

The Italian way to welfare?
Primary education and sport co-production in Parma:
bridging private interests with public goals

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FIRST DRAFT

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1. Introduction

Major changes in the forms of organization, delivery, funding of public services, and the growing involvement of the third sector in such services are often explained by considering primarily the demographic, social and budgetary constraints having weakened traditional public welfare regimes. These regimes have been criticized for being too expensive; for being inefficient because of the lack of competition in services delivery; and for being unable to deal with individual incentives, promoting citizens dependence from the state (Barbetta 1996, Phelps 1995, Savas 1987). Thus, a withdrawal of public actors from welfare services at the advantage of private ones has been welcomed by those who support the idea of the ‘un-sustainability’ of public welfare systems in the long period.

Even though public welfare inefficiencies, as well as the tradition of relations between the state and the third sector in the different national contexts, may be useful explanatory factors of the current diffusion of co-production, co-governance, and co-

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management in public services as they are defined in Pestoff, Osborne and Brandsen (2006), this paper proposes to adopt a more complex explanatory framework. In fact, in the last three decades other important macro-structural developments have contributed increasing the relevance of third sector actors in public service production, together with the change in the way welfare systems are conceived and organized. One of such macro-developments regards the nature and the conception of democracy and the other concerns the way private (for profit) interests are organized and promoted.

Concerning the change in the conception of democracy, what seems to be relevant for this analysis is the increasing interest for (and request of) a shift from representative to participatory democracy. Concerning the change in private interests promotion, it is worth to consider the emergence of the idea (and policies) of corporate social responsibility. Finally, concerning the change at welfare level, we should focus on the passage from a welfare state to a welfare society. These three major developments have been associated with vibrant academic and policy debates, but they have tended to evolve independently one from the other. We believe, on the contrary, that the changes in these three areas are strictly intertwined and that their interactions are extremely useful to understand public services co-production.

This paper moves from a case study, the process of production of sport education in primary schools in Parma, a medium-size town in the centre-north of Italy, as an opportunity to think about how, in the near future, the Italian way of producing, organizing and delivering welfare related services may look like. The case presented here has allowed the author studying the whole process of the production of a specific public service that has involved several actors: a local public authority (the municipality), a public institution (the University of Parma), an hybrid organization that can be considered as part of the third sector (the Italian Olympic Committee, formerly a quasi-public entity, although strongly independent from the state, now a quasi-private body), a private organization (the factory Barilla), and other third sector organizations (sport clubs).

The case is interesting in an Italian perspective as it allows analyzing two areas of welfare services, primary education and sport, where traditionally the state and the third sector have been combining their roles in a very different way. In education, the

Italian welfare model has been characterized by the dominant role of the state and the residual involvement of the third sector, whereas in sport, third sector organizations have played a more active and autonomous role (Ranci 1999). Studying a reality where these two areas are merged represents a unique opportunity to monitor the change occurring in the relation between state and civil society actors and the dynamics promoted by each actor.

This paper is based on interviews with privileged informants carried out in 2007 in the frame of a comparative project focused on the role of sport governing bodies in the creation of social capital both within and outside sport environments². Interviewees include all the actors at the origin of the project (public, private and third sector actors) and those that currently manage it.

In the next paragraph, the paper briefly introduces the debates about participatory democracy, welfare society and corporate social responsibility. Then it illustrates the case study of primary education in Parma, and after this it presents the implications for the Italian welfare regime resulting from the analysis of the case.

2. Participatory democracy, welfare society and corporate social responsibility as nurturing grounds for co-production in public services

The request for more democracy and social equality that spread in the sixties alimanted a critical revision of liberal democracy leading democratic theory to divulgate the normative and practical advantages of participatory democracy (Pateman 1970, Cook and Morgan 1971, Macpherson 1977). If liberal democracy was to rely primarily on the work of responsible elites competing for power, participatory democracy was to rely on the involvement of great numbers of citizens in decision making and on their shared sense of collective responsibility (Zittel 2007:9). Such a debate about the virtues of democratic systems where citizens are given many opportunities for taking part directly to the multiple aspects of democratic government has re-invigorated in the last years when several studies denounced the diffusion of citizens' disaffection towards their states and societies (Pharr and Putnam 2000, Fuchs 2007). Hence, to contrast the

² The Project is funded by a Marie Curie Excellence Grant "Sport and Social Capital in the EU" awarded to Dr. Margaret Groeneveld and Bocconi University.

lack of trust and the lack of civic and political engagement characterizing OECD countries in the nineties, both politicians and academicians have called for models of democratic government in which citizens could be called to play a more active role. The underlying theory was that by involving citizens in decision making processes their disaffection and distrust vis-à-vis public institutions would decrease (Fuchs 2007). In this logic, citizens are no longer seen as pure passive receptors or implementers of decisions taken at upper levels, but they concretely have to take part to the processes leading to a specific decision or policy. Such attitude has been fostered also by the diffusion on a global scale of antagonist social movements whose main political goal was to convince supranational and national governmental actors about the need to include local and global civil societies in decision making (della Porta, Kriesi and Rucht 1999, Pianta 2001, Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor 2001). The request for increasing citizens participation in policy making advanced by social movements has been pushed at the point that in some local contexts citizens have been directly involved in the decisions about public (municipal) budget allocations. These are the so called experiences of *participatory public budgeting* where people's open assemblies decide how to allocate at least parts of the public expenditure, starting from the path-opening example of the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre.

Both academic thinking and policies supporting the diffusion of people's participation in policy making have been facilitated not only by the above summarized debate in the political sphere and in the democratic theory. They have been fostered also by a change in the nature and structure of the welfare state and its consequent academic debate.

In fact, in several countries the development of welfare states that took place from the Second World War until the early seventies (during the so called "thirty glorious years") was based on the active and crucial role of the state (and public actors) for expanding citizens' social rights. But, after those years, public welfare regimes of the so called postfordist era had to rely more than before on the activation of citizens and private actors, also due to public budget constraints. In sum, in the post-modern era the idea that individuals, families and communities more than the state have to assure the wellbeing of everybody has been deeply strengthened (Rodger 2000).

Of course, policy and academic debates favourable to this change in welfare structure present different opinions: some scholars and politicians suggest a purely liberal interpretation of the new welfare state where the state has to play a really minimal role and all initiatives have to be left to the market and to free private associations (this was Margaret Thatcher's policy model). Whereas others think that the state should remain an important actor in the allocation of services and as a guarantor of citizenship rights although it should promote civil society action (Hirst 1994, Leonard 1997, Cohen and Rogers 1992, Etzioni 1993).

Moreover, there are authors that have tried to bridge the debates about participatory democracy and welfare society, like those supporting the idea of *associative democracy*. Particularly interesting in this debate, and for the purposes of this paper, is the position of Paul Hirst (1994) who suggests that welfare services should be provided by "voluntary self-governing organizations that are *partnerships between the recipients and the providers* of the service. Such associations will be at least formally democratic and recipients will have annual right of exit" (Ibidem: 176, emphasis added). In Hirst model of *associational and confederal welfare state*, citizens will have the opportunity to choose among different schools, hospitals, people's homes run by different voluntary associations. Hence, the model applies competitive-market logic in a non-market system where free individual willing can match with community/collective purposes. According to Hirst, voluntary associations should be funded from public sources; moreover, the state should maintain its role of inspector and its power of standard-setting. Finally, welfare services should be designed, organized and delivered at regional and local level.

Furthermore, in some cases, the implementation of policies has not to be made (or not entirely) by a public actor, but it can be delegated to a private entity (i.e. a private firm or a third sector organization). According to other supporters of *associative democracy* private actors should be preferred to public ones because of:

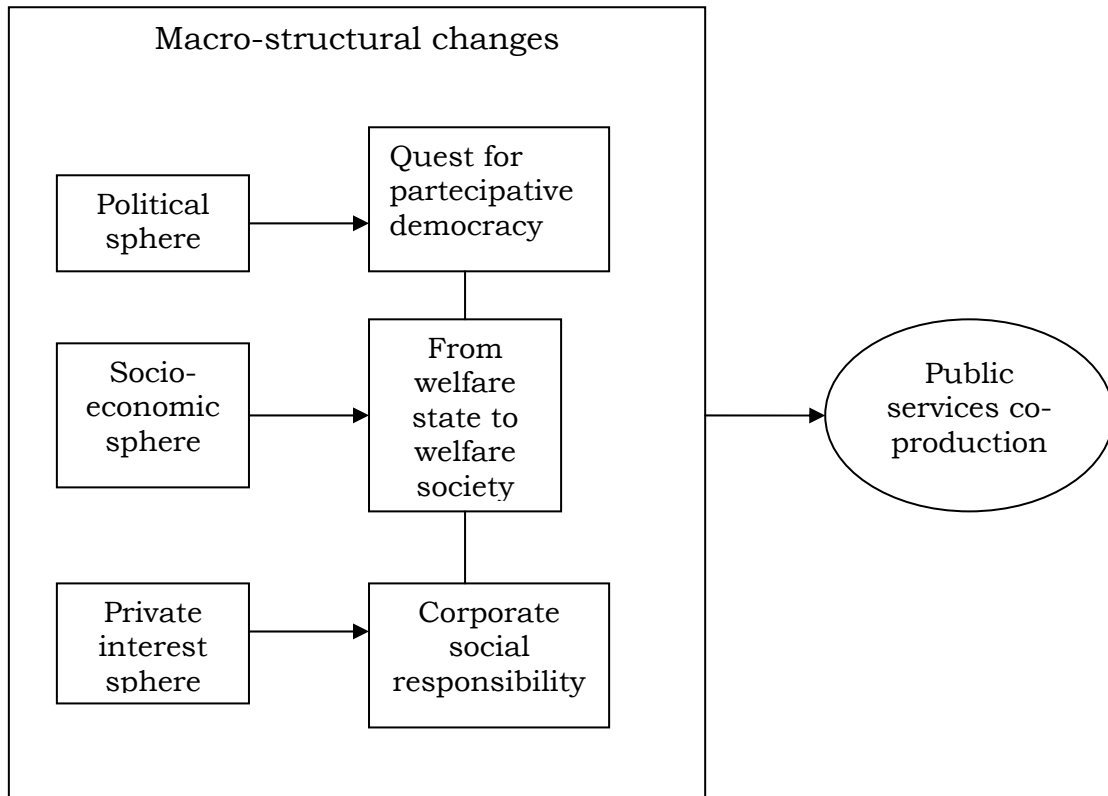
"the distinctive capacity of associations to gather local information, monitor behaviour, and promote cooperation among private actors. In such cases, associative strategy recommends

attending to the possibility of enlisting them explicitly in the performance of public tasks. [...] associative democracy departs from the observations that groups play a fundamental role in the politics of mass democracies, that the threat of faction is real, and that groups could make a substantial contribution to democratic order” (Cohen and Rogers 1992:426).

These debates and changes in the nature of democracy and welfare states have been accompanied by a change in the conception of activities of private firms. In fact, from the early seventies onward a new way of conceiving private companies’ behaviour has been affirmed, stressing the need for private corporations to include social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in the interaction with their stakeholders (Persson 2007, Baron 2001). Even though the immediate aim of a company remains making profit, they have been encouraged to consider the implications of their actions that go well beyond the economic market. Hence, private companies have been called to be responsible also vis-à-vis the society they are embedded in. Corporate social responsibility has gained consensus through the years becoming an accepted code for companies’ behaviour full of ethical prescriptions vis-à-vis both their internal structure and their relations with social and physical environment (EC 2001, Gallino 2005). Hence, private companies have been more easily convinced to merge their resources with voluntary associations and public authorities for the delivery of welfare related services.

What has been called later on co-production of public services is, according to this paper, a result of the complex interaction among the major changes mentioned above. Figure 1 summarizes this reasoning: the box on the left side contains smaller boxes indicating the macro-structural changes in the areas of politics, society, economics, and private interest. The interaction of the changes in these areas pushes the development of new ways of production in public services or different accommodations between the state and the third sector in such production.

Figure 1: macro-structural changes leading to co-production in public services



Very rarely academic thinking has tried to link such processes and to analyze further societal and political developments through their connectedness.

The example this paper is focused on aims at presenting evidences about how those macro-societal changes may positively affect public service and how such a successful situation resulted from a strong cooperation and commitment among different private and public actors. Furthermore, this case shows how such changes are combined with the peculiar situation of the Italian welfare regime.

3. The case of Parma: co-production in primary education and sport

In the Italian public education system, at primary schools sport is not taught by professionals but it is left to the goodwill of teachers that not always have the specific

knowledge about physical education. However, medical and social studies together with parents' opinions strongly support early learning and early practice of sport to prevent health but also social problems among youth. Not to mention well known improvements in children's health, simple sport activities provide children not only with opportunities for socialisation, but also for cooperation learning. As pointed out by one of the interviewees: "passing a ball to someone else is already a form of co-operation".

On a larger perspective, sport practices can be conceived as a crucial activity in a person life for its being a microcosm where "people learn to take responsibility, to follow rules, to accept one another, to look for consensus and to take on democracy" (Jarvie 2003: 142). As argued by Putnam (1995), participation in sport produces 'social capital' through face-to-face interactions which facilitate the development of interpersonal trust, cooperative behaviours, public awareness about commonwealth and political consciousness. On the other hand, medical and psychological experiments currently running at the University of Parma provide evidences that pupils with difficulty in learning how to write or those with concentration problems do recover faster if they practice sport activities³.

In Parma, a group of individual and collective actors strongly believed in the positive implications of sport education. Hence, they merged their resources for a new approach and a new policy vis-à-vis primary education and sport.

As it often happens, the story starts with a person: a professor of physical education at secondary school. Each year at the beginning of the school, he was shocked by the very scarce knowledge of physical education of his pupils just arrived from the primary school. He was reluctant to accept the fact that 11 years old pupils ignored the basics of physical education and that just few of them were involved in some sport activities. Because he strongly believed in the social, psychological and physical implications of sport practice, once he retired and became a volunteer at the local branch of the Italian peak sport governing body (i.e. the Italian Olympic Committee, known with the acronym *Coni*), he started thinking about how he could contribute improving physical education at school. He thought the first step was to introduce

³ Information collected during interviews in Parma

professionals of physical education in primary schools with the double aim of teaching both pupils and teachers how to practice correct and healthy physical exercises.

To transform this idea in a real project the initiators needed first to accede to primary schools (and to have the idea endorsed by the teachers), and then to find financial resources to pay the new “professional” physical instructors. The idea was endorsed by Coni that made it its own project called *Con-i-giovani* (“with the youth”, a word-joke mixing Coni with the Italian word *con* that means ‘with’). Coni asked the member of the municipal government responsible for sport to help it in making the idea accepted by schools and in raising the necessary funds. This member of the municipal government shared with the initiators a strong belief about the intrinsic value of sport, hence he decided to commit himself in the promotion of the project. Though, the official support of the municipality, and the consequent support of the school provincial coordination office were not enough to get primary schools involved. A major effort in this sense was made by other third sector actors. In fact, a key role in convincing primary schools was played by sport clubs. Various handball, volleyball, basketball and rugby clubs had privileged relations with the schools in the city and in neighbouring villages because they used the gyms of primary schools for their weekly activities, and because these clubs’ coaches are often teachers or professors. So sport clubs have served as bridges between the idea of Coni/municipality and the schools.

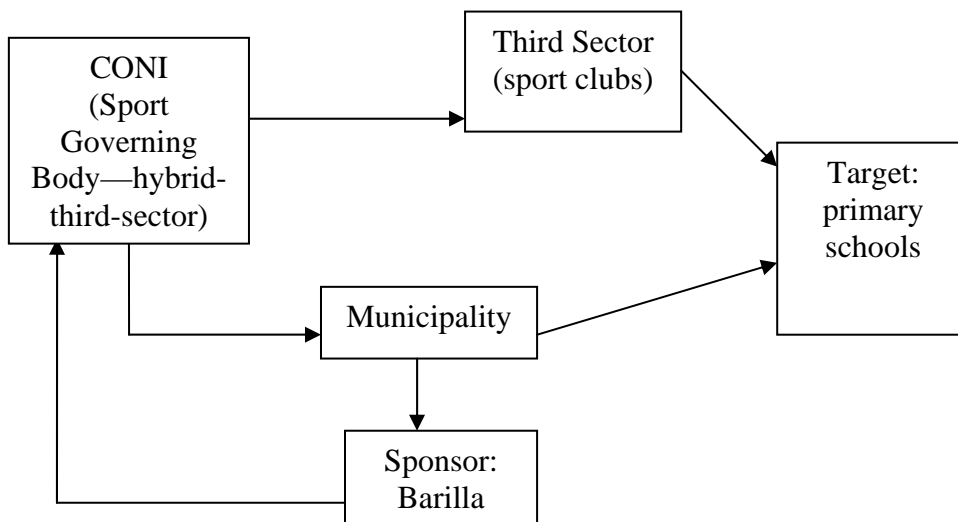
Finally, the initiators needed a sponsor willing to contribute paying at least a part of the foreseen expenses. The sponsor was founded, favourably mobilised thanks to the social capital of the member of the municipal government in charge of sport. In fact, this person could count on a very good personal relation with an important manager of Barilla, the famous pasta factory whose headquarters are based in Parma. The company was convinced by the value of the proposed idea and became involved in the adventure accepting to pay half of the costs of the project (the other half was to be paid by the municipality). This whole process leading to co-production of such a service is summarized by figure 2.

The project has been applied to the pupils of the first two years of all primary schools of Parma, furthermore it has been replicated in neighbouring small cities and villages, and it now involve 24 schools and about 11.000 pupils. In addition, after few

years, another similar project has been successfully launched by the same actors –and with the same sponsor—with the idea to cover the other three years of the primary school (in Italy the primary education curriculum lasts for 5 years). This project, called *1...2...3...Via!* has now reached 26 schools and it includes 6500 pupils.

It is worth noting that the role of third sector has been even more relevant when the project has been enlarged to other small neighbourhood municipalities where sport clubs (like the rugby club of Colorno, a small city near Parma) are particularly well enrooted in the local social environment. Hence, they have a strong clue on the village school and families.

Figure 2: process of origin of co-production of physical education teaching in primary schools



4. Roles of actors and motivations

But which roles do the different actors play in this service production? And why are they committed to these activities? The rest of this paragraph will deal with these questions.

The involved institutions and individuals have agreed upon a clear division of tasks according to their competences. The initiator actor, Coni in the person of its

volunteer who had the starting idea, acts as a coordinator of the whole program, it takes care of the entire administrative procedures, including budget management and hiring procedures of the professional physical educators. The municipality, on its side, contributes by making available its infrastructures (gyms, sport facilities within public primary schools). The University of Parma cooperates with the project by providing the scientific support through the elaboration of guidelines for physical educators, and by making available its final year's students and young graduated in physical education to be hired by the project. The sponsor, Barilla, provides the money, as a unique private sponsor and it does not interfere with the management process. Finally, beside Coni other third sector organizations, sport clubs, contribute to the project with their coaches who do part of the teaching and who introduce the pupils to a specific sport discipline.

How these actors succeeded in their joint effort? Actors' ethical concerns and motivations appear a strong explanatory factor of their cooperation. The strong belief of all the involved actors about the importance of such a project for the well being of their embedding society emerges from all interviews as a strong motivating factor for getting engaged in the project itself. In fact, there has been a convergence of beliefs among very different actors. They were all convinced about the idea that physical education, and sport activities, learned at an early stage in life, represent a value for the whole society.

However, the convergence of moral attitudes among diverse entities and individuals has been heavily facilitated by the macro-structural changes introduced in the previous part of the paper. Without the interaction between, on the one side, the need for deeper citizens' involvement in everyday democratic processes, and, on the other side, the emergence of the conscience of a welfare society and of the concept of corporate social responsibility, perhaps the original idea of improving sport education would have remained the 'dream' of a committed volunteer. One of the official documents used by the private donor, Barilla, to illustrate how well the project has developed, summarizes the new "participatory" conscience:

“Once the activity with teachers and pupils was started, the spokespersons of the project have been local institutions and schools, an excellent example about how good practices make good

participatory and protagonist citizens and consumers” (Barilla 2007, emphasis added).

Furthermore, Barilla has adopted a strategic version of corporate social responsibility allowing it to increase its market share. It has decided to diffuse the same project elsewhere. Hence, together with the established group of partners, the project has been proposed to other cities in Southern Italy: Bari and Foggia. In this case, on a request of Barilla, the project does not only include the promotion of physical education in primary schools, but it concerns also food education. This was due to the interest of the firm to strengthen its market position in the area, but it was also due to the firm’s concerns about the diffusion of obesity and over-weight among children of Southern regions. Hence, the program currently running in Bari and Foggia is an enriched version of the original one, and evaluation made by parents and schools was very positive. The result is that Barilla is now discussing with the Italian Ministry for Youth and Sport Policies a similar project that has to be applied at national level. This seems a good example of how private interests embedded in a firm social commitment can produce positive outcomes for societal actors, with a very small charge for public budgets. However, this case-study suggests also some possible weaknesses that should be avoided in other similar projects.

First, it is important that the private donor does not acquire a real monopolistic position in the support of an important public service such as improving the quality of primary education. The original sponsor should become later on *one of the sponsors* (), it should be considered as a model for other private firms, in a word it should serve as a path-breaking actor. This would avoid a dramatic weakening of the service in the case the main sponsor decides to withdraw its support. Moreover, it avoids the main sponsor to become a potential target of local politicians as a source of political and economic support. To achieve the goal of the diversification of private sponsors, the system could make use of open calls each time there will be the need to raise funds for a public service. In the case analyzed in this paper, the whole process could succeed thanks to the dense social capital mobilized by the diverse actors. Hence, the initiators did not choose an open call to find a private donor. However, the lack of an open competition

may be used by the firm as an efficient instrument to reach or strengthen a monopolistic position. Moreover, the role played by individual social capital in this project may be absent in other contexts. Thus, the adoption of an open call may improve the project, and not only on an ethical perspective.

Such considerations pave to way for an analysis of the main implications this project suggests for the Italian case.

5. Which implications for the Italian case?

In Italy, the relation between the state and the third sector in the provision of public services has been configured as a partnership in which the state assumed the responsibility of funding services and maintained the ultimate control power on them, but it shared their management with private agencies and non-profit organizations (Ranci 1999:233). Hence, the third sector played a crucial role in policy implementation for more than three decades, but traditionally its involvement in policy making remained quite limited. This was due to a sort of mutual agreement between the two actors: the state provided funds and offered multiple opportunities for private actors to intervene in service production and management, but private and non-profit actors accepted taking part to policy formulation only indirectly, via the political intermediation of political parties, the Catholic Church or the trade unions (Ibidem). As a consequence, the hierarchical subordination of third sector organizations to such political actors did not allow them playing an autonomous political role. Furthermore, very often third sector organizations have been used as reservoirs of political support: they have been involved in service delivery according to their political position, and they have also been used as illegal money collectors.

However, in the case of Parma we have seen that the state, represented by the municipality, has played the role of mediator, it has facilitated the meeting of third sector ideas with schools and with a private donor. But the service production has been entirely devolved to Coni and sport clubs. This situation is not atypical in contemporary Italy, and it can be better understood bearing in mind some aspects. From the mid nineties onward, things have started changing in the Italian political system, and consequently in the system of interest organization and representation. In fact, due to

the emergence of corruption scandals and to the change of the international political environment (fall of the Berlin wall and its consequences), the political system has witnessed a deep re-assessment where previous positions and power relations have changed. Important parties that maintained strong (hierarchical) ties with the third sector, like the Communist Italian Party (PCI) or the Christian Democratic Party (DC), have been strongly downsized. Hence, a certain space has been made available for the third sector to play a more autonomous role; and it has opened opportunities for it to participate also in policy formulation.

In addition, in the same years, the country has known a constitutional reform so that the state has devolved substantial power, especially in public service provision, to local institutions. Because third sector organizations usually have a deep knowledge of their embedding environment, and because they have the skills to solve people everyday diverse problems, they have been called to participate more and more to the elaboration and implementation of welfare policies.

Moreover, in the case of Parma, it has to be considered that the city is part of a region, Emilia Romagna, characterized by a tradition of strong social capital (Putnam 1993), where the third sector has been always called to fulfil crucial tasks in the delivery of important services, especially in the field of primary education (although in the system of dependency from the political system described above). But from the early 2000s, the city has a new local government that, also as an opposing reaction to the regional left-wing government more favourable to the traditional dependency relation with the third sector, has decided to provide viable opportunities for the third sector to intervene more actively, and more autonomously, in welfare policy making. This explains also the success of the case scrutinized in the paper.

However, the third sector and public actors should make a good use of such opportunities. In fact, we should avoid the risk of the third sector becoming again dependent on an external agent that comes, this time, under the forms of private interests or private donors. This can be avoided by both strengthening the position of the third sector in policy formulation and by diversifying private sponsors.

Another relevant potential problem concerns the quality-control process. At the moment, in the project, the evaluation of the work carried out by physical educators is

made by Coni. This implies that the actor at the origin of the whole process, the actor that manages it, is the responsible entity for evaluating what could be seen its own work. An independent evaluation process may better functions as a guarantee of its good quality.

In sum, the case-study of Parma has very peculiar aspects that tend to make it more an exception than a general model. We believe it still can be seen as a successful example indicating how third sector actors, in combination with private and public organizations, can innovatory contribute to shape the contemporary social, economic and political systems. However, for such a case to be successfully replicated, a better configuration of control systems and a policy of sponsor diversification shall be foreseen. We may need an independent authority able to secure the development of a dynamic process of interaction between private interests and public goals conducive to really social and economic positive aims.

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