Template for the "Handbook of managed networks" country cases (D.T 1.3.2.)

Partner level input from partner organizations and PPs´ expectations towards Handbook

Country case Italy

By Central European Initiative

1.The defined networking needs and opportunities in the partner country or region

Concerning needs analysis carried out in the Italian regions involved, there are several issues related to networking, both in terms of structure and in terms of activities. Focusing on potential role of Networks and Consortia, the main results are related to:
- To foster strategic planning approach and practices, because SEs are focused on daily work;
- To strengthen the capacity to apply to different funding instruments, like EU funds and other potential funds;
- To promote specific and targeted training modules;
- To support communication to different stakeholders' groups;
- To promote connectivity and relationships, both material and immaterial;
- To highlight opportunities given by networks, at community, local and international levels.

A key point is to promote social entrepreneurship as cultural approach and not just to support existing social enterprises, because the support to potential social entrepreneurs is emerging as a crucial aspect for local development and social inclusion.

In this framework the link with local communities is fundamental. The local community should be considered both an objective and a productive factor for the social enterprises. This means the involvement of a multiplicity of actors and process of co-creation for the strategic vision building.

There is the need to set different levels of network, connecting together digital and physical communities, that concerns the formation and functionality of networks: the means and aims of the entrepreneurial action are shared with the stakeholders.

The local community should be taken into account also a dimension of enterprise, in promoting community or participatory enterprises through a kind of shared governance of the enterprise and the local area.

An issue concerns the sustainability of networks, in regard to which the more established social enterprises networks sometimes need too much money to work. Therefore it is important to focus on organisational processes and management practices which can respond to complex needs.

Other problems and needs are:

- Lack of connection between the social cooperatives and the territory to which they belong. This was confirmed by a study on the social impact carried out by Eurics in 2016 which demonstrated there is little interaction with the local community even though it is very important to be conscious of the needs of the territory/community and understand how to meet such needs.

- Networking is difficult and often seen as a waste of time since there are more cogent problems to solve; local networks are therefore weak and conflicted and the existing resources suffer a lack of synergy.

- Training activities are a problem, as well as the lack of entrepreneurial skills. Such activities should be considered also in a form of tutoring/mentoring.

- Problems in interfacing with the public administration (often representing the only customer). Indeed social cooperatives are currently facing a reduction in the funds they receive despite more and more demanding agreements with public bodies.

- Marginality is a weakness but could be also a resource since it is easier to experiment in marginal areas. To turn marginality into a resource it is necessary to improve both the connection and relationship with the other stakeholders. Transformative energy is needed to overcome connection problems that are actually problems in networking and experimenting and not just problems of geographical accessibility. The social sector should be more receptive, but it is often bound to traditional and non-innovative partnerships.

- The size of social cooperatives is a critical point since there is fierce competition in this sector, especially with big cooperatives (not rooted in the territory) and for-profit businesses. A cultural change is the first step necessary to make all involved understand the value of and the advantages resulting from local companies that are interested - also economically - in the local development of the territory. At the same time social enterprises need to understand the value of a local commitment and welcome it.

- There is a need for communication and connections. With reference to these needs, the problems concerning internet connectivity faced every day by marginal territories are serious and need to be overcome. It is necessary to work on several aspects of communication. Indeed, mastering communication is another critical point for the social enterprises currently not capable of or that have no time/money to make themselves known around the world. Telling new generations about the opportunities of social entrepreneurship, for example, is fundamental.

- Marginality also results in a sort of digital divide: the marginal areas – which are sparsely populated – need to communicate and therefore need high performing communication networks to cover big distances and facilitate alliances. Alliances are very important in

marginal areas and need to be carefully conceived, implemented and maintained. Nowadays a poor internet connection is detrimental and steps must be taken to improve this issue.

- There is the need of a new social pact involving different parties – citizens, administrators and organisations – should be reaffirmed. The changes that occurred in the social and economic fabric have not been properly governed and quite often administrators failed to understand the effects of such changes and their importance. A pact between the local actors is required to uncover new solutions.

- There is a need for experts of social entrepreneurship capable of changing the present idea of social enterprise. They should train administrators and enterprises starting with the concept of community.

- There is a need for facilitators capable of connecting actors and parties from different territories.

- There is a need for specific, on-going and constantly updated training for social entrepreneurs which presents planning skills at the core of the process.

- There is a need for places (virtual or physical) to think and exchange ideas about collaboration, to get out of the rut of doing what has always been done and to learn to foresee and then deliver on what is needed.

- It is necessary to support joint micro-projects too, since it could become a sort of paradigm for local communities, and therefore it is necessary to encourage concrete actions to promote and push through wider concepts.

- The network, intended both as the internet and the connections within and outside of the social enterprise, is a key factor for the future of social enterprises in mountain areas. Networks need to be built: between people and ideas first, then between cooperatives.

2. Already existing networks and good practices

Networking among cooperatives has always been a key aspect of the cooperative movement in Italy.

There are two main forms:
- The first type of network is represented by umbrella organisations at national level, having provincial or local agencies. The main objective is advocacy, lobbying, policy innovation: these groups represent the co-operatives instances in the social or political arena. Italian cooperatives are represented by:
  1. Confcooperative – Italian Cooperative Confederation.
  2. Legacoop – National Cooperative League.
  3. Italian National Cooperative Union.
  4. A.G.C.I. - General Association of Italian Cooperatives.

- Consortia (second level organizations traditionally composed of the cooperatives operating in a specific sectors) are the second type of network. Accordingly, their service are focused to meet specific needs in retailing, banking, agro-industry sector and so on, to exploit economies of scale, to achieve collective marketing and trading goals and to have access to skills and human capital not available within the single co-ops.

An example of networking activity is that provided by Trentino Federation of cooperation which is the organisation in charge of representing, supporting and supervise the growth of the co-operation movement in the province of Trento. The Federation combines a mix of hard and soft policies. Hard policies deal mainly with the financing of new co-operatives or strategic initiatives for the cooperation. Soft policies focus on cooperative values, organisational aspects, training, auditing and consultancy. The activities are designed to oversee member co-operatives and reinforce their entrepreneurial structure.

Networks do not only increase co-operator's influence but they also bring additional skills, knowledge, and information to the co-operatives which may lead to better governance and performance improvements.

The umbrella organisations already existing in Italy, usually perform the following tasks:

- To support and promote cooperation among members and cooperation activities,
- To provide services for its members;
- To disseminate the culture of cooperation, also through the organisation of seminars or projects in schools;
- To act as spokesperson for the needs and interests of cooperatives within the framework of local institutions and at a political level;
- promoting the start-up of new social cooperatives;
- representing the local needs and requests of social cooperatives;
- planning and implementing training and projects for its members;
- supporting – through the dissemination of studies, plans and analyses - the spreading of cooperation activities based on values as ethic and solidarity.

Other good practices that have been presented in the reports, put networking as a key element to the following activities:
- To improve the processes of labour and business inclusion;
- To set-up a supply chain for the whole social inclusion and care processes for vulnerable people, from social and health care services management to educational services, to training, to job placement;
- To increase the level of quality in the pathways of job placement, promoting and supporting the adoption of monitoring and evaluation tools;
- To develop networks that promote the improvement of the local cooperative system, supporting the best experiences of social enterprise in innovative projects and services.
- To implement activities and services to support the business development of social cooperatives also through mutual help and exchange mechanisms among the associated cooperatives;
- To promote cross-sectoral and joint training initiatives among the members in order to improve skills and professional competences;
- To support welfare actions that are able to regenerate available resources, empowering people in order to increase the impact of social policy interventions for the benefit of the whole community;
- to create relationships based on trust both with internal and external interlocutors, activating "free" resources such as volunteer members and non-members
- Co- planning between actors belonging to the third sector, the private sector and institutions;
- to help members to interpret socio-cultural, economic and political changes
- to develop policies and strategies with cooperative members and territorial actors and to spread the vision, the interests and the needs of local communities in order to support a social, cultural and political development;

- to work as consultancy platform, like a network of experts, more than a fix structure, and in this way the network can go on and be financially sustainable;
- to promote appropriate organizational and business management tools to improve the performance;
- to strengthen relationships with financial and development bodies;
- to promote innovation, especially at the organizational level, constantly looking for the best matching of the needs of the members and the skills / abilities;
- to strengthen the integration of the services provided by the consortium members in order to be increasingly more effective in its activities;
- to encourage the introduction of innovative processes and technologies to improve the performance in terms of time and cost while ensuring a better social and environmental impact;

These networks should also guarantee:

→ the function of "general contractor" for the participation of their members in procurements; this could be an added value that permits to members to be more competitive on tenders, providing adequate knowledge and support in business relations (for example, for signing the contract, identifying the responsible representative, supervising the activity carried out and resolving any disputes or disservices);

→ Supervision and coordination activities for specific sectors of intervention, especially in highly complex contracts / services which require high and uniform standards of service provision;

→ The coordination of cross-sectoral training courses, starting from participatory assessment of training needs of the members of the network. A shared planning of courses could be relevant especially for the training aimed at providing medium-high skills, that permit to improve effectiveness and efficiency of management in the social enterprise.

3.Further activities of networking

The approach that should be further developed is to considered marginal areas – like mountains – and local communities as habitats of development and social innovation to promote initiatives, governance models and development processes that are socially innovative from a territorial point of view. Networks should promote new local pacts, that promote new forms of cooperation between local actors.
In this framework social enterprises are key actors of local development, which provides potential for a new vision and additional elements compared to traditional approaches

It widens the structure of a local economy and labour market by addressing unmet needs and producing new/different goods and services, but it also develops the focus of the local development process tackling barriers to demand creation and availability of supply, and the services and labour market needs of disadvantaged groups and communities.
This would be possible through the establishment of fruitful relations with other local actors, from citizens, to institutions, to economic actors, to finance organizations, in order to implement new partnerships, also with a view to bringing about innovative welfare models at the community level

Considering the mountain areas where the Italian pilot action will be implemented, there is a need for taking a joint, cultural action to pass the concept of "mountainess" on, encompassing everything: exertion, difficulties, resources and costs different from those of other territories. The networking process too shall be different: a concept turning into a policy for a territory that needs new tools to

become competitive again. The promotion of this new approach can make possible the idea of mountain and marginal areas as a place where to live and work ("first choice").

Innovative networking activities can promote a new vision of marginal areas that address four issues defined by four key words (from INNOVALP Fair 2017, where a SENTINEL meeting was organised by CEI) :

- "REBELLION", in the sense to de-structure traditional way of thinking, to support new ideas against negative trends and attitude, to promote social innovation through nonconformity approach, to support potential new models of business and community organization, to favour a new storytelling: mountain as a first choice (and a second life);

- "RESOURCEFULNESS", that put innovation as key factor, creating new partnerships to address emerging needs, with new skills and expertise, to set networks as link among innovative experiences, to promote services for business and young citizens, that can enhance attractiveness also with the involvement of new actors (i.e. research centres);

- "TALENT", that means to promote scouting initiatives to support new ideas, new educational models and new organization of schools for skills empowerment, to promote social inclusion and local development also supporting students and families;

- "COMMUNITY" that recognize that social cohesion is a crucial dimension to make ses key actors for local development in marginal areas, strengthening identity, understanding change and emerging needs, creating opportunities for social inclusion and social mobility, that can promote leadership and participation.

Social enterprises should be linked to local communities keeping networks and relations as key strategy. Networking should be promoted as a methodology for interventions and relations as key investment.
SEs needs facilitators for local networks supporting, that can be implemented by SEs at local level through participatory and bottom-up approach at community level, to activate strategic partnerships with a territorial scope. The direct beneficiaries are SEs and indirect beneficiaries are stakehoders and citizens of local communities. This activity should have long-term perspective also thanks to the activitiation of different sources of funding.

It is crucial to support social enterprises but even more important to promote social entrepreneurship as a cultural vision. Social enterprises can be node of networks for local development, that can guarantee accessibility (to social services, to education, to transport,...). Ssocial enterprises can act as facilitator and mentor, and they need facilitators to develop participatory processes for co-creation and co-planning at local level, and evaluation of social impact to strengthen link to local community.

Multidimensional approach for marginal areas should be promoted to avoid specialization and to develop capacity to give complex answers beacuse addressing one single need cannot be the basis to develop entrepreneurship in marginal areas (i.e. social enterprises for: business, job opportunities, labour inclusion, different productions or services, income, development, social inclusion).

The target groups are people working in umbrella organisations, in existing netwroks and consortia, but also associations and support organisations. Bebeficiaries would be people working in SEs in roles connected to strategic planning and innovation.

Key Factors Enabling or Hampering SE networking activities in Trentino Region

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
• The model of the Social Economy in Trentino attract delegation to come and visit the region as example of social economy district. • Regional innovation ecosystem (made of research institute, incubators, Technology transfer bodies, start-up...) enabling a constant cooperative and networking activity	• Scarce attitude to go international • High dependence on public policies and resources
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
• Presence of a dedicated Office in Bruxelles both of the Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione which ensure a European presence and a constant connection with other international offices and institutions • European projects are relevant opportunities to enlarge the scope of the business of national/regional enterprises and to enrich their knowledge • International delegations can open opportunities for developing Agreements, enlarging markets and establishing stronger connections among foreign countries	• Difficulties for small realities to access international networks and bigger players at EU level

Key Factors Enabling or Hampering SE networking activities in Carnia and Cadore areas

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
- Increase of Social economy as a good practice for local development. - Increase of networking culture. - Increase in the relevance of the networks for the Social enterprises/cooperatives . - Increase in ICT application. - EU projects for social economy.	- Social cooperatives organisation. - Social entrepreneurship skills.
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
- Develop of new profiles of entrepreneurs. - Strengthening social cooperative role in local development - Enlargement and diversification of social cooperative production and/or productive cycle (Complementary approach).	- Costs of networking initiatives: who pay for what? - Are existing organisation able to play as network?