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Enhancing stakeholder networks in wine tourism – evidence from Italian small municipalities

Abstract

Purpose - This research intends to investigate validity and reliability of a possible collaboration model for wine tourism with a ‘public’ basis, i.e. from the point of view of the municipality engaged in the promotion of the wine tourism industry insisting on its own territory, moving from the evidence of the current underestimation of these collaborations on behalf of Italian Small Municipalities.

Design/methodology/approach - The survey, which has proposed a theoretical / empirical framework derived from previous studies on the subject conducted by the authors, has showed the substantial trustworthiness of the model.

Findings - A clear difference of perception between non-small municipalities and small municipalities has emerged with regard to the perceived relevance of the collaboration with the individual category of wine tourism player / stakeholder.

Practical implications - A recent legislation in Italy, just focused on small municipalities, might help overcome these gaps, between non-small municipalities and small municipalities, releasing in the territories new energies, from both planning and financing points of view, for an even more important development of wine tourism in Italy.

Originality/value - If considering the total production level, Italy as country is the largest producer of wine in the world. Similarly, wine tourism, as additional business opportunity related to wine production in the strict sense, is a phenomenon of great success in Italy, even though it has not yet reached the high organizational levels of other countries (especially the New World of Wine). One of the main limits of this delay, as is commonly acknowledged, even in the presence of some significant performances, is the lack of public-private collaboration, at wide-spread level, among the players / stakeholder of the sector.

Keywords

Wine tourism, territorial collaboration, stakeholder networks, small municipalities, public-private partnerships.

Introduction

2017 will be remembered by the operators of the Italian wine industry as a very special year, in which the evidence of climate change has been felt with great impact (for all the following information cf. OIV, 2017): a very dry weather, which has brought the Italian production to be around 40 million hectoliters. In terms of quantity, also other 'traditional' wine countries have suffered; if for Italy, always according to OIV data, experts have estimated a decrease of 2018 on 2017 around 23%, for France the decrease is around 19% and for Spain around 15%, highlighting a common situation for the Euro-Mediterranean region. The countries of the New World of Wine, however, remain largely stable in terms of production quantities. The only positive exceptions are Argentina (+25%) in the New World and Portugal (+10%) in the Old World, while in other cases increases refer to previous values that are presumably low and thus suspected of distortions in the calculation evidences (e.g., +169% in Brazil or +64% in Romania). In addition to the summer drought (to be honest, also in other periods of the year), other atmospheric hardships have hit Italy in 2017 (frost, storms, floods, etc.), not everywhere and not with the same intensity, but in any case, contributing to make a very difficult vintage. In many places, however, we can highlight obvious reductions as regards quantity, but also a good if not excellent quality of grapes and wines, with a significant increase of the purchase prices, due to these factors altogether.

These major changes have happened only in one year: it is to highlight that the Italian wine production in 2017 was around 50 million hectoliters, for a reduction from 2017 to 2018 equal to the entire production of South Africa (OIV, 2017). In addition to the wine sector in the strict sense, 2017 has produced great change in Italy also with regard to the world of wine in general, and wine tourism in particular. In fact, in 2017 the Italian Parliament has approved three very important laws: the Consolidated Law on Vine and Wine (Law No. 238/2016), the Small Municipalities Act (Law No. 158/2017), and the amendment to the Financial Law for 2018 on wine tourism taxation (Law No. 205/2017). These new regulations are of considerable interest: somehow, their integrated use could produce a sort of 'revolution' for Italian wine tourism.

The following study is a scientific derivative of the annual survey – on the state of the art of wine tourism in Italy – conducted every year by the National Association of "Wine Cities". Interviewees have been involved in the evaluation of a framework for wine tourism development that has been thought especially (but not only) for small municipalities (i.e., in Italy, municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants). The aim of the research is to emphasize a sort of 'Italian' model for wine tourism, useful even at Euro-Mediterranean level, made of beautiful

places, delicacy specialties, and environmental habitability. In this mix, it is essential to plan, organize, and manage adequate ‘networks of collaboration’ among public and private operators, essentially stakeholders broadly considered (Shams, 2016a; 2017), to give the highest value to the *terroir* not only for wine, but also for the entire wine-tourism supply-chain of the territory.

Literature review on wine tourism collaboration

Wine tourism in Italy is a very important phenomenon, arriving at counting, according to the most authoritative estimations (Wine Cities, 2016), more than 14 million accesses for year (considering altogether tourists in the strict sense and hikers) and at least 2,5 billion euro of total value (considering altogether the wealth produced by the operators of the entire wine-tourism supply-chain). Several limitations, however, are still hampering the complete development of wine tourism in Italy: lack of service orientation (Tommasetti and Festa, 2014), absence of a systemic view (Romano and Natilli, 2010; Festa *et al.*, 2015), delay in considering wine tourism as a real business model (Festa *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, this is a common situation for many countries of the Old World of Wine (i.e., Europe and more in general, the Euro-Mediterranean region). They seem to be focused very much on wine production and very little on wine tourism, at least if compared with the countries of the New World of Wine (USA, Argentina, Chile, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand) (Gomez *et al.*, 2018). One of the most important characteristics of ‘Italian’ wine tourism should reside in the global sustainability of the overall experience (Annunziata *et al.*, 2018; Flores, 2018), adhering to an “Italian Way of Wine” (Festa and Mainolfi, 2013) focused on beauty, quality, and authenticity (Romano and Natilli, 2010; Sasso and Solima, 2018). Even more specifically, as investigated below more in details, rural areas seem to become finally a subject of considerable interest for the activation of new tourism business models in general, and wine tourism in particular (Salvatore *et al.*, 2018).

However, it is not easy to overcome “... the lack of material and non-material resources often associated with such towns” (Rauhut Kompaniets and Rauhut, 2013 p. 20). From a structural point of view, in truth, this limit seems unsolvable: wine tourists, even earlier than ‘wine’, are ‘tourists’ (Tommasetti and Festa, 2014), and they need/desire in general sufficient service, even though not always with best quality standards, given the authenticity spirit of rural tourism. While, from a systemic point of view, new opportunities may arise, also as concerns new tourism strategies, e.g. modularity (del Vecchio *et al.*, 2018). In fact, **if it is almost impossible to find an adequate set of operators/services in single small territories on their own**, their subjects

of governance, also thanks to their natural leadership (Khodabandehloo, 2014), could collect them through a Resource Based View organization – in a stakeholder perspective – that would involve even other territories (Rauhut Kompaniets and Rauhut, 2013; Shams, 2016b; Shams and Thrassou, 2019) for putting together distributed resources of service and competitiveness that isolated would be worthless while together could be successful. This would be even truer especially if – and that should be just the case of small municipalities, very common in the Euro-Mediterranean region – these resources are valuable, rare, inimitable, and organized, according to the VRIO model, which is the successful combination of Valuable Rare Inimitable and Organized resources for a sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1995), especially for wine tourism (Casas-Romeo et al., 2016).

In particular, considering that the necessary resources for enhancing the overall success of a wine tourism territory could not belong to a single operator, but quite rather to the different operators of the local wine tourism industry, in the scientific literature it is well recognized that networking in wine tourism is necessary, opportune, and fruitful (Hall et al., 1997; Telfer, 2001; Mitchell and Hall 2006; March and Wilkinson, 2009; Lavandoski et al., 2018), even from a cross border point of view (Contò et al., 2014; Santoro et al., 2017). At the same time, however, not all public and private operators are always involved in these collaborations with the same engagement (Alonso, 2011; Carson et al., 2014; Alonso and Bressan, 2016), and this can be naturally due to several reasons, but most probably different when considering a public or a private point of view (Lindkvist and Sánchez, 2006; Brunori and Rossi, 2007; Rodríguez et al., 2014).

Specifically, from the public perspective, understanding how a possible stakeholders network in wine tourism could be organized and consequently, if and why it is considered useful for the wine tourism offer, seems a meaningful topic. In this respect, clearly, great importance should be reserved to subjective point of the view of the single operator, more in particular if public.

Research objective and investigation method

Starting from the abovementioned premises, the following study aims to provide a possible answer to the following research question: “What is the contextual stakeholders network for a municipality engaged in wine tourism?”. Two elements are key part of this focus: the public perspective – specifically, the municipalities perspective – and the contextual dimension, concerning in other words not a general network for wine tourism, but the specific network that could / should be relevant the single territory / municipality under investigation, emphasizing the local characteristics of the analysis. The research, more in particular, has been conducted

on the database resulting from the annual survey that every year the National Association of “Wine Cities” deploys on the state of the art of wine tourism in Italy, At its basis relies a structured methodological approach, whose pillars are the following.

- 1) The survey has concerned the municipalities that are members of the National Association of “Wine Cities” (throughout the entire country), being the main promoters, even only for identification, of wine tourism territories. All the municipalities present in the database of the association have been contacted (420), invited to respond once via e-mail notice (universe) and then via telephone reminder (sample), during January 2017, so to present, as usual, the very early results of the survey in time for the International Travel Exhibition of Milan (February 2017), one of the most important events of the world in the tourism field. At the end of the survey, ‘true’ respondents have been 85 (in other words, respondents whose responses have nourished correctly the research database). Thus, the survey perimeter covers 85 municipalities of 420 (i.e., 20.24%). From these considerations, it is evident that the data collected from the field have been derived from a sample that has been selected first with the non-probability sampling technique of convenience, and secondly, with the non-probability sampling technique of judgment. Reasons about time and cost are fundamental motives for this choice, which has had also the intention of involving all the municipalities belonging the National Association of “Wine Cities” As regards the statistical reliability of the survey, in the case of simple random sampling, the sample thus obtained would have been representative for 89.90% of cases with a maximum of 8% of error (0.08 on a unit basis). Individually speaking, the respondents to the questionnaire have been mayors, assessors, or other municipal administrators, all operators with specific expertise in the field of the public administration, which is coherent and relevant for the point of view of the research.
- 2) Beyond an overall analysis of the wine tourism phenomenon, the survey, from an exploratory point of view, has proposed also a possible theoretical / empirical framework of wine tourism development based on ‘collaborative’ networks among public and private players / stakeholders, in which to highlight the key players of the wine tourism industry and the main problems/opportunities in terms of collaboration.
- 3) The above-mentioned framework and the related questionnaire are result of the scientific activity of a research group pertaining to the Postgraduate Course in “Wine Business” of the University of Salerno. The questionnaire consists of 18 questions globally. Because of the explorative character of the research, considering the specific needs about the strategic analysis on wine tourism in charge of the National Association of “Wine Cities”, the scales that

have been used for the investigation have been provided on an empirical basis: just in this respect, before distributing the questionnaire in the field, having prevailing institutional value, it has been tested, verified, and validated by the staff persons in charge of the National Association of “Wine Cities” (Morgado et al., 2017).

- 4) The entire questionnaire procedure has been online, by using a software platform (Survey-Monkey). This has generated a) the links to get to the questionnaire, b) the web masks for compilation (accessible from computers, tablets, and smartphones), and c) the spreadsheets displays, so to simplify respectively the filling of the fields, the accuracy of the answers, and the subsequent building of the database (later investigated through common software application for office automation). For reasons of mere approximation/rounding of the percentages, some data do not perfectly sum 100%, but 99.99% or 100.01%.
- 5) The above methodology could be replicated efficiently in further investigations, even transnational if considering the more and more intense collaboration between “Wine Cities” (the National Association of wine municipalities in Italy) and “Recevin” (the International Association of wine municipalities in Europe).

The theoretical / empirical framework and the related field investigation

The perspective of the investigation moves specifically from the municipalities’ point of view (and not on other operators, public or private, involved in the overall wine tourism offer), because of two fundamental reasons:

- 1) wine tourism, of course, must be developed in a territory with some interest about wine; but, at the same time,
- 2) the only wine offer, intended as cultivating grapes, transforming grapes into wine, and bottling wine, is not enough, because wine tourism is first and foremost ‘tourism’.

In developing such exploration, furthermore, identification, activation, and management of a contextual stakeholders network are strategic operations that constitute a valuable interpretation key for the competitiveness of the wine industry on the territory, even with a “meta” approach (Contò et al., 2012). In fact, the subject of governance (first of all, the municipality) should tend ever more to shift the dynamic behavior from a government perspective (top-down) to a facilitation perspective (bottom-up).

In this research, therefore, the first problem for the municipality (representative of a wine tourism territory) is to define the contextual stakeholders network from a wine tourism point of view. This can be assumed as the **subsystem** of macro- and micro-environment that the subject of governance of the municipality, even only as regards wine tourism, considers an actual / potential system of activities/services able to co-create wine tourism value. For this reason, the exploratory research, which has investigated the municipalities belonging to the National Association of “Wine Cities”, presents the following setting.

First, moving from previous studies (Pellicano *et al.*, 2015; Festa *et al.*, 2015), a possible list of actors, public and private, which should cooperate ‘theoretically’ with the municipality to propose an effective wine tourism offer (cf. Figure 1), has been proposed.

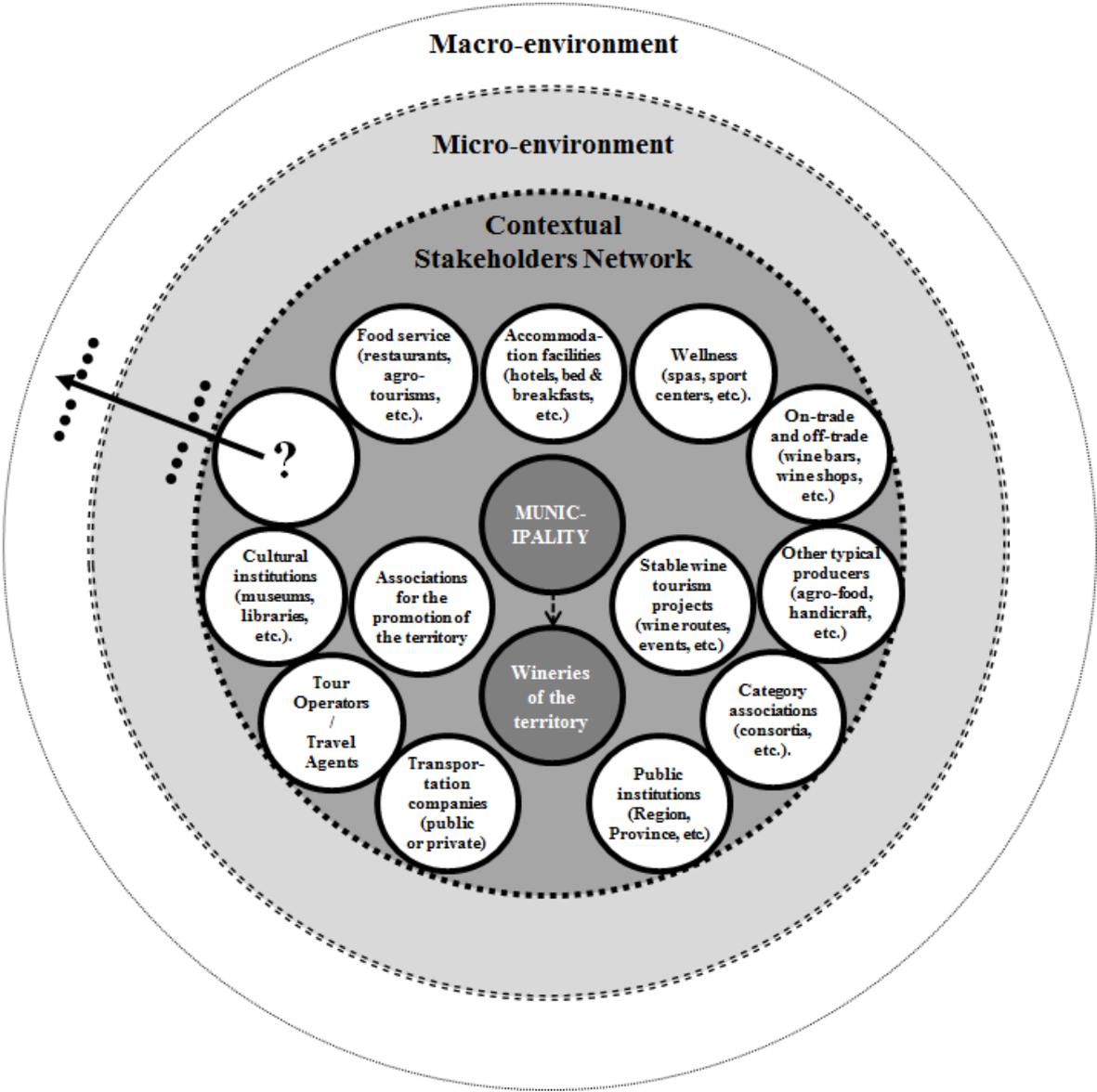


Figure. 1. Synopsis of the theoretical / empirical network for wine tourism based on ‘municipalities’ (contextual reworking of the authors from Festa et al., 2015).

Of course, interviewees have had the possibility to add other actors that are not present in the list, but that are relevant in their opinion. Then, for each category an evaluation scale (from 0 to 10) has indicated how much important ‘in theory’ the interviewee considers each player / stakeholder for the collaboration with the municipality for purely wine tourism aims (cf. the field survey structure as presented in Table 1).

TABLE 1 AROUND HERE

After the main survey structure, further questions have been provided to investigate more qualitative aspects of the possible interaction among territorial stakeholders, always from a public point of view, more specifically from the municipalities’ point of view. More in detail, these questions have regarded opportunities/criticalities of this collaboration, possible initiatives in cooperation, and level of engagement in a stakeholders’ network about the local wine tourism offer.

Results discussion

Table 2 illustrates synoptically the main findings of the survey. In order to bring out a particular highlight for small municipalities, distinction exists among “all municipalities”, “non-small municipalities”, and “small municipalities”, finally indicating the perception spread between non-small municipalities and small ones. From the Law No. 158/2017, to be considered “small”, an Italian municipality must register no more than 5,000 inhabitants.

TABLE 2 AROUND HERE

All the categories of players / stakeholders provided by the theoretical / empirical framework have been considered sufficiently relevant (receiving an assessment in terms of perceived relevance that is equal to or greater than 6 on a 0-10 basis), except that one relating to “Wellness” (spas, sport centers, etc.). The deep analysis of the assessments emerging from non-small municipalities and small municipalities does not reveal substantial differences on the average of

the assessments for each category, but reveals instead a substantial, because systematic, evidence. In fact, the average of the assessments concerning the perceived relevance for each category of players / stakeholders of the potential wine tourism offer, when expressed by small municipalities, is always lower than that one expressed by non-small municipalities. The higher 'spread' deriving from the mere arithmetical difference of the numerical evidences concerns "On-trade and off-trade" (wine bars, wine shops, etc.) for a value equal to 1.78, and "Category associations" (consortia, etc.) for a value equal to 1.44. The third highest spread value (1.12) concerns both "Food service" (restaurants, agro-tourisms, etc.) and "Stable wine tourism projects" (wine routes, events, etc.).

A possible reason for this difference could be that wine tourism is more 'restricted' with respect to food-and-beverage tourism in general (and then, with a potential minor impact in more restricted areas), but two additional evidences seem demonstrating the opposite. First, this reflection should be true also for non-small municipalities; second, there is a spread concerning also the relevance of "Wineries of the territory". Thus, our consideration is that small municipalities simply perceive lesser relevance about the players / stakeholders of the entire wines tourism offer, most probably for cultural and strategic reasons.

Instead, this theoretical / empirical framework can be useful most of all for small municipalities because it is oriented to overcome the lack of resources (i.e., players / stakeholders) emerged from the literature review. In this respect, there is a confirmation of what previous studies have highlighted. Differently, a possible contribution of this research relies in proposing a different methodology for overcoming this natural difficulty, i.e. putting altogether the necessary services/activities of the different players of the contextual stakeholders network for wine tourism in small municipalities not only from a private point of view, but also from a public-private point of view. A practical example of this potentiality is the hospitality solution of 'Albergo Diffuso', which physiologically implies collaboration with private operators and public authorities and which is nowadays a success story in many Italian small rural towns (Morena et al., 2017).

Limits of the research

From the field investigation and the subsequent analysis of the results, two substantial evidences have arisen.

- Except “Wellness” (spas, sport centers, etc.), all the players / stakeholders provided by the proposed theoretical / empirical framework for wine tourism, developed from the point of view of the municipalities, have been considered significant for the overall wine tourism offer of the territory.
- Average assessments about the perceived relevance are quite similar, but a systematic evidence is present: the relevance perceived by small municipalities as concerns the players / stakeholders of the entire wine-tourism supply-chain is always lower than that one perceived by non-small municipalities.

These evidences seem to show substantial reliability, considering that, even though at the end the sampling procedure relies on a non-probability basis, 85 seems in general a large number for a field investigation on a universe of 420 individuals, because the respondents, as Wine Cities, «... have all experienced the phenomenon» (Creswell, 2007, p. 62). Furthermore, and second, the judgment selection has found place only after, and not before, the convenience selection, and thus the theoretical framework could be object of some reliable analysis (for a “pragmatic” approach to sampling see Rowley, 2014).

Clearly, from a strictly **statistical** point of view, since the sampling have been conducted according to non-probabilistic manner, it is not possible to extend with certainty the obtained results to the whole universe of the municipalities associated to “Wine Cities”, and even less, of course, to the entire universe of Italian municipalities. Therefore, subsequent studies **with larger use of probability sampling and larger reliability** are necessary to increase the reliability of the results of the current research, which remains exploratory.

Scientific and managerial implications

From a theoretical point of view, it seems that there is an orientation of small municipalities to consider the players / stakeholders of the sectors that are ‘adjacent’ to the wine sector in the strict sense, on average, as non-relevant for the overall wine-tourism supply-chain. In the above disarticulation, from the small municipalities’ perspective, five categories out of ten do not reach the sufficiency score (Wellness, On-trade and off-trade, Category associations, Transportation companies, and Cultural institutions). The evidence is comprehensible: in a territory with limited size (at least for the population), the ‘core’ of the wine tourism offer is the winery, while the other categories of players / stakeholders of the overall supply chain, when they exist, play a secondary or even marginal role (i.e., lower than 6/10).

From a practical point of view, however, the potentiality of competitiveness for a wine tourism destination that would pose its territorial attraction only on wine seems at least risky, since service orientation of the wine tourism industry and collaboration among the players / stakeholders of the wine-tourism supply-chain nowadays seem to be common principles in the wine tourism economy. For the Italian territory in particular, it is possible that an important role would belong to the above-mentioned Small Municipalities Act, of which some ‘collaborative’ applications seem feasible in order to increase wine tourism cooperation, obviously from the point of view of the governance of the small municipality. For example, as specifically mentioned in the text of the Small Municipalities Act: tourist itineraries, with emphasis on local wine and food, that could enhance historical railway tracks, so involving also the various communities of the territory; local markets for direct selling of local wine and food, nowadays considered very attractive for food and wine tourists; film promotion for the tourist valorization of the small municipalities territory, also in the form of product placement for local wine and food; and many others possibilities/opportunities).

Conclusion

Wine tourism is an extraordinary business opportunity, not only for promoting and selling wine in the cellars, but also and above all as product/market able to generate value on its own. In this respect, however, interaction, collaboration, and value co-creation among all the possible stakeholders operating in the territory are essential, as constantly highlighted by the scientific literature in the field.

Unfortunately, stakeholders networks about wine tourism, both formally or substantially, are not always active in the territories of wine tourism, because of several reasons, most usually concerning some resistance of the various actors in collaborating for a common objective, most of all when competitors. In truth, however, some criticalities seem to emerge also in the dialogue with public actors, which should be engaged in a governance perspective of the wine tourism framework.

Moving from these evidences from the scientific literature about wine tourism, this research has tried to give specific evidence to the role of public actors in the overall stakeholders network that could/should function on a wine tourism territory, moving in particular from their point of view about the perceived relevance of the actors that could/should be part of a wine tourism framework based on a territorial stakeholders’ network. Even more in particular, the focus of

the research has concerned small municipalities, and their approach to the territorial wine tourism governance.

The focus on a proposal for a theoretical / empirical framework for wine tourism, based on the small municipalities' perspective, has highlighted a different propensity of theirs in evaluating, for wine tourism purposes, the relevance of the industry players (wineries and other players / stakeholders). Small municipalities particularly, however, could represent a 'point of reference' (at least because of their high number) for an 'Italian', but also 'Euro-Mediterranean', model of wine tourism to activate in territories with limited size, completely different one from another, and based on beautiful sceneries, fine cuisine, and environmental sustainability.

The Italian Law No. 158, dated 10 June 2017 and published in the Official Gazette on 2 November 2017, has been intended exclusively for small municipalities, providing funds and designing possible scenarios of action (Small Municipalities Act). Among the possible applications of this law, some solutions are especially suited for wine tourism. Nevertheless, skills, experiences, and projects at the service of local governance, including ad hoc training for public operators, are necessary in order to make even more attractive and competitive the wine tourism offer of small municipalities in Italy.

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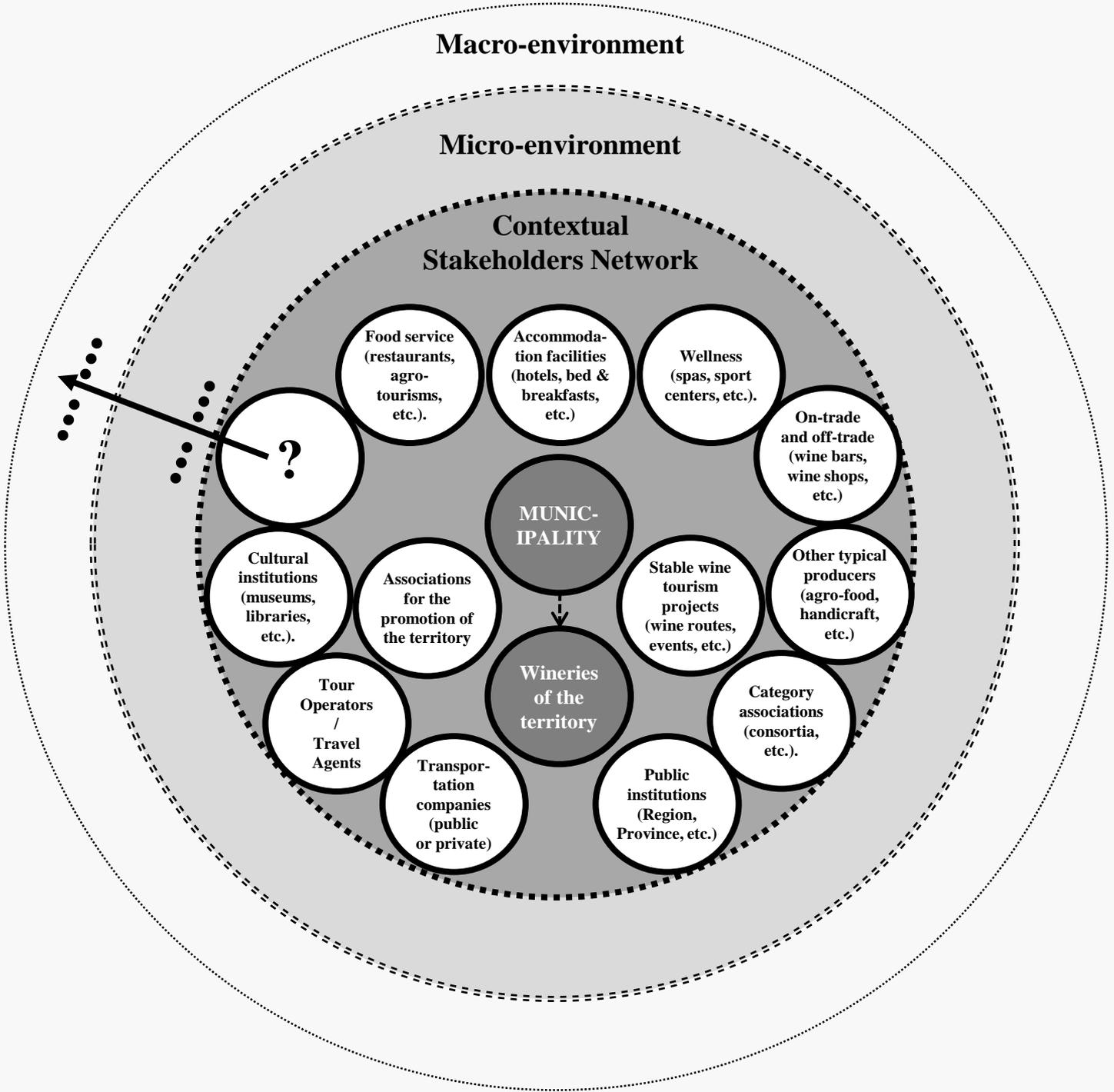
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Category of wine tourism operators on a territorial basis	Strategic relevance of the category from the point of view of the 'municipality' (average values, from 0 to 10)			
	ALL MUNICIPALITIES	NON-SMALL MUNICIPALITIES	SMALL MUNICIPALITIES	SPREAD (NON - SMA)
Wineries of the territory				
Food service (restaurants, agro-tourisms, etc.)				
Accommodation facilities (hotels, bed & breakfasts, etc.)				
Wellness (spas, sport centers, etc.)				
On-trade and off-trade (wine bar, wine shops, etc.)				
Other typical producers (agro-food, handicraft, etc.)				
Category associations (consortia, etc.)				
Public institutions (Region, Province, etc.)				
Stable wine tourism projects (wine routes, events, etc.)				
Associations for the promotion of the territory				
Transportation companies (public or private)				
Tour Operators / Travel Agents				
Cultural institutions (museums, libraries, etc.)				
Other (if 'Other' please specify)	<i>Interviewees have proposed no additional categories</i>			

Table 1. Field survey structure for investigating the perceived relevance of the collaboration with the individual category of wine tourism player / stakeholder. Source: Authors' elaboration.

Category of wine tourism operators on a territorial basis	Strategic relevance of the category from the point of view of the 'municipality' (average values, from 0 to 10)			
	ALL MUNICIPALITIES	NON-SMALL MUNICIPALITIES	SMALL MUNICIPALITIES	SPREAD (NON - SMA)
Wineries of the territory	8.47	8.65	8.28	0.37
Food service (restaurants, agro-tourisms, etc.)	8,11	8.65	7.53	1.12
Accommodation facilities (hotels, bed & breakfasts, etc.)	7.73	8.18	7.25	0.93
Wellness (spas, sport centers, etc.)	5.12	5.65	4.56	1.09
On-trade and off-trade (wine bar, wine shops, etc.)	6.55	7.41	5.63	1.78
Other typical producers (agro-food, handicraft, etc.)	6.86	7.32	6.38	0.94
Category associations (consortia, etc.)	6.65	7.35	5.91	1.44
Public institutions (Region, Province, etc.)	7.15	7.44	6.84	0.60
Stable wine tourism projects (wine routes, events, etc.)	7.48	8.03	6.91	1.12
Associations for the promotion of the territory	7.42	7.59	7.25	0.34
Transportation companies (public or private)	6.15	6.59	5.69	0.90
Tour Operators / Travel Agents	6.71	7.24	6.16	1.08
Cultural institutions (museums, libraries, etc.)	6.50	7.03	5.94	1.09
Other (if 'Other' please specify)	<i>Interviewees have proposed no additional categories</i>			

Table 2. Field evidences about the perceived relevance of the collaboration with the individual category of wine tourism player / stakeholder. Source: Authors' elaboration.