

Domestic hospitality: an IT based approach

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Abstract. The year 2015 obliged the world to contend with touching pictures of hundred of thousands of refugees fleeing from their home countries, risking their lives in the Mediterranean sea, trying to reach safer shores. UNHCR estimates that the number of global forcibly displaced people topped nearly 60 million. The main aim of this article is to consider how an IT based solution can contribute to the global refugee crisis. The research focuses on how citizens can contribute in innovative ways, rather than traditional governmental and institutional approaches. The innovative Italian initiative, called 'Refugees Welcome Italia' promotes domestic hospitality as a way to further integration. Among the other innovative aspects featured by this initiative the most important is the participative nature. To reach this goal IT gives an important contribution, on the one hand helping people to communicate, on the other allowing social work practitioners to collect data and implement a tailored system.

1 Introduction

European national identities have become more diverse in the latter half of the 20th century. However, in recent years Europe has been confronted with several macroeconomic challenges along with a constant inflow of new migrants with a direct impact on social cohesion. The Europe 2020 Strategy highlighted the need for our continent to take an innovative path to respond to these challenges by building upon one of Europe's key strengths; its talented and diverse creative population [1].

Thanks to IT, citizens may provide innovative input for social needs. As social innovation is currently encompassing more than just technological aspects, citizens and civil society organizations may bring essential changes contributing to a more integrated and cohesive Europe. In this context, an adequate understanding of the nature of social innovation process is required to understand the prerequisite of social transformation. The paper proposes a theoretical framework for social innovation and an empirical case highlighting the influence of IT based services to have a transformative impact on asylum seeking policies. The results of a six month participatory action research and subsequent co-design of the internal conformity of the organization and definition of the problems and priorities.

This paper proposes a theoretical framework for Innovation Management addressing practitioners who are not familiar with IT tools they need to exploit. The need for the development of this framework is justified through empirical work. This framework offers a solution, based on which designers can collaborate, identify opportunities for innovation, generate ideas, develop prototypes, identify weaknesses of their design at early stages, complete implementation and proceed with exploitation.

2 Related Empirical Work

The empirical work presented in this paper was conducted as a part of Oggioni's thesis project, which aims at highlighting the importance of co-design processes within the framework of civil society internal processes to create a bottom-up answers to fill the gap of governmental shortcoming. The empirical work consisted of a six months of participatory action research and co-design of the process. Using the tool 'The social innovation journey toolbox' authors helped RWI to consolidate the internal conformity of the organization and to define problems and priorities. Then the general assembly of the association co-designed and developed two outputs to facilitate the diffusion and the duration of the existing service through a higher involvement of users and stakeholders. The co-design process help us to highlight the importance as well as the shortcoming of an IT based social innovation such as the one studies in this paper.

More precisely the action research helped clarify to the involved practitioner the delicate equilibrium between online and offline phases, automatized and human-managed phases.

2.1 The social innovation journey toolbox

The tool is an output of the Transition project³. 'Inspired by the the Social Innovation Spiral by the Young Foundation and Nesta and shaped by POLIMI Desis Lab, who used their design expertise to develop and visualize the model, the Social Innovation Journey is conceived as action format, focusing on the sequence of steps social innovators may go through acquiring the skills and capabilities they need to grow and increase the level of positive impact on the wider society'. It is a tool made by different cards aiming at helping social innovators to tackle internal problems. It starts with the analysis of the social problem and benefits of new service; then it summarizes the different stakeholders involved and impacted and the possible personas⁴ [2]. Finally, through some others cards, it ease the designing of the user journey, the interaction storyboard and the system map. It consists of two circles of support. The external one involves social innovators at an early-stage of maturity, helping them moving from an intuition to an idea to a

³ <http://transitionproject.eu/learning-outcomes/project-methodology/>

⁴ Personas are fictitious user representations created to embody characteristics, behaviors and motivations that real users might express or groups of users. The method is quite diffused but also contested in its epistemological validity.

structured proposal and a pre-prototype ready to be tested with a community of stakeholders. The internal circle works with more formalized and mature social innovations, supporting them to achieve a more structured and replicable solution. The tool is flexible it was thus modified according to the specific need of the social innovation under study [3].



Fig. 1. The social innovation toolbox

2.2 The participatory action research

The participatory action research cannot be canonized in the form of a single, cohesive methodological approach, because it entails to consider what is usually objects of research, as research partners [4] [5]. The approach is particularly diffused in the study of marginalized people, or in the words of Rahman 'ordinary, underprivileged people ... collectively investigate their own reality, by themselves or in partnership with friendly outsiders, take action of their own to advance their lives, and reflect on their ongoing experience' [6]. As for this specific research, one of the author was a friendly outsider who helped the organization under study to consolidate the internal conformity, to detail the internal IT related work-flow and to define problems and priorities. It is important to stress that the two typical asymmetries of PAR did not fully apply. On the one side, the friendly outsider and the social innovators were on equal footing from the real beginning, since the latter had a large social and cultural capital. Some of them are also scholars themselves. On the other the typical divide between salaried researcher and free of charge co-researcher was blurred, being the first a young student, the latter professionals using their skills as social innovators.

3 Social Innovation

The term 'social innovation', in the last years, has entered the public domain as an ill-defined concept, which has tended to be overstretched [7]. For this reason we shall start by defining the historical context where social innovation was born. The concept is a product of the crisis of the traditional welfare system; it finds its application in series of interventions to promote better living conditions for people and communities [8]. The last economic crisis of the new century brought the Western world in a state of permanent austerity characterized by the appearance of new social needs. These needs are caused by important economic, cultural and demographic changes. In addition to this situation, the governments were not able to tackle growing needs because they have to control (or reduce) public deficit. In this context, characterized by new needs but old strategy to tackle them, there is a growing challenge to find new solutions. These are to be found within a change in the relationship between public and private sector, between who provides the service and the users. While the blurring boundaries between the private and the public sector has been studied at length within the framework of governance [9] [10], the shift between social policy beneficiary and, what we can call, social policy prosumers [11] [12] is quite new. As a matter of fact, in social services, as in the consumption of new media, the unidirectional relationship between providers and users is replaced by an active participation of citizens in the design of new products or public utility services. This is particularly true for web based services.

The normative emphasis that can be found in the literature on social innovation is quite diffuse [13] [14], nonetheless we must admit that some issues have never been solved by the welfare state, nor by the private sector left alone. For this reason unemployment, poverty and growing inequalities remain challenges for governments and communities across Europe, which may find a solution thanks to social innovation. In addition to these issues new social challenges emerged in the last decades: mass migrations, asylum seekers and social inclusion of foreign people. Notably while Member States are not able to tackle these dynamic coherently and in a sound manner [15] [16] [17], civil society and citizens are producing extremely interesting experiences. These new approaches can make a difference in addressing these challenges as a source of fresh, dynamic approaches mobilizing communities and building their own resilience. Social innovative solutions are thus coming from ordinary people in their own localities responding creatively and innovatively to the pressing challenges they and their communities are experiencing [14].

4 Italian policies for asylum seekers between security and social cohesion

While populations from the Middle East, South East Asia, and Africa have been crossing the Mediterranean to reach Europe in growing numbers since 2011, 2015

marked the sharpest increase arrivals to Europe and deaths in the Mediterranean [18]. In Italy, during 2015, an estimated 153,842 migrants [18] reached the Italian shore by boat, but only 40 per cent requested political asylum. Europe lacks secure channels for asylum seekers, leaving migrants only with perilous and dangerous route to reach the continent, at the same time public opinion is constantly shocked by the images of dead bodies reaching the shores. The major problem is that an effective answer would required a shared agreement at the European level. However, the EU, is facing multiple and sometimes insurmountable difficulties to act in a unified manner. The result is that the 'migration crisis' is becoming a dramatic humanitarian emergency and it is left mainly to the national level. The conventional mode [19] for foreign citizens to enter Italy is the illegal way. They are welcomed in the centers for immigration where they receive assistance, they are identified and detained. In case of request for an international protection, some specific procedures start in order to verify the requirements; otherwise migrants are sent back to their own country. This increase the share of economic migrant asking for asylum, since nowadays is the only entrance allowed. The hosting system in Italy is divided into two phases: the phase of initial hosting in government centers and the second hosting inside the SPRAR, the official protection system for asylum-seekers and refugees.

The initial phase pf the Italian hosting system is complex, given the discrepancy between legal provision and everyday practices [20]. Notably migrants are obliged to stay in these structures, often built in remote areas, in which, from the structural point of view, the hosting function is marginal compared to the one of containment. The so-called second hosting takes place withing the SPRAR network, created by the Bossi-Fini law (189/2002). It is a decentralized system consisting of a network of private-public partnerships [21] made of local authorities and third sector organizations. It should provide an integrated hosting experience [19], i.e. the provision of services that aim to facilitate the acquisition of autonomy for the refugees/asylum-seekers (empowerment process). The services offered ranges from health care to multi-cultural activities, from legal information to job placement.

However the SPRAR system does not host all asylum seekers but only a minor fraction, hardly reaching 25%. Therefore the Ministry of the Interior set up an emergency solution (CAS) since 2012, based on an allocation of asylums seekers to each Prefect according to the local population. Thereafter the Prefect, which does not have any internal capacity to directly manage the asylum seekers - being the territorial jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior - call for civil society and the private sector to manage the process. However, each Prefect is fully autonomous in drafting the public tender, creating the precondition of high variety of hosting conditions in Italy, often criticized [20] [17]. Indeed the range of services provided by CAS range from a minimum of lodging, food and health up to the fully fledged SPRAR requirements.

The time of staying depends on the specific situation but it rarely matches the legal provision. Moreover the system is fragmented, heterogeneous and based on security rather than social inclusion and social cohesion [23]. Indeed the

vast majority of CAS are made of big structures hosting dozens of asylum seekers without providing them with any tool for concrete autonomy nor any individualized project. As for the SPRAR partnership, the system features better lodging solutions (shared flats or small size centers) and a vast array of supporting tools. These however may vary a lot according to local capacity and local social capital. During this period the migrants are divided according to their status, via a formal assessment of the requisite for asylum. According to the Italian law and the Geneva Convention asylum seekers may be recognized as a Refugee, a Beneficiary of humanitarian protection or a Beneficiary of subsidiary protection. In all three cases migrant are protected and legally resident on the territory for given time spans.

5 Refugees Welcome: a political answer

The conventional way of hosting migrants in Italy is based on big structures. This way of doing things, in most cases increases inequality and social separation between residents and refugees. Indeed the system rarely acknowledge some of the most pressing needs refugees will have to face in their path towards autonomy: legislative discrimination, lack of familial relations, cultural discrimination (concentrating in lodging discrimination and labor discrimination). In most centers (either CAS or SPRAR) migrants rarely meets local people. The system does not allow people to know each others, to interact and to start a common path of social integration and social inclusion. The main idea of Refugees Welcome Italia Onlus (RWI) is to take care of the accommodation issue to promote an integration in the social context. As a matter of fact, considering refugees only, those status of international protection shall enter the so-called 'third hospitality' because they are not yet able to organize by themselves and independent and dignified life but they have to leave the second hospitality. This directly lead to a problem which is both economic and social. On the one side the money invested in those people are at risk - since they can now move wherever they prefer, on the other they are are a vulnerable group at risk of poverty, marginality and exclusion. In most cases they did not have a chance to build significant social networks, nor to know the city which they are located and to reactivate its human and professional resources.

RWI is part of the international network Welcome Refugees, born in Berlin in November 2014. It promotes the diffusion of hospitality in families and in shared homes of asylum seekers and refugees through a web platform. It also facilitates disintermediation and spontaneous application of the ones who are willing to host. It started slowly its activity in order to check the feasibility in the Italian context, from a regulatory and administrative point of view [24]. Thereafter since December 2015 it started the activities in Italy according to an adapted version, which may considered itself an innovation of the original German social innovation. Indeed in order to scale-up in the near future the Italian organization designed the whole process from the beginning to the end so to tackle all critical aspects.

The social innovators behind the organization, while duplicating the German prototype, decide to exploit the flexibility of the web so to design a more coherent project given the Italian institutional constraints and the needs asylum seekers face in Italy (which are different from those faced elsewhere). In order to fully understand the importance of the IT based revolution, it is important to describe the vision and mission behind the organization. RWI wants to promote a cultural change regarding migration and demographic, social and cultural transformation taking place in Europe and in Italy [25] [24] [26]. It wants to encourage the diffusion of experiences that help refugees to overcome the passive psychological dimension typical of the impersonal hosting centers. It wants to involve the resident population (Italian, foreign and foreign-born) inviting them to take an active role in hosting processes and social inclusion of asylum-seekers and refugees. RWI wants to facilitate the launch and the sustainability of experiences of inclusion and social, economic and cultural development that have a positive impact on the territories. The association wants to spread over the entire national territory a new model of domestic hospitality for asylum seekers and refugees, to support and complement the existing models of first and second hospitality. Given this mission and vision, it is now more clear the importance of information technology to design a coherent solution for RWI's needs. First of all, while existing experiences are based on word of mouth and territorial limitation, RWI aims at reaching the whole nation and everyone in the country. Secondly, the matching process, usually producing idiosyncratic results according to local actors preferences, requires to be standardized and uniformed across the country so to provide migrants with a comparable experience from the shore of Lampedusa to the suburbs of Bozen. On top of that the IT procedures allow the system to be efficient, scalable and reproducible elsewhere. As a matter of fact the Italian experience benefits from the German prototype and it is now feeding back the whole Refugees Welcome international network.

6 The role of the IT based platform for Refugees Welcome

RWI may be considered innovative under different criteria. We can say that RWI is a new form of organization, done by the autonomous initiative of private citizens. This group started from the identification of a social problem, in this case, national policies for asylum seekers, and then they created a network around it. The initiative is context dependent and its success depends on the ability of the founders to aggregate different actors and give them an active role; everyone participates but with different skills and roles. Moreover even if the platform and the idea were taken from an existing German initiative, making it work in Italy created different challenges. As we said in the previous section the initiative, even if scalable, is highly context dependent because of the high number of rules and regulations that control migrant's hospitality in Italy.

The research on and with RWI used the social journey toolbox as a tool to understand social innovation, but also to help RWI clarifying its internal flows

and the role IT plays within. Indeed the main purpose of this toolkit was to help researchers to understand better how the organization works and its main aspects. More specifically it helped the organization in five tasks: Definition of the social problem and what RWI offers; Relationships between RWI and the stakeholders; Personas and user journey; Interactive storyboards and system map, Service's challenges.

Two founders together with a researcher designed the possible internal work-flows and 'issue tracking system' (or ticketing) for both the family and the migrant (January 2016). The final results was presented to the other members of the association, during the following general meeting (April 2016). Therefore three goals were reached: definition of priorities, shared understanding and better communication tool. As for the first two goals, RWI reached a higher level of cohesion and a share agreement on both internal procedure and external stance. The research thus helped RWI to have a common understanding of its own working style, routines and communications. This tool was also appreciated by the association for its clarity and summarizing power.

While communication, selection of priorities and the vision, were at the core of the research [3], we focus here only on the role played by IT in the whole RWI matching process. RWI public interface is a Wordpress website (refugees-welcome.it) allowing both families and refugees to register via two simple contact forms. This allowed the media to present the project as a sort of Airbnb [27]. However there are many differences: the strong level of intermediation and the role volunteers play at the local level.

As regards to the commonalities between Airbnb and RWI, they relate to the IT based nature of the two services [24]. Given the mission of RWI, the implementation of a national database allows the domestic hospitality to reach everyone everywhere, to centrally monitor the hospitality and to standardize the service provided. The website is a simple facade for the association which is active mainly on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The other channel of communication, along with media exposure [24] allow the website to increase the outreach. At the same time, the website is the gateway for both beneficiaries and volunteers with dedicated sections and online forms. Once the families (and the migrants) reach the homepage they are quickly directed to the online contact form. The form requires families to provide a set of compulsory information. These information feeds an external relational database connected to a back-office CRM-like system ⁵. The database can be consulted by the Board of Directors in its complexity or by selected volunteers according to territorial boundaries, roles and privileges to ensure privacy and security for both migrant and families are in place. The selected volunteers are activated by a back-office system. After six month of ticketing directly managed by the secretary, the system is now moving to a formalized and automatized process managed by internally IT volunteers. The work-flow is thus activated by a registration, feeding a database, which

⁵ The back-office CRM-like system is developed internally and specifically for RWI needs with open source technologies (LAMP stack) and later will be released as an open source project to easily support other associations worldwide

opens an issue (or a ticket) and assign it to the competent territorial chapter.⁶ Therefore the system notifies the territorial chapter where the family resides and it opens the process to the following phases. Although the work-flow is partially off-line, volunteers constantly enrich the database and the 'issue tracking system' with feedback and further information.

In order to better understand the process, it is important to highlight the two components on the online service: the host side and the guest side. The host side is perhaps the most simple, because flats can be registered on the web only (lower part of Figure 2). Net of different motivations families and individuals have to join, the flat feeds a database and opens an issue. The issue calls into action the territorial board and a given volunteer who subsequently profiled the host through a telephone interview and a follow-up meeting. The profile is later uploaded in the database so to provide the system with a better picture of what is happening offline at the territorial level. Once registered and interviewed, the family becomes matchable, i.e. the association looks for a suitable guest for it, among those in the database. The host side thus meets the guest side (upper part of Figure 2). It is important to highlight that the selection phase is fundamental to prepare the family to the following steps of the procedure, so as not to run into disappointment of expectations.

As for the migrant side, the flows is similar to the host side except for the online registration. Guest may register as independent guest (thus directly feeding the database and opening the issue) or through a referral by a CAS or a SPRAR. The main difference lies in the workload that is placed on RWI. While for the refugees coming from a CAS/SPRAR, social workers are called to share their information with RWI, in the case of self-registered refugees RWI independently profile the candidate, once the ticket reaches the local level. As for the host side, the profiling of the guest is made by telephone in a first phase and subsequently through in-person meeting. Once the refugee becomes candidate for the combination, the association proposes a family. Meanwhile the back office system requires volunteers to continuously impute feedback enriching the database on the guest side too. The cohabitation is not the following immediate step. Once the guest/host couple has entered in the database a first meeting occurs in a neutral space, thereafter if both side agrees there are a series of meetings according to their taste. The cohabitation starts as soon as they are ready for it. This flexible structure is conceived to reach two goals: on the one side built mutual trust from the beginning via leaving the final choice to the counterparts, on the other allows the process to be shortened in case of emergency.

The cohabitation is subject to different rules, according to the funding situation and the legal framework. It seems clear that the choice of RWI in these first months has been to focus on refugees only, without considering to start a CAS for asylum seekers. As for the funding, the cohabitation may be based on an economic exchange (for refugees with a job), a fully free-of-charge hosting, or a funded one. In the latter case RWI does not provide any economic support

⁶ The association is divided in territorial chapters, matching Provinces, thus the Prefect system.

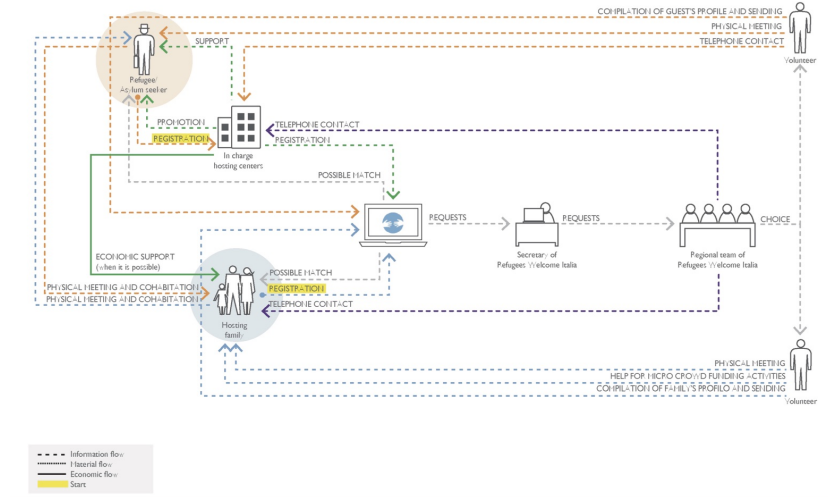


Fig. 2. System map

directly but only activating a tool and the support for micro crowd funding activities. Once the cohabitation starts RWI constantly follow the matching, via mentoring and in-depth analysis. Notably the cohabitation is based on a signed contract in which parts agreed about term of service, duration and rules. The same contract is part of the retro-feedback volunteers provided in the back-office system, along with financial information and the monitoring notes. Indeed, RWI constantly monitors the cohabitation with the dedicated volunteers. The same volunteers activated by the ticket are lately monitoring the situation with a constant dialogue with both counterparts. The volunteers are required to produce a report and doing the monitoring. Even if RWI is now working with an informal monitoring tool feeding a dedicated database, the association is now developing an online survey so to have a constant overview of all registered matches, creating a measurable metrics to better monitor single matches and the global impact.

7 Between social innovation and social cohesion

The IT platform serves not only as a tool for registration and profiling, but as an important tool of awareness rising and territorial coverage. As a matter of fact, even though the Ministry of the Interior has always discouraged the domestic hospitality, since 2013 some SPRAR projects developed some pilot projects. The best known are the one in Asti by PIEM⁷ and in Parma by Ciac⁸. However these

⁷ <http://www.vita.it/it/article/2015/09/07/accoglienza-diffusa-un-modello-che-fa-scuola/136418/>

⁸ <http://www.ciaconlus.org/rassegna-stampa-rifugiati-in-famiglia/>

projects are geographically limited and fully funded by the government. These two limitations are quite important, since they do not allow for the domestic hospitality to spread in the society. On the contrary RWI represents a fully-fledged social innovation with a grass-root flavor and full scalability because of the absence of geographical constraints and need of funding. Moreover the IT nature of RWI allows the system to be the only one with a database covering the whole country and providing donors and institutions with detailed information about the project implementation. Another crucial limitation concerns the visibility of the non-IT project. Before the well advertised pilot test of Milan (January 2016) the national press was focused only on Refugees Welcome Italia. Nowadays after some months the media coverage is still quite high [24]. This is particularly important for the social innovation to take place and to produce social transformation. As a matter of fact after each media appearance RWI observed a clear impact on both the number of families and migrants enrolled in the project. This has been particularly true for the television coverage (+30%), but also for the newspapers' articles (+7%).

RWI moreover has its impact on the society since it changes the perception of the resident population. Directly increasing the interaction between the society and the refugees within the familial life, indirectly via national awareness raising as well as community outreach of the family. As a matter of fact each host family is itself an ambassador of the project, as well as of the transformative power of RWI. The growth of RWI also allows other experiences to emerge and flourish.

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