Entrepreneurial challenges of Albanian agribusinesses: A content analysis*

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Abstract

Agribusiness is seen as a driver of social and economic health. Indeed, analysing the entrepreneurial phenomena in the context of agribusiness sector would be appropriate, as entrepreneurial orientation would provide an instrument to be competitive in the market and foster their performance. Face to face interviews were conducted with 44 representatives of 3 key actors in the of entrepreneurial value formation process of agribusiness sector in Albania. Study results show that collaborativeness among industry-government-academia is essential for the sustainability and prosperity of agribusiness sector. The research proposes collaborativeness as a dimension of the entrepreneurial orientation construct.

Keywords: entrepreneurial orientation, collaborativeness, agribusiness, Albania, content analysis
JEL Codes: L26, L25, Q13

Introduction

After many years of neglect, agricultural development is part of the agenda of international forums. In the past, agriculture was seen as a subsistence activity of farmers involving crop and livestock production (Gandhi 2014). This awakening has been partly a response to the 2010 food crisis, whose debates have resulted in calls from world-wide policy makers for steady growth and investments in this sector. Today, agriculture is rapidly turning into a technology and market oriented "industry" which extends from agricultural production, to sophisticated Agri science, and agribusiness (Gandhi 2014). EBRD (2010), emphasizes the importance of agribusiness as a sector which represents a large share of employment, economic output and future growth potential of the region. The agribusiness sector of the economy is comprised of all organizations, large and small, profit-seeking and eleemosynary, that engage in the production, distribution, marketing, or utilization of food, fibre, forest products, or biofuel, including those that supply water to and collect waste from those organizations (Van Fleet 2016). Food system stakeholders have begun not only addressing the needs of their partners and interest groups, but the needs of the ultimate interest-side society. In its straightforward form, then, agribusiness simply refers to the application of theories and practices of business administration to organizations engaged in agriculture and agriculturally related products and services (Van Fleet 2016). Transforming agricultural commodities into food products typically re-

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quires conversion of large amounts of lower-value materials into more valuable products and transport (of agricultural inputs and food product outputs) over considerable distances (King et al. 2010).

Baran and Velickaite (2008) argue that for the development of agribusiness, entrepreneurial orientation (EO) can enable a tool by increasing revenues, increasing profits, developing products, services and new processes which can bring a competitive sustainable edge. Empirical studies support the proposition that there is a positive relationship between EO and business performance, meaning in practice that businesses that adopt a more entrepreneurial orientation perform better (Madsen 2007).

Albania is a post-communist country, with only 3 decades (1990–2019) experience of democracy and free market, facing high unemployment rates. Extending along the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, Albania`s coastal areas are the most favourable areas for agricultural production, with fertile soils and relatively good access to the national road system (Bernet/Kazazi 2012: 7). More than half of the workforce in Albania is employed in the agribusiness sector, but due to the low profits of the sector, the number of employees is decreasing each year. For the Albanian economy, this sector is a key to spurring growth and development. First, productivity improvements in agricultural production would generate important income in rural regions; and second, the agricultural sector, because of involving so many persons, is crucial for successful entrepreneurial development (Bernet/Kazazi 2012).

Agribusiness is now seen as a product industry, as a driver of social and economic health. The future perspective must foresee and develop opportunities and capacities to overcome obstacles related to the organization of producers, market penetration, compliance with the quality standards and sustainable production systems especially in rural areas (Ruli 2012:5).

Because of the irreplaceable role of the agribusiness sector on the economic development not only of Albania but worldwide, the purpose of this study is to examine the entrepreneurial challenges faced by Albanian agribusinesses. Based on this objective the research aims to answer the following research questions:

R1:   *What are the entrepreneurial challenges faced by Albanian agribusinesses?*

R2:   *How can the agribusiness sector entrepreneurs overcome these challenges?*

An overview of Albanian economy and agribusiness sector

Albania's economy has gone through roughly three periods following the initial transition: (1) a turbulent period from 1990–1997 with overall negative growth,

culminating the collapse of pyramid schemes and conflict; (2) rapid but fundamentally unsustainable growth over the subsequent decade up to the global financial crisis, driven by remittances, largely resource-based foreign investment, and construction; and (3) a lower growth trajectory from 2008 to the present, where Albania has avoided recession but struggled to discover new drivers of growth (O`Brien et al. 2017:3). World Economic Forum (WEF) in its yearly Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) report continues to classify Albania as an efficiency-driven economy. Schwab (2017), recommends that investing in business sophistication and innovation would enable Albania to become an innovation-driven economy. It needs to become more competitive by increasing productivity (improvement of production process and quality) and thereby increase the salaries of employees.

Acs et al. (2017), in the Global Entrepreneurship Index 2018 report, emphasise that the country`s main barrier towards entrepreneurship is the institutional instability. The quality of the institutions that support entrepreneurship for 2017 is very low (score 38 %), while the entrepreneurial qualities of the people in the ecosystem are higher (score 57 %).

Agri-food sector is among the most important economic sectors in Albania, contributing to about fifth of the GDP and accounting for about half of the employment (Gecaj et al. 2018:3). From a total area of 28,748 km^2, the agricultural surface is 697,000 hectares (see Table 1), from which the arable land is the largest one (83.8 %). Albania's geographic positioning, 1/3 of which is wet by the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, enables it to cultivate agricultural products in a fertile land of coastal areas. Along this coastal area is also concentrated most of the production of vegetables as well as the cultivation of fruit trees. In the northern part of Albania, chestnut cultivation occupies significant weight, and in mountainous areas are suitable for growing a wide range of medicinal plants and aromatic plants.

Table 1. Agricultural Areas in Albania

Total Agricultural Surface	697,000 ha
Forests	104,400 ha
Arable Land	584,000 ha
Orchards	60,000 ha
Olive Groves	40,000 ha
Vineyards	20,000 ha
Pastures	415,000 ha

Source: Adopted from Bernet/Kazazi (2012)

The change of the political system after the 1990 s in Albania caused structural changes in the agricultural sector. Starting in 1991, the land reform aiming to

privatize most of the government owed land made it possible within a few years for hundreds of thousands of Albanian citizens to suddenly become landowners and private farmers (Bernet/Kazazi 2012:11). Despite a slight increase in farm size witnessed in the recent years, still the agricultural area per holding in the country is very low at only 2.8 ha (Zhllima/Gjeci 2015:4).

Financial constraints on agribusiness remain inevitable, especially for those small businesses that do not own assets to serve as collateral. Increased global competition, constant change in the social environment and complex consumer demand are other challenges agribusinesses face in the global market.

Preconditions for the development of agro-industries are the necessary transportation, information, and communication technologies (ICT) and access to reliable supplies of key utilities, notably electricity and water (Henson/Cranfield 2009:35). Some important factors that affect agribusiness performance and the business model adopted, include "access to land, availability of specific assets, such tractors or other mechanization, sources of funding, horizontal and vertical cooperation and access to extension service and technical assistance" (Gerdoci 2016). Moreover, agriculture-specific infrastructure such as laboratories for product testing and certification purposes is a must if the sector is to be competitive, particularly in compliance with the sanitary and phytosanitary standards for world food trade (Mhlanga 2010:24). In turn, the infrastructural constraints under which the agro-industrial sector operates influence the cost and reliability of the physical movement of raw materials and end products, efficiency of processing operations, responsiveness to customer demands, etc. (Henson/Cranfield 2009:35).

Mhlanga (2010) emphasizes that agriculture, like other sectors of the economy, needs a supportive macro-economic environment, to foster competitiveness of agricultural exports in world markets and to further attract investments in agro processing plants. The World Bank (2007), explains that agricultural subsidies in developed countries have contributed years of underinvestment to the agribusiness sector in developing countries. In most Western Balkans (WB), agriculture has played a buffer role in a generally deteriorating economic situation and continues to play an important role in maintaining a social equilibrium (Volk 2010). The EU report of 2019 related to agricultural policy developments in WB reports that the proportion of market and direct producer support measures in Albania is very low. Reporting on budgetary support for agriculture tends to be insufficiently transparent, while policy impact assessments and evaluations are practically non-existent, resulting in low quality in policy planning and non-inclusive decision-making (Ciaian 2019:8). Agricultural support schemes have combined two elements of support, namely direct payments, and investments (Gecaj et al. 2018:3). Programs providing direct or indirect support to the farmers, similar to those offered by national governments in Eastern Europe or Euro-

pe in general, have been almost completely absent (Preka 2014). These subsidies granted to producers of industrialized countries, but not complete in Albania, make the competitiveness of products of Albanian producers' unequal in world markets as well as imported products in the country.

Literature review

The discipline of entrepreneurship generally studies the why, when and how of opportunity creation, recognition and utilization (Szirmai et al. 2011). The term "entrepreneurial orientation" has been used to refer to the strategy-making processes and styles of firms that engage in entrepreneurial activities (Lumpkin/ Dess 2001). Entrepreneurial orientation has become a central concept in the domain of entrepreneurship that has received a substantial amount of theoretical and empirical attention (Covin et al. 2006).

Miller (1983) viewed the entrepreneurial orientation "as a characteristic of organizations, which can be measured by looking at top management`s entrepreneurial style, as evidenced by the firms` strategic decisions and operating management philosophy. According to Covin and Slevin (1988), an organization`s EO is the summation of the extent to which top managers are inclined to take business related risks, to favour change and innovation to obtain a competitive advantage for their firm and to compete aggressively with other firms. Rauch et al. (2009) considered EO as the entrepreneurial strategy-making processes that key decision makers use to enact their firm`s organizational purpose, sustain its vision and create competitive advantage(s).

Beginning from 1983, Miller identified three dimensions of EO to measure entrepreneurship such as: innovativeness; proactiveness; and risk-taking. These three dimensions have been used from many researchers (Covin/Slevin 1989; Lumpkin/Dess 1996; Wiklund/Sheperd 2005, etc.). Meanwhile Lumpkin and Dess (1996) determined EO dimensions as five, by adding two other dimensions to the previous study of Miller (1983) as: autonomy; and competitive aggressiveness.

Guerrero and Urbano (2012) refered to an entrepreneurial society for "places where knowledge-based entrepreneurship has emerged as a driving force for economic growth, employment creation and competitiveness". Knowledge is the key element of the innovation systems and the institutions which have an important role in its development can be stated as: universities and academic institutions (develop and transfer knowledge); government organizations; innovative enterprises (Kruja 2013 a). Leydesdorff et al. (2017) explain that "the Triple Helix of university-industry-government relations emerged as a research program from a confluence of Henry Etzkowitz's longer-term interest in the entrepreneurial university (Etzkowitz 1983, 1998, and 2002 a; Clark 1998) with Loet Leydesdorff's interest in the evolutionary dynamics of science, technology,

and innovation". The "triple helix" is a spiral model of innovation that captures multiple reciprocal relationships at different points in the process of knowledge capitalization (Etzkowitz 2002 b). As innovativeness is the most important factor of entrepreneurship, collaborativeness between university – government – industry, is a crucial part of the entrepreneurial process of firms.

This study is approached on analysing the entrepreneurial challenges faced by Albanian agribusiness entrepreneurs by focusing on the five dimensions of EO mentioned in the literature: innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, autonomy, competitive aggressiveness, as well as collaborativeness as a new proposed dimension of EO to be tested in further studies.

Innovativeness

Entrepreneurial activity is the introduction of novel change into the economy, novel meaning not previously known in that context (Wiklund/Shepherd 2005). Joseph Schumpeter pointed out a century ago that entrepreneurs are often innovators, bringing new goods and technologies to markets, opening new markets, processes, and ideas, and commercializing new knowledge (Szirmai et al. 2011).

Varis and Littunen (2010) propose that to encourage and bear innovative behaviour, firms need to seek information from the business environment. Most of definitions regarding innovation point to the exploration of new knowledge. Innovation is the production, diffusion and use of new and economically useful knowledge, a key factor for competitiveness and growth while entrepreneurship the process of business start-up, business creation and growth, the entrepreneurial dynamism is key to economic renewal and growth (Lewrick at al. 2011). Innovation is the specific tool of entrepreneurs, the means by which they exploit changes as an opportunity for a different business or service (Drucker 1985). For companies to compete and to give dynamism to the national economy, innovation together with technical development have become of the main sources. To be a leader in the market, or simply to stay alive, companies should constantly perform innovation activity.

Risk-taking

One of the earliest uses of the term "entrepreneur", appears to have been introduced by Richard Cantillon, an Irish economist of French descent, in the 1700 s. Cantillon (1755) viewed the entrepreneur as a specialist in taking risk. Risk handling is the process in which potential risks to a business are identified, analysed, mitigated and prevented, along with the process of balancing the cost of protecting the company against a risk versus the cost of exposure to that risk (Vij/Bedi 2012). Innovativeness represents a basic willingness to depart from existing technologies or practices and venture beyond the current state-of-the-art

(Covin et al. 2006), while, risk taking is the paramount attribute of entrepreneurship (Mill 1909). As defined by Dickson and Giglierano (1986), risk is "the likelihood that a new venture will fail to reach a satisfactory sales, profit or ROI target", and without taking that risk, it is impossible for the firm to innovate. While Kreiser et al. (2010) highlight that firms operating at higher levels of economic and/or political risk tend to undertake more risks, Kahan (2012) identifies four types of uncertainty for agribusinesses related to: (a) weather; (b) social environment; (c) economy; and (d) the political environment.

Proactiveness

Proactiveness is an indicator of a firm`s behaviour against its competitors, willingness, and desire to compete. Lumpkin and Dess (2001) viewed proactiveness to suggest "a forward-looking perspective characteristic of a marketplace leader that has the foresight to act in anticipation of future demand and shape the environment". Miller and Friesen (1978) defined proactiveness as changing the environment by introducing new products and technologies. Dess and Lumpkin (2005) suggested that a proactive strategy to be successful should be accompanied by a careful analysis and detailed feasibility studies.

Autonomy

Autonomy as a concept refers to the independent action of an individual or group working to develop an idea or vision. According to Lumpkin and Dess (1996) autonomy refers to the ability to work independently, make decisions, and take actions aimed at bringing forth a business concept or vision and carrying it through to completion. Because of delegating authority to operating units in entrepreneurial firms, the impetus for new initiatives stems from the lowest level of the hierarchy. Autonomy can be possessed by either individuals or groups and can exist from either lower-level employees or among more senior decision makers (Langfred 2000).

Although Lumpkin and Dess (1996) referred to autonomy as one of the key dimensions of entrepreneurial orientation, there are few studies that have included it as such.

Competitive aggressiveness

Competitive aggressiveness refers to the intensity of the efforts of a firm to perform better than its rivals in the same industry. It is characterized by strong offensive posture directed at overcoming competitors and may also be quite reactive as when a firm defends its market position or aggressively enters a market that a rival has identified (Lumpkin/Dess 2001).

Collaborativeness

During the past few decades, the configuration of new knowledge-intensive environments has required fertile settings for innovative and entrepreneurial activities (Guerrero/Urbano 2017:294). Etkowitz and Leydersdorff (1995) see the university-industry-government relations as a "laboratory for knowledge based economic development." The triple helix denotes the university-industry-government relationship as one of relatively equal, yet interdependent, institutional spheres which overlap and take the role of the other (Etzkowitz 2002 b). Montensen and Bloch (2005) in the OSLO manual categorize the factors that influence the innovation activities of a firm to be as follows:

■   the institutional and infrastructural environment;
■   innovation policy (different supports, incentives);
■   the education system and the R&D activity of the government (e.g. the activities of the universities);
■   the innovation activity of other companies;
■   the interaction of the above in relation to demand.

Entrepreneurial research in Albania

Entrepreneurial research in Albania has started with the beginning of the 21st century, after a decade of a well-functioning market-oriented system. As a developing and transition economy, most of the studies are focused on the obstacles and barriers of the small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Bitzenis and Nito (2005) evaluated the various obstacles that Albanian entrepreneurs encounter in their local business environment. Through the analysis of a sample of 226 surveyed entrepreneurs they came to the result that the most important obstacles faced by entrepreneurs in Albania include unfair competition, changes in taxation procedures, lack of financial resources and problems related to public order. To provide a more favourable business environment, Bitzenis and Nito (2005) suggested legislative amendments and new legislation with special focus on small business and enterprise development to be implemented by the Albanian government. Kruja (2013 b) emphasised as the main weaknesses of the SME sector, the limited access to finance, low degree of professionalism, difficulties in recruiting qualified personnel, and the absence of economies of scale. In the Albania – Estonia comparative study related to the role of public policy on entrepreneurship developments in post-socialist countries, Xheneti and Smallbone (2008) pointed out government to be one of the main actors in establishing the necessary institutional arrangements for durable development or productive entrepreneurship for such economies, otherwise entrepreneurship remains fragile and its contributions to economic development rather small. Government can be both an enabling and constraining influence through the establishment of regulatory environments, the increased legitimacy of their policies and also through

the role that is placed on entrepreneurship in societies where entrepreneurship has had a short history (Xheneti and Smallbone 2008). The entrepreneurial ecosystem appears to be the same also from the study performed by El Alaoui et al. (2016), who aimed locating the most common barriers to entrepreneurial processes in Albania, Georgia, Morocco, Nigeria, and Pakistan. They found that that state policy towards SMEs and political instability/corruption and tax policy were the most common obstacles to entrepreneurship in these developing countries (El Alaoui et al. 2016).

After 2013, Albanian market researchers have been focused on analysing the entrepreneurial intention of university students in Albania, as it has strong relations with advancements in the entrepreneurship process. Kume et al. (2013) surveyed a sample of 519 students from universities in Tirana to measure their intentions and orientation toward entrepreneurship. The results reveal that 53.6 % of graduates considered starting up business, 5.8 % of graduates were self-employed, while only 0.91 % of them were successful in their business. The study conducted by Kruja (2019), on a sample of 211 private university students in Tirana, highlighted that strengthening students` collaboration with industry and governmental institutions in support of their innovative ideas will increase their intention towards entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurial studies related to the agribusiness sector are vacant in Albania and this study is contributing to fill the gap in the literature, as well as to provide sectoral insights to policymakers, entrepreneurs as well as research institutions.

Methods

Sample and data collection

Exploratory and interpretive research is more likely to rely on primary data such as interviews, field notes, videotapes, and open-ended questions to surveys (Duriau et al. 2007). Semi-structured interviews were used for collecting the primary data of the study. Face to face semi structured interviews were conducted with representatives of 3 key actors in the of entrepreneurial value formation process: (1) industry representatives, (2) governmental institutions representatives and (3) research institutions representatives. Providing perspectives from different participants ensures the validity of the research. Miles et al. (1994) emphasize that these techniques offer researchers an opportunity to gain richer descriptions of the specific social phenomenon in the study. Qualitative inquirers bring to their studies a different lens toward validity than that brought to traditional, quantitative studies (Creswell/Miller 2000).

While in the application of quantitative techniques it is inevitable the selection of large samples to reach the full inclusion of the study findings, the use of qualitative techniques requires a profound and detailed analysis of a relatively

small sample. Miles et al. (1994), argue that the sample in qualitative methods instead of randomness tends towards the objective. An appropriate sample size for a qualitative study is one that adequately answers the research question (Marshall 1996). A total of 44 interviewees were included in this study.

Research instrument

Qualitative research involves the use and collection of a variety of empirical materials, case studies, personal experiences, introspective, life story interviews, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts-that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals' lives (Pandey/Patnaik 2014). Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique (Hsieh/Shannon 2005). Compared to other analysis techniques, it provides advantages allowing the investigator to investigate theoretical issues to develop a better understanding of the data. Content analysis allows the researcher to test theoretical issues to enhance understanding of the data (Elo/Kyngas 2008). A central idea in this analysis is that the many words of the text are classified into much fewer content categories (Weber 1990). As a research technique, it provides new insights, increases a researcher's understanding of particular phenomena, or informs practical actions (Krippendorff 2004). The aim is to attain a condensed and broad description of the phenomenon, and the outcome of the analysis is concepts or categories describing the phenomenon (Elo/Kyngas 2008). As Duriau et al. (2007) emphasize, this method can be used in an inductive approach in cases where there is no previous knowledge of the phenomenon or in a deductive approach if the analysis is based on prior knowledge and especially if the purpose of the study is to test the theory

In this study, content analysis is used to understand the entrepreneurial challenges faced by Albanian agribusinesses and to explore how can the agribusiness sector entrepreneurs overcome these challenges.

Results and discussions

Interviewed respondents

A total of 44 interviewees were included in this study:

- 30 agribusiness entrepreneurs.
- 3 specialists from the Agricultural Technology Transfer Centre (ATTC) in Tirana.
- 3 specialists from the Directorates of Agriculture Food and Consumer Protection (ADFCP) of different cities (Durrës, Fier and Berat).
- 1 specialist from Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).
- 3 researchers.
- 4 managers from Agribusiness Sector Associations (ASA).

The interviewees in the study were identified by a code like "IE" for entrepreneurs; "IG" for governmental institutions representatives; "IR" for researchers; "IS" for the managers of agribusiness sector associations; to maintain confidentiality. A list of specific open questions about the study was used and record keeping was applied as a tool. The eight steps for creating, testing, and implementing a coding scheme suggested by Weber (1990) were implemented to code the text.

Research trustworthiness

Although reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not viewed separately in qualitative research (Golafshani 2003). Creswell and Miller (2000) argue that "qualitative researchers use a lens not based on scores, instruments, or research designs but a lens established using the views of people who conduct, participate in". Qualitative research uses a naturalistic approach that seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings (Golafshani 2003). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have proposed trustworthiness term to replace the concept of validity and credibility of research in a positivistic paradigm. Therefore, the quality of a research is related to generalizability of the result and thereby to the testing and increasing the trustworthiness of the research (Pandey and Patnaik 2014). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the trustworthiness contains four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. This study proceeded in accordance with the required trustworthiness criteria by pursuing along a logical research design. The research structure, including the methods used in data collection, was carefully planned and applied.

Credibility

One of the key criteria addressed by positivist researchers is that of internal validity, in which they seek to ensure that their study measures or tests what is actually intended (Shenton 2004). While in quantitative research reliability relies heavily on the developed instruments, in qualitative research is the researcher himself who plays an important role in determining credibility as "the researcher is the instrument" (Patton 2002). Wigren (2007), emphasizes that the researcher is the one that influences the research process. Creswell and Miller (2000) state that qualitative researchers may engage in one or more of routinely employed procedures of member checking, triangulation, thick description, peer reviews, and external audits. To achieve the internal validity of this study was applied the triangulation method. It is a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study (Creswell and Miller 2000). Triangulation may involve the use of different methods, especially observation, focus groups and individual in-

terviews, which form the major data collection strategies for much qualitative research (Shenton 2004). By using the within-methods triangulation observations data and field notes written during the interview process were compared. Providing perspectives from different participants ensured the validity of the research through data triangulation. It proved the consistency of the collected data within the qualitative method, providing an internal validity and ensuring that this study measures and tests what is intended.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the researcher`s working hypothesis can be applied to other contexts or different settings (Lincoln/Guba 1985). During the data collection period of this research, field records regarding the undertaken activities, interview situations for each interviewee and facts that were considered interesting and appropriate for the study were kept.

Dependability

Dependability refers to whether the study can be replicated (external reliability) and whether others who observe and hear the information agree with it (internal reliability) (Lincoln/Guba 1985). According to Flick (2014), dependability in quality research depends mainly on the quality of data recording and documentation, and on the ability of the researcher to interpret. The first interviews were used to check and correct the questions contained therein, after which appropriate modifications were made to achieve the required security and clarity of the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability is achieved when the researcher acts in good faith when conducting research (Lincoln/Guba 1985). The research findings should be output of the study focus and not the prejudice of the researcher. Based on this criterion, the researcher allows others to determine whether the conclusions, interpretation or recommendations rely on the research data, which are presented in detail to meet this criterion.

Agribusiness entrepreneurial challenges

The interviews conducted during this study with entrepreneurs, government institutions representatives, academics and agribusiness sector association managers served to explore entrepreneurial challenges faced by agribusinesses entrepreneurs in Albania, within the framework of the five EO dimensions and collaborativeness.

Innovativeness

Respondents in this study perceive innovation as a continuous effort to improve their products/services or production/operation processes to be as competitive in the market; offering new products with the aim of expanding it; as well as the application of new technologies. Product and market innovations are more common in the sector, while radical innovations, are less applicable. Large firms, which have high production capacities and higher sales have the greatest potential towards technological innovations, while for small firms, challenges are numerous such as lack of funds, lack of qualified personnel, market shortage and lack of various collaborations necessary for their realization. One of the interviewed entrepreneurs presents the financial problem and links it to banks that are not willing to be supportive, pointing out:

> *"I have no financial opportunity to make further investments. Banks should offer soft loans for our sector." (IE7)*

This concern is also expressed by a researcher, who suggests that government should provide more subsidies to the sector:

> *"Banks should be "friendlier" with this sector. The government should increase the amount and percentage of subsidies given to this sector." (IR1)*

The necessity of government support through subsidy for the purchase of contemporary technologies is also expressed by a specialist, employer of ADFCP:

> *"Government should support the sector with subsidies for the purchase of contemporary technologies and create working conditions and tax relief." (IG4)*

An interviewee entrepreneur expresses concerns regarding applications for grants and innovation funds:

> *"We seek help from government institutions. We need support for applying for projects and grants coming from abroad and facilitating documentation in taking part in these projects for further technological investments." (IE1)*

The lack of qualified and skilled labours is another challenge faced by agribusinesses in their efforts to innovate, expressed by an entrepreneur as follows:

> *"Investing in technological equipment requires qualified employees to use them, while our employees are incapable of doing so." (IE5)*

A researcher also expresses his concern for qualified sector personnel suggesting the necessity of opening vocational high schools:

> *"The opening of vocational high schools is a necessity for the sector to have qualified and skilled employees." (IR1)*

While a specialist of ADFCP, emphasises that skilled staff is a must for agribusiness success:

"Every business should understand that to be successful, recruiting skilled staff is a necessity. With the existing form of management and staff quality, business performance is at the expense of spontaneity" (IG3)

Besides to the lack of specialists, another barrier to implementing innovations is the lack of collaboration with research institutions, highlighted by an ATTC specialist:

"The lack of field specialists is a determining factor. Collaboration with research institutions is at a very low level. Increasing collaboration means applications of innovation with a positive effect on the product." (IG1)

Risk-taking

From the interviews conducted with entrepreneurs, it turns out that most of them have taken different risks. Their risk is related to uncertainties regarding weather, social environment, economy, and political environment. Agribusiness is measured in terms of functions performed on its system which is interdependent with other enterprises. This is an ever-changing natural system depending on the cycle of harvest, cycle of plant and animal reproduction, depending on suppliers, transport operators and processors. So, the final produce quality is dependent on any player in this supply chain. The perceived coordination failures risk is high, but they see it as indispensable to take bold and broad-spectrum actions in the context of the value chain as well as the investment opportunities in new products and markets. To increase their profits and be successful they need to minimize the risk related to their social environment: fair competition, labour quality; economy: technology support, land, capital; political environment: support schemes, agricultural policies, tax policies, competition regulation, anti-dumping duty.

The interviewees expressed their concerns regarding the so many risks that agribusiness entrepreneurs face. So, an interviewed entrepreneur state:

"We face difficulties in meeting the required standards by foreign markets. We need supportive policies to export our products." (IE11)

Another entrepreneur expresses dissatisfaction with the agricultural policies:

"I`m not satisfied with the agricultural policies of the government. There is not enough market in Albania for selling fruit-vegetables." (IE22)

Undertaking risky projects requires capital, which small agribusinesses have difficulty to find it. A specialist of ADFCP emphasizes the sector's support through soft banking loans:

"Encouraging the agribusiness sector through soft loan bidding." (IG3)

Food safety and certification issues are the challenges of the sector that require the support of government institutions towards their solutions, expressed by an entrepreneur as:

"Food safety issues need to be resolved. Cattle / meat quality certificates are issued by the veterinarian who are not recognized by international institutions." (IE15)

Besides to the collaboration with governmental institutions, collaboration with research institutions and sector associations, is seen as a must to overcome the risks expressed by an interviewed entrepreneur as follows:

"Governmental institutions, research institutions and associations play a greater role in helping agribusinesses overcome unfair competition through price movements. The price of the product is too low to cover its cost. Since 2011, the industry is experiencing a financial crisis." (IE30)

Proactiveness

Although pro-active behaviours emerged from large firms, which have greater investment opportunities for market expansion and the application of new techniques, most agribusinesses try to compete in the market by introducing new products or services or improving the existing ones. They try to apply different strategies from one another to make their products/services unique in the market. The lack of both financial and human capital (skilled labours) are the main barriers faced by agribusinesses. Regarding the export opportunities of their products an interviewee entrepreneur state:

"We cannot certify production because of the lack of proper required conditions and consequently we cannot export our products." (IE19)

Meanwhile, an interviewee researcher raises the problem of informality as well as dishonest competition:

"A very big and disturbing problem for agribusiness in Albania is high informality and unfair/ unequal competition, which remains a serious obstacle to a clear and comprehensive understanding of agribusiness as a whole!" (IR1)

Lack of capital associated with the lack of proper information about market opportunities, with the lack of potential collaboration is another cause. A specialist of ADFCP emphasizes the importance of enhancing collaboration by creating product associations:

"Increasing business collaborativeness as part of the product chain by creating a product association that gives lobbying access." (IG3)

Autonomy

The agribusiness sector applies simple and practical business practices. In general, interviewed entrepreneurs are both the owners and the leading business man-

agers. Majority of them are family businesses. During the interview an entrepreneur state:

"In this business we are engaged as family: me, my wife and our two children. I give the main ideas, which are then discussed with the other family members. Decision-making is common. Ideas coming from other members, are also discussed and evaluated." (IE19)

Entrepreneurs are also responsible persons who follow all operations and at the same time are dominant in defining business policies and directives. An interviewee entrepreneur state:

"I define key business strategies and follow most of the operations. It's not because I do not trust my employees, but some things are a matter of vision." (IE21)

Autonomy given to business employees by interviews with entrepreneurs turns out to be limited by giving them the opportunity to engage in some activities such as giving ideas for further development of existing products or new products. Also, autonomy in dealing with their daily duties is provided to employees. An interviewee entrepreneur state:

"I often consult with the production experts regarding product production and new market opportunities. They are also free to pursue their affairs and make decisions independently for tasks left in their competences." (IE11)

Since majority of the businesses interviewed are small to medium family ones, the staff is not well-qualified, entrepreneurs take the decisions and seek opportunities, without neglecting the consultation with relevant field experts.

Competitive Aggressiveness

In the sector there is a high market informality and an unequal competition which negatively affects the growth and performance of agribusinesses in general. During surveys as well as interviews, aggressiveness was evaluated as a phenomenon that seriously harms competition and the sustainable development of Albanian businesses. Agribusinesses tend to continuously be competitive, while aggressive attitude toward each other is not stimulated. Regarding this issue an interviewee entrepreneur state:

"Being competitive in the market is one thing and being aggressive is totally another thing. I think that they are completely different concepts from one another. If I were aggressive in the market, then other businesses would attack me and be aggressive to me. This behaviour would not be neither in my interest nor in the interest of the other businesses." (IE23)

Among the concerns of entrepreneurs are the imported products. They come to the market at a lower price due to subsidies provided by their government. An entrepreneur explains as:

"Our competitors are not the domestic producers but the imported products" (IE3)

Another entrepreneur discloses his business strategy as competing through differentiation in the market, not being aggressive:

> *"We are trying to find an action plan that will differentiate our products, but not having an aggressive attitude." (IE4)*

Competition through quality and good relationship with the client is the strategy applied by another entrepreneur:

> *"The aim and objective of our company is to have the best relationship with the customer and provide qualitative products in order to create an absolute confidence in him/her. Competing through market prices remain in the second plan as the quality of service often shows the price offered to it..." (IE29)*

Collaborativeness

Interviewed respondents believe that the industry-government-academy collaboration is very important in developing entrepreneurship and the entrepreneurial skills of the agribusiness sector.

As highlighted during the analysis of interviews regarding the implementation of innovativeness and risk-taking dimensions, the biggest challenge of the sector is the potential collaboration of entrepreneurs with industry, government, and research institutions. Collaborativeness is the main challenge of the sector. Increasing these collaborations will have a direct impact on performance. Through increased collaboration, it is possible to increase investment in innovations and opportunities for high profit returns. Thus, an interviewee entrepreneur says:

> *"Collaboration with universities or innovation NGOs is very important for our business performance." (IE8)*

The need for subsidies by government institutions is seen by respondents as a necessity for the performance and growth of the sector not only for Albania but also for the developed countries. This need is expressed as follows by an interviewed entrepreneur:

> *"We need subsidies from the state. We are not satisfied from our profits. Costs of animal feed is very high. Government should supply farms with food base. Not only in Albania but also in other developed countries, farms face enormous difficulties if they are not subsidized by the state." (IE25)*

This need for support and promotion of the sector by government institutions is also highlighted by an interviewee researcher who states:

> *"The abolition/subsidy of energy/fuel taxes used for processing is a necessity.*
>
> *Review/reduction/removal of value added tax on raw materials; as well as review of packaging taxes is a necessity.*
>
> *Supporting and encouraging the creation of large farms destined to produce raw materials for the agri-processing industry... "(IR1)*

Collaboration within the value chain enables the reduction of production costs, directly influencing performance, expressed by an entrepreneur as follows:

"Lack of collaboration with other aid sectors; agricultural mechanisms; very high cost food base is among the main problems we face." (IE1)

Also, the continuous effort of collaboration with domestic businesses, assisting each other in case of need, as it was presented during the analysis of the dimension of competitive aggressiveness is also highlighted by another interviewee:

"We try to be competitive in the market as to keep our customers, as well as to expand our market, but that does not mean to be aggressive with each other. Instead, we try to give support in case of need. For example, when the factory of one of the market competitors was burned, we supported them by providing with our products so that they could continue their sales and not lose their customers. We as a firm give a great importance to good relationships with other businesses. We strive to compete in the market through the quality and services we offer." (IE20)

Discussions

This research aimed exploring the entrepreneurial challenges faced by Albanian agribusinesses and on how overcoming these challenges. Through semi-structured interviews with representatives of the 3 key actors of the entrepreneurial value formation process, were collected the primary data. The research approached its analysis focusing on six EO dimensions: innovativeness, risk-taking, proactiveness, autonomy, competitive aggressiveness, and collaborativeness.

Agribusiness sector in Albania is mainly run by family businesses. The environment in which they operate is very risky and uncertain. Agribusiness is measured in terms of functions performed on its system, a natural system depending on the cycle of harvest and cycle of plant and animal reproduction. The enterprises in this sector are interdependent, making the final produce quality dependent on any player in the supply chain. So, the perceived coordination failures risk is high too.

Apart from the risks and uncertainties related to the sector itself, the sector entrepreneurs face with other challenges, which can be converted to opportunities through government-industry-academia collaboration. These challenges unfortunately continue to be same to those mentioned in previous studies conducted in the Albanian agribusiness sector (Bitzenis/Nito 2005; El Alaoui et al. 2016; Kruja 2013 b).

Unfair competition, political instability/corruption, changes in taxation procedures, state policy towards SMEs, limited access to finance, lack of technological and process innovations, lack of qualified personnel, market shortage, product safety and certification are among the main challenges faced by agribusiness sector entrepreneurs.

As the staff is not well-qualified, entrepreneurs are the ones who take decisions and seek opportunities, without neglecting the consultation with relevant field experts. So, autonomy given to the employees turns out to be limited.

Agribusinesses tend to continuously be competitive, while aggressive attitude toward each other is not stimulated. Although there exists a high market informality in the sector which negatively affects the growth and performance of agribusinesses, competitiveness and aggressiveness are perceived as different concepts from one another. Aggressiveness is evaluated as a phenomenon that seriously harms competition and the sustainable development of the sector.

Agribusiness entrepreneurs are mainly focused on differentiation strategy as a competition strategy that provides a sustainable competitive advantage. Through quality and customer relationship management, new products/services are introduced in the market, or existing products and services are continuously improved. This strategy may satisfy the domestic market, but to increase their profits and achieve economies of scale it is needed to expand the market through technological and process innovation and exporting the products. However, entrepreneurs face difficulties in meeting the required standards by foreign markets as there still exist food safety and product certification problems becoming so an obstacle for their exports. The market limitation also becomes an obstacle towards further investments in technology and process innovations, which is also affected by financial shortages.

Implementing innovations nowadays is essential to gaining a competitive edge over competitors. Factors influencing firm`s innovation activities are categorised by Montensen and Bloch (2005) to be: the institutional and infrastructural environment; innovation policy (different supports, incentives); the education system and the R&D activity of the government (e.g. the activities of the universities); the innovation activity of other companies; the interaction of the above in relation to demand. Collaboration is seen as a key to the development of the innovative processes, reducing the risk that entrepreneurs constantly face, and foremost for a sustainable development of the economy. Increased collaboration between government institutions – research institutions and the sector would increase opportunities and facilitate entrepreneurs in implementing innovations, taking risk, and enhancing their performance. Figure 1 below provides the collaboration framework necessary for the entrepreneurial synergy development, where each actor of value creation contributes and collaborates to overcome the sector challenges. This increased collaboration will not only have a positive impact on the established enterprises in Albania, but also in the students` intention towards entrepreneurship as evidenced by Kruja (2019) study.
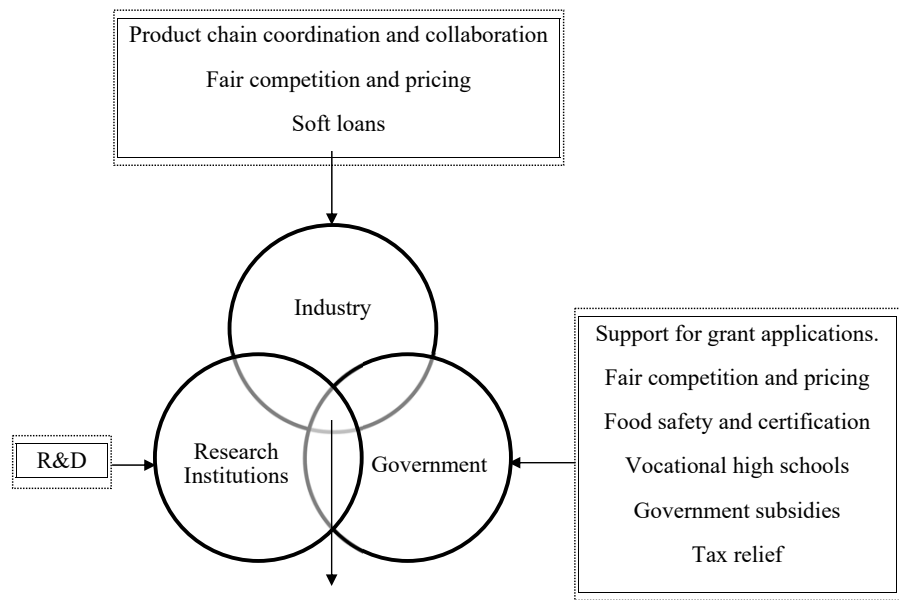
```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│ Product chain coordination and collaboration │
│                                              │
│           Fair competition and pricing       │
│                                              │
│                   Soft loans                 │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Industry

R&D

Research Institutions

Government

```
┌──────────────────────────────────┐
│   Support for grant applications. │
│    Fair competition and pricing   │
│   Food safety and certification   │
│      Vocational high schools      │
│       Government subsidies        │
│            Tax relief             │
└──────────────────────────────────┘
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Figure1. Entrepreneurial synergy system

Conclusions and implications

This study aimed to examine the entrepreneurial challenges of Albanian agribusinesses, as entrepreneurship is perceived as a motor of social and economic development all over the world. Agribusinesses employ more than half of the workforce but since the profits of this sector are too low, the number of employees year by year comes down to a deep decline, while the continuity, growth and development of this key sector of the economy is a necessity.

This study provides various contributions that have significant theoretical implications. First the research revealed that collaboration between government- industry-research institutions is the strongest enabler of entrepreneurial synergy. For the agribusiness sector, a very fragile and important sector, in a developing country is hard to innovate, take risks and proact without the necessary collaborations that support it. Second, the study found that the concept of aggressiveness should not be considered with competitiveness. Agribusiness sector in Albania prefers to be more competitive through value chain and sector collaborations, instead of being aggressive to each-other. Finally, the findings of this study encourage entrepreneurship researchers to further study the impact of government-industry and research institutions collaboration on entrepreneurship

process and entrepreneurial performance for other developing countries as well as developed ones and not agribusiness sector only.

Beyond the theoretical implications this study has also some practical implications. The EU report of 2019 related to agricultural policy developments in WB reports that the proportion of market and direct producer support measures in Albania is very low (Ciaian 2019). First, the study findings highlight the necessity in improving the quality of governmental policy planning; creating a proper institutional and infrastructural environment for the agribusiness sector development; developing a proper innovation policy and increasing the support of direct payments and investments; subsidy of energy / fuel taxes used for processing; reduce unfair and unequal informality and competition; providing a food safety certification system; opening of vocational schools to enable appropriate and specialized education for current and future employees of the sector; promote the agribusiness sector through soft loan bidding. Second, the study emphasises the contribution of research institutions in R&D activities to support the entrepreneurial process of agribusinesses. Finally, the creation of a synergy in agribusiness, rural development through input, processing and distribution, are key factors for its development. As the value of agribusiness lies in the synergy produced in its shell through links in the supply chain involved in the production and distribution of food and fibre to the needs of the economy; its development too lies in the entrepreneurial synergy created through the government-industry-research institutions collaboration.

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