

The Development of Social Capital in Different life Cycles of Tunisian Agritourism Entrepreneur

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Abstract

The role of social capital in the early phases of development of a family business is well documented, but the dynamism of the entrepreneur's social capital in the agritourism business remains a relatively lesser studied area. The current research on an inductive, exploratory, and qualitative base aims to uncover the place and role of social capital in the establishment of agritourism enterprise, from concept formation to stabilisation. Results of the study highlight the importance of governmental help in financial and networking help for launching the enterprise especially in remote areas, where these additional activities are relatively lesser known. The role of the network is relatively weak in the risk analysis of the business. This fact enhances the vulnerability of enterprises.

Introduction

There are many different theories of and approaches to agritourism as an economic, social, cultural phenomenon (Petrović, Gelbman, Demirović, Gagić, & Vuković, 2017). There is a consensus, that rural area represents the essential, core source for the expansion of agritourism, as a complex touristic product, serving the satisfaction of urban community's demand for peace and outdoor space for recreation (Nickerson, Black, & McCool, 2001). Agritourism is a rather complex touristic product, embracing a wide array of touristic services (Petrović, Gelbman, Demirović, Gagić, & Vuković, 2017), contributing to the general development of rural regions. This complexity highlights the importance of collective decision making, integrating all relevant stakeholders (Roman & Golnik, 2019).

Agritourism consists of numerous micro-, small-, and medium-sized entrepreneurs. Under this condition, it is essential to create such an environment, which promotes the cooperation and collaboration of tourism service providers (Che, Veeck, & Veeck, 2005).

This cooperation, formation of networks is particularly important for very specialized entrepreneurs who seek the survival of their businesses in agritourism, that is why the understanding of driving forces behind their propensity to cooperate is essential.

The ability and dynamism of the entrepreneur to develop and mobilize social capital is a key factor in the agritourism business (Neergaard & Madsen, 2004). Social capital helps the entrepreneur to spare time, cost, or effort to acquire the different resources, necessary for establishing or running the business. (Witt, 2004). Results of preliminary research have shown that the structure of mobilized social capital is different in various stages of the life cycle of business (Greve & Jane, 2003; Borges & Filion, 2012). Depending on changing need of the entrepreneur in quantity and quality of resources, his/her network structure changes dynamically.

The majority of the results of research available has been focussing on the structure of the network between entrepreneurs in a rather static way, analysing this system at a given point in time (Borges & Filion, 2012). The dynamic aspects of network relations have been obtaining relatively lesser importance (Borges & Filion, 2012). Understanding of dynamic character of the network of entrepreneurs is a gap in

current literature, that is why the focal point of the current paper is the analysis of changing social capital structure of entrepreneurs in different stages of the life cycle of their business. We will analyze this question on an example of Tunisian lodge provider entrepreneurs. In the framework of this inductive, exploratory, and qualitative research ten cases of Tunisian bed and breakfast providing business providers will be the current paper is structured as follows: The first is the present introduction, the second part analyses the relationship of agritourism with entrepreneurship, and the third part deals with problems of social capital. The fourth part describes the methodology, applied for quantitative research, and the fifth part summarises the results. Finally, the sixth section discusses them and outlines the possibilities of their implications.

Theoretical overview

Agritourism as a business opportunity for entrepreneurs

Today, the increase in the attractiveness of agritourism and the relatively low market entry barriers have made agritourism-related entrepreneurship a major component of green entrepreneurship in rural areas and an approach to support local sustainable development (Mastronardi, Giaccio, Giannelli, & Scardera, 2015).

All over the world, there is a high level of interest in agrotourism, as a driver of rural economic development. Based on the effective market demand, there is a possibility to shift from agriculture to agritourism-related services by introducing innovative methods and decreasing the inherent risk of agricultural activities by diversification.

In the opinion of Bosworth and McElwee (2014), agriculture has become more and more market-oriented in the last decades, periods of socio-economic crisis have prompted farmers to be more flexible, to develop and mobilise innovative skills and competencies, and to renovate themselves from "mere managers" to "entrepreneurs". Therefore, agritourism entrepreneurship refers to business initiatives based on agritourism lodges, aiming to develop economic activities in rural areas as an additional activity to agricultural (or food industrial, e.g., wine, cheese production) to respond to a change in the socio-economic environment. (Sima, 2016).

Compared to traditional agritourism the concept of entrepreneurial agritourism highlights the entrepreneurial character of this activity (Dragoi, et al., 2017). Therefore, economic aspects are counterbalanced by social and cultural characteristics when examining agritourism entrepreneurship. The entrepreneurial character is reinforced by the perceived market opportunity. practical initiatives and risk-taking by the creation of an innovative business. Therefore, the crucial characteristic of agritourism entrepreneurship refers to the agritourism entrepreneur's perspective of achieving his or her entrepreneurial goals even if the profit of this activity is well below the level of another sector net income-generating capacity (Tew & Barbieri, 2012).

Creation of agritourism-related enterprise as a business process

Despite the complexity and uniqueness of each case of new business creation, authors, to facilitate the understanding and study of the phenomenon, try to schematize the process by breaking it down into stages/phases or activities that show the path of the project, from the idea to the business. A classic model in the study of SMEs is that of Churchill and Lewis (1983). This model - which includes five stages: existence, survival, success, take-off, and resource maturity - deals not only with the creation phase of an SME but with its entire life cycle. Other authors have focused more specifically on the creation phase. One model that targets the creation phase is the one proposed by Filion, Borges, and Simard (2006). It groups the main activities of the business creation process into four stages. This model was successfully used in a study on business creation in Quebec, in which 196 new businesses participated, 77 of which were technology-based. Table 1 presents this model.

Table 1
Steps and activities in the process of starting a business

Steps	1. Initiation phase	2. Preparation	3. Start-up	4. Consolidation
Activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Analysis and identification of the business/market opportunities 2. Reflection and development of the business idea 3. Owner's decision to create the business 4. Preliminary financial planning 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Preparation of the business plan 2. Conducting the in-depth market study 3. Setting up a preliminary concept on the mobilization of resources 4. Building and education of the entrepreneurial team 5. Registration of a trademark and/or patent 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Legal registration of the company 2. Creation of physical infrastructure (if necessary): Installation of facilities and equipment 3. Development of the first product or service 4. Hiring of employees 5. First sale 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Carry out promotional or marketing activities 2. Selling 3. Achievement of break-even point 4. Formal financial planning 5. Management structure development

Source: Own edition, based on Borges and Filion (2012)

Social capital

The basic idea behind the concept of social capital is that personal relationships are intangible resources (Borges & Filion, 2012). An agent's ability to act, whether an individual or a firm, does not depend only on the financial or tangible resources he or she possesses, but on his or her intangibles (Bourdieu, 2000). He,

therefore, distinguished three main forms of capital that agents can use to achieve their goals: economic capital, social capital, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2000). At the same time, other researchers have conducted studies using similar concepts, including those of social networks and social resources (Granovetter, 1985, Burt, 2005, and Lin, 2001). Relationships among social actors remain central to social capital studies, and social network approaches are widely used to operationalize empirical research on social capital (Burt, 2005; Neergaard & Madsen, 2004).

There are two major perspectives in research using the concept of social capital: the external perspective, which focuses on the external relationships of an actor, and the internal perspective, where the focus is on the internal relationships of a group or community (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Our research can be considered as an approach, applying the external perspective. In this external perspective, the focus is on the relationships the target actor has with other actors. Studies that use this perspective are mainly interested in the characteristics and dynamics of a target actor's interactions with other actors and the resources he/she mobilizes through these networks. The following table presents the main contacts of agritourism entrepreneurs and emerging businesses (Table 2).

Table 2
– Social capital in the development of agritourism business

Main contacts of agritourism entrepreneurs and emerging businesses		
♣ Family members	♣ Clients	♣ Other entrepreneurs
♣ Friends	♣ Suppliers	♣ Entrepreneurship support organizations
♣ Partners	♣ Bankers	♣ Government agencies
	♣ Investors and lenders of venture capital	♣ Professional and commercial associations
	♣ Various actors from the financial world	
	♣ Consultants	
	♣ Accountants	
Main contributions of social capital to the process of setting up a business		
♣ Information	♣ Associate recruitment	♣ Presentation to other people and organizations
♣ Tacit knowledge in the sector	♣ Recruitment of employees	♣ Identification of suppliers and customers
♣ Training	♣ Financial resources	♣ Services for the company
♣ Business opportunities	♣ Moral or emotional support	♣ Services for the entrepreneur
♣ Marketing ideas	♣ Credibility	♣ Various types of support
♣ Management advice	♣ Resourcing	

Source: Own compilation

The contribution of social capital to the process of enterprise creation and its impact on this procedure are focal points on entrepreneurial research (Anderson, Park, and Jack, 2007, Cooper, 2002, Davidsson and Honig, 2003, Neergaard and Madsen, 2004 and Vale and Guimarães, 2010), that is why the research on the role of social capital can be considered as a part of the mainstream of research.

The objective of this research is to determine the evolution and the formation of the social capital, mobilized in the context of the agritourism sector and more specifically, the rural lodgings on the example of Tunisian entrepreneurs. In the framework of the current study, we will search for the answer to the research questions as follows:

How can be characterised the place and role of social capital in the early life of agritourism enterprises?

What types of social capital has been applied in different parts of the life cycle of agritourism enterprise?

How has been changed the different types of network-based assistance in the life cycle of agritourism enterprises?

Methodology

We have applied semi-structured interviews with the Tunisian entrepreneurs of rural lodgings in agritourism. This method has been to most adequate to real drivers and processes of entrepreneurial development and activity.

Sampling

For the achievement of our research objectives, we contacted the owners of rural lodgings, and have selected ten Tunisian entrepreneurs, who have already started their business more than a year ago. All of respondents had an agricultural, at least part-time enterprise. In process of selecting the respondents, we tried to mirror the diversity of the Tunisian agrotourism sector (Table 3).

Table 3
Characteristics of the qualitative sample

Entrepreneur	Case	Experience of entrepreneur
Man in his 50s	Rural lodging + local dishes	Work experience as an agriculture engineer + Experience in farming
Man and woman (a married couple in their 40s (Both interviewed)	Rural lodging	Experience as doctors
Man and woman (a married couple in their 40s (Both interviewed)	Rural lodging + Equestrian farm	Work experience as doctors + Experience riding horse for a woman
Two men in their 50s (brothers and both interviewed)	Rural lodging + Equestrian farm	Experience as both in hotel services
Woman in her 40s and man in his 50s (married couple and both interviewed)	Rural lodging + Green pedagogic space for children	Training on the food sector for the woman Man long experience as a food engineering
Woman in her 40s	Rural lodging	Experience as a teacher

Source: Own compilation, N = 10

The interview guide for entrepreneurs of rural lodgings

The interview guide with rural lodgings entrepreneurs has been divided into four main parts. The first topics dealt with the network building problems, of opportunities, a second theme approaches the support network, a third theme deals with the use of resource networks, and a fourth theme addresses the funding network.

- Investigation procedure

The research was carried out in Tunisia in 2020 among entrepreneurs of rural lodges located in five cities: Bizerte, Nabeul, Tozeur, Mednine, and Bèja. The cities have chosen to represent the geographical diversity of the agritourism sector in Tunisia.

A temporal deconstruction strategy by phases of the business development process (appendix 1) has been applied (Borges & Filion, 2012). Initially, a descriptive, allowing to retrospectively reconstruct the history of the business development process, and the evaluation of mode and intensity of application of the social capital in case of each enterprise. The duration of the interviews was between one to three hours. The qualitative data collection has been taken place between January and March 2020 (In Tunisia, in the middle of March, the situation has changed because of covid-19 pandemic).

The materials have been transcript, then recorded of each case was compiled, followed by the intra-case analysis and finally the inter-caste analysis.

Results And Discussion

We have analysed the different categories of entrepreneurial social capital, namely: The knowledge and information network, the family and other categories, the resource and business network, and finally the financing network.

For each category of social capital, a figure is presented, offering an overview of the intensity of mobilization of these networks at different stages of the business creation process. In figures the intensity of use of social capital is indicated, ranging from low to high. This intensity is intended to graphically illustrate our interpretation of the analysed cases. There are considerable changes in the entrepreneurial social capital at different stages of the business creation process. This social capital develops goes from a network predominantly consisting of knowledge and information to a more diversified network, including all categories of networks, embracing diversified resources and business contacts. These observations confirm the results of other research (Borges & Filion, 2012; Filion, Borges, & Simard, 2006) that had noted the dynamic, progressive, and evolving character of the social capital of the entrepreneurs as the process of creation of their enterprise progresses.

a) Knowledge and information network: After deciding to start their business, entrepreneurs need to seek information and acquire knowledge about developing projects in the agritourism sector. These pieces of information are vital to start a successful business. The participants of the interviews used their previous contacts to get information and advice. For example, the owner of "Côté ferme" in Mjez ilbeb, a rural lodging that offers visitors to discover life in the countryside and enjoy the agrotourism services offered by this place in the preparatory phase of his enterprise, based on his wide network with people, having soon agrotourism enterprise, had visited other lodgings and observed their solutions and technologies, with special emphasis on harmonisation of agriculture and tourism. The entrepreneur of "Côté ferme" was able to compare the different services offered by the other lodges and get inspiration as well as experiences before launching his enterprise.

The of the "El nour sahara" (a rural house in the south of Tunisia) could not find information and knowledge through his informal network. The owner of this rural lodging tried to contact other managers of rural lodgings in different cities in Tunisia because he wanted to get advice and help. Time and distance were efficient barriers in this process. So, he contacted the municipality, which turned out to be a wise choice. The lack of information he had in his informal network was filled with the help of the government as a formal link, and he was finally able to get the necessary pieces of information. He gained knowledge about starting, planning, and running a business, which was vital to him during this time. This is a positive example of the mediating role of the local public administration.

In another case, the rural lodging "Dar Ennour" used social networks as a source of information and inspiration to create and develop its project. The entrepreneur found what he needed to launch his project

in the Facebook groups, concerning this sector.

b) The family and other networks, entrepreneurs begin to talk with family members, friends or colleagues about the possibility of creating an agritourism-related enterprise. To advance their business idea or evaluate a business opportunity, entrepreneurs, in addition to what their core entrepreneurial team colleagues provide, seek information and opinions from other contacts in their network, often within family and friends. These are contacts who have expertise in the relevant field or who have some knowledge of the market in which the entrepreneur is considering starting his own business. For example, these aspiring entrepreneurs talk to family members or friends who already have projects in the sector. Four of the five entrepreneur cases progressed in this way, out of ten of our interview partners. As the entrepreneurs' knowledge has been deepened, the importance of these relations has been decreasing. This is in line with the results of other researchers (Ruef, Aldrich, & Carter, 2004).

The family was primarily a source of encouragement and financial resources in most cases. Family contacts were applied to a lesser degree as we had previously expected. This can be explained by the fact, that there has been a well-working enterprise official support infrastructure behind the projects.

c) Resource and business networks: this type of networks had been playing a rather limited role in the early stages of the enterprise creation process. A possible explanation of this fact is that mobilization of third-party capital and knowledge begins only in the start-up phase when the entrepreneurs begin to commercialise their services or products.

Despite the importance of the formation of the idea of developing and marketing an agrotourism product to potential customers or at least to someone who knows the intended market of the agrotourism, our results highlight, that rural lodgings entrepreneurs rarely mobilize resource contacts in the initiation phase. As we have experienced, they often begin their enterprise without serious market research or at least a face-to-face meeting with a potential customer. Under these conditions, the preparatory phase is often guided by the wishful thinking of the entrepreneur, and not on a basis of actual pieces of market information. From these follows, that there is no risk analysis. This fact enhances the vulnerability of enterprises.

When they started their business, they all needed help, like the example of "Green ranch" shows this phenomenon. The entrepreneur has applied his informal network and friends' contacts to decorate their lodge. He had contact with his friend from their network to work on the place in his free time, evenings, and weekends. He told him that they would eventually pay him when the income started. According to Shane (2003), this knowledge reflects the characteristics of network theory that strong ties offer advantages over weak ties. Strong ties are often vital during the development of the business process.

d) Financing network: The financing network is mobilized from the preparation phase and continues to be mobilized throughout the establishment of business activity and consolidation phases. There have been four sources of foreign capital. The outside finance has arrived essentially from governmental funding agencies. In almost all cases, we found that venture capital funds had been mobilized, too. Entrepreneurs

mobilize financial resources from banks as well as from family members. Of course, the basis of starting the agritourism business has been the own capital of the entrepreneur and his/her family. These results are in line with other studies (Di Gregorio & Shane, 2003).

The interviews showed that the entrepreneurs' social capital had sometimes allowed them access to new resources. Relationships can often be more local (within the territory) and stronger than before (relationships with friends). Some owners discovered the existence of certain subsidies and thus benefited from additional financial capital. When the tourist accommodation activity is accompanied by a catering or leisure activity, this type of relationship often allows entrepreneurs to find casual workers more easily than via temporary work agencies.

Other entrepreneurs have been able to benefit from the experience of other accommodation owners, providing them with advice on the management of their business (e.g., membership of networks and choice of labels, investment...). As with access to new resources, this form of learning emerges more in cases where the entrepreneur has strong relationships with people from the same group, in this case, tourism entrepreneurs or accommodation owners.

The interviews show that in terms of the mechanisms linked to the circulation of information, it is important to differentiate the type of information involved. Social capital can influence the image of an activity if it is present on the widest possible scale and concerns people from different circles. Therefore, the entrepreneur who has many local contacts and in remote areas will be favoured by numerous professional relationships and other advantages. On the other hand, for advice or resource information, the entrepreneur will have easier access to information because of the presence of many people from different groups, and within the professional sphere. Finally, relative geographic proximity can be advantageous when the information exchanged concerns the daily management of the business.

The agritourism managers must be careful in developing their businesses by adopting a social approach. Indeed, the results related to the effect of social capital on entrepreneurs in the agritourism sector, highlight the importance of the social capital links that these entrepreneurs must foster in the development of their business that facilitates certain steps to improve the progression of their functional skills and identify the right strategy to adapt to market their products and services.

Conclusions

This research sought to explore the main characteristics of the industrial network and how they were used for new Tunisian entrepreneurs in the agritourism sector. Focusing on qualitative interviews, the impacts of networks were mapped according to the entrepreneurial creation process, to answer the research question: How did the Tunisian entrepreneur benefit from his or her networks throughout the entrepreneurial process of developing his or her agritourism business?

Most of the entrepreneurs interviewed belong to several local professional networks (e.g., tourist office, agricultural office, etc.) or national networks, where these are often associated with general or thematic

labelling. They consider that the legibility and image of their enterprise among tourists are mainly due to these formalized relationships or, increasingly, to the creation of a website. However, their acquaintances (friends of friends, family friends) sometimes use word of mouth to attract tourists. Tourists may also come through local tourism providers, although customer referrals remain limited. Thus, it appears that entrepreneurs with many weak links to both local contacts (other tourism entrepreneurs such as restaurateurs, leisure activities, or even sometimes other accommodation facilities) and close contacts (mainly family members) can benefit from the dissemination of information about the location and quality level of their structure. However, it was found that within social capital, interpersonal relationships tend to complement the more formal relationships (network of professionals, internet).

One of the limitations of existing research on social capital in entrepreneurship is that it generally takes a cross-sectional perspective, ignoring the changes that occur during the process of creation. Our contribution in this regard has been to conduct a retrospective study that presents a detailed and careful analysis of the development of social capital over the four stages of the farm development process. The variation in the mobilization of different networks is illustrated in the Fig. 5. It is important to note that some contacts sometimes act as multiplex contacts. A multiplex contact is a contact that plays several different roles or serves as a vehicle for several resources, not just those that are typical for its category. Thus, mobilizing a contact from one category can sometimes allow entrepreneurs to gather resources that would normally be channelled to another category of contacts.

Thus, this study suggests the establishment of an environment and a support structure for entrepreneurs to expand and diversify their network before the development process of rural accommodation begins. This step allowed us to clarify the portfolio of social capital that an entrepreneur uses the most during the business development process.

The analysis allowed us to see that the social relations of agritourism entrepreneurs play an important role in the process of developing a rural accommodation and in the dissemination of information. But this prompts us to distinguish between different forms of social capital: those relating to communication, knowledge, and information around the accommodation structure involving distant social capital and weak ties, and those relating to start-up and management. The mainstream of tourism activity is rather through relationships with government organizations and other local tourism entrepreneurs, which leads to stronger ties. The interviews also confirm the role of social capital, and more specifically the role of strong local ties, on the strategic behaviour of agritourism entrepreneurs.

Future research could extend our work, empirically testing our result in the context of agritourism to get a complete picture of the dynamism of social capital in the process of agritourism business development. Further investigations are needed to understand the demographic factors such as gender, education; it could be interesting to activate the dynamism of social capital during the business development process and discover new relationships through them. Also, future studies could focus on exploring the role of other variables with social capital, such as social motivation and the social identity of an entrepreneur in the context of agritourism.

Abbreviations

Micro-, small-, and medium-sized entrepreneurs: SMEs.

Declarations

Availability of data and materials

Does not apply.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions

conceptualization, N.K; methodology, N.K.; validation, Z.L.; investigation, N.K.; data analysis, N.K.; writing—original draft preparation, N.K.; writing—review and editing, Z.L.; visualization, Z.L.; supervision, Z.L.

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Figures

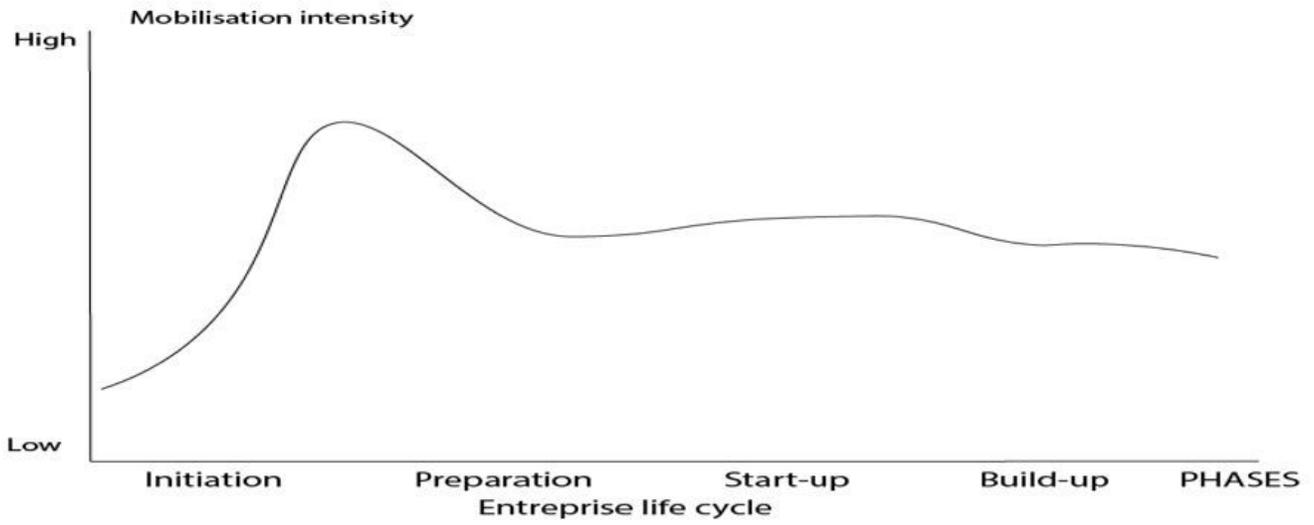


Figure 1

Mobilization of the Knowledge and Information network

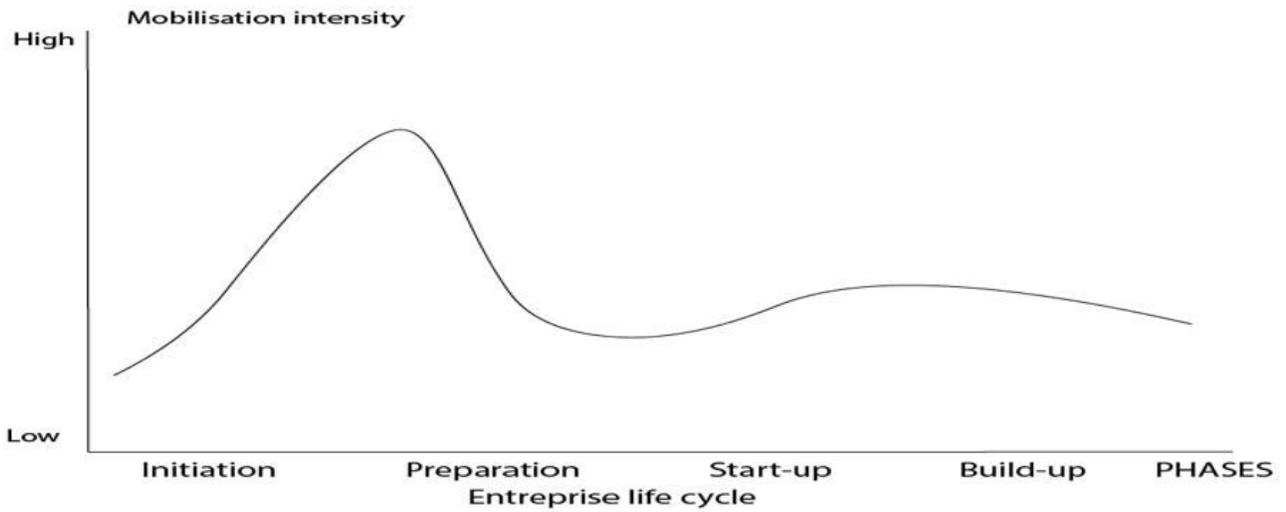


Figure 2

Mobilization of family and other networks

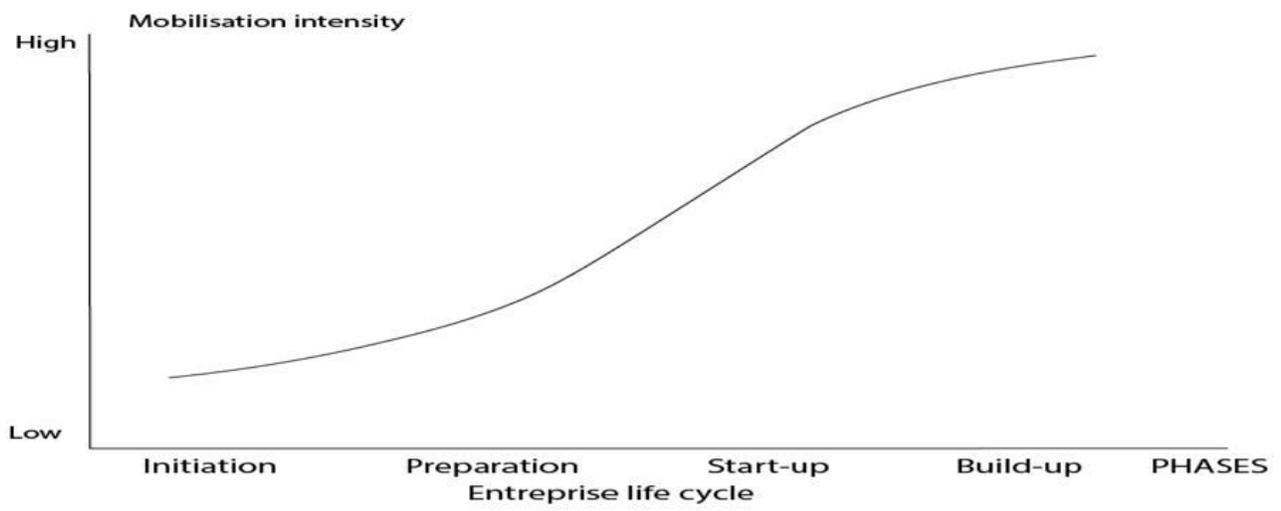


Figure 3

Mobilization of the resource and business networks

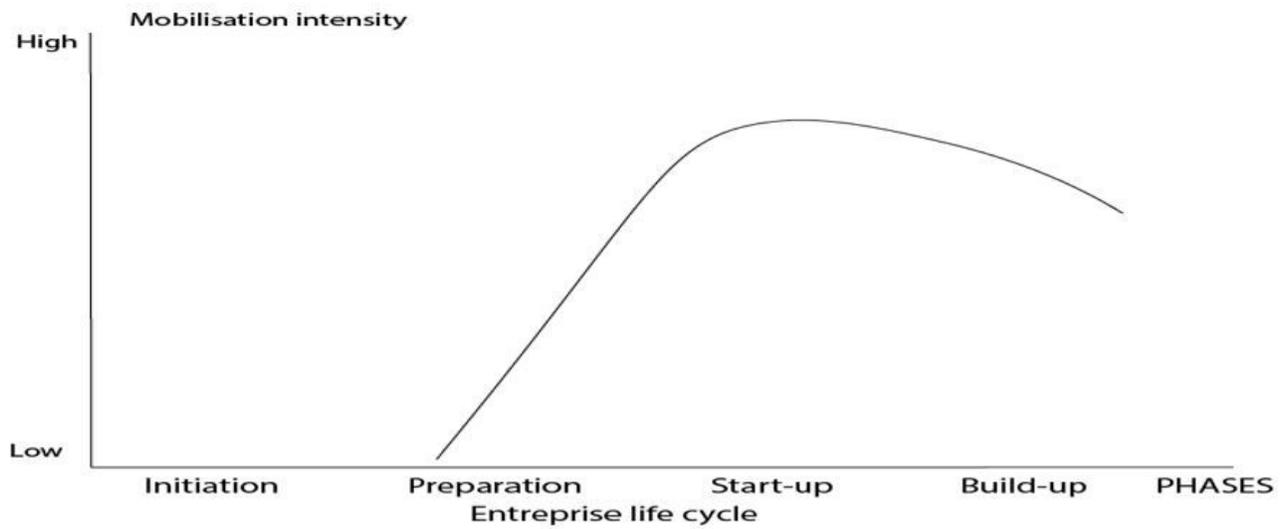


Figure 4

Mobilization of the funding network

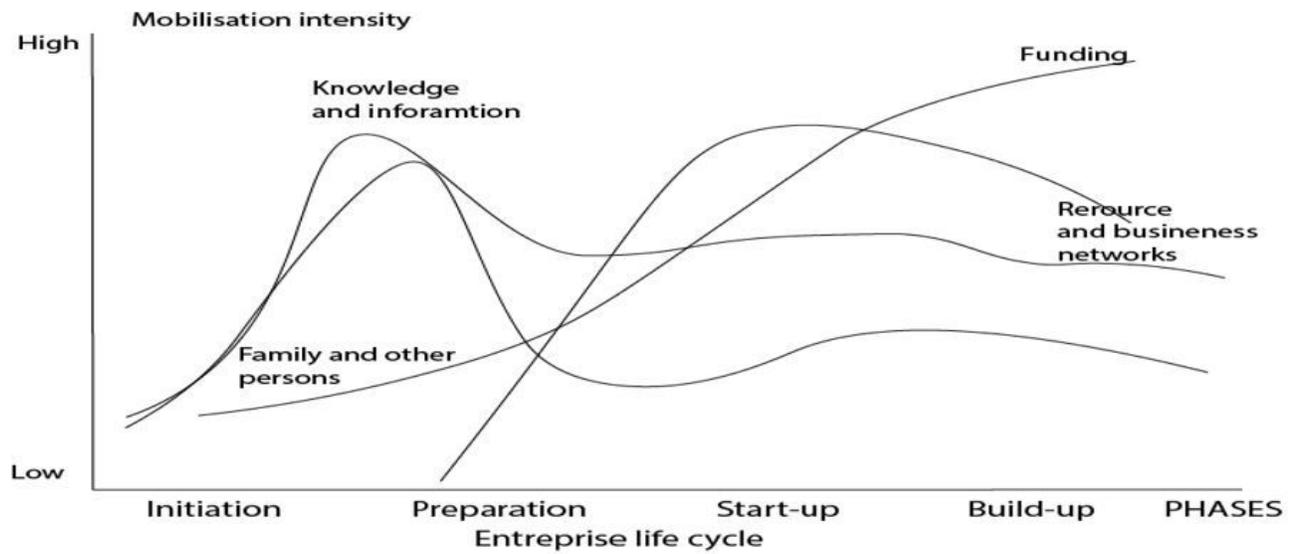


Figure 5

The social capital mobilized by each network throughout the four stages of the development process of a rural lodging

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- [Appendix.docx](#)