

The community cooperation as a co-production experience in public utilities provision

An international perspective

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Abstract— In recent years, in many of the so-called advanced Countries, continuous attempts, especially in the provision of public services, have been promoted to introduce new models of public administration governance. In this process, a central aspect is related to the recovery of the users' inclusion: this concept, initially studied with reference to the relationship between individuals and public providers, now is expanded toward the involvement of organizations with specific characteristics, many of which belonging to non-profit organizations (NPOs). The theory we refer to is the co-production theory that, starting from the first studies of the Nobel Prize Elinor Ostrom, is becoming central in the debate on the new relationships amidst State, market and civil society. Coproduction is not only a theoretical topic but is also evidenced by the spread of experiences for new solutions in the production and delivery of public services to the community. Particularly, the paper focuses on a recent Italian experience, named "community cooperative", which is inserted into the tradition of Italian users' co-ops but, at the same time, has unique characteristics. Aim of the paper is to analyze the peculiarities of this phenomenon, initially structured to cope with the depopulation of small towns and the creation of job opportunities, but now also used for the provision of public services. To this end, we will also introduce an international perspective through a comparison with similar experiences in other Countries, in order to highlight commonalities and differences.

Keywords - Coproduction, Community cooperatives, Italy, Non profit organizations

I. Introduction

While the issue of the citizens' inclusion in the management of public services was initially studied with reference to the relationship between individual users and the service provider, today this field includes the involvement of organizations with specific professional capabilities, many of which are part of the non profit sector.

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This practice is highlighted in cases in which efforts are made to go beyond the traditional model of user involvement, and pursue organized forms of inclusion, thus introducing new elements to the classic framework of co-production in public services. This trend is present in a number of international experiences, in France and Britain for example, with the introduction of new types of organizations in the legal system, considered as a prototype of international scope, the Community-Based Enterprise.

Such innovations have also proved influential in Italy, where the establishment of the social enterprise has now been followed by the new phenomenon of community cooperation. This involves cooperatives that operate in legal forms already regulated by the legislature (usually with regard to production and labour cooperatives), which include elements of reference to the local community; these elements express the "social reason" for the organization, which is ultimately related to its ability to make a contribution to the development of the local area. Attempts at participative production involving public services can also be observed as part of this emerging phenomenon.

This paper aims, with an exploratory spirit, to analyse the potential of such cooperatives in co-production experiences, in the public service category with greater technical and economic content, namely public utilities. To this end, the paper begins with the presentation of a conceptual framework regarding the opening up of the production processes involved in such services to citizen-users, in order to highlight the efforts to overcome the conception of the citizen as a simple user, and achieve a vision of the citizen as a member of the local community. In the second part, the cases of the *Société Coopérative d'Intérêt Collectif* (SCIC) and *Community Interest Company* (CIC) will be presented, as international examples of a similar trend. The paper concludes with the study of the Italian Cooperative Community, based on the emerging characteristics of the praxis, and the first literature to examine it. The approach is to verify elements of continuity and innovation with other experiences of co-production, and in particular, those classifiable as Non Profit Utilities (NPU).

II. Co-production as an innovative practice in public utilities provision

The reorganization of public sector and the revision of its administrative methods are central arguments on the agenda of most, if not all, governments in the more advanced countries.

The issue has been heightened in recent years by the effects of the on-going financial and economic crisis, regarding, in particular, the need of reforming the delivery of public services.

Since the 1980s, authentic cultural movements have risen up, and pressed for a profound revision of the old bureaucratized Public Administration. After passing through the managerial season (with reference to New Public Management), albeit in an inconsistent and disorganized manner, today Public Governance can be considered, with its various interpretations and labels, as the great standpoint in the discussion of public sector renewal. Particularly, what is to be noted is the widespread belief about what should qualify the “good government” of “public affairs”, namely a new conception of the relationship with the community, recovering the bi-directionality of the relationship between Public Administration and citizens, who are to be considered not only as a clients, but also as partners [1].

Some Authors expressed this idea [2] as the need to move beyond the concept of citizenship as an entitlement to certain rights (citizenship of entitlement) to one based on the effective ability to make a contribution (citizenship of contribution). In this cultural context, as underlined by a number of sociologists [3], the reference point is a new “collaborative” society, through the rehabilitation of an “old” theme of economic studies, that is the co-production of public services.

The earliest literature on co-production dates back to the 1970s, and the Nobel Prize Elinor Ostrom’s study of urban reform in US cities. The first interpretation describes the phenomenon as “*the process through which inputs used to produced good or service are contributed by individuals who are not “in” the same organization*” [4]. It can be described in a more accomplished manner as “*the mix of activities that both public service agents and citizens contribute to the provision of public services*”. From this perspective, “*the former are involved as professionals, or “regular producers”, while “citizen production” is based on voluntary efforts by individuals and groups to enhance the quality and/or quantity of the services they use*” [5].

A qualifying aspect of Ostrom’s original approach is the active role of the potential recipients of the public service. In this sense, the concept of co-production overlaps with that of user involvement and, more generally, with the theme of civic participation.

In a recent work, Cataldi [6] proposes an analysis of the literature on co-production, identifying two different strands of interpretation:

- according to some Authors [7], the involvement and participation of citizen-users, because of the ontological specificity of the service, would be a necessary condition to ensure the success of the delivery process;
- another school of thought [8] holds that the contribution of consumers would not be an essential element in the technical process of the production/supply of the service, but would have

benefits in terms of efficiency, effectiveness and quality.

In general, two types of positive effect deriving from the application of co-production processes are outlined [9]: improvements in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of the process (due, for example, to improvements in the skills of front-line staff, the increased allocative efficiency of the service, and the increased capacity for technical innovation), and improvements in terms of democratization, with the spread of greater civic responsibility and a wider sense of being part of the community.

It is also noteworthy that over time the concept of co-production has extended to include phases and activities that do not exclusively focus on the technical issues involved in the production and delivery of a service. Osborne and McLaughlin [10] propose a distinction among three different levels of co-production: *co-production stricto sensu*, with reference to contexts in which citizen-users organize themselves to, at least partially, autonomously produce the service; *co-management*, in which the process of production and distribution takes place with the participation of a plurality of (for profit and/or non-profit) public and private organizations; *co-governance*, when inclusive practices are adopted in the formulation of policy decisions and development plans. According to Bovaird [11], genuine co-production experiences can only occur when public officers and users assume the role of co-planners and co-deliverers.

Another consideration is that while in co-production stricto sensu, the user involvement is necessarily of an individual nature, in the two other forms this may occur – and typically happens – with a collective dimension. To this sense, some Authors [12], precisely because of the greater impact at the systematic level, express a preference for collective forms of involvement for citizen-users. Again, the same practice demonstrates an increasingly frequent recourse to established methods of interaction with organized bodies; not coincidentally, Joshi and Moore [13] describe co-production as “*the provision of public services [...] through regular, long term relationships between state agencies and organized groups of citizens, where both make substantial resource contributions*”.

According to Pestoff et al. [14], the inclusion of citizens on an individual basis achieves a lower degree of participation than organized involvement, in which the action is developed collectively, and participation is more direct. Among such organizations, non-profit organizations (NPOs) would be the most effective for the production and provision of welfare services: it is in this light that the involvement of NPOs assumes particular importance.

Although there remains a lack of comprehensive and systematic literature on the benefits of the participation of NPOs in co-production experiences [15], several Authors indicated the reasons why NPOs constitute an optimal partner for the Public Administration [16]. From an operational perspective, the spread of NPOs in co-production experiences has recently been favoured by the simultaneous presence of certain environmental factors, such as the development of the voluntary sector, the aging population, and the emergence of

new social needs, as well as the almost permanent state of financial austerity in western countries. The phenomenon can therefore also be classified in relation to the welfare system in each specific context, and this could be promoted as a factor in the renewal of the existing system. In this sense, Pestoff [17] believes a gradual contraction of the activities of the State is inevitable, as it will be able to configure two different scenarios for the near future: a welfare system, characterized by the predominant presence of private operators, operating according to market logic, and the vision typical of NPM; and a system that promotes the leadership of the Third Sector, implementing the vision of a network and welfare mix associated with NPG.

In this regard, the issue of co-production has so far been analysed by the literature with particular emphasis on services with a social content (personal services, housing, etc.). Much less attention has been paid to the public utilities sector, although some Authors [18] have highlighted the potential of this solution, and the existence of some cases of the so-called Non Profit Utilities. This regards a limited number of experiences, which operate under different legal forms, according to the applicable national legislation, in various sectors of activity (provision of electricity and water services, public transport, etc.), and which are coming to public attention as a result of their potential.

III. Towards a community dimension of co-production: some international experiences

The analysis of the various experiences is showing the existence of cases characterized by an explicit reference to the territorial community, this latter considered as the “real” co-producer and recipient of the service. To this sense, the citizen/user is just one of the involved subjects, together with institutions, entrepreneurs, associations belonging to the territory. The idea is that to satisfy the needs of the citizen/user it is necessary to use optimally the local resources through the synergies created by different local actors.

These peculiarities have recently converged to an organizational model [19] called Community-Based Enterprise (CBE). Its origin is related (at least initially) to the poorest and underdeveloped areas of the world to allow a growth process through the direct involvement of the population; then the idea has spread also concerning the areas more economically advanced. The main characteristics of CBE can be identified in the centrality of the community (as a homogeneous group of subjects in terms of territory and culture), in a non-profit and multi-stakeholder structure, with an economic and social purpose focused on the development of the territory in which the organization operates [20].

In France and in Great Britain, some recent laws seems to indicate, also, that these kind of organizations can be used as a tool to convey good practice of co-production of public services, for the development of the entire community.

The *Société Coopérative d'Intérêt Collectif* (SCIC) is a French cooperative (Loi n. 2001/624) not governed by a new legal status, but characterized by an adaptation of the French traditional law on cooperatives. The main purpose of the SCIC is to create synergies between different stakeholders (employees, volunteers, members, communities, associations, etc.) through the production of goods and services to satisfy the collective needs of a territory: the article 3 of the Decret n. 2002-240 describes the social utility of a SCIC, stated that «il faut tenir compte notamment de la contribution que celle-ci apporte à des besoins émergents ou non satisfaits, à l'insertion sociale et professionnelle, au développement de la cohésion sociale, ainsi qu'à l'accessibilité aux biens et aux services». SCIC can generally be divided into two broad categories [21]: personal services and proximity services, environment and related activities. The legal forms are the company limited by guarantee (CLG) or company limited by shares (CLS) with variable capital and they are both characterized by the non-distribution constraint. The audit activity by public authorities is satisfied by the obligation, for every SCIC, to renew the authorization to operate and to review its activities every five years. The key characteristics of this organization are the absence of a formal legal status, the obligation to create a multistakeholder governance, the social purpose, and the possibility to receive funds from both the public and the private sector [22]. As regards, in particular, the multistakeholder structure, the law provides that the board members are required to be composed by a representative of all stakeholders, with particular attention to employees and users, whose presence is mandatory even in the members' structure. Furthermore, no category of stakeholders may have more than 50% and less than 10% of the capital (the exception is for public institutions, which can not in any case hold more than 20%). There are several examples of SCIC (136 units in 2011), the activity of which may relate to the fight against the depopulation of rural areas and the creation of jobs, as in the case of “Champ Commun”, created in 2009 in Augan, in northern France, that manages, through the members, a local food shop, a bar and other areas for the initiatives of its inhabitants (about 1,400). The cooperative also manages a hostel and some services especially for the elderly, such as home delivery shopping. In other cases, instead, the SCIC activity may concern more “industrial” service [23]: “Enercoop”, is a SCIC that provides renewable energy; “Bois Bocage Énergie”, “Bois Énergies Locales” and “Haute Mayenne Bois Énergie” are three SCIC that have in common the creation of a system to reuse wood for heating. Other sectors are public transport, waste management, car sharing. In summary, the peculiarity of the SCIC is essentially to “condense”, around the same project, interests and resources of persons who, for various reasons, are tied to a community, through a shared management and results.

A similar phenomenon is that of the *Community Interest Company* (CIC), an British organization belonging to the *genus* of companies [24] introduced in 2005. As the SCIC, also in this case there is not a unique juridical form (they may be qualified as CLG, CLS, or Public Limited Company - PLC)

to ensure organizational flexibility, but it is possible to find two basic characteristics.

- *The community interest test.* The law provides that it is necessary, to acquire and maintain the legal status of CIC, that the activity is carried out for the community interests («*an organisation satisfies the community interest test if a reasonable person might consider that it carries on its activities for the benefit of the community or a section of the community*» [25].
- *The asset lock.* Another obligation concerns the permanent ban to alienate the CIC's assets (including profits, although in the case of the CLS is possible a profits distribution within certain specified limits) except for those transferred from another entity with an asset lock or those explicitly directed to the benefit of the community.

The purpose of CIC is to establish a new form of social enterprise, in specific sectors like child care, social housing, and public transport, although, as shown by a recent study [26] CIC were involved in urban regeneration processes as part of the community enterprises. In particular, this study focuses on the analysis of some social enterprises, including the Community Interest Enterprises, characterized by areas of intervention related to the satisfaction of the needs of specific local communities. These experiences are related to the concept of sustainability, for their role in the increase of wealth, the growth of job opportunities in a specific area and of the environmental quality through the recovery of abandoned buildings. About the public utilities sector, among the experiences presented on the site of the CIC Regulator (www.bis.gov.uk/CICREGULATOR), it is noteworthy the case of "Community Energy Solution" (CES), a CIC that provides, in marginal areas, the delivery of heating services, the structuring of systems of renewable energy and the improving of energy efficiency. CES works closely with the Department of Energy and Climate Change and other local agencies.

IV. The Italian community cooperatives

The emphasis on the community dimension in the delivery of public services is now also affecting Italy with the creation of the community cooperation, which is experiencing its first manifestations. The idea of the community cooperative is related to areas with a strong territorial identity with the aim to satisfy various needs (such as to face the depopulation of small towns, to create new job opportunities, to protect particular environmental heritages) and other strategic activities for the local economies (agriculture, local crafts, tourism).

At present, there are in Italy different experiences, most of them with the same aim to preserve the cultural identity of the areas in which they develop. These are some examples of Italian community cooperatives (alongside the entire country):

- "I briganti di Cerreto", a coop created in 2003 to redevelop the local economy by promoting tourism-related projects, by organizing educational courses on environmental issues, excursions and gastronomic visits;
- "Il miglio", founded in 2010 to manage an old mill, with the intention of enhancing and promoting local tourism and recovering the craft traditions;
- "Jemma", founded in 2012 with the aim to promote some local food excellence;
- "Oltrevalle", created in 2012 by three inhabitants in order to redevelop and enhance the local activities through the organization of a community tourism, management of housing, promotion of local products;
- "Melpignano Comunità Cooperativa", founded in 2011 in order to install and manage photovoltaic systems on the roofs of the inhabitants' houses, using the production for the needs of users and reselling the surplus on the market. It is a sort of multi-utilities company [27] since it also can provide gas fuels and water and network services.

These experiences have a great variety of activities; it is possible, however, to find a convergence since their purpose is "pursued through the production of goods and services to hack a stable fundamental aspects of the quality of social and economic life. Does not matter so much, therefore, the type of the cooperative [...] or the type of activities [...], but the purpose of improving the conditions and to enhance the community, also promoting job opportunities especially for young people" [28].

The community cooperative does not constitute a new "legal status", but a qualification that characterizes organization and governance of these experiences (which are structured anyway as cooperatives) created for the satisfaction of specific needs to enhance the community in which they operate. Unlike French SCIC and British CIC, therefore, there is not "formalized rules"; even in the absence of legal regulation, however, it is possible to identify certain characteristics of these phenomena:

- *Non profit nature.* Every experience has, as main purpose, to bring, through the activity, benefits to the community. This targeted is reached mainly through the reinvestment of the wealth produced in the enhancement of those activities.
- *Territorial marginality.* Localism is, on the one hand, an instrument to cope with market and government failures, offering goods and services not provided by the traditional welfare system, and, on the other, a way through which the principle of horizontal subsidiarity can be realized [29]. This feature is also reflected in a limited size of the company and in activities focused on the valorization of territorial resources and the recovery of local traditions.
- *Cultural and territorial identity.* All the experiences have a strong link with the territory and a sense of belonging of the population that often constitute the real driving force of the cooperative: this leads us to

consider the community cooperative as physiological multistakeholder model. Particularly, in these realities it can be emphasized a participatory and inclusive management, allowing the members/citizens (who are also users and workers) to actively collaborate.

v. The community cooperation as a co-production experience in public utilities provision

The “rediscovery” of the concept of co-production as an alternative and, in some ways, innovative way to manage public utilities has introduced a new benchmark by which analyze the relationship between citizens and institutions. The transition from a conception of “passive” user (mere recipient of the service) to an another in which the user is considered as a protagonist of the delivery process also impacts on the quality of the service provided, that is improved due to the sharing of the expectations of the beneficiaries [30].

To this sense, it is noteworthy that it would be desirable to overcome the logic of an individual involvement preferring instead, as partners of the public institutions, structured organizations, specifically those belonging to the non-profit sector. New forms of relationship between public and private are thus envisaged, different from the traditional public interventions or the contracting out models.

In this regard, the experiences of community cooperatives seem to confirm similar potential: they represent the attempt to build, through a dialectical and collaborative exchange, a different relationship between civil society and public sector. In particular, all these phenomena have in common some basic characteristics: presence of a multi-stakeholder governance, localism and territorial identity, focus on the community dimension of the activity.

Generally, the involvement of different stakeholders in the decision-making systems is based on the set of organizational practices able to involve individuals who do not have formal power of control [31]. This model is particularly suitable for NPOs, particularly for services which require a process of continuous interaction, because of the positive impact on the quality of the output. Several Authors [32] agree to associate inclusive forms of government with organizational advantages (enhancement of dialogue process and problem solving attitude, better circulation of information) and organizational performance. This structure would further protect the different categories of stakeholders from opportunistic behaviour related to information asymmetries, and the sharing of information would allow to optimize the system of controls on their activities.

In all cases of community cooperation, also emerges the strong local presence and the small size of the activity. This peculiarity, if on one side could be considered a limitation to the possibilities of the development of these phenomena, tied to the delivery of services in marginal and rural areas, on the other could be a strong point precisely in relation to the link with the territory.

The most interesting element (in our opinion an evolution of the concept of the single organization as “co-producer”) is constituted by the focus on the community aspect of activity. In the examined experiences, the emphasis on the community is an important cultural transition: there is a different “enterprise boundary” which involves and brings together all the parties that belong to a specific territorial context, strengthening the potential of the collaborative processes: in particular, it is interesting the transition from a single to a “collective” user. The community, also through its actors, is the owner of the enterprise and the last recipient of the activity through the wealth obtained. The economic result is only a part of the general purpose; the social and environmental aspects have the same importance (through the creation of job opportunities and new economic activities).

In other words, the community cooperative could be a “germ” of a new way of understanding the collaborative processes of public utilities provision. These cases highlight the passage from a “categorical” to a “geographical” conception of stakeholders; this new accent impacts in terms of organization (they are structures “ontologically” with processes of multistakeholder governance), of reporting (in the accountability processes the figure of the “excluded” does not exist), and of efficiency of the service provided (better ability to respond to the needs of users).

It is also to be noted that the so-called “hard services” are closely linked to the territory where they are provided (for example the public transport network and waste collection). In this sense it is possible to identify, in the community enterprises, not just an operative deliverer of the service, but a partner that can assist the government in regulation and policy making (such as co-management and co-governance experiences).

VI. Conclusions

The preceding reflections have highlighted the need to support the traditional ways of delivering public utilities with alternative forms capable to meet the users’ expectations, through also innovative ways of inclusion. The themes of civic participation and of co-production aim to emphasize the role of the citizen as a privileged interlocutor of public administration in the management and delivery of public services. In particular, now the main focus has shifted from the user as an individual towards the involvement of organizations with specific skills (most of which NPOs).

The case analysis seems to confirm this direction: the international experiences show multiple forms of shared management of public utilities. Particularly, the fundamental aspect is the community as a fulcrum around which to rotate all the activity and, at the same time, the final recipient of the enterprise wealth: this could represent an “evolution” of the traditional idea of NPO and, in particular, of social enterprise. The inclusive structure of these organizations, also due to the presence of a multi-stakeholder governance, permits the introduction of “voice” mechanisms, legitimizing the organization itself in the relationship with public institutions.

These peculiarities can also be found in the experiences of community cooperation, a new “bottom-up” model (there is, in fact, no legal formalization) where is highlighted the attempt to reestablish a “community” meaning to the management of certain public utilities.

Although currently most of the experiences of Italian community cooperation are mainly aimed at the enhancement of marginal territories through the creation of job opportunities and urban regeneration activities, their characteristics indicate positive applications in the field public utilities. It is important, in fact, that we continue to analyze these kind of experiences in order to find best practices as a stand point for the creation of a network of dialogue among various subjects.

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