The Role of Networks in Local Governance

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INTRODUCTION

In this historical phase in various European countries, we are assisting to a redefinition of the competencies among different level of governments; this decentralization involves a redistribution of power, authority and monetary resources towards lower level of government implying so new arrangements in the relationship between these different authority structures (Haveri 2006). This process defines a framework characterized by a high dispersion of authority and competencies which are fragmented among these various levels around which the governance issues are organized, determining so that arrangements of power, competencies and relationships that is called multilevel governance (Hooghe and Marks 2003; van Popering-Verkerk and van Buuren 2016).

The devolution of powers, authority and resources which is at the base of the multilevel model, feed the amplification of fragmentation that is a distinctive feature of new governance systems; an unavoidable produced by the need to foster and improve specialization and bring services production/supply as close as possible to citizens (Peters 1998; Hooghe and Marks 2003; van Popering-Verkerk and van Buuren 2016).

As a result of this state of affairs, the great challenge that local governance is facing at the moment is the quest for coordination and cooperation between and within governance levels and among different actors (Peters 1998), otherwise every effort to realize a more efficient and effective governance model could be useless (van Popering-Verkerk and van Buuren 2016).

If we take in consideration, for example, the production of public services at the local level, we can appreciate that inter-municipal co-operation and interaction networks are becoming more relevant (Haveri 2006; Klok et al. 2018; Previtali and Salvati 2018), requesting the effort to foster new organizational models and instruments for coordination.

These networks which can represent different levels of government and/or different actors within the same territory, may be characterized by the simultaneous presence of different interests, power asymmetries, conditions of interdependence and organizational differences. Such a concept defines an organizational innovation that implies for public (local governments, public administration) and private actors (citizens, associations, profit and non-profit organizations) both challenges and opportunities.

The broader aim of the chapter is to identify some of the main features that characterize these networks, which are their goals in the framework of the occurring changes to local governance, trying to sketch which is their role and the opportunities connected to this organizational innovation for public administration and the implications for the connection between p.a. and social actors, as it is well represented by a particular experience of governance network like the one of the inter-municipal cooperation.

BACKGROUND

The Governance Concept: a Useful Tool to Understand Networks' Functioning?

The scientific debate on network cannot be totally disconnected from the one on governance, a field of research that has become extremely popular in the last decades, in particular in its stream of research connected to the New Public Management's approach that, briefly said, was based on the strong assumption of a reduction of the Government and public sector's role in services provision (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000; Klijn 2008; Klijn and Koppenjan 2012).

The most known definition of governance is the one provided by Rhodes (1996) that defines it as a system of self-organizing and inter-organizational networks which has changed the old hierarchical bureaucratic model of power and authority centralization typical of the modern state. The adoption of informal practices and organizational provisions by the private sector is characterizing the new governance model that stresses the role of multiple relationships between public and private actors. Such an organizational perspective allows to understand the changing process in governing and policy making, with new arenas in which policies are defined/implemented and multiple actors within them that can contribute to their definition and implementation (Montin 2000). Relevant is the emphasis posed on processes rather than on structure and on the diffusion and fragmentation of power and authority.

Following the literature review on governance made by Klijn (2008, 507-508) four strands characterize this field of studies:

1. governance as corporate governance which refers to the function of public administration;
2. governance as new public management or market governance, which is focused on the analysis of performances and implementation;
3. governance as multilevel governance pertaining the study of networks across various levels;
4. governance as network governance that focus on the interaction between different organizations within a complex pattern of (multitier) relationships.

Considering the main features of governance like the presence of both informal and formal relationships, involvement of both public and private actors, multiple connections between actors, seems difficult to consider it not strictly related to the network model, which is the direct product of dynamic processes and continuative interactions among actors (Klijn 1996; Klijn and Koppenjaa 2000; Verveij et al. 2013).

As wisely pointed out by Klijn (2000; Klijn and Koppenjan 2012) it is not necessary to create a distinction between governance and governance networks because the first is an ongoing process that happen within the "boundaries" created by the governance networks. In fact they are both defined as the "public policy making and implementation through a web of relationships between government, business and civil society" (Klijn 2000, 511). What emerges from the connection between the concepts of governance and networks is the fact that networks are a specific arrangement of interdependencies and relationships between actors that allows governance to deploy its self-steering and self-organizing capacity (Klijn and Koppenjan 2012).

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