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Background

There are more than 1200 startup support programs in Europe. These businesses help start-ups to succeed and emerge in the economic ecosystem. As start-ups are key players in sustainable economic development, support programs also play a central role in this context. However, little is known about how they can contribute to sustainable entrepreneurship. To find it out, it is necessary to analyze their sustainable performance.

Objective

This study aims to develop a method to understand the extent of start-up support programs' contribution to the sustainable performance of start-ups. By demonstrating that they contribute to sustainable entrepreneurship, startup support programs can improve their legitimacy. Furthermore, since entrepreneurs and founders invest time and money in them, it is useful to understand whether their resources employed for valuable purposes.

Introduction

Existing literature is not exhaustive on the topic. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap, by answering the question:

To what extent do Start-up Support Programs influence the sustainable performance of incubated start-ups?

To do so, after examining relevant literature, a framework to analyze how the incubators influence startups' impact has been developed. The framework has then been applied to the case of Innofest. A startup support program based in the Netherlands.

Methods

To answer the research question, a qualitative case study approach was chosen. Semi-structured interviews allowed to collect data on how Innofest participants felt the program influenced their sustainability performance. Thanks to the acquired information it was possible to apply the framework to the case of Innofest and to draw conclusions on the extent of the influence that start-up support programs have on start-up impacts.

The framework

In the pyramid I presented the 4 main steps of the incubation process with Innofest (represented in the boxes at the left). Each step includes several activities (represented in the boxes at the right). The central arrow means that the activities are consequential and their combination influences the performance of the startup. I considered the performance of the startups from the point of view of the impact, which I have represented with the 3 pillars of TBL: people, planet and profit.

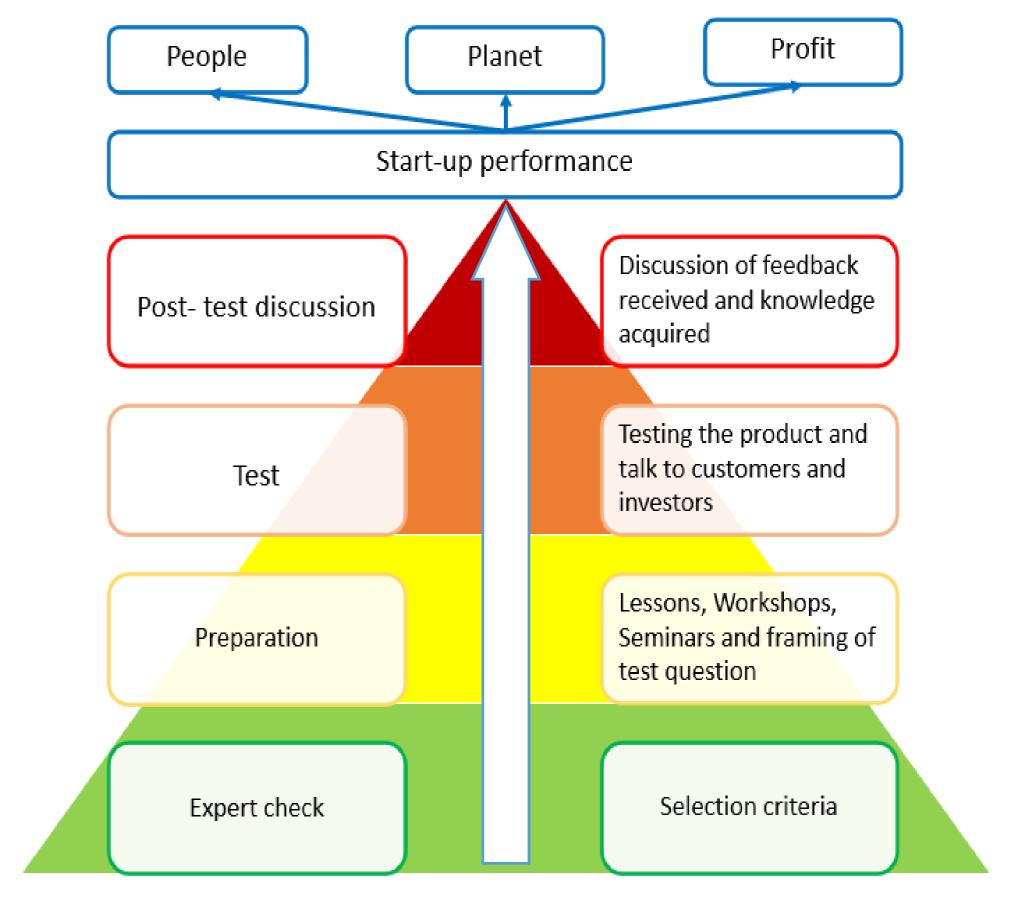


Figure 1. Framework for assessing Innofest's contributions of star-up's impact

Results

- The admission criteria are crucial to make the incubator a contributor to sustainable entrepreneurship because they allow sustainable start-ups to emerge and succeed.
- Innofest allows the start-up to get relevant feedbacks in a short time.
- The feedback received allow the startup to improve their products
- Little attention is put on increasing sustainable performance of the startups.
- Many startups experience a growth after the program
 - o Profit
 - Number of employees
 - o Broader social and environmental impacts.

Conclusions

- Startup support programs contribute to the success of sustainable startups and as a consequence to sustainable entrepreneurship.
- If no actions specifically directed to influencing the sustainability of the company, the contributions are only external.
- Helping sustainable start-ups to emerge and succeed contributes to the economic prosperity of the area in which the program operates, for instance by creating new job opportunities and making the business environment more innovative and competitive.
- Considering that impacts are not necessarily positive more attention should be paid to helping entrepreneurs develop strategies to reduce unintended negative impact.

