Exploratory insights about a sustainability programme in the wine sector: an Italian case study

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The pilot phase, conducted with the scientific collaboration of OPERA (the Research Centre for Sustainable Agriculture of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore), involved a number of major Italian wineries, which were selected based on their geographical location and their products. This phase was completed in 2014 and led to the definition of technical specifications for sustainable wine production, that now serve as a reference for companies who want to achieve the validation foreseen by the project. At the moment, about 24 companies have joined the program; 18 products from 16 companies have been awarded with the label.

The objective of this research is to investigate through a descriptive approach the drivers and barriers behind the decision to apply for a sustainable production program in the Italian wine sector. To reach this aim the authors carried out an explorative analysis of a group of wineries involved in “VIVA – Sustainability and Culture”, as it is one of the most important sustainability initiatives in the Italian context.

Method

The present analysis uses direct structured interviews and a tailor-made online survey to focus on the sustainability initiatives of our sample of wineries, involving representatives for each company (usually the person responsible to implement the sustainability practices). The interviews were carried out in August-September 2016.

The online survey was sent via email to twenty-four companies which have been previously contacted by email telephonically from the researchers. Nine out of twenty-four expressed interest in the study, providing useful information for the coherent development of the analysis. Following previous studies (Borsellino et al., 2016), the questionnaire included open-ended questions, closed-ended and 5-point Likert scale questions (1-not important, 5-extremely important).

At the beginning of the questionnaire, general information was asked about the company (e.g. name, annual wine production, distribution channels and size). Followed by specific questions about the sustainable certification (e.g. the number of bottled labeled with the VIVA logo) and finally how the winery applied
the sustainable approach (e.g. sustainable practices involved, reasons for their adoption, changes, costs and benefits). We also intended to study the communication strategies and vision about sustainability issues undertaken by the companies in the sample.

The questionnaire allowed the collection of data referring to the year 2015. The main points were related to understand what motivations (e.g. ethical, environmental, and economic) drive people (companies) to take a sustainability path and more in specific the VIVA program.

**Results**

The preliminary results suggest that companies to be sustainable consider the importance about the proper use of agricultural chemical products (e.g. fertilizers), which is followed by biodiversity preservation (strictly connected) and proper water management and the optimization of energy consumption. On the other hand, attributes which are considered less important are related to a lower packaging use or the replacement of normal packaging with recyclable or recycled materials for the wine products.

Companies are also aware the implementation and communication (e.g. advertising) about the sustainability initiative can be an added value and a tool to differentiate themselves with respect to competitors. Some of the sample believe that the sustainable labelling in a wine bottle can give an easier access to international markets. Participation in national (e.g. Vinitaly) and international wine trade fairs is considered important by half of companies included in the study.

On the other hand, one of the main complications for the companies to be engaged in the sustainability initiative are the difficulties of data collection and calculation about sustainability inputs. Moreover, also the implementation costs have been identified as a strong barrier; however this aspect depends on the type of certification and size of the company.

Suggestions on how to improve the sustainability programmes have been asked to the company and it seems there is a need to better offer a support to online sales through the creation of an e-commerce platform.

Final and more elaborated results will be available upon the acceptance of this abstract.

**Conclusion**

The results of our study concern wineries involved in a sustainability initiative in Italy. Main conclusions suggest that adopting sustainable approach and be part of a common programme has its benefits and drawbacks.
In theory, the implementation of VIVA programme should lead to an improvement in business efficiencies and management systems. However, this outcome mainly depends on the size and structure of the company. Moreover, most of the respondents have experienced only few years with the certification, suggesting the need of a longer period to understand the potential benefits, reduce costs and optimizing the resources.

**Essential bibliography**


**Keywords**: wineries, qualitative study, questionnaire, sustainability, Italy