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# Strategic alliances in Consortia: driver of proximity for knowledge and innovation exchange in the agri-food industry

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## Résumé

Droughts, floods, and diseases such as *xylella*, which severely damage olive trees in parts of Italy, are common problems in olive growing. Olive oil has become a luxury product due to the decrease in its production in recent years, despite being an essential food for the whole world. The study explores how business cooperation can add value and stimulate innovation in olive growing to address these problems.

Consortia and cooperatives have led to increasing label identification by connecting Geographical Indications (GIs) labels to the territory, as emerged from the literature. Thus, some locations have become synonymous with producing high-quality products by creating a reminder for consumers to remember the label and territory. Joining efforts can be a great producers' tool to beat difficulties and exploit the GIs' potential, given the limited dimension of firms producing typical products. Investments in environmental research and techniques that ensure sustainability could represent the innovation power of consortia.

In response to the urgent challenges posed by climate change, and recognizing the associated economic implications, this study aims to evaluate the benefits of strategic partnerships and the impact of spatial dependence. The focus is on companies involved in olive oil production and processing, analyzed through a geographical examination of cross-sectional data. The study exploits the Italian district phenomenon, which has promoted innovation and knowledge acquisition in various economic sectors. In the case of the agri-food sector, studying the spatial component can offer several suggestions. This is especially true when treated as a common sense of attachment, proximity, identity, strong social relations, and local differentiation.

The best collaborative practices require a greater focus on the underlying basis of the success of Italian consortia, therefore questioning the extent to which consortium membership can make a difference in a sector as fluctuating and shock-ridden as the olive oil sector. The topic may be more applicable to the olive oil market, considering the Italian utilization of approximately 1.1 million hectares of cultivated land for growing olives that are later turned into olive oil. This could make collaborations and joint problem-solving resources more manageable for the olive industry.

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Data were collected over ten years (2013-2022) and 659 Italian companies from 2013 are included in the research. To assess the possible geographical effects of cooperation, the study also compares climate data collected during this period.

The choice of variables to include in the analysis was made via the components of intellectual capital. The choice was made to include the presence of the GIs certification and the membership of the *Consorti di Tutela* in the analysis of the ascertained variables, in order to understand how much these two factors can impact the verified relationships.

According to the results, geographically close companies have a significant impact on each other, highlighting the importance of spatial autocorrelation in this particular context. The results demonstrate the possible benefits of strategic partnerships between neighbouring companies, especially when it comes to increasing resilience against market and climate threats.

**Mots-Clés:** Consortia, Geographical Indications, Innovation, Olive oil sector, Partnerships.