Partnership, Social Capital and Good Practices among Public, Private and the Third Sector: a Case-Study in Social Cohesion

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This paper presents the results of an investigation focused on the theoretical framework of relational sociology with respect to best practices in social cohesion.

The conceptual framework underlying our investigation and which will be illustrated in this volume is based on three key concepts: 1) partnership; 2) social capital; and 3) good practices.

The term “partnership” refers to a structural configuration characterized by the co-presence of different social subjects 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. The paradigm adopted for our observations explicitly refers to the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, which is understood as the expression of full citizenship for all social actors (state, market, third sector and family).

Social capital is the second key concept that guided both theoretical reflection and empirical analysis. For this concept we have a body of consolidated sociological reflection largely illustrated by empirical evidence gathered from an Italian setting. The relational approach was adopted in order to define the concept. According to this approach, social capital consists of the ability to create cooperative relations and networks based on relations of trust in order to pursue a common good. Within this framework, the spirit of solidarity, relation-centred aid between the service provider and client together with interpersonal trust make the third sector a privileged environment of social capital generation.

The concept of “good practices” has entered the language of social policy, to indicate a concrete benchmark of reference in social intervention evaluation. It evokes an intuitive dimension referring to a concrete experience. This dimension carries a positive value in itself and this orientation inverts the previous perspective based on a deficit model of service evaluation aimed at underlining negative or unsatisfactory aspects. In recent years, we have been witnessing a growing need to base social care interventions on evidence and a public discourse characterised by resort to the principle of excellence.

These concepts, if considered in terms of their inter-connections, allow us to anchor the analysis of an experience of social cohesion to a articulated reflexive itinerary that is quite specific and has rich heuristic potential able to give a good account of the observed complexity without reducing it to rigidly predetermined categories of analysis.

The need to operationalise complex concepts such as partnership, social capital and good practices and to apply them to a specific case-study induced us to consider as particularly important the elaboration of a presentation to the scientific community.

From the methodological point of view, the qualitative investigation conducted enabled us to carry out a case-study aimed at collecting original empirical materials ad hoc.

The case analysed is the Mazzini Arcipelago Project originated in an initiative of 16 public and third sector subjects in a territory situated in a district of the greater metropolitan area of the city of Milan, Italy. This is an historic district of low cost, working class housing, characterized by buildings with courtyards and by closed blocks of flats of four or five storeys facing on to the street. The neighbourhood, known for its high density, low cost housing, was already targeted by urban renewal interventions financed through the “Neighbourhood Contract II” initiative.

The actions in the two-year plan proposal (launched in November, 2006) have to do with three principal intervention areas:
1. the development of a cooperative network shared by educational, aggregate, cultural, social, and assistance entities present and operating it the neighbourhood;

2. the involvement of neighbourhood families and residents, to encourage their active participation in the life of the local community, greater social cohesion, and a wide-spread and capillary presence in the living spaces of the resident population;

3. the experimentation of wide-spread forms of support to families – and especially to the weakest inhabitants – to prevent forms of social exclusion.

The analysis conducted has made possible to decode in an orderly way the crucial passages that guided the implementation of the partnership and identified its hinging points and critical passages. For example, a certain amount of inertia, which in the constitutive moments of partnerships can be a virtue by making it possible to fix a sort of barycentre in the agreements, cannot be a constant characteristic of the formalized relations. Moreover, the objective represented by the development of social capital, from the standpoint of an increase in social cohesion was fostered through family empowerment, which set in motion processes of mobilization not only of manifest but also of latent resources. All of this is possible, in the first place, thanks to a climate of reciprocal trust at the working tables that is able the third sector organizations to mediate differences and to allow conflicts to be managed in a non-destructive manner.

The level of internal coherence turns out to be considerable, understood as the appropriateness of instruments chosen in response to the type of need one is trying to address; behind these practices there are people – professionals -- who desired them and carried them forward with dedication, facing all of the normal difficulties that actions of this type entail for institutions as well for clients.