs are becoming dynamic to catch up with the fast pace of digitalization of the economy, but youngsters are attracted to practical science examples they can put hands on therefore innovation hubs are getting in another wider dimension. They are creating and accelerating innovation partnerships with private and public sector organizations; facilitating and building Technology and Innovation Zone in the heart of main cities with associated full-scale R&D centres; developing and nurturing innovation talent among academic staff, students, alumni, our partner organizations and the wider community; supporting start-ups, spin outs and innovative SMEs; forming and leveraging national and international networks to support expertise, knowledge and investment; applying the best innovation practice and policy through Innovation Research Institute.

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4. Results: Innovation Hub as part of a public regional University

As ICC (International Chamber of Commerce) states - Open innovation is the use of “purposeful inflows and outflows of knowledge to accelerate innovation internally while also expanding the markets for the external use of innovation” Chesbrough, (2006). Open innovation is not limited to the sources to enhance innovation and thus deliver additional value for customers. Put differently, when relying on an open innovation model, a company does not strive to generate the best ideas entirely by itself. Rather, it seeks to utilize internal and external ideas in an optimal manner, to be more effective at managing cost and risk and to accelerate technology development. Sources of knowledge typically include suppliers, research centres, universities, customers, competitors, and companies with complementary offerings. De Meyer et al., (2014) Including an Innovation Hub in the University enables students to thrive in their creativity for business and/or technology. The HUB made the study programs more dynamic as it combined theoretical knowledge and practical success and information. The HUB incites the recreational potential of students, introduce commercially stable technologies and business models, engage local and international partners; bring the science to the level of community (students and their mentors) and hopefully attract the attention of venture capital or any individual investor to commercialise any of the inventions or businesses initiated in the Hub. Partnership is the key to success for such projects as the success is measured while the results of students work reach the market.

One important partner is **local business**. The southeast prefecture is ranked fifth in the national statistics of enterprises with 50+ employees¹ and chances for these companies to focus on innovation are higher than family business or artisans that are more reluctant to invest for technology or innovative business models. The business environment is improving in regard to starting it, taking permits getting loans but worsen in case of taxes and insolvency. Start-ups are having a special status and less import duties while buying components of high-tech or IT, so the trend is going in that direction.

Local Government is the other key partner for the HUB to be successful. In the southeast prefecture implemented a project – Creative Hub where powerful, ambitious, and creative young people were invited to become part of bringing the citizen’s perspective. Cooperation ensures inclusive political policies, the built of institutions that foster innovation, and more importantly for the actual circumstances, attract the necessary financial capital to drive change in the southeast prefecture. The change in the institutional context of the city may be as important as the tangible infrastructure projects that this cooperation may produce.

Community organizations, NGOs supporting heterogeneous societies in unfolding their values and outstanding leaders and innovators are also imperative partners as they foster an agile, open, and collaborative environment. This partnership is open and not so well structured as the other two partnerships, but it generates the most of ideas and interact with the society as a whole.

Private Education Institutions with sustainable academic activities and budgets and guarantees can become partners and institutional donors for Innovation Hubs. As mentioned earlier in the research, and as the Law of higher education implies,

¹ Active enterprises by municipality and size (INSTAT 2017)

the modern universities develop cross faculty study programs as a reaction to the labour market demands and modernised industry.

Innovation Hubs set up objectives for: a) promoting entrepreneurship; b) Helping early-stage start-ups thrive; c) bringing commercially viable technologies and businesses into local and global market; d) supporting employment of youngsters in a growing ICT industry.

Innovation Hubs can serve as a focal point for those start-ups or existing businesses that have an interest in technological parks that can be financially supported more easily if innovation and knowledge dissemination is one of their long-term objectives.

5. Discussion: Who can benefit from Innovation Hubs

The first beneficiary group of Innovation Hub are Start-ups – they can be new companies; spin offs from an existing business; or teams (two people minimum) with a commercially valid innovative business idea; a product or service.

By setting up advanced criteria the admission and start-ups will be highly competitive therefore elevating the input and outputs of the system. The Innovation Hub program is for people with a business mindset who prefer teamwork, who aim to enter global market and who are looking for networking, professional business advice and an energetic working environment. Although such criteria require lots of investments and put up the entry level for start-ups, it will significantly improve the texture of the economy and increase some indicators of doing business like competitiveness of the economy, productivity, and so on.

ICT communities and professionals can use the Innovation Hub indoor and outdoor spaces and facilities for their events, meetings, training, interactive presentations, whereas Universities can team up with Innovation Hub for research, for student projects and businesses can approach the Innovation Hubs when they are looking for new products, or when seeking to outsource services, when they are looking for placements of their apprentices or when they are interested to invest in start-ups.

One of the biggest challenges is to generate income from Innovation Hub Services. The Innovation Hub creates a vibrant working environment that includes co-working space with smart interior and modern office and meetings infrastructure, and a series of indoor and outdoor facilities and recreational areas.

Products - Innovation Hub close to a university can be a successful Game House where youngsters are eager and interested at creating games for Mobile Applications, especially offering marketing service for different companies through mobile interactive gaming. A market niche that students of different majors can cooperate are i -Tourism project like **3D Tours**. Albania is a rising star in the tourism market where the number of visitors and tourists has recently increased, and such products will be of a great interest. Bicycles that produce clean energy are fun to be developed in an Innovation Hub. Students studying in engineering programs of professional high schools are capable to assemble drones that can be used for capturing videos or images in real time to a country or territory or specified person. Various Apps (bus timetable, first aid App, Air pollution/cleanness App, etc., can be developed and sold to industry as well as to government institutions (local government) in order to create income for the centre.

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6. Conclusions & Recommendations

Albania's R&I system

Most of Albania's Research & Innovation activities are clustered in public research institutes/centres, and higher education institutions which together account for about 97% of the research undertaken in the last decades. Generally, the quality of the science system is considered higher than the performance of the Albanian economy would engross. This scenario does not facilitate the dispersing of the results of science into society, nor it enables the application and utilisation of any invention from those businesses that have an interest in promoting innovative initiatives. Businesses needs as well as educational needs are largely addressed by imported technology and know-how rather than domestic R&D and production.

The centralised approach imposed from lack of research infrastructure, funds and autonomy in choosing the area of research brings most of the researchers (including young people following their post-graduation studies) and those businesses that are technology based in the capital, Tirana, which offers the right infrastructure (although very modest) to support such development.

The commercialisation and exploitation of scientific knowledge, leading to the creation of new technology-based companies, processes, products and service has only just started, with examples limited to the garment sector, energy and ICT sector.

The Research & Innovation Sector located either in education institutions or in dedicated agencies for science and research has traditionally received limited attention by Government of Albania. Improving physical capital and promoting innovation are important elements for enhancing productivity and competitiveness of the national economy.

Albania is continuing to suffer from a lack of modern research infrastructure and state-of-the-art equipment, but efforts are under way to improve infrastructure, starting with support for the development of communication networks and IT systems. Major projects are co-financed by the EU, along with other international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, which has also funded the equipping of teaching laboratories for some secondary and tertiary education institutions.

There is an evident need for the Albanian R&I system to engage and support more knowledge intensive activities and to focus on the development of high-tech & innovative products, which will increase the growth potential and sustainability of the national economy, eventually driving the country out of the economic crisis and stagnation of low competitiveness and low performance in doing business.

To boost technology uptake and enable industry to absorb and scale up the technologies matured into new products and services and bring them to the market with high societal impact, the next step might be the support for cross-border collaborative research.

Support public-private partnerships (local governments, academia and SMEs) at national & regional levels, as key instruments to build competitive RD&I ecosystems with a long-term vision, enabling trust between partners. Such partnerships play a crucial role in leveraging private sector investments, linking those with national and regional efforts, as well as in helping SMEs and start-ups to engage in EU and international supply chains.

Within Innovation Hubs, ensure the long-term sustainability of the Technology Infrastructures managed by competence centres with a strategic approach based on

Industry's needs. Universities are the excellence centres for accomplishing this task that can prepare for the future with a strategic approach based on the industry needs.

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