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**Local partnership as a new mode of governance:  
a framework for analysis**

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## 1. Introduction\*

Over the past years, partnership has become a very fashionable word in both political and academic discourses. Partnership analysis has been primarily connected to the diffusion of what has been labelled “collaborative discourse” [Clarence and Painter 1998; Glendinning *et al.* 2002] which emphasises the advantages of social regulation patterns based on a broader inclusion of social and political actors or focuses on the more systematic link between national/public authorities and the “stakeholding society” [Geddes 1998].

The ‘partnership solution’ has rapidly and broadly been diffused as a common strategy to deal with issues related to socio-economic governance at various levels of government: international, supranational, national and subnational. International institutions such as the OECD, the World Bank and the UNESCO have increasingly made policy recommendations aimed at promoting horizontal cooperation among different social and political actors [OECD 2001 and 2004; World Bank 2004; Unesco 1998]. Also at the supranational level, in particular at the UE level, what has been called a “partnership orthodoxy” [Geddes 2000] has developed in connection to specific domains such as regional development, environment and social inclusion policies [Hooghe 1996; Benz and Eberlein 1999]. At the national level, among other examples<sup>1</sup>, the United Kingdom is an interesting case with regards to national partnership initiatives: the Blair government explicitly promoted a ‘partnership culture’ as a ‘third way’, different from more traditional hierarchical regulatory patterns based on the exclusive role played by public authorities or ‘quasi-market’ contractual forms of regulation [Glendinning *et al.* 2002; Bevir 2002]. Finally, at the subnational level a good example is the Italian case where, during the second half of the ‘90s, many forms of partnerships took place at both regional and sub-regional levels, involving not only local governments, but also other local societal interests, with the aim to tackle multidimensional issues such as limited local development growth. In several cases, a key role in the creation of such partnerships was played by local public actors who tried, successfully, to mobilise private resources and to make traditionally public – and somewhat closed – decision-making processes more inclusive. In sum, partnership experiences have acquired great interest over the past fifteen years at various levels of government, making its study particularly relevant for both public management and political science scholars.

The aim of this article is to present a framework for the analysis of local partnerships for local development studies. In particular, our attention will be devoted to one specific aspect of these cooperative experiences, i.e. their consolidation as new modes of socio-economic governance at the local level. Therefore, we will address three main questions:

1. How can partnership consolidation be conceptualised?
  2. What are the internal dynamics which characterize partnership evolution and what are the main factors that have affected it?
  3. What are the elements of consolidated partnerships than can be labelled as new modes of socio-economic governance?
2. Local partnerships: a new tool for territorial governance

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\* The article has been jointly discussed and designed by the authors. Paolo Graziano wrote section I and IV; Patrik Vesan sections II and III.

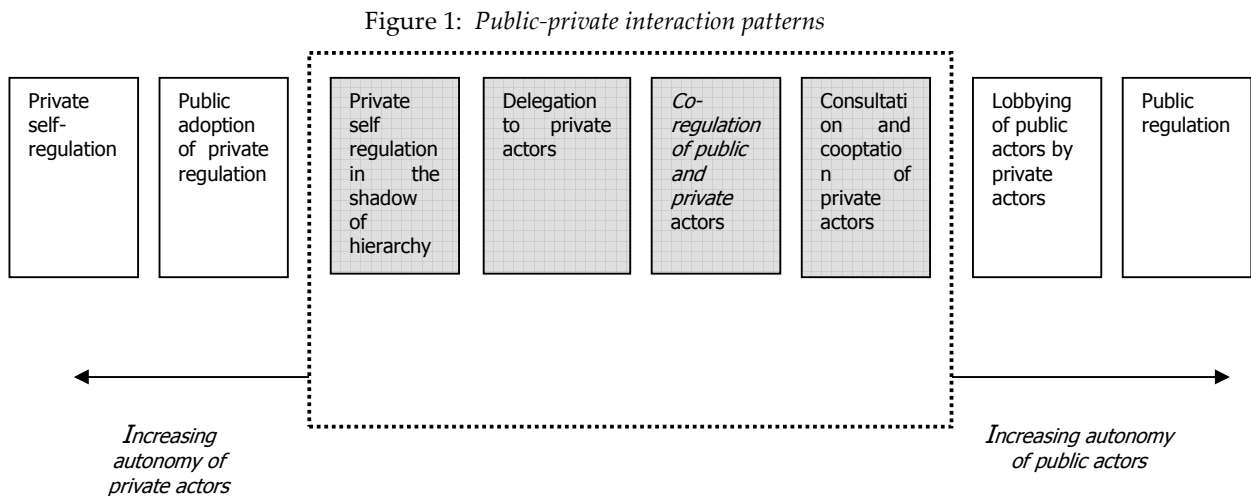
<sup>1</sup> See Walzer and Jacobs [1998]; Osborne [2000].

## 2. Local partnerships: a new tool for territorial governance

### 2.1. Towards a working definition

In many European states during the 1990s public-private partnerships were increasingly referred to as good examples of innovative institutional arrangements aimed at territorial and socio-economic development. In numerous urban and regional policies, co-operation between public and private actors has become a new common pattern for local development policies. Nevertheless, it is quite difficult to find in the literature a shared definition of what a public-private partnership is: in other words, the specific features of such agreements remain somewhat unclear. In general, partnership is a term used to characterize every kind of cooperation involving public and/or private actors operating at the same level of government (horizontal partnership) or at various levels of government (vertical partnership). The partnership goal varies according to both the specific policy domain (environment, local development, etc.) and the policy phase (agenda setting, formulation, implementation, etc.) involved. In order to delimit and clearly specify the object of our article, we will focus on a specific form of partnership – the cooperative agreements among local public and private actors aimed at promoting local territorial development – and review some of the main definitions which can be found in the literature.

The first promising definition is provided by Borzel and Risse [2005] on public-private partnership in the international policy arena. The two authors conceptualise the public-private relationships on a continuum (see Figure 1) going from total autonomy of private actors (*private self-regulation*) to total autonomy of public actors (*public regulation*). Partnership configurations will be located somewhere in the middle and will include a) private self-regulation in the shadow of hierarchy; b) delegation to private actors; c) co-regulation of public and private actors; d) consultation and cooptation of private actors.



Source: Boerzel and Risse, 2005, p. 200

The above distinction highlights that partnerships should be conceptually separated from other forms of interaction which do not set up a direct and explicit cooperation between public and private actors. Nevertheless, although useful, the above mentioned definition

is too ample. In fact, if we follow the cooperation types indicated by Borzel and Risse, a partnership for local development will include very different experiences such as contracting-out relationships for public services management or consultations between public authorities and social partners. Furthermore, no specific attention is devoted to the specific role and participation mechanisms of the various actors involved, particularly at the local level. Finally, we also need specify the actors' involvement during the various decision-making phases. Therefore, further features of a partnership have to be identified in order to better clarify our object of research.

A first attempt can be made looking more specifically at the literature on local development partnerships. A relevant definition was adopted by a EU Regulation at the end of the '1980s, when a radical reform of cohesion policy took place: in the 1988 Regulation text, partnership is defined as "a close consultation between the Commission, the Member State and the competent authorities designated by the latter at national, regional, local or other level, with each party as a partner in pursuit of a common goal" (Council Regulation 4253/1988). The main focus of this definition is on vertical partnership among various institutional actors. A second more ample definition is provided implicitly by US and UK policies or explicitly by scholars focusing on the horizontal nature of partnerships among local public and private actors. For example, Harding [1990, 110] defines partnership as "any action which relies on the agreement of actors in the public and private sectors and which also contributes in some way to improving the urban economy and quality of life". Bailey *et al.* [1995, 27] assumes that partnership must involve "the mobilisation of a coalition of interests drawn from more than one sector in order to prepare and oversee an agreed strategy for regeneration of a defined area". The problem of these definitions is that partnerships are described as general forms of cooperation established among public authorities and private organisations, without clearly identifying their specific features. In other words, their conceptual delimitation still appears too vague. A more helpful contribution can be derived from a policy-oriented research work carried out by the UK Audit Commission<sup>2</sup>. In a report on local cooperative experiences, the Audit Commission defines partnership as a "joint working arrangement" and it provides a "check list" of their main features: partners are (a) independent bodies; (b) which agree to cooperate to achieve a common goal; (c) create a new organisational structure or process to achieve this goal; (d) plan and implement a joint programme; (e) share relevant information, risks and rewards" [Audit Commission 1998, 8].

The above mentioned features are particularly valuable in order to provide a better focused general definition of a partnership as a formalised cooperation mode among public and private actors which involves co-regulation processes, i.e. the co-management of the policy-making process, and the creation of one or more *ad hoc* administrative structures. This definition limits the use of the term partnership only to those cases where cooperation goes beyond mere consultation processes which do not give birth to any administrative structure or institution aimed at reaching specific policy goals. Furthermore, a partnership differs from more specific delegation forms which establish more traditional principal-agent relationships, where the principal (for example, an administrative body or a public institution) sets autonomously the scope and the implementation mechanisms and where the agent (for example, a private organisation

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<sup>2</sup> The UK Audit Commission is an independent public body aimed at improving the quality of public services, promoting good practices and ensuring an economically, efficiently and effectively sustainable expenditure of the public money. Further information can be found at: <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk>

active in the territorial development policy field) is responsible for the implementation of the decision adopted by the principal. Such a relationship does not provide an opportunity for the agent to cooperate in the policy formulation phase since goals are explicitly set by a contract conceived autonomously by the principal. Instead, in a partnership the goals and implementation mechanisms are shared and agreed upon by all the actors involved in the decision-making process [Klinj and Teisman 2000].

Furthermore, if we adopt our working definition it is also possible to focus on three main analytical dimensions which are crucial for an in-depth empirical characterisation of local partnership experiences: the purpose, the actors and the mechanism of their involvement and the articulation in different phases, as suggested by Mc Quaid [2000]. The purpose is the set of objectives pursued by the local partnership which are usually defined through *formal* agreements, i.e. a strategic pacts among partners illustrating and making explicit the broad guidelines and the nature of the partnership involvement at the local level and/or *ad hoc* action plans which further detail the policy procedures and instruments needed for the implementation of the overall partnership strategy. Nevertheless, the explicit goals do not always constitute the 'real' goals of the partnership: each partner can hide its specific interests and objectives and therefore its behaviour will be guided by hidden objectives which can be much more important for each partnership member.

With regard to the actors, i.e. the key players in the partnership game, although their number varies according to the degree of inclusiveness of the partnership, we expect typically to find public authorities, local public bodies (Universities, Chambers of Commerce), social partners' or other public interest groups' representatives, third sector associations. The mechanisms of their involvement are of great interest in order to better understand the organisational structure and governance mode which rules the partnership. Partnerships can be organised according to formal rules which define in detail their functioning or they can be governed by more informal agreements reached by a group of actors at the local level. In particular, the presence of *ad hoc* bodies, to which specific programming or implementation functions are delegated, is of great importance in order to define the specific "organisational identity" of each partnership [Wilson and Charlton 1997].

Finally, like more traditional decision-making processes, partnerships are developed following different phases which can analytically be distinguished. In general terms, partnership experiences are articulated in two main phases: the action plan formulation, and its implementation. In the literature, we find a more refined phase articulation: for example, Murray and Osborne [1998] consider five different phases (pre-contact, preliminary contact, negotiating, implementation and evaluation), while Lowndes and Skelcher [1998], divide the "life cycle" of UK urban renewal policies into four stages (pre-partnership collaboration, partnership creation, partnership programme delivery and partnership termination). Therefore, for each decision-making phase specific attention has to be devoted to the role and modes of influence of the various actors.

## 2.2. *Inside local partnerships: a brief state of the art*

Studies dedicated to partnership analysis are recent but quite numerous. Not only are they characterised by various definitions of what a partnership could or should be (see § 2.1), but they are also focused on a wide set of policies and/or different levels of government. To begin with, the partnership literature can be divided into three main

analytical strands: the “network governance system” approach; the partnership as “experimental context” and the partnership as a “political arena” (see Table 1 below).

In the first one, partnership is seen as a social co-ordination mechanism based on social dialogue, resource sharing and activity concentration [Jessop 2000]. Under this analytical lens partnership experiences can be considered as an example of a “networked governance” system, i.e. a kind of social regulation where public and private actors depend on each other and are connected in a non hierarchical mode with the aim of sharing resources and coordinate interests and activities [Boerzel 1998]. At the heart of this analytical strand there are two main questions: how public and private spheres relate to each other and what democratic accountability can be guaranteed by such governance tools. Firstly, over the past years the diffusion of partnerships has contributed to the redefinition of the relationship between the state or national public authorities and civil society. National public authorities have not only increasingly reduced their powers, “hollowing out” in favour of other actors (private actors, independent agencies or supranational institutions), but also the distinctions between the public and the private sphere have become very slim since the two are increasingly interconnected [Rhodes 1997]. Secondly, the growth in the fragmentation of competences poses a fundamental problem linked to democratic accountability [Pierre 2000; Stoker 2000; Skelcher 1998]: if many actors intervene in the decision-making process, who will be responsible to whom and for what? Public authorities find themselves, as Kettl phrased it, “on the top of complex public-private relationships whose dimensions they may only vaguely understand” and therefore they risk to be accountable “for a system over which they have little real control” [Kettl 1993, 206].

The second main analytical strand focuses on the innovation potential channelled by partnerships in specific policy areas such as environmental or social policies or, more in general, local development policies. Partnerships are considered “experimental contexts” [Cersosimo and Wolleb 2001; Garmise and Rees 1997], where innovation might be expected with respect to the traditional functioning of decision-making processes. The relevant question becomes: has something changed in the policy-making process due to the inclusion of new actors? If so, how has the process changed and how has it happened? From this perspective, the main research concerns will be understanding if and how partnership practices have changed the policy under analysis and if new partnership practices have increased or reduced institutional performance with respect to the supply of common goods. The creation of a partnership among local public authorities, local firms and other stakeholders is often considered a strategic policy device for those lagging regions that try to replicate the forms of economic and institutional capacity founded in “successful” regions [Gibbs et al 2001]. As a matter of fact, a partnership can have a “transformative potential” for community development: cooperative arrangements can enhance the capacity to build trust among the actors involved and promote, by this way, the pooling of resources in common, integrated projects or programmes [Geddes 2000; Evans and Harding 1997].

The third – and less explored – literature strand focuses on specific features of partnerships and their functioning: how do they originate? How are they organised? Can they be consolidated? If consolidated, what are the consolidation mechanisms? These questions are the most interesting for our research purposes not only because there have been limited studies on the topic, but also because it is a field where political and policy science tools can be particularly fruitful. From this standpoint, partnership experiences are seen as new political arenas where power resources are distributed or redistributed

[Hasting 1996; Davis 2004]. In other words, new political arenas can challenge traditional power distribution patterns and therefore create opportunities for actors which have been traditionally excluded from the decision-making process. The scarce attention paid to this specific analytical focus can be explained by the fact that most of the studies on (local) partnerships have looked primarily at the cooperative dimensions of such experiences, limiting the analysis of their conflictual components. Therefore, it is important to address our attention to how partnerships work in reality and to the conditions which can promote the emergence and the – even more – the consolidation of cooperation among local actors.

Table 1: *The state of the art: literature strands and research focus*

Analytical focus	Research Focus
“Networked governance systems”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public-private spheres interaction</li> <li>- Democratic accountability</li> </ul>
“Experimental contexts”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Transformative potential” of partnership experiences</li> <li>- Partnership experiences’ evaluation</li> </ul>
“Political arenas”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Political determinants of partnership initiation</li> <li>- Power distribution</li> </ul>

### 3. The consolidation of local partnerships: a framework for analysis

In our attempt to characterise the politics of the partnership experiences, we will pay specific attention to one of the possible alternatives of their development, i.e. their consolidation as a specific tool for territorial governance.

There are two main reasons that support our research focus on partnership consolidation. First of all, in the literature on partnership for local development much attention has been devoted so far to the analysis of partnerships’ creation, whereas partnership consolidation has been largely neglected. A large amount of pieces of research have mainly focused on the conditions which promoted the emergence of partnership experience and on the preliminary assessment of policy outcomes produced [Cersosimo and Wolleb 2006; Pichierri 2001; Hasting 1996; Craig 2001]. Nevertheless, many partnership experiences have witnessed a significant evolution over the past ten years, changing their organisational nature and broadening their functions. Therefore, currently it is possible to focus more specifically on the reasons of partnership persistence through time (i.e. their consolidation), as well as on their possible failure as new modes of socio-economic governance at the local level.

Secondly, a consolidation-centred perspective is useful in order to understand the evolution and potential of local partnerships as specific new modes of governance experiences. In fact, our aim is to focus on the basic reasons which trigger local partnerships and to detect the institutional and political preconditions for their durability. It is clear that partnership consolidation cannot be considered neither a sufficient, nor a necessary condition for the implementation of “successful” local development policies. On the contrary, it is possible, at least in theory, to envisage also the consolidation of “collusive practices of cooperation” where local stakeholders’

commitment is basically addressed to obtain resources for particularistic goals, without any significant effect in term of increased territorial competitiveness. But this is a different focus from the one selected for this article: what is relevant for our purpose is that the persistence in time of partnership experience may have a strong influence on the relationship among public authorities and local stakeholders. In this sense, the study of partnership evolution will allow us to better understand if, to what extent and how such an innovative tool of governance has been incorporated into the ordinary functioning of local institutions and what is its impact on the policy process through which (local) socio-economic issues are governed.

### 3.1. *Inside consolidation: definition and empirical indicators*

As every cooperative experience, a partnership, in the aftermath of its creation, can follow at least three different paths. Firstly, such cooperation can be maintained for a certain period of time just in order to fulfil the agreements initially reached. Secondly, a partnership, after reaching a preliminary general consensus among local actors, can fail to implement the specific actions agreed upon by its members. Thirdly, a partnership may consolidate over time, strengthening its organisational foundations and widening its scope in different policy areas beyond its original aims. Furthermore, the term "consolidation" may be defined as a multidimensional process through which a partnership acquires stability and becomes a widespread practice in a specific policy area. Therefore, the consolidation process involves two main dimensions, an organisational and an operational one, which are of particular interest in the development of adequate indicators for our analysis.

The first aspect (i.e. the organisational component of partnership consolidation) is related to the reinforcement of the partnership organisational structure. In our definition presented above, each partnership is defined by the presence of an administrative board with its administrative sub-units. This organisational aspect is of great importance since it constitutes the way through which the partnership will interact with other local institutions and it can also reveal the consistency of the overall strategy adopted by the partnership members [Pichierri 2001]. Moreover, the creation of a specific organisation provides a stronger and clearer identity to the partnership and more credibility vis-à-vis external institutions, thus enhancing its probabilities of further consolidation.

In order to capture this dimension of the consolidation process we will focus on the degree of complexity of a partnership structure. As already mentioned, a partnership, that shows a higher level of organisational complexity has more probabilities to consolidate over time than a poorly structured one. An organisation composed, for example, of a variety of subunits will be more stable than an organisation characterised by a limited number of subunits, since it will be more flexible and likely «to adjust itself to the loss of any purposes» [Huntington 1975, 18]<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, a simpler form of partnership will be limited in its capacity to resist through time, as it will be more vulnerable to changes which can affect its basic organisational structure. Following

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<sup>3</sup> It can be argued that the loss of some tasks may not necessarily cause the instability of the partnership organisation if such an organisation is composed of a limited number of sub-units which deal with a wide range of functions. Nevertheless, even if these multifunctional sub-units may show a high level of flexibility *per se*, they contribute less to develop the flexibility of the organisation as a whole, than the presence of a more articulated partnership. For similar arguments, see Huntington [1975].

Huntington, such a complexity can be measured considering both «multiplication of organisational subunits, hierarchically and functionally, and differentiation of separate types of organisational subunits» [Huntington 1975, 18]: in our case, the number of internal boards (departments and offices), the creation of new “satellite-structures”<sup>4</sup> linked to the main organisational unit and the size of the administrative staff (for example, the number of people employed adjusted to the amount of the population served) will represent indicators for partnership consolidation.

The other aspect of the consolidation process, i.e. the “operational component”, deals with the capacity of a partnership to act over time, developing its ongoing strategies for local development. From this perspective, it is important to point out whether the collaborative relationship between public and private actors has been increased or at least maintained. Keeping partnership cooperation alive is not always a simple exercise: its tasks may be reduced over time as a consequence of the inappropriateness of the partnership to deal with new challenges.

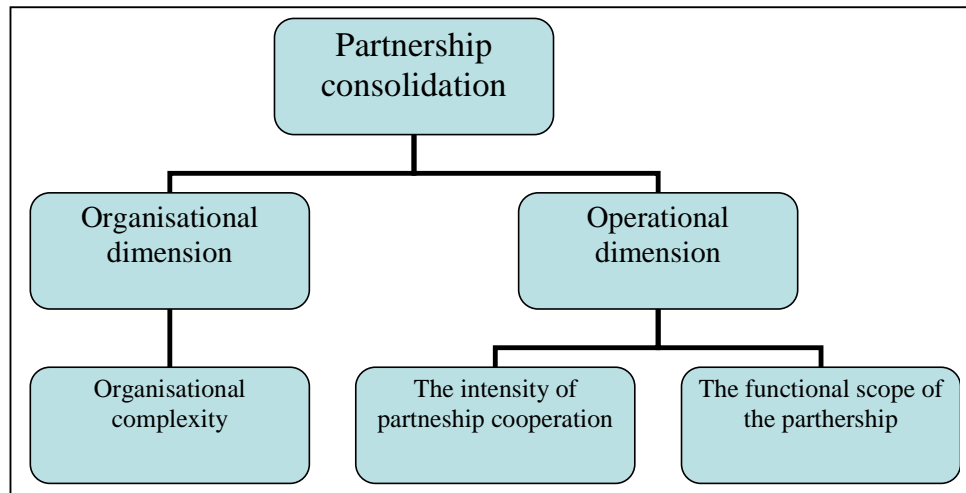
The operational component of the consolidation process can be detected using two different variables. Firstly, it is possible to consider the intensity of partnership cooperation, i.e. the capacity to maintain and develop cooperative ties among partners. Such a variable can be measured considering, for example, the frequency over time of formal and informal contacts among local actors due to partnership activities. If this frequency is still high some years after the partnership emergence, this means that the cooperation is robust and the partnership is consolidating.

The second variable which can be used to evaluate the degree of consolidation of a partnership deals with the functional scope of the partnership, i.e. the areas or topics covered by the partnership. The broadness of this scope can be measured both by the achievement of new agreements and by the presence of a wide range of projects which specify or adapt the original partnership agreements. This variable is strictly related to the consolidation process for at least two reasons. Firstly, a multi-functional partnership, which can rely on different purposes, is most likely to survive even if some of these purposes have been reached or have become obsolete. In other words, the wider the scope of the partnership is, the longer the partnership will last. Secondly, the widening of the scope of the partnership over time gives evidence of the capacity of the partnership to adjust its goals to the emergence of new challenges or to better specify its general aims with respect to evolving local needs.

In conclusion, the consolidation of partnership cooperation can be analysed taking into consideration its organisational and operational components. An in-depth analysis of the indicators in any selected case will show if and to what extent a partnership has consolidated, providing specific information on its development pattern. Figure 2 summarises the main dimensions and variables above mentioned.

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to consider only those satellite-structures which clearly show a good degree of integration with the main partnership organisation. Otherwise, a multiplication of separated and fairly independent structures, will in fact reveal a lack of partnership’s coherence and therefore unveil a weakly consolidated partnership.

Figure 2: *Inside partnership consolidation*

### 3.2. *The analytical framework*

The working definition of the consolidation process allows us to analyse, from an empirical point of view, the evolution of different cooperative experiences. It is likely that some partnerships will show a high level of consolidation regarding both its organisational and operational components, while other cooperative arrangements will reveal a weak organisational structure and a lack in their capacity to operate over time. Therefore, it is important to take a close look at the dynamics of partnership evolution and to the presence of facilitating conditions which can cause such differences in the degree of consolidation.

Following our working definition, a (local) partnership has to be considered as a mode of collective action aimed at pursuing local actors' interests and views related to the increase of the socio-economic competitiveness of their territory. In particular, one of the main aim of a partnership experience should be the production of the so-called local collective competition goods (LCCGs), that are these goods and services which may provide competitive advantages to a local community in terms of adequate infrastructures, business services or specialized know-how [Crouch *et al.* 2004]<sup>5</sup>. The basic assumption is that without the achievement of a certain amount of material and immaterial resources through the participation of different local actors, the production of these LCCGs will be hardly viable.

Nonetheless, the creation and the maintenance of a partnership also implies specific participation costs. Indeed, the actors involved are called to invest in the cooperation several resources such as:

<sup>5</sup> In our research we assume that the main goal of a partnership for local development is the production of LCCGs. However, this does not mean that a partnership is the only or the best way to shape policies addressed to territorial competitiveness. Moreover, it can be noticed that the production of different types of LCCGs in different circumstances (infrastructures rather than vocational training initiatives) may require different decision-making strategies.

1. time and dedication;
2. financial resources for the co-funding of programmes;
3. a partial delegation of some rights due to sharing of responsibilities for the use of the resources involved.

It follows that the active participation in a partnership will be considered convenient only if local stakeholders may profit from it. But what are the main advantages and the underlying rationales which can guarantee the support of such cooperation practices?

In order to move forward in our analysis, we will consider a partnership for local development as a form of a “political exchange” (see Figure 3) in which the actors involved invest some of their resources (material or immaterial) to obtain specific gains. More in detail, we distinguish two main groups of actors: public authorities and the representatives of socio-economic interests (mainly trade unions and business associations). Their active involvement will be dependent on some specific incentives.

Starting from the role of local authorities in cooperation practices, it seems clear that their central interest in a partnership concerns its capacity to provide new opportunities for the maintenance and increase of political consensus. In other words, the active involvement of public authorities in a partnership experience will be guaranteed if it is considered as a “politically remunerative” investment. In particular, three types of political advantages seem crucial for consensus building, preservation and increase: political visibility, problem-solving capacities and economic resources availability.

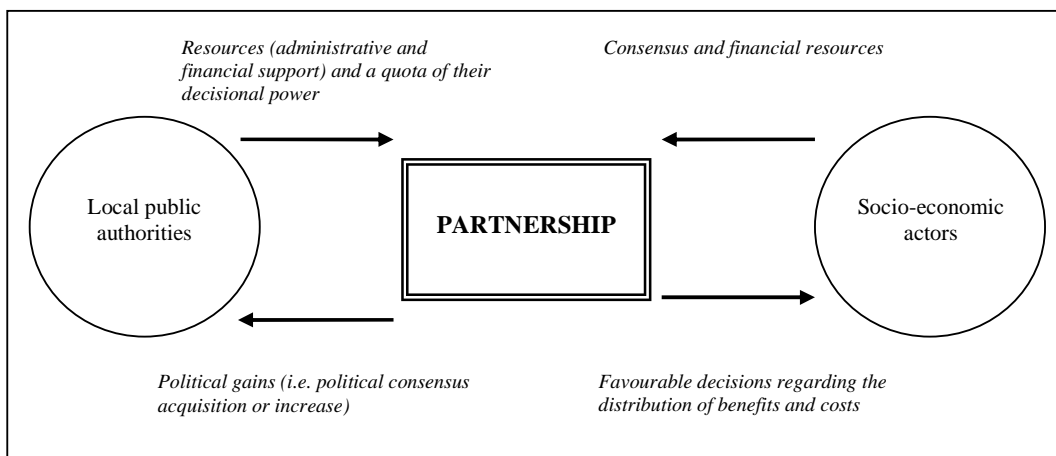
The first one concerns the “political visibility” potential of the partnership. Political actors with an electoral mandate must increase their political attractiveness in order to maintain their role. Thus, if the existence and the promotion of a cooperative framework support the perception among local key actors, local media and voters that public authorities are “politically productive and successful”, there will be strong incentives for partnership consolidation. The second possible advantage deals with the contribution to the solution of specific problems of territorial governance which can be provided by the partnership. Local development policies may imply the participation of a wide range of actors who represent different levels of government: if the partnership arrangement is considered as a strategic device to face administrative weaknesses and coordination problems, enhancing the institutional capacity of local administration, there will be a common (i.e. public and private) interest in preserving it. The third main political advantage is linked to the fact that a partnership can serve as a useful instrument for the access to new funding opportunities. From this standpoint, if a partnership proves to be a profitable strategy for such goal, it will be considered as a politically remunerative activity. Since building new and ad hoc cooperative arrangements may involve high transaction costs, local authorities may have an interest in preserving the ongoing cooperation, especially when it is regarded as a suitable starting point for the collection of new resources.

Beyond the “political remunerativeness” for the local authorities, there is a second decisive aspect which characterises the political exchange model connected to partnership aimed at local development. This deals with the capacity of a partnership to provide particular “goods” for the socio-economic actors involved. Assuming that a partnership should be supported by a sufficient amount of resources in order to deliver the expected services and projects, a crucial question is: why do socio-economic actors have an interest in the active participation in such a partnership? One of the most important incentives is probably due to its “selective socio-economic remunerativeness”, i.e. the possibility that such actors have to affect the decisions regarding the distribution

of costs and benefits produced by the partnership itself. Choices related to, for example, the construction of a new road, the creation of a specific service for companies or the supply of a financial support for local industries may be of great importance for the local actors involved in cooperation practices.

Therefore, the idealtypical logic of the “political exchange” underlying partnership cooperation can be considered as a first step towards an analytical framework of the dynamics of the consolidation process. On the one hand, public authorities provide time resources, administrative and financial support, as well as a quota of their decisional power, to the partnership in exchange of “political gains”, i.e. acquisition or increase in political consensus. On the other hand, the socio-economic actors exchange political support with local authorities, and sometimes supply financial or logistical assets, with the purpose to achieve favourable decisions regarding the benefits connected to the implementation of partnership arrangements.

Figure 3: The ‘political exchange’ involved in partnership experiences



Nevertheless, if considered *per se* neither the “political remunerativeness” nor the “selective socio-economic remunerativeness” connected to a partnership can fully explain the consolidation process. Detecting the specific interests in the emergence and preservation of the partnership experience is not sufficient in order to account for the consolidation process, since such a cooperative experience can be challenged by exogenous or endogenous pressures which may inhibit its reinforcement and hinder its duration. As a matter of fact, several empirical researches have shown that many partnerships find it difficult to offer selective incentives beyond the initial phase [Piselli 2005; Cersosimo e Wolleb 2006]. This can be understood if we consider that the consolidation of a partnership experience relies upon a continuous process of consensus and coalition building and upon the promotion of internal and external interests in its maintenance. Therefore, it is important to analyse the partnership experience in its dynamic evolution, taking into consideration the presence of specific factors which can influence (i.e. facilitate or hinder) partnership duration.

Looking at the literature on partnership experiences, we can focus on four main conditions that can positively affect the consolidation process:

- a. *the availability of economic resources*. Since one of the main targets of a partnership is its “budget enlargement function” [Mackintosh 1992] , i.e. its capacity to collect funds from several actors (private and public) at different levels of government (regional, national or European levels), the probabilities of the partnership consolidation will be higher if local actors will find new financial resources for their initiatives;
- b. *the presence of a “policy entrepreneur”*. Policy entrepreneurship, as a distinctive type of political action, may constitute a key facilitating factor not only for the promotion of the emergence of partnership cooperation, but also for the durable equilibrium of the interests involved in the cooperative experience [Vangen and Huxam 2003; Purdue 2005; Cersosimo and Wolleb 2006]. Policy entrepreneurs can foresee and promote constantly, for instance, the advantages of the cooperation, causing expectations of new additional rewards deriving from the persistence of the partnership experience;
- c. *the presence of a “technical unit”*, such as a local development agency, which can support local actors in the management of the partnership cooperation. In particular, what is important is the maintenance of a strict link between the political and the technical aspects of a partnership experience. In other words, a partnership will have more probabilities to consolidate where a certain continuity between the concertation process and the planning and implementation phases is safeguarded and, in particular, where a technical unit such as a local development agency is present and active.
- d. *the “political homogeneity” of the public administrations involved*: in this case we can highlight two opposite predictions. On the one hand, “political homogeneity” among local authorities may encourage agreements on policy initiatives and so the promotion of cooperative experiences. On the other hand, as some studies on Italian local partnerships have shown [Barbera 2001, Magnatti *et al* 2005], the mixed “political colour” background can favour the achievement of partnership goals and, by this way, its consolidation.

These ‘facilitating factors’ seem to cover the most relevant aspects which can emerge in the analysis of the development and duration of (local) public-private partnership. Taking them clearly into account could facilitate the understanding and explanation of empirical cases of such interesting new modes of (local) governance.

#### 4. Conclusion

Local partnership consolidation relies both on the achievement of a specific political exchange and on the capacity to maintain it. Therefore, the analysis of partnership consolidation must (a) look closer at the internal dynamics of partnership evolution and (b) pay attention to the particular conditions which can facilitate such partnership consolidation over time. More in detail, partnership as a new mode of governance of socio-economic issues at the local level may represent an important strategy for the production of local collective competition goods. Nevertheless, it cannot be considered as the only or the best “game in town”. On the one hand, a partnership is not always the most effective way to produce collective goods and services. Moreover, it can also serve collusive redistribution of resources among stakeholders, without enhancing the competitiveness of the local area. On the other hand, it can constitute a sub-optimal solution even in terms of consensus building, since it may represent a too costly activity

which induces fatigue and disenchantment in the actors involved, eroding their mutual trust and commitment to cooperation [Jessop 2000; Glendinning *et al.*2002].

However, all the above mentioned questions are empirical questions. The purpose of this article is to present an analytical research framework which will have to be tested in a different empirical exercise. The research framework suggests that partnerships, under certain circumstances, can consolidate producing positive results in terms of initiatives implemented. Among these circumstances, the most interesting one is the creation of an autonomous 'functionally specialised' structure which can assure both competence and strategic vision and typically this structure has been called local development agency. The latter can play a crucial role enhancing the institutional capacity of local authorities to deal with the planning of inter-municipalities initiatives and influencing the dynamic of "political exchange" among local partners in the consolidation process. For these reasons, it may be put at the centre of future research agendas on public-private partnership as the heart of new modes of governance. In particular, comparative research efforts would be quite useful in defining the role of such specialised structures in national and local development policies.

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