

# SOCIAL INNOVATION AND NETWORKING IN TOURISM: INSIGHTS FROM CASE STUDIES IN NORTHEAST ITALY

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the role of networks in social innovation in tourism (SIT), focusing on their capacity to foster inclusive and sustainable practices. Drawing on the concept of structural embeddedness, it highlights how networks mediate between individual actions and institutional frameworks. Using a mixed-methods approach, including literature review, desk research, and 39 qualitative interviews, the study analyzes two case studies: Bassano del Grappa and the Trentino province. Findings show that networks, particularly those linked to festivals and local heritage, enhance collaboration, trust, and innovation across urban and rural contexts. Brokers and stakeholder engagement emerge as key elements in shaping effective and resilient networks. The research underscores the importance of balancing inclusive and specialized initiatives and calls for policies that support community-driven collaboration. Understanding how networks evolve and generate*

*both tangible and intangible outcomes contributes to advancing SIT as a tool for local regeneration and long-term community development. The chapter concludes by highlighting the theoretical and practical implications.*

**Keywords:** Social innovation; sustainable tourism; networks; festivals; community participation

## INTRODUCTION

The chapter explores the intersection of SIT, focusing on the role that networks play in fostering innovation within local contexts. SIT is an evolving field, with significant implications for both social inclusion and sustainable tourism practices. Theoretical perspectives on SIT highlight the importance of networks as critical drivers for innovation, bridging the gap between individual actors and broader institutional frameworks. Drawing from the concept of structural embeddedness, the paper argues that networks not only shape individual actions but also influence the outcomes of social innovation by mediating between micro-level behavior and macro-level institutional structures.

The research examines two distinct geographical areas – Bassano del Grappa and the broader Trentino province – as case studies for understanding how networks operate in regions varying degrees of social and institutional support. Bassano del Grappa, with its rich cultural heritage and growing tourism sector, offers a compelling case for studying how local actors, ranging from businesses to community organizations, create networks that support evolving sustainable tourism practices based on the valorization of local cultural heritage and social inclusion. The Trentino province, renowned for its natural beauty and established tourism infrastructure, provides a different perspective. Here, the focus is specifically on festivals, which serve as an important focal point for the research. Interviews with festival organizers and related stakeholders in the Trentino area offer valuable insights into how networks are formed, maintained, and leveraged to create innovative cultural and tourism experiences. Festivals in this region play a central role in connecting local actors and facilitating collaboration, making them an ideal case for studying the operational dynamics of networks in tourism.

Through these case studies, the paper explores how networks influence the adoption of SIT, highlighting the importance of both formal and informal networks, the role of brokers in connecting disconnected actors, and how the density of networks impacts cooperation, trust, and innovation. The findings

offer a deeper understanding of how local networks in tourism can be harnessed to foster social innovation, creating a more sustainable and inclusive tourism industry in both Bassano del Grappa and the Trentino province.

## FRAMING STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT WITHIN SOCIAL INNOVATION

Social innovation and stakeholder involvement are essential for regenerating local contexts, revitalizing communities, and promoting sustainable development. Social innovation starts by identifying community-specific challenges, such as economic decline or social inequality, and developing tailored solutions to address them (Moulaert et al., 2013; Nicholls & Murdock, 2012). By involving community members in creating new services or initiatives, social innovation fosters empowerment, resilience, and long-term sustainability (Franz et al., 2012). It also contributes to economic revitalization by supporting community-based enterprises and social entrepreneurship, which create jobs and attract investment (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). Furthermore, social innovation enhances cultural and social revitalization by preserving local traditions, boosting community pride, and fostering cohesion (Manzini, 2015).

Stakeholder involvement complements social innovation by ensuring that diverse local actors – residents, businesses, and local authorities – are included in decision-making (Freeman, 2010; Greenwood, 2007). Involving stakeholders from the start ensures that regeneration initiatives are supported by the community and are more likely to be sustained over time (Reed et al., 2009). The collaborative approach between social innovation and stakeholder involvement ensures that solutions are deeply rooted in the community's needs, making them more relevant and impactful (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Shared ownership and responsibility enhance the success and sustainability of these initiatives (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

Key variables drive the success of social innovation, including identifying community needs, engaging stakeholders, and mobilizing resources such as finance, human capital, and material assets (Mulgan, 2006). Engaging diverse stakeholders ensures that solutions align with the community's desires, increasing acceptance and the likelihood of successful implementation (Sacchetti & Borzaga, 2021). Collaborations across public institutions, private enterprises, and community groups are crucial for pooling resources and expertise (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

Social innovation, when combined with stakeholder involvement, creates a framework that fosters holistic regeneration. The integration of grassroots

initiatives, organizational competencies, and a deep understanding of community needs promotes economic sustainability and new ways of living and thinking. Analyzing this process from a social innovation perspective reveals how stakeholder involvement fosters heterarchical organizations (Stark, 2009), where decision-making and resources are distributed across networks of actors and the local community (Da Roit & Busacca, 2024). Studying these networks and their interactions with the community helps understand the operational mechanisms underlying successful social innovation.

## METHODOLOGY

The research methodology adopted in this study is a mixed methods approach that triangulates literature review, secondary data, and qualitative data, all centered around the concept of networks, particularly within the context of SIT in the Bassano del Grappa territory and the Trentino province. The study began with a theoretical exploration of the topic of SIT, focusing on the main trends and emerging micro-focus areas within the sector. This initial phase involved the collection of key theoretical frameworks and concepts, which provided a foundation for understanding how networks play a role in driving innovation and collaboration. The exploration also included identifying critical challenges and opportunities, shedding light on the evolving dynamics and the impact of networked collaborations in the tourism industry.

In addition to the theoretical exploration, a desk analysis was conducted, examining institutional reports on tourism in these specific geographical areas (DMP Terre Vicentine, 2016; Veneto Tourism Strategic Plan 2022–2024, 2022; DMO Veneto regional orientations, 2024). This helped to identify regional policies, strategies, and challenges that influence network dynamics and the broader context of tourism development. The desk research also provided a concrete backdrop for the empirical findings, grounding them in the real-world context of Bassano del Grappa and Trentino.

The third component of the methodology involved in-depth interviews with local stakeholders engaged in SIT initiatives and the valorization of local cultural heritage. For the Bassano del Grappa area and its surroundings, 12 interviews were analyzed through their representatives. For the Trentino region, 3 festival organizations located in both rural and urban areas were involved in an in-depth interview process with internal and external stakeholders (27 interviews). These interviews were designed to gather first-hand insights into how networks operate on the ground, with a particular focus on how actors collaborate, share resources, and co-create initiatives around

social innovation and local heritage. The representatives and key witnesses of these initiatives provided valuable perspectives on the challenges they face and the strategies they employ to build and sustain effective networks, emphasizing the importance of trust, shared goals, and long-term cooperation.

## CASE STUDIES

We have chosen the two case studies we are going to introduce in this section for their capacity to explore the relationship between social innovation, networks, and local communities. The first case, Bassano del Grappa, focuses on the functioning of the network per se; the Trentino case delves into the relationship between network and local community.

### BASSANO DEL GRAPPA

In the Bassano del Grappa town and surroundings, social networks play a crucial role in shaping community initiatives, fostering collaboration, and driving local development. The following section illustrates how both formal and informal networks have contributed to the area's growth and vibrancy. Through interviews, we uncover the importance of creating and nurturing relationships between local actors, businesses, and cultural organizations. The section highlights how the strength of these networks, built on trust and shared goals, enables innovation, enhances community engagement, and creates a lasting impact. The insights shared offer a deeper understanding of how Bassano's network-driven culture contributes to the greater area's dynamic and interconnected ecosystem.

### THE POLICY CONTEXT

Over the years, Bassano del Grappa has developed a distinct and original network DNA, which has been significantly fostered by projects such as the OperaEstate Festival and various community-driven initiatives. This unique characteristic of the city, built on collaboration and shared values, has evolved through various activities and programs, with the Festival playing a central role in supporting these efforts.

The OperaEstate Festival, founded in 1981, has been instrumental in fostering a cultural network that spans the entire region. By working in close

collaboration with local institutions, the Festival has helped to strengthen the city's cultural policies and promote local initiatives. It is not just an artistic event but also a catalyst for creating connections between the public, private, and cultural sectors. The Festival has also demonstrated the city's long-standing commitment to cultural innovation, as evidenced by its collaboration with several local administrations over its 34 years. These partnerships have created a lasting impact on the community and continue to enhance Bassano's reputation as a cultural hub.

Furthermore, the Musei Civici di Bassano, with their rich history and collections, have also played a role in solidifying the city's cultural policies and its connection with the broader community. The museum's continuous expansion and community donations reflect a commitment to preserving and sharing Bassano's heritage, supporting both local pride and cultural tourism.

In addition to these institutions, other initiatives have contributed to the city's collaborative spirit. For instance, in 1999, the Cittadinanza e Volontariato initiative was launched, engaging local youth in projects that would later empower them to take on leadership roles in various sectors of Bassano, such as welfare, public services, businesses, and local communities. Similarly, in 2003, the Festival supported the creation of the Casa sull'Albero association, a collaboration that brought together volunteers, local leaders, and citizens to build a space for children and families in need. This was followed by La Terra di Mezzo, a network of 45 local associations aimed at connecting young people to hands – on volunteer work, further enhancing the sense of community in the area.

These initiatives, alongside the Festival's activities, exemplify how Bassano's cultural and social networks have flourished thanks to continuous collaboration. From school programs fostering inter-school communication to fundraising campaigns supporting local projects, the presence of OperaEstate Festival has helped reinforce these local alliances. It has contributed to creating a cultural environment where community-driven solutions are nurtured and supported by strong partnerships across different sectors, including education, business, and social services.

## NETWORKING IN BASSANO

As stated by Interviewee 1: “You should imagine this place a bit like a forest, where what is visible are the trees. [...] we like to represent ourselves this way, saying that, in reality, the vitality of this place lies in the roots, which are the daily exchanges between the different realities. And it's precisely there

that the true creativity and generativity of the projects are found.” The interviewee highlights that the network is a living ecosystem, where collaboration and exchange generate creativity. The complexity and richness of the network emerge only when viewed through a collective perspective.

According to Interviewee 2: “This metaphor, suggested to me by a craftswoman and artist, deeply struck me, so much so that I am adopting it as a description of our work. We are ‘weavers of relationships’, a material just as valuable, if you will, as high craftsmanship, which is delicate and precious.” Networks, like relationships, require care and attention to weave meaningful and valuable connections. This view underscores that networks are not just about visible connections but about deeper, more meaningful bonds that create real value.

Interviewee 3 provides another example: “Do you know those grants that, starting from hotels, end up with twenty electric bikes? So, I call the nearest bike shop and propose renting the bikes to tourists. At what price? 25 euros an hour, I say to them, I agree at 25 euros. You don’t buy the bikes, you don’t think about maintenance, but you create a network.” This example demonstrates how collaboration between local businesses, like bike shops, restaurants, and tourist attractions, creates a synergistic ecosystem. The network allows for resource-sharing and interaction without the need for ownership or direct management, resulting in a more dynamic, sustainable approach to tourism and business.

Shared goals and mutual interests are vital to a network’s success. Interviewee 4 notes: “If there is adherence to the goals and a strong interest in the actions that realize them, these generate positive impacts on the work and organization of each member. Otherwise, participating in the network would become truly burdensome. More than internal difficulties, challenges are often found outside the network.” When members align with common objectives, the network becomes more sustainable and effective, but external challenges like a lack of support from institutions can hinder success.

Interviewee 5 reflects on the collaborative culture in Bassano: “In my opinion, the most general answer is that Bassano, and the Bassano area in general, has a rather unique and original network DNA compared to many other areas. [...] I believe our presence in the territory over the years has nonetheless facilitated and strengthened this characteristic.” Bassano’s strong network culture has been built over time through continuous collaboration, involving local actors such as businesses, cultural institutions, and community-driven initiatives. This collaboration has created a fertile environment for relationships, trust, and cooperation, making the network resilient and adaptable.

Interviewee 5 continues: “Being, so to speak, genetically oriented towards the concept of networks, for us it is something natural, almost spontaneous. [...] one of our most appreciated ‘creations’ is the project ‘Ci sto Affare Fatica.’ In just a few years, we created it, we really committed ourselves, and little by little we faded from the spotlight, but today ‘Ci sto’ has become a public asset of the territory.” This example illustrates how the network transcends individual efforts, creating a collective, shared value. The project evolved into a public asset, demonstrating how collaboration and community involvement can lead to long-lasting impact. The approach emphasizes that networks must continually grow, innovate, and expand rather than remain static.

Interviewee 6 discusses the network as a system that includes both formal structures (like schools and families) and informal elements (like markets and entertainment spaces): “The fundamental idea is that connecting these diverse elements creates a support system that can help address issues faced by young people. Despite challenges, this network has been essential in fostering volunteerism and supporting individuals dedicated to the cause.” This network is critical for building community-driven initiatives and addressing collective needs effectively.

The insights from the interviewees highlight the crucial role of networks in driving innovation, collaboration, and community development. Tight-knit networks, based on trust and shared norms, foster smooth collaboration, while looser networks encourage new ideas. Brokers – individuals who connect different parts of the network – are essential for facilitating collaboration and creating positive change, guiding resources and opportunities through the system.

The deeply embedded collaborative culture in Bassano, as pointed out by Interviewee 5, shows how networks are an instinctive part of the social fabric, with projects like “Ci sto Affare Fatica” thriving due to mutual support and shared responsibility. Interviewee 1 emphasizes that “the vitality of this place lies in the roots, which are the daily exchanges between the different realities. And it’s precisely there that the true creativity and generativity of the projects are found.” Dense networks create a foundation of trust that allows projects to come to life, while looser networks, as seen in local tourism initiatives, foster innovation, as demonstrated by Interviewee 3.

Effective networks rely on ongoing engagement, collaboration, and external support from institutions and the broader community. The role of brokers is crucial in maintaining cohesion and the success of networks. In conclusion, networks are dynamic systems that enable collaboration, resource sharing, and the achievement of collective goals, based on the commitment of participants and institutional support.

## TRENTINO PROVINCE – THE CULTURAL POLICY CONTEXT

In the Trentino case, the meritorious value of culture is recognized by the 1987 law on cultural promotion and subsequently by the provincial law on cultural activities 15/2007. Civil society is given a special proactive role. It is, in fact, by empowering civil society organizations that the norm aims to implement a principle of participation in the development of culture. A key practical implication of this principle is the development of actions toward the participatory planning, coordination, and evaluation of cultural activities, together with an emphasis on the economic sustainability of cultural organizations, stressing public support as well as the autonomous role of cultural organizations in developing cultural entrepreneurial capacity. There is, in other words, the promotion of both community engagement and of a cultural industry attitude. This law has provided the normative context for the development of cultural organizations, which fall within the realm of the social and solidarity economy, including both voluntary organizations, foundations, cooperatives of artists, as well as (more rarely) social enterprises. Moreover, it has supported community competences that in large part already existed within voluntary associations such as brass bands, choirs, cultural heritage associations, and amateur theatre companies. From the point of view of distributional effects, it has supported cultural services in multiple and remote locations, rather than focusing on a few (urban) centers. Cultural activities of local relevance are given special attention. Article 8 addresses this point, emphasizing the need to identify, within the community, the local cultural and creative venues and networks “that can integrate the different forms of cultural and artistic expression of the residents and for the participation of cultural operators in the enhancement of local creativity.”

## FESTIVAL ORGANIZATIONS

The festivals analyzed focus on performing arts, music, and audiovisual media. Three festivals were considered: Contavalle, located in the rural Cembra Valley, and two urban festivals in Rovereto: Oriente Occidente (an international dance festival) and RAM (an archaeological film festival). Contavalle aims to regenerate community identity amidst challenges like depopulation and the decline of the local porphyry industry. The urban festivals focus on specific cultural interests and also engage in cultural and creative management activities, fostering local community connections and contributing

to a cohesive social fabric. These festivals enhance synergies with institutions, increasing opportunities for local and external partnerships through the search for funding.

The key competencies identified for successful festival management include community engagement (especially in rural areas), economic and organizational skills, and proficiency in communication, marketing, and competitive selection for funding. Festival organizers express confidence in their ability to secure and manage both public and private funding for project implementation and sustainability. Over time, these cultural organizations have increased their fundraising efforts through local and national funding, which has been crucial for sustaining activities and events beyond the festival's peak period.

#### CONNECTIVITY WITH LOCAL BUSINESSES AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

The network perspective suggested by the local cultural policy reinforces mutually supportive strategies, which are again incentivized by the public resources available for joint projects and by community organizations' capabilities to design and implement joint projects. The interplay between the pillar organizations of this cultural policy has emerged through the events and activities that have been developed over time. Festival events, for example, are often produced not by one single organization but through the partnership of multiple associations and with the cooperation between two or more local authorities. The president of one of the Festivals commented on the collaborative linkages with private citizens and volunteers, as well as with local associations, who represent the social capital of the place. Another festival manager observed the relevance of cooperation with local associations and cultural institutions. The production of events is also beneficial for young professionals and artisans who can contribute their work to the staging of events, and it also creates opportunities for small hospitality businesses. However, the involvement of small entrepreneurs also has another meaning related to a sense of belonging to the community. One local entrepreneur observes: "The need for community made me gladly accept the opportunity to participate, and in fact, I have always done so willingly. Participating in initiatives like those of RAM or Oriente Occidente is not a commercial endeavor – it's not done for promotional or economic reasons. There might be some return, but it is relatively minor."

## COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS

The Contavalle Festival, located in the Cembra Valley and coordinated by the Puntodoc association, operates in a rural, isolated area. It combines high and popular culture and engages the community through participatory theater and decision-making activities throughout the year. Artists conduct listening sessions with locals to incorporate their stories into performances, fostering inclusivity. Collaborations with art companies, volunteers, community associations, and local businesses are central to the festival's success. Support from municipalities, regional institutions, and national partners helps sustain the festival's community-driven approach. The artistic director plays a pivotal role in engaging locals and ensuring the festival's relevance. Puntodoc has been nurturing these values since 2011.

In contrast, the urban festivals RAM and Oriente Occidente cater to niche communities with educational goals. Oriente Occidente, established in 1981, was created by a group of professionals in Rovereto passionate about dance. It has since grown internationally, addressing themes like migration, rights, and sustainable development. In 2003, it expanded to include production, training, and dance culture promotion, and it is now part of the European Dancehouse Network. The festival also engages local communities through dance projects and supports young choreographers from Trentino.

The RAM Film Festival, focused on archeology and cultural heritage, is more community-oriented, engaging a diverse audience with a range of activities, including workshops and masterclasses. It has a strong international presence, with past editions attracting figures from 20 countries. Both urban festivals are more globally focused compared to Contavalle's locally rooted approach.

## DIVERSITY OF APPROACHES TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND VALUE CREATION FOR COMMUNITIES

Despite the diversities of approach toward the community of the three in – depth cases, overall, if we consider all the 16 festivals, we could observe that festivals generally tend to use culture as a tool for education and skills development, on one hand, and for participation, relationships, and the promotion of community identity, on the other hand. They aim to create both personal and collective benefits, primarily of an intangible nature.

Their cultural activities activate a community's vitality in various ways, depending on the territorial and social context, as well as on organizational

aims and choices. In rural settings, the adaptive and emergent nature of cultural initiatives, following engagement with the community members on the definition of activities and interests, proves to be essential. In urban contexts, festivals are more exclusively shaped by expert groups and cater to more specific communities of interest. However, through the diversification of activities, they still aim to create broader cultural exchanges, at least in terms of audience engagement.

On one hand, there are predominantly inclusive festivals where communities actively contribute or are consulted in defining the content. This does not usually lead to localism but rather leverages high culture as a tool to enhance popular culture and address local needs. On the other hand, some festivals have adopted an international approach from the outset, with the goal of establishing themselves as cultural enterprises recognized as key players in their field. These festivals cater to niche groups by promoting high culture, focusing on capacity-building for specific audiences, and indirectly generating positive external effects for the broader community. The skills developed within this framework enable the creation of cutting-edge expertise and innovative projects for targeted social groups.

## CONCLUSION

The cases presented above allow us to highlight two key findings. First, local networks take forms that depend on their institutional and social context. In this sense, the presence of public policies that continually act to foster the creation of networks is an important resource because it contributes to creating a system of relations that is more prone to building partnerships and trust.

In Bassano, networks function as dynamic ecosystems grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared purpose. Local actors – such as artisans, educators, and cultural operators – foster micro-regeneration by activating both dense and flexible ties. Their actions are sustained by a culture of collaboration and the presence of brokers who connect diverse initiatives and translate local knowledge into shared opportunities. These networks are not passive contexts but active infrastructures of care and innovation, essential for inclusive and sustainable development (Da Roit & Busacca, 2024).

Second, involving local communities in networks enables people and organizations to build cultural and social inclusion pathways that reinforce local resources and make territories more dynamic and innovative. The Trentino case study, based on 16 cultural festivals, shows how events can enhance education, identity, and civic participation. Rural festivals often

emerge from community involvement, while urban ones are more curated and audience-specific. Both, however, contribute to social vitality and cultural exchange. A balance between inclusive, grassroots events and specialized festivals is key to fostering both local engagement and broader cultural dialogue (Sacchetti, 2015).

In both cases, regarding networks, they are essential for fostering community development, innovation, and collaboration. Their success depends on continuous exchanges of ideas, resources, and support. Networks thrive when participants align around common goals, creating benefits such as trust, community vitality, and social capital. However, a lack of commitment can hinder their success (Sacchetti & Borzaga, 2021).

Future research should delve deeper into understanding the temporal evolution of networks, particularly within community and cultural contexts. This includes examining how networks respond to shifting community needs, emerging challenges, and changing socio-economic environments. A dynamic approach is necessary to trace how relationships within networks strengthen or weaken over time, how new actors are integrated, and how roles such as brokers adapt to facilitate evolving forms of collaboration. Additionally, research should address the conditions that enable networks to remain inclusive and resilient, especially in contexts where resources and trust are limited (Kazepov, 2008). Evaluating the sustainability of these networks involves not only tracking their immediate outputs but also their long-term outcomes in terms of community empowerment, shared governance, and social innovation (Heidenreich & Aurich-Beerheide, 2014; Sacchetti & Sugden, 2009). This line of inquiry will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of networks in promoting equitable development and offer practical frameworks for designing and supporting durable, community-oriented organizational ecosystems (Da Roit & Busacca, 2024; Kazepov & Cefalo, 2022).

On a practical level, the findings highlight the need for policies that foster not only inclusive networks but also those that support specialized functions within communities (Sacchetti & Borzaga, 2021). Particular attention should be paid to brokers and to mechanisms of external institutional support, which are vital for maintaining healthy and adaptive networks (Sacchetti, 2015). At the same time, it is essential to encourage forms of enterprise and cultural organization that are generative for both communities and territories – models of governance and access that are inclusive, responsive to local needs, and oriented toward shared benefits rather than the appropriation of value by a few (Sacchetti, 2015). This can be facilitated through co-programming processes between public and private actors and by promoting initiatives that intensify meaningful interactions among local stakeholders (Sacchetti & Sugden,

2009). These interactions build mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation, forming the social foundations necessary for effective network work. Without these conditions, networks may become inefficient or even counterproductive (Sacchetti & Borzaga, 2021), risking extractive uses of local resources rather than fostering shared, community-based development.

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