New Relational Processes in Social Services
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Abstract

The paper proposes a comparison between current thought and on-going research concerning social partnerships, social co-production and governance.

The term partnership refers to a structural configuration characterized by the co-presence of state, market and third sector and by collaborative social action that seeks to achieve project goals.

The concept of co-production concerns the participation of individual initiatives among the general public, the goal of which is to benefit the city itself and the contribution of the subject to the production process of services, through participation in voluntary organizations and networks of relationships.

The function of governance often affects the role that third sector organizations can play in policy planning.

The consideration these three concepts has recently begun to be explored in surveys and qualitative studies conducted in Italy and looks to be useful in promoting understanding of emerging configurations of the third sector in the field of human services.

Keywords: third sector, social partnerships, co-production.

1. Introduction

The paper sets out to explore the concepts of social partnerships, social co-production, and governance, comparing current thinking and on-going research.

Third sector organisations give rise to or are active participants in these processes, which are becoming increasingly important in the realm of

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contemporary welfare arrangements thanks to their ability to address the current multiform needs seen in such relational networks among different actors and to introduce innovation in the offer of services, with the goal of providing an adequate and effective answer to ever more complex needs. In this connection, there are two emerging phenomena that will be referenced in the following pages: social partnerships and the co-production of services.

The function of governance, or co-governance, is essential in both of these processes (social partnerships and co-production) and often affects the role that third sector organisations can play in policy planning as well as the contribution they can offer to improving well-being and quality of life within the community.

2.   Social partnerships, that is, multiple relational processes

The term 'partnership' refers to a structural configuration characterised by the co-presence of different social subjects – state, market, and third sector – and by reciprocal and collaborative social action that seeks to achieve project goals and is based on the implementation of mostly medium- to long-term relations (Osborne, 2000; Powell and Geoghegan, 2004; Glendinning et al., 2002; Newman, 2001; Rummery, 2002; McQuaid, 2000; Boccacin, 2005; 2008; 2014[1]).

Social partnerships are equal collaborations between third sector organisations, local public agencies, and market enterprises, founded on reciprocal relations and voluntarily established, in which resources, capabilities, and risks are shared for the realisation of a multidimensional project not achievable by any of the individual entities (Boccacin, 2009).

A recent emerging orientation regarding some 'mature' partnership forms realised in the area of human services points to species-specific networking that connects different partnerships with one another; through shared planning, the different parties are involved in continuous processes of reciprocal learning, mediation, and innovation (Seitanidi, Crane, 2009; Archer, 2010). This method allows them to expand their know-how and improve expected performance from the perspective of a concrete assessment of shared work (Mann, 1997).

The latter tendency sheds light on some points of contact between social partnerships and service co-production practices. Both of these, as shall be shown analytically in the following section, have the goal of realising a service

[1] For an analytical sociological explanation of the concept of partnership, see Boccacin (2014).

that neither partner is able to work toward on an individual basis (Dekker 2010).

3.   What is co-production? Definitions, typologies, functions

The term 'co-production' entered the field of sociological reflection only recently, with respect to the third sector, in particular. As with many other sociological concepts, this term is characterised by a polysemy that, on the one hand, allows it to be applied to many and diverse situations while, on the other hand, it makes it difficult to establish an analytical definition that could promote a comprehensive review of the conceptual debate (Verschuere, Brandsen, Pestoff, 2012).

The concept was first used by Ostrom (1996), who defined this process as a 'mix of activities through which institutional agencies and citizens contribute to the realisation of public services. The former employ professionals who are situated within an explicit procedural and normative context (these are the so-called "rule makers") while citizens make individual voluntary contributions aimed at enhancing the quality or quantity of services that they themselves use' (Ostrom, 1996: 1073).

From a sociological standpoint, the pertinent element of this definition is its 'voluntary' aspect, which underscores the subject's intentionality in freely choosing to contribute and participate in the process of service co-production, both to benefit others through one's actions as well as to increase one's own personal benefit. This definition is situated exclusively at the level of logic relative to the individual.

Following this line of interpretation, the concept of co-production focuses on the role of individuals and groups of citizens in the production of public services and is 'characterised by a mix of activities that have the status of "public services", which both the agents formally designated to deliver public services as well as citizens contribute to realising. The former are involved as "regular producers" while "the citizen's production" is founded on voluntary action carried out by individuals and groups aiming to enhance the quality and/or quantity of the services that they receive' (Parks et al., 1981: 1002).

Over time, sociological reflection has made it possible to shed light on the effects of the meso- and macro-social levels generated by co-production processes, probing the 'synergy realised in them between citizens' and public institutions' activities, and which involves different levels of partnership, for example, between users and financial underwriters and/or between users and public service professionals' (Pestoff, 2012: 1104).

A further elaboration captures the concept as follows: 'Co-production [is] undertaken by the beneficiary and community as the offer of services through stable relationships, and over a long time period, between professionals operating in the services launched in any sector and the service recipients or other community members within a context in which all the parties make substantial contributions' (Bovaird, 2007: 847). This definition focuses on volunteers and groups operating in the community, in addition to service recipients, underscoring that each of these groups can have a different relationship with public sector organisations.

Thinking relative to the concept of co-production later shifted from a focus on the service delivery process to the result that is pursued through reciprocal relations (Porter, 2012). This path of inquiry has led to the superseding of the almost exclusive centrality of the service delivery process in sociological debate by a more inclusive perspective in which the phases by which the process unfolds are combined with an evaluation of the results obtained through the process itself. In fact, according to the definition formulated by Boyle et al. (2010), 'co-production means delivering public services in an equal and reciprocal relationship between professionals, people using services, their families and their neighbours. Where activities are co-produced in this way, both services and neighbourhoods become far more effective agents of change' (Boyle et al., 2010: 9).

Following this same line of interpretation, we find scholars who, adopting the perspective later delineated for Scotland by Loeffler et al. (2013), understand the co-production of public services by users and different community actors as 'the best possible use of the assets and resources of the public sector and citizens in order to pursue the best result or to increase efficiency' (Bovaird, Loeffler, 2012: 1121).

In this version of the concept, the focus is on reciprocity between the partners, with the goal of pursuing the best and most efficient result from a costs perspective.

According to some scholars, 'co-production is a partnership between citizens and public service actors that allows them to achieve a valuable result. Co-production is essential for addressing a growing list of social changes with respect to which neither the government nor citizens, considered individually, are able to act appropriately' (Horne, Shirley, 2009, cited in Pestoff, 2012: 1106).

Moreover, considerable differences exist among the North American, British, and European contexts as to how the term is understood. If the American perspective mainly emphasises the individual axis of participatory engagement, 'in the United Kingdom the term co-production is used to analyse the role played by voluntary and community co-organisations in the

offer of public services (Osborne, McLaughlin, 2004). From this perspective co-production is different from co-management[2] or from co-coordination between public institutions and third sector organisations in the offer of some public services and also distances itself from the concept of co-governance[3]. This multilevel approach allows us to capture more facets of these processes as compared to a univocal use of the concept of co-production. However, the concept of co-production in the British context seems to imply a direct, but limited, role for third sector organisations, which can only carry out the role of service providers' (Pestoff, 2012: 1106) and have no part to play in formulating policies.

The meaning that the term co-production has assumed in continental Europe is very close to the semantic field for the concept of self-mutual help. In the European debate, in fact, the concept of 'co-production has to do with the growing, direct involvement of citizens within organised forms, in the production of social services and their use (Pestoff, 2009; Vamstad, 2007). The continental European interpretative perspective seems to follow that of the Americans more than the British. Examples that illustrate this view, carried out in France, Germany, and Sweden, consist of forms of parents' direct involvement in early childhood services used by their children: the parents are involved both on individual as well as on intersubjective levels through participation in family associations and pre-school services of a cooperative type' (Pestoff, 2012: 1107).

Co-production is understood by scholars as an individual action, a collective action, and as an outcome of both.

According to the first meaning, individual co-production actions are ad hoc, spontaneous, and informal and can be realised both in public contexts as well as in more circumscribed spheres as regards geographical location and the nature of the intervention (having to do, for example, with the realisation of in-home care services).

The collective actions of co-production pertain to formally organised and institutionalised activities realised together with others, often aimed at offering long-term services. Such services, usually realised by a small group, involve activating many collective interactions as well as a univocal collective action that can effectively promote the development of social capital, mutuality, and reciprocity within circumscribed contexts (Pestoff, 2006; 2009).

Many co-production actions combine the dimension of individual actions with that of collective actions: such an intertwinement is particularly relevant

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[2] The concept of co-management can entail giving TSOs a more important role in planning and implementing local services.
[3] For an analytical explanation of the concept of co-governance, see the next section.

in the case of social services delivered on a stable basis. From this perspective, it becomes important not only to broaden the individual's engagement in co-production processes, but also to facilitate the realisation of a greater number of collective actions in the offer of public services, and an increase of both (Pestoff, 2012: 1108).

In synthesis, we see two semantic roots for the concept of co-production: the first has to do with the participation of individuals (citizens) in initiatives that are usually public, whose outcome is to obtain a benefit for the citizen him/herself. The second semantic root highlights the subject's contribution to the service production process through participation in third sector organisations and in the networks of relations that they establish with the public and private subjects involved in the offer of services. The intertwinement of these two semantic roots is often at the basis of successful co-production processes.

In terms of motivation and culture, it is crucial that the organisational representatives understand the beneficiaries' real need for services and that they recognise the level of commitment that the latter are willing to put into co-production practices. It thus becomes critical that the 'user' and the 'organisational producer' clarify their reciprocal expectations in order to identify the expected outcome or result, reaching a shared meaning of the organisational mission and contributing to the co-construction of an organisational culture that is shared as much as possible. Other variables that influence the realisation of effective co-production have to do with building relational capital among the different stakeholders (Brown et al., 2012) and with a sense of shared responsibility in offering new services (Schlappa, 2012). Factors that are able, in a broad sense, to foster efficacy in the offer of public services are: trust, reciprocity, and the sharing of values and mission by the actors participating in the co-production processes (Agranoff, 2007).

The degree of the involved actors' engagement and the propensity toward a cooperative orientation among subjects represent factors that facilitate the consolidation of co-production processes.

4. Governance forms in network relational processes

The function of governance is essential in both social partnerships and co-production and often affects the role that third sector organisations can play in policy planning, as well as the contribution they can offer to the improvement of well-being and quality of life within the community. In particular, some authors emphasise the participatory dynamics inherent in the definition of the term 'governance' by referring to 'hybrid governance' and 'co-governance' (Bertin, Fazzi, 2010).

These hybrid forms of governance are based on regulatory mechanisms between the public and private sectors: within these forms of governance they find a balance that is, however, contingent upon such intangible resources as authority, trust, and social capital (Bertin, Fazzi, 2010).

These forms of co-governance are created in an attempt to govern growing differentiation through implementation of democratic initiatives and citizen participation. They involve the presence of representatives of various levels of action (national, regional, local) to whom is given the opportunity to vote in the choices that affect the development of a particular sector and its future.

Co-governance involves third sector actors and other public and private entities in the implementation of public policies related to a particular field or area of intervention.

Similarly, forms of governance such as 'collaborative governance' (Huxham, 2000), and 'flexible network governance' (Hardiman, 2006), which is made up of a complex, yet flexible, network of relationships, facilitate bipartite and tripartite negotiations among institutions, representatives of voluntary organisations, and citizens' groups. The ultimate goal of such negotiations is to reach a joint decision. Thus, cooperation and exchange between actors of different sectors become the core of an innovative relational process (Glendinning, Powell, Rummery, 2002).

Sociological reflection on the concepts of co-production and partnerships are connected to thinking on the concept of governance[4]. The term governance is taken to mean a modality of plural, co-participated governing based on collaborative and dialogical forms for managing internal decision making processes and the implementation of activities and services (Donati, Tronca, 2008)

The activation of governance processes makes it possible to move beyond governing forms inspired by hierarchical and market rules by introducing relational and network modalities for managing decisions: in fact, today's growing complexity and pressure toward the fragmentation of society and the increasingly widespread impossibility for individual subjects to cope with emergent social problems necessitate overcoming organisational barriers to new modalities of co-management, co-production, and partnership in

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[4] The concept of governance entails moving beyond the conception of governing conveyed in the English language by the term 'government', which indicates a management modality headed by a single subject that decides and establishes with complete autonomy which direction to follow and which road to take. It is a more direct and rapid management form, but it runs the risk of being more coercive.

which shared decision making can also find space (Newman, 2005; Taylor, 2008).

The most efficacious governance processes are founded on a collaborative approach and on the participation of a plurality of actors in addressing social needs in that, faced with society's growing complexity, the limitations of mono-directional management exclusively based on a hierarchical order become evident.

As was previously discussed, in the arrangements put in place by partnerships and co-production processes, the subjects belonging to volunteer organisations and the third sector play a strategic role: indeed, their contribution is considered to be crucial for bringing about a 'regeneration' of the local social fabric (Newman, 2001: 118), also in terms of trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit (Huxham, 2000).

The role that third sector organisations can play in policy planning and the contribution that they can make toward developing forms for improving the community's well-being and quality of life are expressed in governance forms that are often correlated with co-production processes.

Another typology that has contributed to thinking about governance between institutions and social actors refers to four distinct modalities: consultation, which contemplates decision making on the part of institutions based on the assessments expressed by social partners; planning, which bases governance on a praxis of negotiation; auto-administration, which partially hands over the institutional level's decision making process to social interest groups; auto-regulation, an outcome of the voluntary agreement between all social subjects.

According to this thinking, partnerships, co-production, and governance emerge as interdependent concepts whose co-implication determines most of the results obtained on the ground in local communities in terms of response to social needs.

We find forms such as 'collaborative governance' and 'flexible network governance' (Hardiman, 2006), which consists of a complex and flexible network of relations that facilitate bipartite and tripartite negotiation capabilities between institutional representatives, representatives from volunteer organisations, and citizen groups, with the goal of reaching a joint decision. In such forms, collaboration and exchange between actors from different sectors becomes the fulcrum of an innovative type of relational process.

5. Governance forms in network relational processes

What has been discussed so far is synthesised in the following figure in which the starting point of the entire helping process is the consideration of the multi-dimensionality of personal needs which, in order to be adequately met, require answers in terms of activities, services, and practices that can withstand the challenge of present-day social complexity (figure 1).

FIGURE 1. *The conceptual path.*
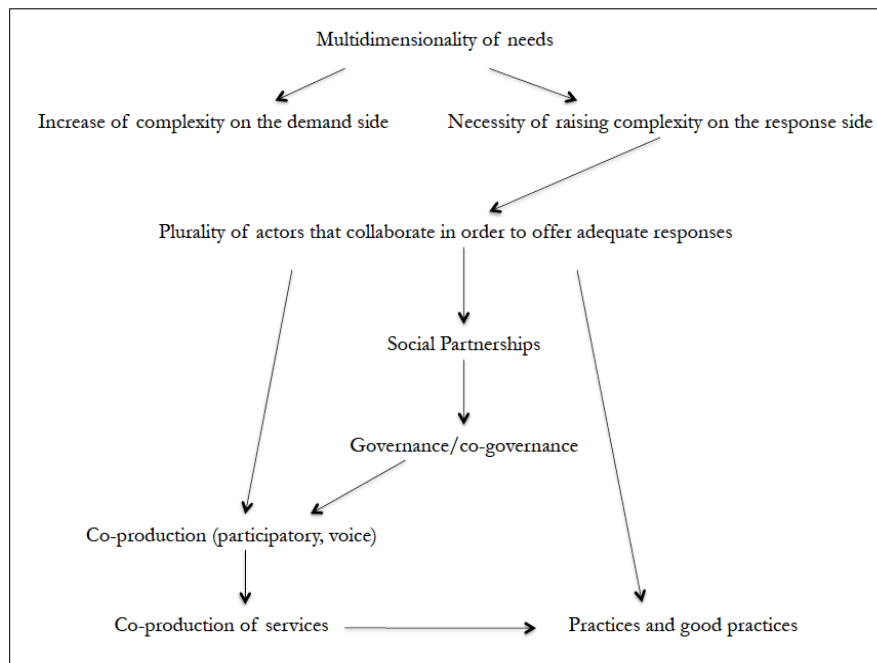
6. Research

The consideration of each of these three concepts, individually and in combination, has recently begun to be explored in surveys and qualitative studies conducted in Italy and looks to be useful in promoting understanding of emerging configurations of the third sector in the area of human services (Boccacin, 2009; Rossi, Boccacin, 2012).

Here below some experiences through which we can observe these phenomena and their social impact.

6.1 Conceptual-methodological framework and empirical indications that emerged from the investigations

We will now turn to findings that emerged from two investigations regarding partnership forms and the type of relationality that connotes them. These studies used a methodological-conceptual apparatus that is divided into three key categories: the structured networking defined as partnerships (Boccacin, 2009, 2014), co-production practices, which are seen to derive from the services carried out (Carrà Mittini, 2009), and governance-co-governance.

Such a framework arises directly from the logic of relational sociology (Donati 1991, 2011; Terenzi, Boccacin, Prandini, 2016), both in its single referential categories as well as in its observation of the interconnections that exist among them: indeed, if, on the one hand, fiduciary, collaborative, and reciprocal relations are needed in order to realise social partnerships founded on a shared governance (co-governance), on the other hand, the practices that are realised in the sphere of complex services for the individual enhance their efficacy if they can rely on a 'safety net' constituted by structured networking configurations.

The observational starting point in the investigations is the networking processes that lead to the realisation of social partnerships, which are the analytical unit and are the outcome of the networking of social relations, with specific reference to separate investigations (Rossi and Boccacin, 2011). These examined: three partnerships that offer services to the family in the province of Milan and six partnerships in the form of associated management of services for the individual in Lombardy.

These investigations, of a qualitative nature the first and of a quanto-qualitative type the second one, were realized through the reconstruction of case studies carried out by means of a plural content analysis conducted on the unabridged transcription of interviews on an annotated data report, which synthesised them based on a systematic rereading of the documented material. In the context of these investigations, 52 in-depth interviews and 2 focus groups were conducted in total. Moreover, using the SPSS statistical package, quantitative information relative to the 98 Planning Offices, collected with an ad hoc investigation was processed.

6.2 Relational complexity and social services

This investigation makes reference to three complex social services realised in partnerships in Milan and its province[5]. The partnerships under consideration are connoted by a variable number and type of involved subjects and can be differentiated in terms of the role played in the three projects by the different participating subjects. In the first situation analysed, the Mazzini Archipelago, the group of entities in partnership is composed of fifteen subjects, twelve of which are directly involved in planning and managing activities, six as founding partners, and six as effective partners. The other three, while sharing in the partnership's overall goals, carry out a mainly operative and more circumscribed function with respect to the mission of the project as a whole.

As regards the extent of the partners' involvement, two clusters of subjects thus come into focus, one that is central to the partnership and one that is located in a position at a distance from this centre.

In the second case (the Professional Foster Care Service of the Province of Milan), the partnership is based on relations that are characterised by an explicit formalisation and connect different subjects, such as the Province of Milan, several social cooperatives, experts, consultants, agencies, and families.

The third case examined here (the city of Magenta's Listening and Guidance Booth for the family members of elderly Alzheimer's patients) is instead a type of partnership founded on mainly horizontal relations among contact persons from third sector associations, although it still involves highly structured institutional entities, among which there are two hospitals, a socio-sanitary district, and an institution that cares for elderly patients. In this service, however, relations between people – involving charismatic individuals who played a decisive role both in launching the initiative as well as in its present configuration – are the linchpin of the partnership.

It emerges from the investigation that co-governance is a decisive factor, that have allowed this partnership to persist over time. These are the conviction that the societal result, achievable in terms of social performance, could not be reached otherwise, the presence of forms of coordination and governance – preferably of a bottom-up type – and the formalisation of agreements. Overall, the research reveals that the testing ground for partnerships and their resilience is represented by the modalities with which the transition between the phase of elaboration and formalisation of

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[5] These are the Mazzini Archipelago of Milan, the Professional Foster Care Service of the Province of Milan, and the Listening and Guidance Booth of Magenta (Milan) for the family members of elderly Alzheimer's patients. For an analytical account of the research, see Rossi and Boccacin (2007).

agreements and that of co-production of service delivery and interventions takes place: indeed, these passages are often not without impasses or risks.

As regards co-governance, additional difficulties have to do both with the ability to identify shared operative modalities in which each subject participating in the partnership brings its own specific contribution as well as with excessive discretionary power in interpersonal relationships which, in the event of a conflict between individuals, can call into question comprehensive agreements.

In social partnerships different subjects (public and/or private and/or of the third sector) can put into practice a manifold capacity for observing needs and attending to those in need through co-production: in this connection, considering families from the standpoint of personal empowerment and social networks has made it possible to activate practices that can be described as 'good' in that they deliver services that are efficacious for the social referential context and liberating for the recipients of services. Like co-production, good practices are also able to introduce a spirit of innovation into helping processes and to strengthen relationality and put it into circulation, on a meso- as well as macro-level. The investigation revealed that, while in two cases the sphere of action is unmistakably of a meso type, in the third case the scope of action can be identified as belonging to the macro-level as regards the variety of activities undertaken and of social subjects involved.

Relations among social subjects promoted a service offer marked by personalisation, which was able to meet the user's need in its particular manifestation, implementing services that are at once organised and structured. Organisation and flexibility appear to be elements aimed at guaranteeing efficacious and stable responses.

It emerges that social relations are formulated on different levels: there are formal networks, and groups of networks. Just as diverse are the modalities of governance or, in some cases, of co-governance. These modalities seem to be correlated with the organisations' size, the funds available for carrying out activities, the areas of intervention, and the relationships that each organisation has developed with the external environment over the years.

So, partnerships that can truly comply with their societal mission – delivering quality services – are morphogenetic (Donati, Archer, 2010): that is, they are able to absorb change and to include it in their arrangements, detecting transformations of social needs in more or less real time. The tendency toward the morphogenesis inherent in partnerships has also been found in recent studies conducted at an international level, in which organisations that initiate partnerships are seen to move toward reorienting

these relations on the basis of what they have learned, realistically evaluating the costs and benefits of the collaborations undertaken (Newman, 2005).

6.3 A quanto-qualitative analysis of forms of associated management of services for the individual in Lombardy

The research set for itself the objective of analysing forms of associated management realised in Lombardy both from a quantitative perspective, focusing on their structural and organisational elements, and from a qualitative standpoint, probing the meaning of such configurations for the different partners and their referential context[6]. It should be clarified that these forms of associated management, which are very close to the co-governance process discussed at the outset, are characterised by collaboration between institutional entities (municipal, super-municipal entities) and third sector entities (volunteer organisations, prosocial associations, social cooperatives), allowing for a pluralization of service offer based on the synergy of interventions, i.e., co-production. These forms can be realised both by creating a third subject, which is new with respect to the individual partners and 'mixed' from the standpoint of the juridical configuration, as well as by means of a contract stipulated among the different subjects, i.e., a social partnership, which, however, does not cause them to alter their organisational-juridical nature even though they pool some resources[7].

These are entities that can sometimes contribute to introducing into the social sphere modalities of efficacious interventions in which actors having different identities, missions, and cultures work together to address complex social needs, such as those involving minors and their families.

In a scenario in which the involved actors become more numerous, it is necessary to reflect on each one's role and on the specific functions of the

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[6] On a qualitative level, case studies were carried out involving six forms of associated management in Lombardy. Quantitative data collection, carried out at the conclusion of the qualitative investigation, had as its object the network of relations enacted in the domain of the 98 regional Planning Offices. For a detailed treatment of the results of the investigation, see Rossi and Boccacin (2009).

[7] In the investigation, the subjects that created a form of associated management through the institution of a new subject made up 26.5% of cases while 73.5% of them did not consider it to be advantageous to constitute a new juridical subject. As regards the forms of associated management that gave rise to a new juridical entity, the most widely used modality was the special consortium agency (50%). In cases in which a contractual type of solution was used, which did not lead to the definition of a new subject, the preferred instrument was the planning agreement (63.9%), the convention (29.5%), and, finally, the protocol of understanding (4.9%).

public entity, in this case, the regional entity. Relational welfare (Donati, 1991), which assigns an active role to the institutional level in governing societal action overall, requires that the involved subjects and the relations that connote them be clearly identified. In fact, public action, from the perspective of the principle of subsidiarity, is called upon to coordinate and support the different associative forms that enliven society by means of shared policy and strategy trend lines of governance and co-governance of complex networks. This 'hybrid' or mixed style of governance is connoted by cooperation and mutual coordination among autonomous and interdependent actors, in relationship with each other through reiterated and intentional interactions based on reciprocal trust and regulated by agreed upon norms (Rhodes, 1997; Mayntz, 1999). Societal governance, therefore, singles out the role of relational guide for the public entity (Donati, 1991) which allows for the development of concerted, deliberative processes among different social actors.

Among the instruments that make governance of social policies and services possible, there has been widespread use of so-called 'tables' in the past, regarding which ambivalent judgments emerged. Prior experience documents that occasionally tables were not found to be places for encounter and dialogue with respect to social needs, responses implemented, and the efficacy of the strategies employed, thus nullifying the possibility of co-constructing shared work praxes on a local basis. Moreover, a deficit in governance of the third sector itself was found among the organisations that constitute it. A weak faculty for self-governance in the third sector often goes hand in hand with a concomitant reduced capacity for negotiation with the public level.

As regards the co-production of services managed in an associated manner, these are clustered around three intervention areas: family-minors, the elderly, and the disabled. To these specific interventions is added a service action carried out by the Planning Offices for participating municipalities, which mainly concerns accreditation processes.

Services delivered in an associated manner have to do with: a) first access social service; b) the service aimed at safeguarding minors; c) services promoting in-home care. For small municipalities participating in the Zone Plans, the form of associated management allows for a developed and timely presence of the first access service through a capillary distribution throughout the territory. All in all, strong points and weak points emerged from the investigation. The strong points consist in the distribution of first access services that were previously not available and in the greater proximity of practitioners and interventions offered to the life-worlds of individuals and families. In situations which gave rise to a third subject, the stability of staff, which allowed for a greater professionalism on the part of practitioners, is also

important. Critical elements include an orientation toward delegating, which forms of associated management risk generating in a given geographical area, independently of the juridical guise that they adopt.

7. Concluding observations

In synthesis, several strategic elements emerged from the investigations under consideration. A first element concerns the quality of relations and their generative capacity: the presence of fiduciary and reciprocal orientations among partners is a fundamental prerequisite for launching collaborations and represents, *in itinere,* the *humus* – the soil – in which partnerships and the entire process take root.

A second element, correlated with the first one, has to do with the constitutive modalities of partnerships: projects that arise from below turn out to be characterised by a greater symmetry on the relational front, which facilitates the structuring of the collaboration and the co-production of activities and services.

A third element has to do with finding human, material, and financial resources: in particular, human capital represents a crucial component, whether in structural-organisational terms or with respect to values and symbols.

A fourth factor concerns the partnerships' governance and co-governance style: the governance solutions are found to be more suitable to the complexity of networking configurations in that they make it possible to clarify the functions and specific responsibilities of the social actors involved.

All in all, the empirical pathway taken in the investigations illustrated here made it possible to shed light on practices that cannot be immediately observed as regards the forms assumed by networking processes, the services offered, and the complex relational mechanisms relative to the governance of decisional processes.

In particular, the differentiation of partnerships' structural forms – in which co-governance is included – the missions pursued, and the action modalities implemented as the co-production of services indicate that the crucial element of such arrangements is represented by relations. Indeed, the studies reveal that creating networks of social relations (partnerships), within a praxis that unites resources and expertise, can lead toward generating bonds and not addressing as isolated cases situations which are complex.

In other words, relations dictate the rules of the structural configurations adopted by partnerships, and not vice versa: the organisational form is, therefore, the outcome of ongoing and reciprocal processes of dialogue and mutual learning that lead to the realisation of non-prescriptive and, at times,

original solutions. It means including in structure organisations the symbolic codes of the civic sense, of participation and of tolerance as well as of the sense of responsibility and autonomy.

In short, emerges the existence of some shared processes with reference to the fixation of networking processes, the quality of the relationships between different stakeholders and the modality they use to meet needs in services and activities, that could require a sort of cultural sedimentation before being able to be stably implemented within structured networking configurations.

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