

Beyond the crisis: what is the future for small businesses?

Challenges, opportunities and lessons learned

4th PISB Conference

Urbino, 3-4 December 2021

ASPI - Piccola Impresa/Small Business

CRIMPI - Centro di Ricerca su Imprenditorialità e Piccole-medie Imprese

Research Centre on Entrepreneurship and Small-medium firms

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered the largest public health crisis in living memory, with serious - and still unpredictable - consequences for the global economy. Available data clearly shows that small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have particularly suffered the economic downturn: their inherent weaknesses have amplified and accelerated the effects of the crisis compared to larger firms (Cowling et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Notably, in Italy, the Covid-19 outbreak is challenging SMEs' survival after a decade of a slow and incomplete recovery (CERVED, 2020).

The crisis has also generated the opportunity to (*re*)think about the economy and society as a whole (Barbier and Burgess, 2020), accelerating some already ongoing key trends: *innovation, digitalisation, sustainability, flexibility*. On the one hand, these big challenges represent the future we aim for and that we would like to build (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020; Kumar et al., 2021). On the other hand, they mark the way forward in the face of the changes that are now unavoidable for everyone: people, firms, and policymakers (Giones et al., 2020; Nadina et al., 2021).

For SMEs, this means "looking inward" to truly understand what is needed to move forward and activate those changes - in the production systems, in the organization, in the relationships with the markets - that cannot be postponed any longer (Cortez and Johnston, 2020; Modena, 2020).

One year after the start of the crisis, it is apparent that policy measures adopted by the governments of several countries worldwide, including Italy - that are deemed urgent to compensate for the loss of turnover, especially in sectors more heavily affected by the crisis (Amankwah-Amoah, 2020; Gössling et al., 2020; Pencarelli et al., 2021) - can only provide short-term benefits and will be insufficient to support SMEs in facing the forthcoming challenges, once the crisis is over (Liguori and Pittz, 2020; Wenzel et al., 2020).

Therefore, we must look to the future, beyond the crisis, to discover and understand the social, economic, and political scenarios the SMEs will act in, and to explore the critical strategic choices and policy measures that together will allow SMEs revitalize and return to the economic scene as protagonists.

To explore these issues, the PISB 2021 Conference "*Beyond the crisis: what future for small businesses? Challenges, opportunities and lessons learned*" encourages scholars to submit both empirical and theoretical contributions that advance our understanding of how SMEs are preparing to tackle and overcome this crisis and how they can effectively address, enhance and exploit policy measures at the local, national and European level (i.e. NextGenerationEU, The UK Government's COVID-19 Recovery Strategy) in order to move successfully towards this completely renewed and challenging scenario.

Possible research questions aligned with the conference theme include – but are not limited to – the following topics:

- What do small enterprises need to emerge stronger from the crisis?
- What are the possible trajectories for successful turnaround processes?
- What resources and skills are needed for small businesses to truly be competitive in the future? How could the university provide education for the acquisition of these new skills and professionalism?
- Which main lessons have small enterprises learned from the crisis?
- How can small enterprises be encouraged to reconsider traditional approaches to doing business and reconfigure/adapt/change their business models?
- How can small enterprises identify and exploit those opportunities offered by policy measures at local, national and European levels, to develop in the future?
- Which current and new actors can support SMEs in overcoming the crisis by triggering new development paths? How can SMEs effectively exploit the opportunities in the renewed network of relationships?
- How does the new scenario post-crisis impact entrepreneurial processes and new entrepreneurship? Can new and "unconventional" contexts of entrepreneurship be envisaged? What role could the university play in the spur of new ventures?
- What main changes - new products/services, new business models, new forms of work organization, new technologies and new digital infrastructures (such as the 5G network) represent key trends that small enterprises cannot escape?

- How do external (country/market/sector) and internal (firm specific) factors specifically affect SMEs' transition to the future?
- How has the crisis changed/is the crisis changing goals and values that drive SMEs' behavior and choices?
- Which policies can help small enterprises capture new growth and development opportunities brought out by the crisis? How can SMEs effectively address the design of such policies?
- Which specific policy measures can encourage small enterprises to incorporate new goals - innovation, digitalization, sustainability, flexibility – in their development processes?

We welcome submissions from a variety of disciplines including management, economics, organization studies, law, sociology and finance. Contributions with an interdisciplinary approach are particularly appreciated.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as conceptual papers and literature reviews are welcome. Research on SMEs of different sectors as well as cross sector analyses are very welcome.

The conference will be virtual and presented in English.

A selection of the best papers will be invited to publish in *Piccola Impresa/Small Business* with a fast review process. The Scientific Committee will select the winners for the Best Paper award.

Special attention will be addressed to papers aiming to answer the PISB Special Issue call for papers "*SMEs and human entrepreneurship overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic*". The conference will host a special track for those papers aimed to advance the discussion on SMEs, human entrepreneurship and their role during the COVID-19 pandemic and post-COVID-19. The authors will have the opportunity to discuss their work in progress with the Guest Editors during the workshop. More information can be found at <http://rivistapiccolaimpresa.uniurb.it/>.

Deadlines

Abstract Submission: 31st May, 2021

Notification of Acceptance: 30th June, 2021

Registration Slot: 30th June - 30th September, 2021

Full Paper Submission: 15th October, 2021

Author guidelines

Abstract

You are requested to clearly highlight:

- Objectives (max 200 words)
- Literature review (max 300 words)
- Approach/Method (max 200 words)
- Results/Findings (max 300 words)
- Value & Implications (max 200 words)

All abstracts will be reviewed using a double blind review process. Therefore, it is compulsory that neither your name nor your contact information appear on the submission.

You are asked to enter the name/names of the Author/Authors, the University affiliation and e-mail address on a separate page from the text; in the case of more than one author, please clearly indicate the corresponding author on this page.

It must be sent in electronic format (.doc. or .pdf) to **PISB2021@uniurb.it** by May 31, 2021.

Full paper

The full paper, following the communication of acceptance of the abstract by the Scientific Committee of the Conference, must:

- consist of 20 pages (including graphs, tables, figures, notes and bibliography) with 2200 characters each (including spaces), Times New Roman font, the body of text 12; the template to be used will be sent upon notification of acceptance of the abstract;
- be sent in electronic format (.doc. or .pdf) to the address **PISB2021@uniurb.it** by October 15, 2021.

The conference will have Formal Proceedings (ISBN).

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The 4th PISB Conference has been supported by AIDEA – Accademia Italiana di Economia Aziendale and ECSB – European Council for Small Business and Entrepreneurship.

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