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**The co-design and co-production of social welfare services in Italy:
an innovative practice with complex alignments and multiple meanings**

Paolo Rossi*, Monica Colombo**

*Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano Bicocca,

e-mail: paolo.rossi@unimib.it

**Department of Psychology, University of Milano Bicocca,

e-mail: monica.colombo@unimib.it

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1. Introduction

In Italy, the provision of social welfare services has been an exclusive prerogative of public bodies for decades. Only from the Seventies, private-sector organizations, primarily non-profit organizations, have been involved in this process [Maino and Neri, 2001; Madama, 2013]. Many public bodies have begun outsourcing the production of social welfare services by relying on non-profit organizations (primarily social cooperatives) through procedures of contracting-out. This process has been particularly intense and today it is now estimated that some 70% of the social welfare services offered by the Municipalities have been outsourced [Gori *et al*, 2014].

For several years, nonprofit organizations have been engaged in mainly executing tasks. Only since the 1990s and in particular after 2000, they have been involved in the design of social welfare services, thanks to the introduction of an innovative process of territorial planning: the so-called “local area plan” [Bifulco, 2014] that allows social enterprises to participate to the design of social policies together with local public institutions. However, the focus of the area plans was very wide and concerned the overall planning of resources and interventions at the territorial level, without getting into the details of each service.

The notion of co-design of specific services has spread only recently in the Italian welfare system [Rossi, 2016]. Consequently, Italian experiences of co-design of social welfare services are very few, in comparison with the broader diffusion of this practice in other Western countries and, in particular, in Anglo-Saxon countries. Moreover, pioneer initiatives of co-design in Italy are very small in their scope and quite inhomogeneous. This is due to a number of reasons: firstly, the absence of a specific national regulation of administrative co-design procedures. Thus, several experiences of co-design have been developed within a scenario of legislative and institutional uncertainty. Second, the legislative decentralization of social policies [Kazepov, 2011] has further differentiated the motives and the opportunities of experimenting initiatives of co-design. Finally, most public administrations and no-profit organizations lack of professional and organizational expertise in co-designing, and this is a consequence of the absence of a clear institutional definition of this practice, which hampered its diffusion.

In spite of these troubles, the practice of co-design is now emerging as an innovative opportunity for the production and regulation of social welfare services. This is due to two main factors: the reduction of public resources [León and Pavolini, 2014] and the diffusion of new social risks [Taylor-Gooby, 2004]. The reduction of public resources, as a consequence of austerity policies, pushes public administrations and no-profit organizations to look for new forms and sources of funding of welfare services. Moreover, traditional forms of planning and delivery of social welfare services are inadequate to face the new challenges of new social risks and the new organizational and institutional logics of designing welfare services are necessary to deal with these untraditional issues.

Within this scenario, the paper proposes a study of the practices of co-design of social welfare services developed in Italy, considering two levels of analysis: firstly, it proposes an explorative and descriptive taxonomy of co-designing practices, starting from a review of the international literature on this topic. Secondly, it proposes an empirical analysis of the reasons that push public administrations and no-profit organizations to experiment co-designing practices, considering the remarkable degree of uncertainty that is still surrounding this practice from an institutional and organizational perspective.

The paper is composed of three sections. In the next paragraph, a theoretical analysis of the notion of co-design is proposed, in order to provide an heuristic taxonomy of its various meanings and declinations. This paragraph presents a reflection on the state-of-the-art of the national and international debate on this subject, focusing on co-design as an organizational process that typically (but not necessarily)

involves the creation of inter-organizational partnerships. From this point of view, a relevant gap in the international debate is the examination of the configuration of co-designing practices in terms of an interplay between pre-existing partnerships. An analytical scheme will be provided in order to fill this gap. In the third paragraph, the empirical research will be introduced: a qualitative analysis of co-design practices conducted in Italy, developed through the realization of three case studies. These cases have been selected starting from the taxonomy presented in paragraph two. Each of the three cases will be considering both its goals and rationale, together with an in-depth analysis of its organizational configuration. The fourth paragraph proposes an inductive analysis of the factors that nurtured the development of these three experiences, considering some common and distinctive variables. Finally, in the conclusions a synthesis of the emerging factors that – according to the findings of the empirical research – are driving the development of co-designing practices in Italy is proposed. Although this reflection is circumscribed to a small number of cases developed within the same national context, some indications about the overall implications of the co-design of social welfare systems are proposed and discussed, together with an illustration of future possible directions of research.

2. Intra-organizational antecedents and inter-organizational arrangements of co-design partnership

In the field of social welfare services, it is possible to attach different meanings to the notion of co-design. The analytical framework proposed by Bovaird [2007] emphasizes the distinction between co-design practices and other forms of design and delivery of social services. His scheme is based on the elaboration of two main issues: the responsibility of design and the responsibility of production of a service. A public actor and a private actor may either share both responsibilities or being engaged in just one of them. According to his viewpoint, a co-design practice implies that public and private actors share at least the responsibility of designing a service. As long as both actors share also the burden of the production of the service, Bovaird argues that they are performing a process of co-design and co-production of the service.

The distinction between co-design and co-production is a neglected issued in the literature. Several studies on the co-production of social welfare services [Brudney and England, 1983; Pestoff 2006, 2014] do not mention co-design as a specific step within a process of co-production. Nevertheless, we argue that co-designing a service is a preliminary condition for its co-production by different actors. Our assumption is that that co-design is a distinct process, because it typically implies the creation of an inter-organizational partnership that serves as the institutional platform for the subsequent (co-)production of the service.

The literature on public and private partnership (PPPs) is very rich, although it is made of quite differentiated and inhomogeneous studies [Grossman, 2012]. Linder [1999] stressed the plurality of meanings attached to the notion of PPP. According to him, PPP is a sort of label that has been employed to convey very different forms of agreements between public and private actors: on the one hand, PPPs represent agreements that are basically oriented to the externalization and privatization of public services; on the other hand, PPPs imply a tougher realignment of roles and levels of authorities between public administrations and private actors (who previously acted as mere providers of services). In accordance with Linder, Hodge and Greve [2007] examined the plurality of forms of PPPs in different contexts, considering the incidence of institutional contextual factors in their development. Schaeffer and Loveridge [2002] analyzed the differentiation of the configuration of PPPs, examining two factors: a) the level of involvement of each partner in the governance of the partnership (that may result in an overall condition of symmetry or asymmetry of power); b) the breadth of the mission of partnership, juxtaposing PPPs with a narrow and circumscribed mission with PPPs who have a broad and unbounded mission.

A number of scholars examined the difficulties faced by public and private actors who collaborate to the development of a PPP. Becker and Patterson [2005] studied the problems connected to the balance of risks (mainly in financial terms) and opportunities in a PPP, starting on the assumption that public and private actors have different possibilities of risk-exposition. Young and Denize [2008] examined the conflicts that may potentially arise between the members of a PPP, focussing on the risks of opportunistic behaviours that are likely to afflict the interactions between actors with an asymmetric distribution of power [Eisenhardt, 1989]. The same topic has been discussed by Van Slyke [2006] and Mendel and Brudney [2012], although they both focussed on PPPs composed by public actors and not-for-profit organizations.

In spite of the variety of studies and researches, the analysis of organizational antecedents of a PPP is still a missing topic in the literature on this topic. By organizational antecedents we mean the dynamics of construction and governance of a PPP as a multi-layered network of organizations. Most studies examine the configuration of PPPs focussing on the institutional nature of their members, distinguishing them between public, private and not-for-profit actors. However, the members of a PPP can be themselves pre-existing partnerships or networks, with different degrees of formalization and with peculiar governance's structures. In a nutshell, PPPs can be the result of an agreement between single organization or they can be "partnership between partnerships". Ignoring the configuration of the organization structure of the members of a PPP hinders the possibility to catch the multi-layered articulation of a PPP, whose governance is likely to be influenced by a complex plot of antecedent intra-organizational agreements and subsequent inter-organizational arrangements.

The "architecture" of a PPP can thus be analysed along three dimensions:

- a) the institutional profile (public administration, private organization, not-for-profit organization) of its members;
- b) the roles (provider, commitment) and the level of involvement (responsible, supervisor, producer) of each partner in the activities performed by the PPP;
- c) the organizational configuration of its members, who may be either single organizations or pre-existing partnerships and inter-organizational networks.

As it has already been noticed, most analysis of PPPs focus on the first of these three dimensions. Our purpose, from a theoretical point of view, is to provide an analytical framework for the study of the organizational architecture of PPPs. This can be obtained combining the second and the third dimension, in order to point out the number of direct and indirect members of a PPP playing a specific role in the partnership. It is important to specify that direct members are those organizations who participate autonomously to a PPP, whereas indirect members are those organizations who are part of a pre-existing partnership or an inter-organizational network that is part of the PPP. The roles played by each member can be synthesized in two categories: funder (of economic resources) and provider (of services). The resulting scheme is shown in Figure 1.

For the sake of clarity, it is important to state that the number of members (one/many) indicated in Figure 1 (i.e. the number of actors involved in each role) is calculated on the basis of the following criteria:

- "one" means that only one member is playing that role;
- "many" means that more than one (direct or indirect) members are playing that role. In the case a PPP has just one member playing a specific role (e.g. the funder) it is considered one if this member represents a single organization (i.e. a Municipality, a company, a social enterprises etc.), while it counts as "many" if it is a collective actor, such as a consortium, a meta-organizations [Göran and Brunsson, 2008], a structure of implementation [Hjern e Porter, 1981] and, as such, it conveys within the PPPs a plurality of indirect members.

Figure 1. Organizational architecture of a PPP

		PROVIDER	
		One	Many
FUNDER	One	One to one	One to many
	Many	Many to one	Many to many

Beyond this first analytical level, it is possible to introduce a second level concerning the inter-organizational arrangement defined by the members of the PPP. From this point of view, in accordance with Pichierri [1999] a PPP can be:

- a) a project-organization [Jensen *et al*, 2013], that is a new (and typically temporary) organization created by the founders of the PPP;
- b) a network of organizations [Snow *et al*, 1992], that is an informal arrangement of inter-organizational collaboration, with looser and less structured connections among the members.

This second analytical level allows to get more comprehensive view of the organizational architecture of a PPP. This perspective is important in order to examine both the forms of administrative institutionalisation of a PPP and the configuration of its governance’s structure.

The analysis of the intra-organizational structure of the members of a PPP and the analysis of their inter-organizational arrangement within the PPP represent two fundamental steps for understanding the governance of a PPP. They represent two analytical levels that offer two important viewpoints for studying the organizational antecedents of co-design practices performed by a PPP. From this point of view, a first contribution of the article is the definition of a heuristic and articulate analytical framework.

3. Research design and methodology

In accordance with the analytical framework presented in the previous paragraph, we identified and studied three cases of PPPs created for the co-design of social welfare services. The three selected cases differ in many ways:

- the number of the members of the partnership (given the assumption that a “collective” actor represents more than a single organizational unit);
- the nature (public/private) of the funder(s);
- the territorial scope of the activities (limited/broad)

Table 1 reports a descriptive synthesis of the three cases.

Table 1. Synthesis of the three case studies

	Case #1	Case #2	Case #3
Number and types of partners	5	11	8
Types of partners	1 Municipality + 4 No-profit organizations	1 Consortium of Municipalities + 1 Consortium of no-profit organizations + 9 no-profit organizations	1 Foundation of Municipalities + 2 Consortia of no-profit organizations + 5 no-profit organizations
Number of funders/promoters	1 (Municipality)	1 (Private Foundation)	1 (Foundation of Municipalities)
Funding	Public	Private	Public
Partnership's configuration	One to many	One to many	Many to many
Providers' inter-organizational arrangement	Temporary project-organization	Temporary project-organization	Temporary project-organization
Overall inter-organizational arrangement	Administrative agreement, without the creation of a new organization between providers and funders	Administrative agreement, without the creation of a new organization between providers and funders	Administrative agreement, without the creation of a new organization between providers and funders
Territorial scope	Small municipal area	Broad multi-municipal area	Broad multi-municipal area
Target population	Teenagers	Population at risk of poverty	Children/Teenagers/Families
Mission	Service innovation in the area of teenagers' services	Service innovation in the area of new poverty	Management of existing services in the area of children and teenagers' housing services (with a potential for service innovation)
Duration of collaboration	3 years (possibility of extension)	3 years	3 years (possibility of extension)

According to our original research design, we were supposed to identify one case study for each of the four types of PPP described in Figure 1. However, during the empirical research, we discovered that two of these types are not very widespread in the Italian welfare system. We are referring to one-to-one and many-to-one partnerships. We are currently able to argue that there is a common reason for explaining the exiguity of these types of PPPs: analyzing the data we collected (see next paragraph for more details), we noticed that co-design is mainly interpreted as a process oriented to increase and pluralize the number of actors involved in a PPP. This process of pluralization typically concerns the actors who participate to the PPP as providers of services. As long as the goal of co-designing processes is to pluralize the number of actors, PPPs with only one provider within their structure (i.e. one-to-one and many-to-one) are not compliant and consistent with purpose and, consequently, quite rare.

Moreover, it is important to notice an ambivalence of one-to-one form of co-design. So far, we presented co-design practices as “vectors” of inter-organizational agreements (i.e. practices). The data collected during the research suggests that co-design (particularly when it is conducted in a one-to-one interaction's scheme) does not necessarily lead to a formal partnership. Vice-versa, co-design emerges a practice that can be performed within different institutional arrangements of interplay between a public and a private organization, such as a contracting-out procedure. Anticipating the presentation of the findings, this point emerges in the words of one of the actors interviewed for the third case study.

“I think of some experiences with some local administrations, they even don't know what co-design partnership are [as formal administrative procedure], but the work we are doing every day, what we produce there, is just the result of a very strict collaboration and of co-designing because when you sit at the table with the mayor and with the members of the local council for deciding what to do and both [public institutions and private no-profit organizations] are willing to invest and share their resources... what you are doing is planning together, it is co-design (...) I call co-design also all those situations where a formal procedure is not necessarily adopted, but public institutions and private no-profit organizations think together. This is also co-design for me”

This “informal” practice of co-design is likely easily to be performed as long as the actors are few, as it typically occurs in a one-to-one situation.

3.1 The empirical research

In order to explore both emerging practices of services co-design and different forms of PPPs we set out to take a case-based, multi-sited ethnographic perspective to compare the complex inter-organizational relationships that shape collaboration and decision-making processes. To this purpose, we adopted an extended version of ‘focused ethnography’ (Knoblauch 2005) and we conducted three case studies of inter-organizational collaboration in public services co-design and co-production involving both public and private organizations.

Drawing on archival data, official organizational and institutional documentation we first traced out the main steps in the constitution of the inter-organizational networks and the establishment of their governance structure. In order to understand the continuities and differences between the three cases more in depth, we conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with the main actors involved in each case. The interview grid included questions concerning three main topics: the way the collaboration was started and the constitution of the inter-organizational network, the PPP management and its functioning. The interviews were recorded and entirely transcribed. The analysis was based upon repeated readings of the materials in search for emerging key themes.

Table 2 presents a synthesis of the interviews conducted for each case. As far as the first case is concerned, we interviewed the mayor, two members of the local council, the director of the no-profit organization involved in the project as main partner of the local administration and the coordinator of the educational activities implemented by the social enterprise involved in providing the services. As far as the second case is concerned, the interview was administered to all the members of the steering committee (local council member, the director of the Consortium of Municipalities, the director of the no-profit consortium involved in the partnership, three members of the technical staff of the project and the coordinator of the social workers involved in the project implementation. As far as the third case is concerned, the interviews were administered to the director of the consortium of municipalities which promoted the collaboration, the directors of the 2 no-profit consortia involved in the partnership and the head persons of the two no-profit organizations which have a key role in the project implementation. Interviewees were selected on the basis of their role and of their responsibilities in the PPP partnerships.

Table 2. Interviews for each of the three case studies

	Public actors	Private actors
Case #1 5 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor of the Municipality • 2 Members of the local council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of no-profit organization 1 (main partner) • Coordinator of the educational activities no-profit organization 2
Case #2 7 interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of the Consortium of Municipalities • Member of the local council of one the Municipality • Coordinator of the social workers of one the Municipality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of the no-profit consortium • 3 Members of the technical staff
Case #3 5 interviews		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Director of the consortium of local municipalities (the consortium is a private foundation, although it is composed by local municipalities) • Director of no-profit consortium 1 • Director of no-profit consortium 2 • Director of no-profit organization 1 (main partner) • Director of no-profit organization 2

4. The case studies: a tale of three partnerships

In this section, we introduce the three case studies and we illustrate their main features. The presentations deal with the history of the partnership, a synthetic description of their members and an introductory discussion of the organizational arrangements that support each partnership.

4.1 Case #1: a small and focused experience of co-design

The first case deals with an inter-organizational collaboration started in 2015 by the local administration of a small city (20.000 residents) in Northern Italy. In this case, a formal procedure was adopted to select a limited number of organizations as potential partners in the co-production and co-management of innovative services addressed to a specific target population (11-18 years old). The collaboration is expected to last from October 2015 to July 2017. The network included 4 no-profit organizations as partners of the local administration. They are all well-rooted in the local community and share consolidated pre-existing formal and informal relationships with the local administration.

As it is shown in Figure 2, the Municipality promoted a request for proposals for the creation of a new service for teenagers, within an existing building currently unused. This call was devoted to no-profit organizations (social enterprises and voluntary associations). The organizations who wanted to apply for the call were asked to create a temporary-project organization (TPO). Only one TPO (composed by 4 no-profit organizations) applied for the call and was selected by the Municipality. After the selection, the Municipality and the TPO co-designed the project (or, re-designed the project submitted by the TPO) before starting its realization. The Municipality was not supposed to join the TPO. The evaluation of project's activities was made by the Municipality.

Figure 2. The articulation of the first case of co-design

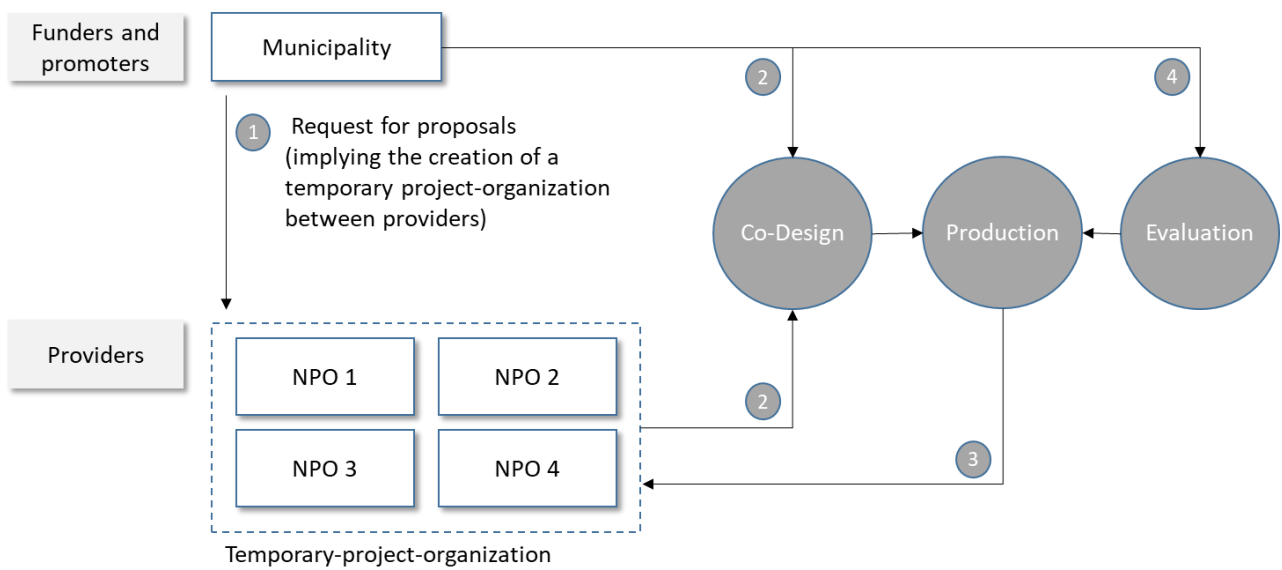
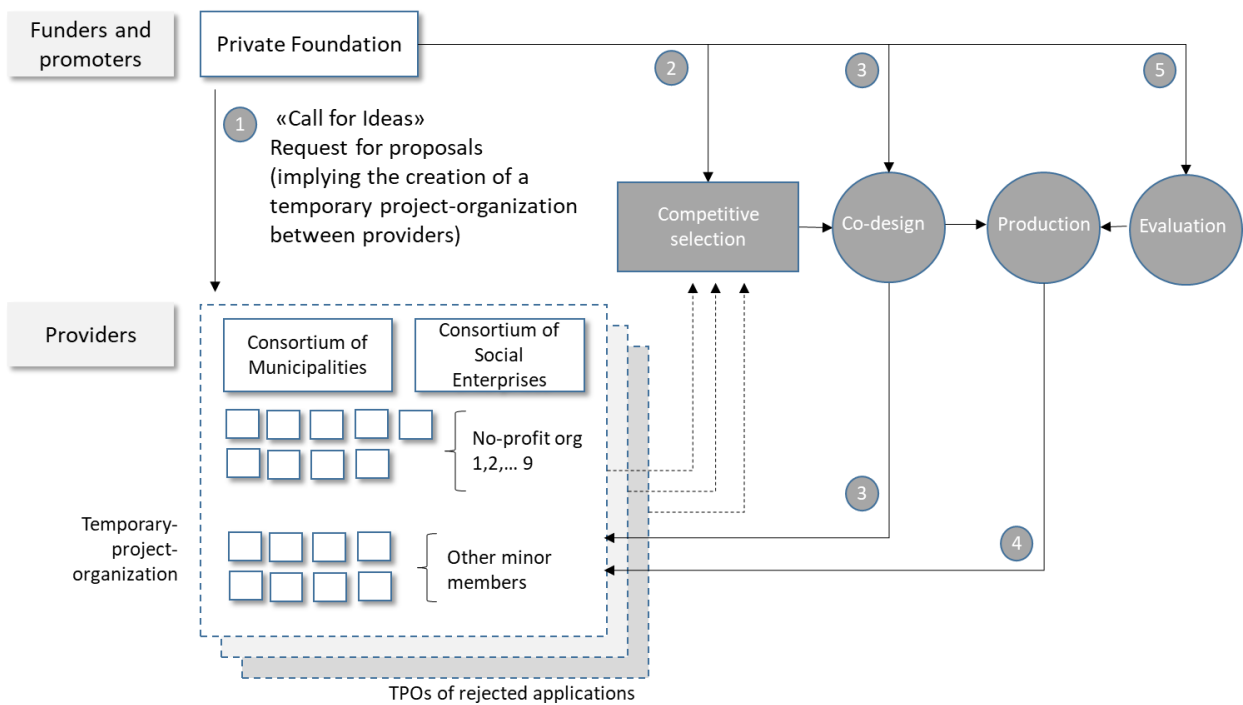


Figure 3. The articulation of the second case of co-design



4.2 Case #2: a selective experience of co-design

The second case illustrates how an inter-organizational collaboration can start on occasion of private funding opportunities. In this case, the constitution of a large network of different organizations (public, no-profit, profit, institutional) was involved in order to co-design new integrated services for different target populations (families, children, adults experiencing temporary financial/housing difficulties, unemployed people). The network was specifically established in 2014 for applying to a call of a private foundation and included 11 different organizations as partners for managing the project and other 29 organizations as members of the network for collaborating to its implementation. A formal leading

proponent was required in order to apply to the call and it was identified in the Consortium of Municipalities (MSC, a consortium of eight local municipalities). The collaboration is expected to last three years.

The articulation of this process of co-design, synthesized in Figure 3, is more complex than that of case #1. The greater complexity is due to the more hybrid and larger and organizational architecture of the TPO of providers (that includes a higher number of heterogeneous partners) and to the higher level of participation to the initial request for proposals promoted by the funder (a private foundation). However, after the selection of the applicants, the process of production of the services is very similar to that illustrated for case #1. The funder participate to the co-design (“re-design”) of the project, while leaving its implementation to the network of providers. The *in-itinere* evaluation, performed by the funder, can influence the implementation of the project.

4.3 Case #3: a conflictual experience of co-design

The third case deals with a complex inter-organizational collaboration started in 2015 by a Consortium of local administrations including 22 municipalities in Northern Italy, who created a Community Foundation. Although this Foundation is composed only by municipalities, from an institutional point of view it takes the form of a private entity. The consortium adopted a formal procedure to select a limited number of organizations as partners in the co-production and co-management of some housing structures addressed to children teens facing familiar troubles. The process developed in two phases. Four different coalitions applied to the first call, as shown in Figure 4. Two of the TPOs (TPO A and TPO B in Figure 4) were composed by locally well-rooted no-profit organizations. The result of this call was then invalidated and nullified by the Court after the excluded partnership registered a complaint for formal errors. In the second phase (Figure 5), these two coalitions reorganized themselves internally and established a new broader partnership in order to participate together to the new call. This process implied a long and delicate negotiation between the leading representatives of the two coalitions and the consequent exclusion of some of the organizations previously included in the partnership. The resulting new coalition comprised two consortia and 5 no profit organizations.

Beyond the conflictual dynamics of its construction, the distinctive aspect of this experience of co-design is the presence of a plurality of funding members, aggregated into a collective organizational actor (the Community Foundation). This is hence a case of many-to-many PPP, and its complex organizational architecture is the outcome of its troubled genesis. Once the PPP was established and the project co-designed, the realization of services followed the steps already illustrated in case #1 and #2.

Figure 4. The organizational antecedents of the third case of co-design

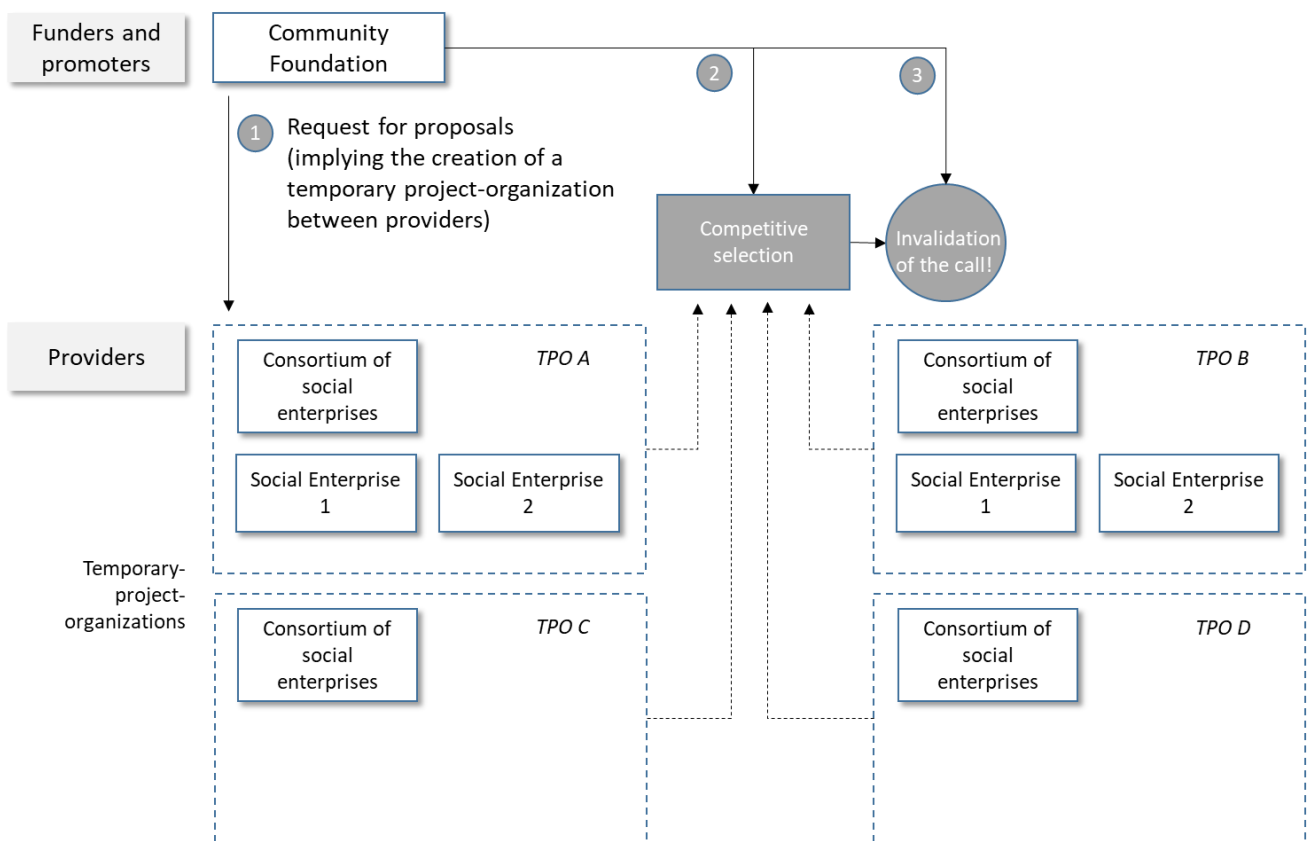
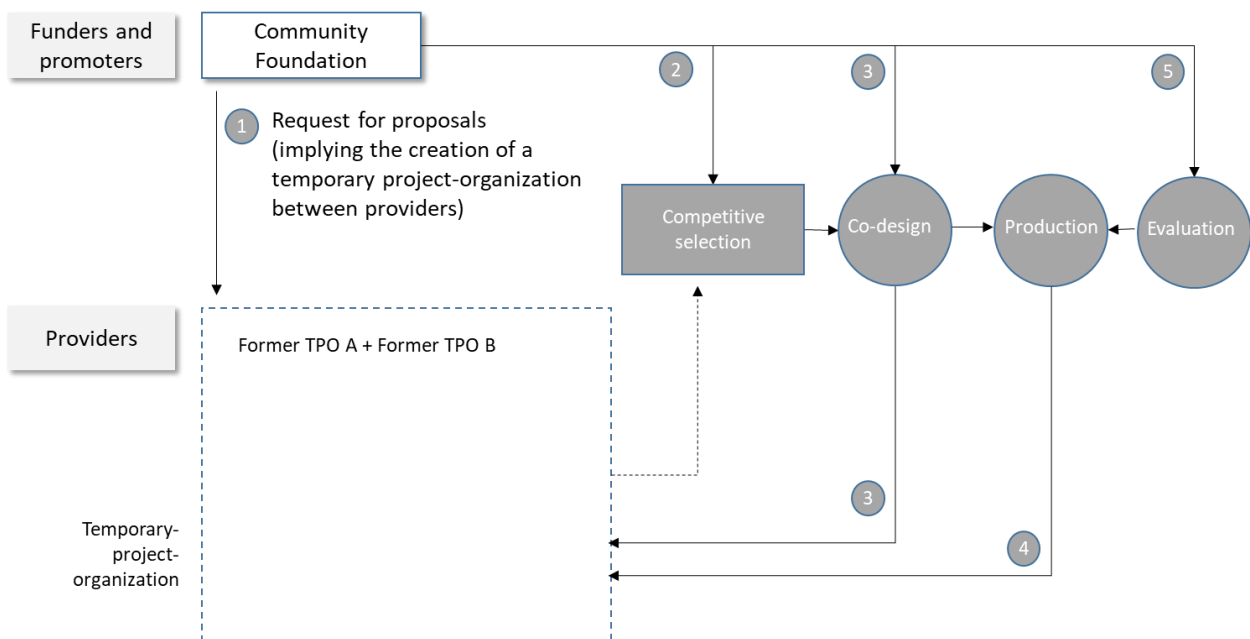


Figure 5. The organizational articulation of the third case of co-design after the second request for proposals



5. Why co-designing?

The previous paragraph has described the antecedents of each of the three experiences of co-designing, analyzing their organizational architecture. In this paragraph, we will discuss the motives that lead the protagonist of these experiences to promote and/or being involved in a process of co-design. Our analysis is based on the examination of the data collected through the interviews and archival resources.

The overall examination of these data lead us to identify three main motives that explain the decision of undertaking an experience of co-design and collaboration within a PPP:

- a) promoting and consolidating a local pre-existing inter-organizational network;
- b) developing institutional/public entrepreneurship;
- c) aligning with a managerial/institutional trend.

These motives have been identified through an inductive process of data analysis [Thomas, 2006; Buroway, 1998]. They frequently emerge in each of our case studies and frequently overlap one each other as well. A single motive is not strictly related to a specific case, nor it causally provides an explanation of its development. They all influence, although in contradictory forms, the decisions to promote a co-design process and the convergence of all actors in its development.

In the next sub-paragraphs, these three motives will be presented and discussed using extracts and quotations from the interviews.

5.1 Promoting and consolidating a local pre-existing inter-organizational network

Pre-existing and consolidated inter-organizational relationships are generally regarded by all the interviewees as a facilitating factor for establishing a satisfying and well-working partnership. As far as case #1 is concerned, the formal procedure adopted by the local administration in order to select their partners was a tool for consolidating pre-existing inter-organizational relationships with no-profit organization well-rooted in the territory. In this case, co-design was regarded not only as a way to tighten these relationships, but also as a way to establish a stricter collaboration in service production than in the past under the former administration:

Extract # 2 - Member of the Local Council – Case #1

“I tell you as I see it: they [no-profit organizations] manage the services, but it is as if they were part of the municipal staff... they do have autonomy, they play a role as protagonist in planning and in the organization of services, but in fact it is as if they were the long reach of the local administration which cannot manage the services itself and so it entrusts their management to them, but there is an ongoing stable relationship.

In this case, co-design is an instrumental solution developed within the boundaries imposed by the current institutional arrangement of local governments. Although this solution represents an innovation in terms of administrative and governance agreements, its main innovativeness emerges when considering the content and the expected outcome of the actions it is supposed to produce and support. Co-design is regarded as a way to go beyond the traditional procedures of contracting-out allowing public and private actors to position themselves in a different relationship and the local administration to have the opportunity to monitor the implementation of innovative services.

As far as the second case is concerned, the fact that a pre-existing and consolidated inter-organizational network (the Consortium of Municipalities) was already operating in territorial planning and in the

implementation of services is regarded not only as a key facilitating factor in the constitution of the partnership, but also as one of the element that increased their funding opportunities.

Extract #3 - [Director of no-profit consortium – case # 2]

“I think that [the private Foundation] has chosen this territory for doing this experimentation because there were the right conditions for it: third sector organizations are active, local administrations are willing to go through new experiences... It is no coincidence... “

In this case, the main concern of the actors seems to refer to governance and organizational arrangements (at least in this initial phase). A key role in this process seems to have been played by meso-level organizations (consortia).

As far as case #3 is concerned, the two no-profit consortia are not rooted in the same territory and had never collaborated before. On the contrary, the interviewees refer that they had often competed in the past on occasion of other public tenders for the management of services. In this case, the difficulties connected to the integration of heterogeneous organizations within the network have been particularly harsh and the lack of a pre-existing collaborative relationship has involved a tightening of inter-organizational conflicts.

Extract 4 - [Director of no-profit organization – case #3]

“These two consortia have a story of conflicts and of open competition... There was rust, there were very rigid positions... It was not easy to approach the other consortium, it could not be taken for granted that they could stay together”

5.2 Developing public/institutional entrepreneurship

The process of co-designing and the creation of PPPs can be regarded as strictly connected to “public entrepreneurship” [Giuliani, 1988; Schneider and Teske, 1992] and to innovation, experimentation, and creativity in the welfare sector [Osborne and Browne, 2011]. Different aspects of this relationship emerge from the interviews. The 3 cases under examination here show how private and public entrepreneurship can be mutually dependent and co-evolve in ways that can be gradual or sudden and are often path-dependent [Ostrom, 2005].

As far as case #1 is concerned, the local administration was deeply involved in supporting no-profit organization in looking for funding opportunities which can allow for the implementation of new services.

Extract #5 - [Member of the Local Council– Case #1]

“What I like is that it is not a bounded project. If I say “Look there is this opportunity, why don’t you attempt to apply for this call, so that we can add a new piece...” or, “Why don’t you try to contact that subject?”, or “Look, I put you in contact with that one so that you can start thinking about...” So, for me co-design allows to have a space which can be filled with different kind of content that can emerge from the territory. This is the novelty which makes co-design different from other tools”

In this case, the creation of partnerships between public and private organizations is regarded as strategy that public institutions are promoting in order to tackle the reduction of public resources without decreasing the supply of social welfare services, both in qualitative and quantitative terms.

Unlike contracting-out, co-design is regarded as a solution for the management of those social welfare services that meet the so-called new social risks or emerging new needs.

As far as case #2 is concerned, it is quite clear that also in this case the practice of co-design and the establishment of PPPs are regarded as an innovative opportunity for the production and regulation of social welfare services. This is due to two main factors: the reduction of public resources and the diffusion of new social risks [Taylor-Gooby, 2004].

Extract #6 - [Director – Consortium of Municipalities – Case #2]

“The call had not been published yet, but we had already decided to include intervention for people at risk of poverty in our (piano di zona) and then we started looking for funding opportunities. The call represented this opportunity”.

As far as case #3 is concerned, for no-profit organizations the constitution of a new partnership involved the opportunity both to expand and to consolidate their relationship with local institutions:

Extract #7 - [Director no-profit organization – case #3]

“For the two no-profit consortia, joining the partnership meant to attempt to measure themselves with a policy at the province level instead of managing the services only in their own territories also because other competitors were arriving from outside”.

5.2 The alignment with a managerial/institutional trend

In Italy, the practice of co-design is now emerging as an innovative opportunity for the production and regulation of social welfare services [De Ambrogio, 2016; Rossi, 2016]. In the last twenty years formal procedures for the constitution of PPPs have started to be adopted by local administrations, training courses have started to be offered and the number of papers and books dedicated to co-design has been constantly increasing [Cau and Maino, 2017; Brunod *et al*, 2016; De Ambrogio, 2016]. Co-design has been having more and more attention in the debate on the transformation of welfare and in the development of the so-called “community welfare” in particular. The cases under examination here show how this trend impacted on the decision to start a PPPs.

As far as case #1 is concerned, co-design is regarded as consistent with the aim of promoting a form of “community welfare” which the local administration has decided to support since the beginning of their mandate. Political actors (the mayor and the members of the local council) were looking for the normative tools which could allow them to implement participatory practices in social policy and the head of the technical staff had been previously trained in co-design:

Extract #8 - (Member of the Local Council – Case #1)

“Why have we decided to do so? The scope was not so clear, so we regarded co-design as a tool for experimenting and for defining a project. The second reason is that we wanted to adopt a participatory approach (...) Everything was new for us, we were unexperienced with administrative procedures (...) It was the head of our technical staff who proposed to adopt this kind of procedure and this was consistent with our vision”.

As far as case #2 is concerned, the constitution of PPPs is a key element in the idea of welfare that the funding Foundation has been supporting in this territorial area and co-design is explicitly connected to new kinds of social risks which challenge traditional forms of welfare social services.

Extract #9 - [Director – Municipalities Special Company – Case #2]

“Even if it has been written a lot about co-design and administrative procedures, what is still unsaid is that the management is then totally different. In fact, in codesigning services a number of different subjects have to meet around a table and to develop a kind of shared vision (...) In the implementation phase you have to put together different organizations and in this phase they put forward their identities and their internal skills. It’s not easy...”

As far as case #3 is concerned, the decision of establishing a co-design partnership is regarded as strictly connected to the orientation of the Foundation management.

Extract #10 - [Director, no-profit organization, case #3]

“The local municipalities decided to open a call for the co-planning of all the services addressed to children because they had been fascinated by this idea... But, they didn’t decide to make a small-scale experimentation even if they were unexperienced with this process and with the formal procedures, they decided to make a call for a big project... 4 million Euros!”

As far as case #2 is concerned, the constitution of PPPs is a key element in the idea of welfare that the funding Foundation has been supporting in this territorial area and co-design is explicitly connected to new kinds of social risks which challenge traditional forms of welfare social services.

Extract #11 - [Director – Municipalities Special Company – Case #2]

“Even if it has been written a lot about co-design and administrative procedures, what is still unsaid is that the management is then totally different. In fact, in codesigning services a number of different subjects have to meet around a table and to develop a kind of shared vision (...) In the implementation phase you have to put together different organizations and in this phase they put forward their identities and their internal skills. It’s not easy...”

6. Conclusions

There are still few in-depth empirical studies investigating how people actually collaborate in everyday settings and this lack is even sharper with regard to collaborations within PPPs. The case studies we have presented allowed us to examine three emerging forms of PPPs in the co-design of welfare services.

The analysis of institutional and organizational documentation allowed us to map the constraints and the opportunities that shaped the composition of each partnership and their resulting profile (in terms of organizations involved, the structure of governance, organizational coordination arrangements, financial resources, etc.).

Our research made it possible to collect data for a better understanding of the underlying decision-making processes that guided the creation of each partnership. The results show that a decisive factor that guides the composition of the partnership at an initial stage is the presence of pre-existing and already established relationships between the actors. The three experiences were initially developed within a network of relationships of trust and only later have implicated the involvement of new partners.

Our analysis provided a number of insights for understanding the forms and the meanings a PPP can take, considering its contingent and embedded nature. In case #1, the creation of the partnership can be understood as an innovative administrative procedure, aimed at regulating the interplay between two groups of actors. From this point of view, the partnership emerges as an opportunity for developing “product” innovation, overcoming the difficulties that both public and private organizations are currently facing in providing welfare services in Italy.

In case #2, the partnership takes the form of a collaborative project and it is a requirement for applying to a call. As a consequence, the management and the governance of the partnership represents one of the main challenge that members are called to tackle; the creation and the maintenance of the partnership provide innovativeness to the whole process. Also in case #3, the creation of the partnership between two previously competing consortia is a result of the adoption of a co-design formal procedure and it is connected to a growing trend in the providing of services.

The preliminary findings of our study show that in the three cases under examination the starting conditions have given rise to different forms of inter-organizational collaboration and in different forms of partnership. Leading roles within the network and asymmetry in the decision making processes are negotiated and legitimated on the basis of different prevailing criteria: in the first case they are mainly justified by a set of arguments concerning efficiency and professional/technical skills; in the second case by mutual trust, pre-existing relationships and shared values; in the third case by a troubled and controversial path of negotiation between actors operating in overlapping territories.

Beyond these contingent findings, our paper contributes to the research on co-design of social welfare services and PPPs in the welfare sector in several ways. Firstly, it provides a theoretical analytical framework for the classification of PPPs, based on the number of actors involved in the partnership and the differentiation of their roles and responsibilities. This framework fills a gap in the understanding of the organizational architecture of PPP, considering the intra-organizational configuration of each partner of the partnership. This scheme is moreover complemented by a reflection on the type of inter-organizational arrangements between the actors who participate to the PPP.

Secondly, our paper provides a discussion of the emerging motives that lead different actors to take part to a co-design experience. Although these motives are contingent to the features of the cases we analyzed, they offer some relevant viewpoints for understanding the potentialities and limitations of co-designing practices.

Finally, it is important to report some of the limitations of our paper. First of all, it is important to say that it is currently based on a limited number of case studies. Secondly, these cases are developed in homogeneous contexts: both these limitations hinder to catch the even bigger variety of co-design experiences developed in Italy. A further examination of the implications of the motives leading to participate to a co-design experience is needed.

7. References

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