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WHAT SHOULD BE THE EU POLICY FOR
MEDITERRANEAN 'THIRD PLACES'?
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Finale of the projet COWORKMed in Zagreb, April 2018. COWORKMed, Author provided

The COWORKMed project is a multidisciplinary European research partnership aimed at understanding the challenges and potential benefits of coworking spaces in territories across five European countries: France (PACA region), Spain (Catalonia), Italy (Tuscany region), Greece and Croatia. The project began in December 2016 and ran until April 2018. The final presentation of the COWORKMed project took place in Zagreb on April 2018_

[Defining, counting and mapping](#)

Led by the Agency for Sustainable Mediterranean Cities and Territories (AVITEM) and several European partners – the Institute of Entrepreneurship Development (Greece), Barcelona Activa SA SPM (Spain), IRIS Research Institute s.r.l (Italy), Conseil Régional Sud Provence-Alpes-Côte-D’Azur (France), Zagreb Development Agency (Croatia), Barcelona International Business Incubator (Spain).), the project’s primary goal was to define the concept of coworking spaces. After discussions, which considered the importance of the idea of territories, in particular, partners agreed on the following definition:

“A coworking space is a physical space aiming to build and implement a dynamic community of users sharing a propensity to foster collaborative, open and sustainable relationships. Coworking spaces are actively managed to promote these goals, also by organising events and activities supporting mutual learning and exchanges and by developing new functional typologies and interactions with other services or centres.”

Using this definition, the partners sought to compile a census of coworking spaces through collaborative mapping. More than 320 coworking spaces were identified across the territories of the COWORKMed project, with heavy concentration in Catalonia (more than 150 spaces). The spaces are all of recent creation (since 2012) and most (66.7%) are privately run. These spaces account for 2.3% of the world’s coworking spaces (COWORKMed, 2018).

This census showed the extreme diversity of coworking spaces, which take many forms: fab labs, maker spaces, living labs, third places, business factories, public innovation laboratories, etc. Bearing this in mind, the project’s partners decided not to stick to a static understanding of coworking spaces so as to remain open to new opportunities, especially relating to the development of third places. The number of third places is expected to rise over the coming years along with the continued growth of independent operators, the transformation of economies (knowledge economy, collaborative economy, digital economy and so on) and the emergence of a regulatory and incentive framework that encourages remote working.

Identifying third places’ externalities and needs

The study’s second goal involved identifying the socio-economic, environmental and territorial benefits of coworking spaces. Reports were produced showing the capacity of third places to increase the productivity and performances of companies, employees and workers. These spaces also enhance quality of life while stimulating changes in the labour market and collaboration and innovation processes (read the reports at coworkmed.interreg-med.eu). Other reports aimed to establish details about the extent to which third places reduce commuting distances, greenhouse gas emissions and the numbers of people on public transport at peak times.

In order to increase this impact on territories, the COWORKMed study also highlighted the need to structure public action in a way that helps to create and develop third places. The project leads

often expressed this requirement in terms of regulation, networking and financial and methodological support. With regard to methods, managers of coworking spaces and public actors appear to be insufficiently equipped to assess third places' externalities. Studies on externalities are still based more on assumptions than on qualitative and quantitative data that could be used to evaluate and establish objective facts about observed phenomena. Moreover, it became clear that more is needed in terms of structuring networks for third places in order to pool resources and increase the visibility and attractiveness of coworking spaces. It seems essential to support the development of third places' networks like Cowocat (Associació Coworking de Catalunya), Cowopy (Coworking Pyrénées) or the European Coworking Network.

Lastly, the study demonstrated the need to make third places more firmly and deeply rooted in their territorial and innovation ecosystems. Performances of third places are, according to the economist Raphaël Suire, heavily dependent on their capacity to become well embedded in territories. This view has to be taken into consideration along with the need to build mutually beneficial ties between territories and develop third places in low density areas (rural and outer-urban zones). With the exception of the PACA (Provence, Alpes, Côte d'Azur) region, third places in CoWorkmed regions are mostly (more than 80%) based in urban areas.



Conclusion of the COWORKMed project in Zagreb, April 2018. Author provided

[Paving the way for European public action](#)

Workshops were held in Zagreb, Florence, Marseille and Barcelona to pursue a third goal of the COWORKMed project: to design a European public policy conducive to third places. What public policy should be put in place to support multifunctional and intermediary spaces that often operate with horizontal organisational systems? Four main strands of action were identified:

- Support the creation and development of coworking spaces in low-density territories (support with initiating projects, subsidise investment allocated after calls for proposals and on top of regional development support, etc.). The leverage effect that coworking spaces can have on development in these territories could be decisive, especially by cutting down commuting and by revitalising fringe areas and village centres (boosting local services by retaining/attracting independent workers, employees or new country dwellers to these territories).

- Support the creation and development of networks of coworking spaces and third places across the Mediterranean so as to improve these spaces' connections with each other and with their territorial and innovation ecosystems, make them better equipped (by pooling methods), better understood and more visible through combined and targeted publicity and, lastly, to stimulate demand through lobbying (e.g. raising employers' awareness of the benefits of remote working). It may also be worth holding discussions at a later date about creating a "Mediterranean third places" label.
- Use third places to support more agile European public policies that are closer to territories and citizens. third places can become special areas for jointly forming and testing new European public policies. Furthermore, discussions could be held about the staff of the European Union and its partners using coworking spaces in order to help inculcate a third places culture within EU administrations (collaborative work, horizontal government, digital culture, etc.).
- Launch a European call for proposals for projects aimed at supporting coworking spaces and third places by directly impacting economic, digital, ecological, organisational and/or territorial transitions.



Workshop organised in Marseille on February 20, 2018, at the Mars Medialab.

Obviously, the intention is for these strands to help shape a facilitating, non-prescriptive European public policy. The mindset of third places hardly seems compatible with a vertical, top-down public policy in which a public authority plays the central role as driver, coordinator, approver, financier and arbitrator. It is less about setting out a top-down planning policy for coworking spaces, more to do with introducing a public policy capable of creating conditions that encourage the emergence and development of coworking spaces, performing what Michael Foucault would call an “environmental-type intervention”.

Alongside this, issues of social and organisational innovation within the EU must be addressed, alongside those that the EU promotes in territories through public policies. With this in mind, the regular use of third places by EU staff could help the European Union to transform the positions it takes and the way it works.