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## Preface

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Over the last few years, agricultural and food systems have undergone a deep transformation around the world in line with the remarkable changes of economies and with relevant implications for economic development (Buller and Hoggart, 2017; Swinnen and Maertens, 2007; Reardon et al., 2009; Mergenthaler et al., 2009). This profound change was driven on the one hand by market liberalisation and the globalisation of consumption, on the other hand by the growing consumers' concerns related to the food safety, following several cases of serious food scares (such as dioxins, BSE, blue mozzarella), and the sustainability of processes. All this has determined the need for companies to review and update their business models (Marotta et al., 2017). These concerns have led companies to place increased emphasis on quality and safety control, traceability of food products, and environmental issues (Fiore et al., 2020; Giacomarra et al., 2016), thus integrating environmental and social concerns into their strategic choices. Therefore, more and more companies have recognised corporate social responsibility as a winning strategy (Galati et al., 2019; Iaia et al., 2019) and have adopted proactive or reactive behaviours in order to guarantee a greater quality and sustainability of products, while creating a greater satisfaction and interaction with consumers and stakeholders (Giacomarra et al., 2019; Marques et al., 2019; Upward and Jones, 2016). In light of this, companies, in defining sustainable strategies, may not avoid taking stakeholder expectations and needs into account (Shams et al., 2020). It is evident that companies, through the involvement of internal and external stakeholders and exchange of knowledge among them, can achieve corporate purposes and at the same time satisfy consumers' expectations, creating value and a lasting competitive and sustainable advantage (Fiore et al., 2020; Dimitropoulos et al., 2019; Giacomarra et al., 2019; Tardivo et al., 2017). The value generated by sharing information and knowledge concerns not only single firms but all the players in the supply chain, who together can adopt increasingly responsible behaviour (Pellegrini et al., 2020; Drejerska et al., 2018). Furthermore, as several authors reveal (Grama-Vigouroux et al., 2019; Loureiro et al., 2019), stakeholder engagement and knowledge exchange are the basis of the open innovation process, defined by Chesbrough (2006, p.1), as "the use of purposive inflows and outflows of knowledge to accelerate internal innovation, and expand the markets for external use of innovation respectively", thus improving subsequent entrepreneurship development (Thrassou et al., 2020; Leonidou et al., 2018; Thrassou et al., 2018). It is evident that in order to gain and sustain a competitive advantage, it is necessary to redesign business models taking into account new forces, both internal and external to

companies, and trying to respond more and more promptly to consumers' expectations, both in B2C and B2B relationships.

All of this has motivated the Research Committee in Agribusiness of the EuroMed Research Business Institute (EMRBI) to promote this special issue of JGBA on 'Knowledge sharing to ensure sustainable and competitive business models in the agri-food industry'. The issue comprises six papers presenting new and relevant insights that have not been covered in previous special issues of this journal or of other scientific journals, but exclusively as single scientific papers and not in a holistic way.

More in detail, this issue follows the 12th Annual EuroMed Academy of Business (EMAB) Conference 'Business Management Theories and Practices in a Dynamic Competitive Environment' held in Thessaloniki, Greece, on 18–20 September, 2019, by providing coverage of some of the themes discussed at the symposium related to the strategic management in the agri-food industry.

Specifically, Fait et al., in their study titled 'Communities of practice and value co-creation: the motivational engagement system of the Italian Consortia', use a conceptual framework named connection, discussion, and influence (CDI), in order to investigate the relationship among the motivations involved in the knowledge exchange within an online community as well as the shared planning of the value co-creation. In particular, the authors tested this conceptual framework on companies participating in the agri-food protection consortia, thus showing that connections among people and the exchange of knowledge on a common topic, offer the opportunity to satisfy both personal and community expectations. The latter increases the awareness that the reinforcement of relationship by knowledge sharing can affect enhancement of the business-territory relationship, and protect and renew cultural heritage elements and natural heritage on which they operate.

In line with the latter, the paper 'Investigating the role of community of practice for sharing knowledge in agriculture sector' by Adamashvili et al., analyses the role of information, cooperation and sharing experiences of good practices among farmers and discusses the importance of the community of practice (CoP) as a tool for creating strong networks along agri-food chains. Then, the paper introduces the EU SKIN project (Short Supply Chain Knowledge and Innovation Network H2020) that has implemented the model of CoP, 'keep it short', on the basis of best practices collected under the project. The goal of the CoP is to develop tools and services capable of capturing market trends and demands to meet the needs of companies or their organised groups (networks, supply chains, production districts). Therefore, the authors highlight that the CoP appears capable to act as an accelerator and to promote economic and social innovation in the short supply chain.

The study of Varvaras et al., titled 'The relationship between strategic orientation, the degree of innovation and the financial efficiency in the food industry', develops a conceptual framework addressed to verify the relationship among the three strategic factors strategic orientation, innovation degree and financial results. The authors test this model, using a structural equation model, on big Greek cheese businesses. Results confirm that there is a relationship among the considered factors. In particular, the more innovative a business is, the less its financial results become, as a consequence of the financial costs needed, and changes in the financial situation of the business involve also changes in strategic orientation. However, the innovation degree is not influenced by financial results, owing to the specificity of the sector studied characterised by a low level of innovation and whose products are subject to the consumer culture.

Karasmanaki et al., in their paper ‘The practices of small and medium-sized agricultural businesses affecting sustainability and food security’, analyse crop and livestock farmers’ attitudes towards sustainable agriculture in the protected area of Lake Pamvotis in Greece in order to draw conclusions concerning their behaviour. The analysis was structured by means of a final 53 items questionnaire, with most of them being closed-ended questions and few being open-ended questions, that was administrated to 185 holdings. The paper’s insights can be used as a guide to train and educate farmers so that they will be prompted to adopt practices that do not harm the environment but, at the same time, generate higher profits. Overall, the authors’ results demonstrate that both crop and livestock farmers had positive attitudes and conformed to regulations protecting the environment from the adverse effects of agriculture; however, significant room for improvement was detected in terms of both sustainability and business development.

The fifth paper, by Galati et al. titled ‘The dynamics of Italian competitive positioning in the Mediterranean Bluefin tuna industry’, evaluates the Italian competitive advantage in the international trade of the Bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) industry. The analysis, carried out using the Relative Trade Advantage index, based on trade data, reveals that the competitive positioning of Italy in the international arena has changed fundamentally, on one hand gaining a competitive advantage in the Maltese market and, on the other hand, losing the competitive advantage in the Japanese market, historically a reference market for the Italian product. Results highlight the need to revise the current organisational models of companies operating in this strategic sector, reinforcing in particular the traceability systems aimed to offer more and more guarantees both to consumers and stakeholders along the supply chain. This could allow to retain a major part of the added value of the final product, respecting at the same time the Bluefin tuna sustainability programs.

Finally, the paper by Camanzi et al., ‘Market structure and supply chain strategies in the global agricultural commodity industry: a comparison between EU and USA’, provides a comprehensive understanding of the commodity market structure and how its features impact the supply chain organisation and companies’ strategies based on secondary data and case study analysis. The authors identify the main sources of risks of wheat, corn and soybean commodities markets, relating these risks to international trade and supply chain relationships, and emphasising what strategies and capabilities companies working in this market implement to overcome these obstacles. Results show that despite the price volatility issues and supply chain trend of the commodities studied and which entail several risks for all players of the sector, differences emerge in productive, organisational and trade comparative advantage, affecting the business strategies adopted by the cereals supply chains agents.

In conclusion, the papers included in this special issue confirm an increasing interest toward the role of knowledge and competencies for the definition of consistent and durable successful strategies. Knowledge sharing and transfer appears more and more crucial to both ensure and promote sustainable and competitive business models. The reading of these papers in this special issue can contribute to give new insights, shed some light on new scientific paths and certainly constitute an inspiration and a cornerstone for future research.

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