

Innovative processes in SMEs between deglobalization, digitalization and sustainable development

7th PISB Conference

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ASPI - Piccola Impresa/Small Business

CRIMPI - Centro di Ricerca su Imprenditorialità e Piccole-medie Imprese (Research Centre on Entrepreneurship and Small-medium firms)

Aim and Topics of the Conference

The world is currently undergoing epochal transformations that are disrupting the traditional cultural paradigms of individuals, organizations, and society at large, posing unprecedented challenges for national and business leaders.

In the macro-environment, we are witnessing profound shifts in political, social, and economic equilibria both within individual countries and among them, driven by numerous factors typically summarized by the acronym PESTEL.

First and foremost, new and rapidly changing geopolitical scenarios are redefining global power dynamics and spheres of influence, contributing to the emergence of a new world order. Among other consequences, this evolution is challenging the traditional logics of international trade, fueling commercial conflicts characterized by the imposition of tariffs on transactions between countries and entire continents, and bringing about processes of de-globalization, after years in which globalization seemed unstoppable.

The trend toward de-globalization, however, is not entirely clear-cut (Thakur-Weigold & Miroudot, 2024). Global trade flows have persisted even in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rahman et al., 2022). This trend appears to manifest primarily in the progressive restructuring and shortening of international value chains (Kim et al., 2020). The crisis in global supply chains and ongoing geopolitical instability have exposed the limits of excessive corporate dependence on distant markets, simultaneously opening up new opportunities for local SMEs to regain centrality as flexible and reliable suppliers (Smith, 2023). This shift, however, requires companies that have long relied on international suppliers in pursuit of cost advantages to undertake processes of reshoring and nearshoring, while also building or rebuilding regional and local networks, capitalizing on the “Made in Local” concept.

According to Yousaf (2024), de-globalization is also generating new dynamics within the tourism sector, where a new segment of "de-globalized tourists" is emerging—visitors who resist the cultural integration and cross-fertilization processes that characterized the globalized world. These tourists are often driven by nationalist sentiments, further amplified by growing restrictions on international mobility and by socio-psychological preferences that favour destinations aligned with their national norms and lifestyles.

Another significant source of uncertainty and instability lies in the number and geographical spread of armed conflicts, which have become so numerous and widespread that in recent years scholars and opinion leaders have referred to the current situation as a "piecemeal world war" (Pope Francis, 2014; Pencarelli et al., 2022), to describe the widespread turmoil affecting today's world.

Furthermore, despite widespread recognition in management literature and public discourse of the importance of embracing the stakeholder capitalism paradigm—which seeks to generate shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011) and redefine the purpose of the firm beyond shareholder profit maximization—there has been a marked resurgence, even dominance, of financial capitalism. This predatory form of capitalism is heavily focused on short-term profit, dividend distribution, and maximizing market valuation, often at the expense of stakeholders, society, and the planet.

Moreover, financial capitalism increasingly intersects with technological and digital capitalism, giving rise to a new elite of internet and platform owners (Volpi, 2024), who hold the power to influence not only economic dynamics but also political and social structures on a global scale (Harris, 1999). Through digital technologies, financial and economic systems have become increasingly interconnected and interdependent, reinforcing global value and supply chains. Consequently, digitalization has not curtailed globalization but has instead accelerated it—particularly in the realm of financial transactions (Kornpobst & Paul, 2021) and commercial exchanges mediated by large digital platforms such as Amazon, eBay, and Alibaba. The advent of hyper-connected processes, therefore, fuels contradictory phenomena and, in any case, highlights the growing risk of vulnerability of highly interdependent systems in the face of the occurrence of errors or unexpected negative behaviours (Barreiro et al., 2020).

The advent of digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI) is also reshaping all business processes—procurement, logistics, production, marketing, and sales—producing profound implications for the labour market. On the one hand, we observe the gradual elimination of jobs, especially in repetitive roles that can be easily automated; on the other hand, there is a growing shortage of workers with the technical skills needed to operate new technologies. At the same time, the convergence of financial and technological capitalism is exacerbating inequalities in wealth distribution, further deepening social divides.

Digital transformation is no longer optional; it has become a fundamental enabler of innovation across all organizational processes. Nevertheless, many SMEs approach this transition in a fragmented manner, often failing to integrate it into their broader corporate strategies.

On a social level, especially in Europe and Italy, another major transformation is underway: the progressive aging of the population and declining birth rates. These demographic trends are creating new pension and welfare needs that states are increasingly unable to meet, also due to the shrinking number of active workers and taxpayers. Some stakeholder-oriented companies, particularly those led by humanistic entrepreneurs (Parente et al., 2018), are attempting to address these challenges through organizational and territorial welfare initiatives.

From an environmental perspective, the intensification of extreme weather events—including hurricanes, floods, and prolonged droughts—resulting from ongoing climate change is having severe repercussions on economies and societies. These phenomena are causing extensive damage to infrastructure, individuals, and entire regions, prompting urgent calls for climate risk mitigation measures in strategic sectors such as agriculture and tourism.

Further disruptions stem from the recurring emergence of pandemic events, caused by the global spread of infections that were once localized—an unfortunate reality made evident by the COVID-19 crisis (Pencarelli et al., 2020).

In this changing global context, sustainable development and the goals set forth in the United Nations 2030 Agenda remain an unavoidable paradigm for ensuring societal well-being and preserving the planet's ecological balance. Environmental and social sustainability must not be interpreted merely as a regulatory requirement, but rather as an integral part of corporate strategy and a powerful lever for market differentiation and expansion.

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals requires companies to adopt responsible innovation processes based on environmentally and socially sound strategic behaviours. Responsible innovation must aim not only to avoid harm to people and the planet but to actively improve environmental and social conditions through the adoption of responsible governance models (Voegtlin & Scherer, 2015).

Non-disruptive innovations (Kim & Mauborgne, 2019) represent strategic innovation models that rely not necessarily or exclusively on technological breakthroughs, but on value-driven innovations for consumers and society. These innovations do not destroy existing industries—thus avoiding widespread business failures and unemployment—but instead create entirely new sectors, offering original solutions to emerging or unmet societal and environmental needs without engaging in direct competition with incumbent firms. At the foundation of innovation processes and corporate engagement with sustainable development strategies lies the critical importance of intellectual capital (Giampaoli et al., 2024), along with the willingness of companies—particularly SMEs—to participate in networks for sustainable innovation (Moore & Manring, 2008). The success of innovative challenges for small and medium-sized enterprises is linked, in addition to the availability of social capital, also to possible relationships with multinational or transnational companies, the participation in organizational networks, the availability of technologically trained manpower and the ability of companies to adopt new technologies to seize technological and market opportunities (Prasanna et al., 2019). We need new entrepreneurial paths implemented by existing companies, especially those focused on responsible and sustainable innovation, or by new companies with sustainable business models that propose value proposals for creating common good in a world facing significant environmental and social challenges. This change can happen through collective action, as more startups aim “to improve the world” while also achieving economic-financial success (Cucino et al., 2021).

How are small and medium-sized enterprises responding to these transformations? How can they face new challenges proactively, without passively enduring the negative effects of change? What role can innovation processes play in this context?

The conference offers a valuable opportunity to explore these and many other questions, including:

- Are SMEs ready to seize the new business opportunities offered by deglobalization and the push for localism?
- Will SMEs be able to innovate traditional business models and generate non-disruptive and responsible innovations?
- Are SMEs capable of adopting digitalization strategies that are fully integrated into business processes and strategies, moving beyond mere resistance to change?
- Will public policies be able to effectively support the digital transition of SMEs, which are often constrained by limited resources?
- Are there virtuous examples of Industry 4.0 technology adoption (IoT, robotics, cloud computing, big data), accompanied by adequate technical and managerial training?
- Can SMEs leverage their agility and become key actors in the ecological transition, by adopting circular economy practices and investing in eco-innovation, eco-design, carbon footprint reduction, environmental and sustainable supply chain certifications, or by participating in renewable energy communities?
- How are SMEs adapting their accounting, management control, and reporting systems to navigate increasing complexity, uncertainty, and sustainability demands in the post-globalization era?
- To what extent do sustainability-oriented accounting practices—such as integrated reporting, ESG disclosures, and environmental cost accounting—support responsible innovation and long-term

value creation in SMEs?

- What is the role of digital accounting technologies and financial governance in enabling SMEs to align strategic decision-making with ecological transition, circular economy principles, and the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda?
- How are entrepreneurial mindsets and leadership models evolving within SMEs to address the challenges and opportunities of sustainable, digital, and locally rooted business ecosystems?
- What role do purpose-driven and humanistic entrepreneurship approaches play in fostering socially and environmentally responsible innovation in the context of systemic global disruptions?

Conference Mode

The Conference will be held from 14th to 15th May 2026 in hybrid mode and presented in English. The authors of accepted papers will have a choice to present their papers on-line or in-person in Urbino.

Deadline Abstract Submission

- Abstract Submission: 10th January 2026
- Notification of Acceptance: 31st January 2026
- Full Paper Submission: 31st March 2026
- Early-Bird Registration Slot: 15th February – 1st April 2026
- Standard Registration Slot: 2nd April – 10th May 2026

Author Guidelines

Abstract

Short Structured Abstract (between 600-1,000 words) is required. You are requested to clearly highlight the following paragraphs: Objectives; Literature Review/Theoretical Framework; Approach/Method; Main Results; Value and Implications for Theory and Practice.

Full paper

The manuscript (including abstract, keywords, references, tables, and figures) must be between 5000 and 8000 words. The template will be provided upon abstract acceptance.

Abstracts and full papers must be sent in electronic format (.doc or .pdf) to PISB@uniurb.it.

Publication and Best Paper Award

The conference will have Formal Proceedings (ISBN). All accepted papers, irrespective of the presentation mode, will be included. Publication is subject to Author registration and payment. A Best Paper Award will be granted to the three best papers presented at the Conference. Selected best papers will be invited to publish in Piccola Impresa/Small Business with a fast review process.

Registration and Participation Fee

Early-bird conference registration: By February 15th, 2026

- Virtual Conference: 120 EUR.
- Physical Conference: 200 EUR.

Standard conference registration: From 2nd April to 10th May 2026

- Virtual Conference: 150 EUR.
- Physical Conference: 250 EUR.

Attendance fee includes conference participation and paper publication in the Conference Proceedings.

For in-person attendees the participation fee also includes the social dinner and a light lunch.

The Registration Form and payment details will be sent to the Corresponding Authors of accepted papers.

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