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# Supporting open, shared and collaborative workspaces and hubs: recent transformations and policy implications

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## ABSTRACT

Shared workspaces and hubs for independent workers and start-ups are increasingly becoming a subject of local and regional economic development policies as they are considered crucial intermediaries in facilitating entrepreneurial growth and local innovation agendas. However, so far policy-makers do little to address two transformations in recent shared workspace development: the growing commercialization and diversification of shared workspaces and the spread of coworking beyond big agglomerations towards medium-sized and smaller cities and even rural areas. The paper argues for new policy principles that acknowledge the social values as much as the economic values that shared workspaces generate and promote.

## KEYWORDS

Coworking spaces; self-employed work; policies; incubators; social infrastructures

Shared workspaces and hubs for freelancers, self-employed, remote workers and start-ups are increasingly becoming a subject of local and regional economic development policies as shared workspaces are considered important intermediaries that help deliver entrepreneurial growth and local innovation agendas (Babb, Curtis, and McLeod 2018; Bone, Allen, and Haley 2017; Di Marino and Lapintie 2018; IPPR 2016; Madaleno et al. 2018). An increasing number of collaborative spaces receives public funding from programs such as the EU's URBACT and Interreg programs, from universities or city governments (see, e.g. IPPR 2016; Virani et al. 2016). The support for shared workspaces can be categorised as a particular type of co-location policy in economic development (Madaleno et al. 2018). Firms and freelancers are enabled to locate on the same premises (e.g. in coworking spaces) where various benefits should arise from close physical proximity and unplanned interactions (see Gill, Pratt, and Virani 2019 for a discussion of the notion of a creative hub). However, so far, there is little research to provide robust frameworks, empirical evidence or structured monitoring to support those policies. Furthermore, there is little research into the growing commercialisation and diversification of shared workspaces (Brown et al. 2019; Capdevila 2017; Kojo and Nenonen 2017; Schmidt, Brinks, and Brinkhoff 2014).

In this policy paper, we want to highlight two recent transformations and discuss their implications for future public policies for shared workspaces. The first transformation is the continuous increase of entrepreneurial-led coworking spaces and the decrease of community-led ones in inner-city areas (Avdikos and Iliopoulou 2019;

Deskmag 2018). The second transformation has to do with the spread of coworking beyond big agglomerations towards medium-sized and smaller cities and even rural areas (Capdevila 2017; Fuzi 2015). The paper will be structured as follows: the first part discusses the rise of shared workspaces in cities, the second part presents the move towards more entrepreneurial-led collaborative spaces in urban areas, the commercialization of coworking and the subsequent pressures over the more community-led collaborative spaces and what are the challenges for future policy-making in cities, whereas the third part points to the recent expansion of collaborative spaces outside big urban agglomerations and the ways that policy-making can be enriched towards the more effective support of these spaces. The fourth part discusses a number of general policy directions for the future of collaborative spaces, where the main argument is that understanding the diversification of collaborative spaces and their further socioeconomic potentials is key for effective policy support.

Contra to the increasing commercialization of coworking, collaborative spaces should still be regarded as mutual survival platforms of precarious employment and community development and that they can play a wider role in the socioeconomic development of small cities and rural areas and for that reason should be regarded a kind of community good. With the above as policy principles, public policy (and especially EU cohesion policy) should use shared workspaces as redistributive tools, along with using them as tools for entrepreneurial development.

## 1. The rise of shared workspaces in cities

Since the mid-2000s a new type of shared workplaces has emerged in cities worldwide promoting a collaborative, community-based approach to the organisation of new modes of independent work such as freelance work or self-employed work (Cappelli and Keller 2013). According to the 2018 Global Coworking Survey, the number of coworking spaces rose worldwide from 600 in October 2010 to 18,700 in 2018 with 1,65 million people working in shared workspaces (Deskmag 2019, 3).

Shared workspaces are shared office infrastructures where different professionals can rent a desk on a flexible basis, where they are provided with the necessary technical equipment: *'A coworking space is a place to get work done – specifically, knowledge or service work that originates outside the site in other intersecting activities'* (Spinuzzi 2012, 400). While in coworking spaces independent workers share more than a physical space, they often share intangible resources such as information, knowledge, mutual support or even projects with each other (Bouncken and Reuschl 2018; Coworking Manifesto 2014). To enable these forms of sharing, the spaces often promote a shared set of values, comprising of community, collaboration, openness, diversity and sustainability that embeds independent modes of work into a socially shared experience (Coworking Manifesto 2014). This approach represents a distinctive feature that sets collaborative spaces apart from other, and sometimes older, forms of shared, flexible workplaces such as satellite offices, hot desks, coffee shops, libraries or traditional business incubators. Besides coworking there is also a rise of other types of collaborative oriented workplaces such as fab labs, creative hubs, maker labs, hackerspaces, incubators and accelerators (Schmidt and Brinks 2017), in which people come together for different types of work and activities in a shared space (e.g. tinkering, play, repair, entrepreneurial learning, business development, open innovation).

The majority of empirical research uses coworking spaces as a lens into innovation and entrepreneurship; often approaching these collaborative workplaces optimistically concerning their capacity to foster knowledge generation, entrepreneurial activities and innovation (Bouncken and Reuschl 2018; Schmidt, Brinks, and Brinkhoff 2014). Another research strand interrogates the facilitation of different social processes such as community development, collaboration, learning or mutual social support and social innovation (Avdikos and Iliopoulou 2019; Avdikos & Kalogerisis, 2017; de Peuter, Cohen, and Saraco 2017; Garrett, Spreitzer, and Bacevice 2017; Spinuzzi et al. 2019). So far there is little research into the differences between spaces, especially between entrepreneurial-led and community-led spaces. What is missing in research and in the implementation of public policies for shared workspaces is a *differentiated approach*. We will argue that understanding the diversity of shared workspaces is critical to evaluating their potential for entrepreneurial growth, innovation agendas and local development.

## 2. The commercialisation of coworking

When coworking emerged in the mid-2000s, it was characterised by small, independent workspaces catering to the needs of freelancers and self-employed workers. Well-known places such as Philadelphia's IndyHall, New York's New Work City or Berlin's Betahaus are representative of this first wave of coworking spaces (Deskmag 2013). Recently, however, we witness a second wave; a growing commercialisation through the expansion of globally operating offices and real estate developers (e.g. Regus, Workspace Group, Wework, The Office Group) into coworking, and whose tenants include more financially viable freelancers and self-employed but also increasingly companies such as Amazon or Microsoft (NLA 2016). For example, Wework recently became the biggest private office renter in London (Sidders and Turner 2017). Furthermore, there is a rise of managed industry-led incubators and accelerators for tech businesses in the digital sector (Brown et al. 2019; GLA 2014). Increasingly, smaller coworking spaces adopt their models and change from open floor plan offices towards dedicated office space to accommodate start-ups and smaller businesses with several employees. Most of these large coworking companies situate their premises in inner city areas pushing further the real estate market in cities, that already have problems with affordable workspace (e.g. Berlin or inner London). Inner city areas attract companies such as WeWork and Regus, as their tenants seem to be attracted by several factors that central city areas offer, such as many cultural and urban amenities and the symbolic capital of inner city areas, good public transport access, a related variety of businesses and the benefits from the function of localization economies, amongst others. Nevertheless, smaller coworking spaces still exist and continue to grow. But they are increasingly pushed outside of inner-city areas towards peripheral neighbourhoods or in deprived inner-city areas with lower, affordable rents.

Both types of shared workspaces fulfil different roles within the city, the local economy and increasingly attract different groups into their spaces. Entrepreneurial-led coworking spaces are more embedded into the start-up ecosystem and aim to foster business growth among their coworkers and coworking businesses. Community-led workspaces focus on freelance workers, offer work and training opportunities and are more embedded into their neighbourhoods. So far, it seems that only entrepreneurial spaces get the attention and public support as can be seen for example with university-

driven coworking spaces or funding for incubator spaces. As such, coworking spaces seems to undergo a kind of commercialization towards market-oriented practices, and in favour of the start-up ecosystem.

The challenge is to prevent the displacement of smaller, community-led workspaces from inner city areas and to acknowledge their contribution to economic development, to local communities and neighbourhoods. Another challenge is how to measure the economic impact of these workspaces, as no comprehensive economic impact evaluation exist yet and most spaces only measure tenant turnover and job growth (see IPPR 2016).

### 3. Coworking outside of agglomerations

Another major trend in the current evolution of shared workspaces is their rise in small and medium sized cities and rural areas across Europe. In contrast to the large urban areas, smaller cities and towns are not characterized by agglomeration economies that attract entrepreneurship and talent. Thus, the scope and function of collaborative spaces in smaller cities consists of different characteristics. Most of the times collaborative spaces in smaller cities can be seen as tools for regeneration purposes, place marketing and for attracting economically active individuals and their families (CGET 2015). According to a COWORKMed study (2018b) shared workspaces in rural towns '*act as nerve centres, revitalising rural communities and embedding new forms of innovation and development outside big cities*' (p.28), while they can also act as innovation catalysts, '*where people can learn and progress through trial-and-error, in rural territories where experimentation is generally avoided*' (p.30). The EU Interreg and Leader programmes have funded the development of a number of collaborative spaces in rural areas of the EU during the last seven years. Through a search in the Interreg's and Leader's databases we found consortia that have created smart work centres (Micropol project in cities of the Danube macro-region), coworking spaces that focus on equipping young people with entrepreneurial skills in order to prevent them from migrating (YOUMIG project in Kajniza and Maribor), pre-incubation services (CO-WO-RK project in Cork and TRACES project in Apulia and Western Greece) and coworking spaces where female workers share childcare duties (Kolga in Northern Estonia).

Moreover, the size of the city seems to determine the functions of collaborative spaces, as in medium-sized and accessible cities their primary focus usually is on supporting freelancers and small businesses, whereas in small communes and remote towns collaborative spaces can function as social hubs that deliver a number of wider social services to the local communities, while they are more attached to them. These services can include employment services, such as job search facilities, employment recruitment services and skills development, information services, such as tourist information services, public access to computers and IT and library services and also wider public services such as health and social care services, information on and access to other public services, etc (Micropol 2014). Hence, it seems that the diverse functions and the kind of services that collaborative spaces offer depend on the size of the city/town, the distance to larger urban areas/agglomerations and subsequently the remoteness of the area. Usually in low-density and remote areas the services offered are more pluralistic and collaborative spaces address wider societal needs and function as social infrastructures (Klinenberg 2018). Whereas, in small and medium urban centres

collaborative spaces may target specific social groups and focus more on enhancing entrepreneurial capabilities and skills, facilitate the local start-up scene, etc. Thus, another reason for the hybridity and diversity that characterizes collaborative spaces' scope and function is the economic geography of the place where they are developed.

In most of the cases researched through the Interreg funding programme collaborative spaces in small and medium sized cities host freelancers, as well as small enterprises, start-ups, distance workers and third sector/not-for-profit employees (COWORKMed 2018a). Distance workers can be private sector employees that work remotely from their organisation's main offices or freelancers and through their work at a collaborative space aim to reduce commuting. Third sector employees have been identified as a separate type of users due to their role as 'anchor tenants' to these spaces (Micropol 2014).

Although collaborative spaces seem to be a very attractive instrument for small cities and rural communities there are a number of challenges that have to be met for the more effective planning of these initiatives. One of the challenges is the effective re-territorialization of specific features of collaborative spaces from urban areas that are characterized by agglomeration economies to smaller cities and rural areas that do not benefit from agglomeration of economic activity. Collaborative spaces in large urban areas have the benefits of external economies of scale (e.g. urbanization and localization economies) and thus benefit from a large pool of very skilled labour, dense information networks, local buzzes and global pipelines (Bathelt, Malmberg, and Maskell 2004) and the dense forward and backward linkages between the enterprises. All these benefits of agglomeration economies are usually absent in smaller and remote cities. Moreover, precarious employment characteristics can vary between urban and rural places (Avdikos and Kalogeresis 2018), and freelancers/entrepreneurs' motivations can also be quite different (Bell and Jayne 2010). Thus, collaborative spaces in non-agglomerative economic areas need to facilitate their users with networking opportunities with agglomeration economies and develop national pipelines with other collaborative spaces found in large urban centres. Moreover, they should re-territorialize and re-integrate specific characteristics of shared workspaces such as openness and flexibility to the characteristics of their small communities. Place-based policy approaches (Barca 2009) can be of value here, as they have been developed through Integrated Territorial Investments and Community Led Local Development funding tools under the 2014–2020 EU Cohesion Policy. As, it is not only that these funding instruments have boosted the creation of collaborative spaces in-mainly-urban areas, but they have provided a clear bottom-up methodology for local communities to plan and implement local-specific solutions tailored to their needs. This bottom-up methodology seems to be adequate for the development of collaborative spaces in small and medium sized cities and towns, in order to re-integrate functions and services of collaborative spaces of large urban areas to the local communities' needs. Effective collaborative spaces in small towns and cities can then become community hubs that serve different socio-economic needs of diverse local communities and in parallel connecting them with information flows of larger urban areas, opening up the possibilities for further collaborations in the fields of entrepreneurship and social innovation. Through that, collaborative spaces can eventually become centres of community socio-economic development and further contribute to the goal of polycentric spatial development in the EU (ESPON 2018).

## 4. Discussion

As highlighted in the beginning of the paper, we need to acknowledge that the diversification of coworking is a critical point in order to develop effective and specific policies for the further support and development of shared workspaces and hubs and raise their (economic and social) value added for their users and communities. The diversification of coworking is driven by two interrelated dimensions: a) the scope dimension, where this can range from the entrepreneurial-driven coworking spaces (e.g. WeWork, etc that mainly accommodate start-ups and tech freelancers/companies and promote business development) to the more community-led ones (that usually serve the needs of the creative precariat and of local communities and the social economy), b) the functional dimension, where the functions of coworking spaces can range from simple office-sharing to wider social services and from personalized mentoring services to open innovation processes. The spectrum of each of the above dimensions is relative to the collaborative spaces' spatiality. Usually entrepreneurial-led coworking spaces are more bounded entities that offer personalized services to those that can afford a relatively expensive rent and are usually found in large urban areas. On the other hand, community-led coworking spaces are more open entities; they can deliver multiple services and they can also function as community goods in larger or smaller urban areas fostering social innovation processes.

Until today public policy for coworking spaces is scarce, based on weak evidence and usually found in funding schemes that mainly support business development programs. That policy views coworking spaces in a homogenous way and fails to unpack collaborative spaces' full potential.

Thus, we recommend several general policy directions for the future of collaborative spaces:

- (1) **Acknowledge the economic and social diversity in shared workspaces:** What characterizes shared workspaces is the 'coexistence, within them, of various, heterogeneous and potentially conflicting economic forms, relations and practices' (Vidaillet and Bousalham 2017, 3). Policy-making needs to adapt to the heterogeneity and diversity of collaborative spaces and develop different policy spectrums.
- (2) **Develop affordable workspace programs:** With the rising rents in inner city areas there is a clear need to protect workspace for freelance workers and small businesses from displacement (Ferm 2016). Policies should facilitate the provision of premises for collaborative spaces that do not usually get the attention of the market and that are increasingly priced out of cities.
- (3) **Map existing economic development policies onto shared workspaces:** Shared workspaces can make valuable contributions to local economic development. They engage their members in skills' development or help to incubate nascent companies. Especially community-led spaces help to cope with flexible, precarious working conditions of freelancers (Merkel 2019). Policies should be targeted to skills development services and wider networking opportunities. Thus, collaborative spaces and hubs should be more

organically linked with policies that target urban socio-economic development, as well as with place-based policies that aim to foster the revitalisation of lagging and remote rural regions and shrinking cities.

- (4) **Broaden the notion of innovation in economic development:** Apart from product and business innovation, social innovation can also emerge within and from these hubs. Thus, a more integrated approach is needed, where collaborative spaces can become shared social infrastructures and community platforms, playing a distinct social role in cities and rural areas in offering wider social services and in maintaining but also creating the social fabric within rural areas. Their role as community hubs can be the base for a more integrated approach to rural development potentials that combines social, cultural and economic development.
- (5) **Foster capacity building of local facilitators and agents,** as in order to develop their local potentials in collaborative spaces and hubs (especially in rural areas), they need to broaden their capacities, knowledge development and participatory local development actions.
- (6) **Enable better impact measurement through research,** as until now most shared workspaces do not measure their impacts which results in a weak empirical base for policy interventions. To create better arguments for public support, better indicators for various economic and placemaking effects shall be developed, as well as matrices that help spaces assess their outcomes and values (IPPR 2016). Moreover, and similar to innovation research in economic geography, research on coworking exhibits an ‘urban bias’ (Shearmur 2017) and has not given attention to coworking in peripheral, areas and smaller cities.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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