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Exploring Networking of Third Sector Organizations: A Case Study Based on the *Quartieri Spagnoli* Neighborhood in Naples (Italy)

Giuseppe Lucio Gaeta¹ · Stefano Ghinoi² · Francesco Silvestri^{3,4} · Giorgia Trasciani^{1,5}

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Abstract In the last decades, European Third Sector Organizations have been increasingly affected by marketization and the reduction of public resources for social services, hence pushed to develop new strategies to accomplish their social mission while remaining economically efficient. The existing literature suggests that the activation of networking activities can be a strategy to overcome these problems. By using a partially mixed-methods approach, this study investigates factors that stimulate the TSOs' networking and attitudes toward different types of informal and formal networks. Our results suggest that TSOs try to cope with contextual challenges by activating both formal and informal networks, depending on financial and structural opportunities, but also suggest that the rationalities moving TSOs are highly heterogeneous.

Keywords Third Sector Organizations · Networking · Resource dependence theory · Partially mixed methods

Introduction

In recent decades, Third Sector Organizations (TSOs) have been significantly affected by a reduction in public funding devoted to social protection, along with the spread of market-based instruments and mechanisms to allocate this funding (Pape et al. 2016, 2019; Zimmer and Pahl 2016). As a consequence, the inter-organizational governance of TSOs has changed (Bode 2014), with the organizations developing fluid and market-responsive interactions among themselves (Grabher 2002), thereby increasing their inter-dependence (Casady et al. 2019).

According to the scholarly literature, networks are formed by actors and by the patterns of relationships that link them together (Scott and Carrington 2011). More specifically, inter-organizational networks arise through the establishment of relationships between two or more organizations aimed at achieving mutual benefits (Powell 1990). In this perspective, networking is the adapting strategy (Bouek 2018) carried out by TSOs to tackle the aforementioned issues (Marival et al. 2015). This is consistent with Resource Dependence Theory (RDT), which posits that organizations establish networks to acquire and maintain external resources (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978), thus enabling them to secure protection against turbulence and uncertainty.

TSOs have to manage differentiated networks because the heterogeneity of the social services they provide requires interactions with many partners (Guo and Acar 2005). This translates into the creation of multiple formal and informal inter-organizational links (Borgatti et al.

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2013; Isett and Provan 2005) that potentially allow them to gain a collaborative advantage (Vangen and Huxham 2005), and which are therefore valid means to achieve 'long-term network development and evolution' (Kapucu and Hu 2016: 401). While networking might determine these benefits, 'a growing body of research suggests a potential dark side to non-profit collaboration' (Witesman and Heiss 2017: 1502), which is represented by the rise of 'artificial' partnerships that lead to inefficiencies.

In line with such reasoning, networking may be accompanied by both advantages and drawbacks. Research is therefore needed to assess these benefits and drawbacks empirically, along with the conditions that cause them to arise. Unfortunately, there is a lack of empirical studies dedicated to TSO networking (Bouek 2018; López-Arceiz et al. 2017).

With this in mind, the present study aims to contribute to the existing literature by empirically investigating inter-organizational networking among TSOs and other stakeholders involved in the provision of social protection services. The objectives of the analysis are threefold. The paper aims to: (i) determine how the inter-organizational networking of TSOs is structured, (ii) investigate the organizational-level drivers of networking, and (iii) understand the sentiments of TSO staff about their networking experience.

Our analysis concentrates on the Quartieri Spagnoli neighborhood of Naples (southern Italy), a small urban area which is an adequate case study for our analysis because it is characterized by i) a high level of physical and social degradation (Pappalardo 2014), ii) a long tradition of TSO intervention, and iii) a lack of public funding for social policies. In line with the definition provided by the recent Italian Reform of the Third Sector,¹ our analysis takes into account all those 'organizations with an explicit aim of benefiting the community, initiated by a group of citizens and in which the material interests of capital investors are subject to limits' (Defourny and Nyssens 2010: 5, quoted in Nyssens 2008: 87), as well as other relevant stakeholders such as public authorities and schools. Furthermore, following Murray (1998) and Guo and Acar (2005), our study takes into account different types of informal and formal networks.

The inter-organizational networks that exist within the Quartieri Spagnoli were mapped during the Reverse Evaluation to Enhance Strategies (REVES) pilot evaluation project funded by the Department for Cohesion of the

Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers (Tagle and Celano 2018, Tagle et al. 2016). Data were collected between July 2014 and October 2015 through a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews. A partially mixed-methods approach is used for the analysis.

The paper is structured as follows. Section Two presents a short review of the relevant literature and highlights the study's research questions. Section Three provides essential information about the Quartieri Spagnoli neighborhood. Section Four illustrates the data collection process, while Section Five describes the methods used for the analysis. Section Six presents and discusses the main findings. Finally, Sect. 7 concludes.

Literature Review and Research Question

The evolution from welfare state to welfare mix (Vittadini 2002) that took place in the 1990s, along with the 2008 financial crisis (Steinebach et al. 2019), led to a significant reduction in public funding devoted to social protection, and a subsequent rise in uncertainty for TSOs. At the same time, the increasingly fragmented and uncertain nature of public management led to a new configuration of public governance, based on the participation of multiple actors in different stages of policy implementation (Osborne 2010).² In addition, the social service sector has taken interest in a notable projectification trend—with many public policy fields concerned (Godenhjelm et al. 2015)—that implies either discontinuing funding, or leaving it in a state of uncertainty (Geyer 2001; Whitley 2006), and which has forced TSOs to change their resource acquisition strategy (Dwivedi and Weerawardena 2018; McDonald 2007). In this context, scholars have observed that TSOs rely increasingly on building inter-organizational networks and participatory multi-actor projects (Sorrentino et al. 2018).

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of such networking for the social mission of TSOs (Fondazione Symbola – Unioncamere – Consorzio AASTER 2014; Guo and Acar 2005; O'Brien and Evans 2017). Indeed, TSOs are grounded in communities and rely on civil society and movements to strengthen trust-based relationships to promote social capital (Putnam 1993, 2000), which enables, in turn, the promotion of local regeneration and social integration from the bottom up (Moulaert et al. 2010; Enjolras and Sivesind 2018).

Alongside this social motivation, there are financial incentives to network. By building up large networks,

¹ In an attempt to reduce the fragmentation that traditionally affects the various entities belonging to the third sector, the Italian Reform of the Third Sector, implemented in 2016, gathers most of them (i.e., associations, foundations, social enterprises, including social cooperatives, philanthropic entities, voluntary organizations, etc.) under the common status of 'Entities of the Third Sector.'

² For instance, during the 1990s and early 2000s Italy introduced a number of national reforms that significantly increased TSO participation in the delivery of social services, in collaboration with public authorities or in compensation for the absence of public intervention (Bifulco and Facchini 2013; Ferrera 2012).

TSOs create a mixed resource base instead of simply relying on a single donor. Berrett and Holliday (2018) observe that this enables financial stability, a reduction in financial dependency, a reduction in uncertainty, and a lowering of fiscal risks. Furthermore, since projectification determines an increasing complexity in the provision of public services, it requires collaboration between multiple actors (Godenhjelm 2013), which may be achieved through networking.

It is crucial to analyze two elements when discussing TSO networking. First, what is the shape of the interaction between organizations that results from networking? On the one hand, networking strategies may be different in nature. Biermann and Harsch (2016) recognize a variety of informal and formal networking typologies; for example, networks may be based on the exchange of information (informal networks), the sharing of resources (e.g., human resources and facilities; formal networks), or the presence of project-based agreements (formal networks). On the other hand, networking may imply mutual interdependence, and therefore a sort of balance among networkers; or it may translate into the prevalence of the most powerful actors in the network over the others.

RDT suggests that organizations aiming to adapt to an uncertain environment (Hillman et al. 2009) implement a set of collaborative strategies, including inter-organizational arrangements (Wood and Gray 1991). Through the lens of RDT, organizations create and maintain networks to overcome respective resource and capacity limitations (Dania et al. 2018). In other words, organizations are constantly interacting with other actors in their environment to obtain resources, while simultaneously reducing external pressures (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). For instance, in the context of inter-organizational networks, a focal organization relates to other actors in control of important resources (Pfeffer and Salancik 2003), and its position in the network determines the governance structure (Gulati and Gargiulo 1999). While RDT describes organizations as being in a position of mutual interdependence with others, O'Brien and Evans (2017) sustain that networking relationships can also be characterized by unbalanced and mutual dependence. In the first case, an actor benefits from being in a position of power and claiming to exercise it in the decision-making process (Drees and Heugens 2013). In the second case, actors are characterized by bilateral dependency. Economic sociologists add to this picture by suggesting that actors embedded in different relational patterns can shape their network, favoring, or limiting others' access to resources (Granovetter 1985; Uzzi 1996). Taking these contributions as starting points, our analysis aims to investigate empirically how networking among TSOs is structured in the Quartieri Spagnoli area of Naples.

A second element concerns factors that might shape inter-organizational relationships. The RDT literature suggests that three factors are particularly relevant in explaining the shape of networks: the source of funding (Guo and Acar 2005); the organizational form of the organizations involved, i.e., whether organizations present the same legal structure and social objectives (Wymer and Samu 2003); and the level of expertise and competence (Selsky and Parker 2005).

Moving on from these contributions, our analysis aims to determine which factors drive TSO networking in the Quartieri Spagnoli area, and how TSOs perceive networking.

The Context of the Analysis: The Quartieri Spagnoli Neighborhood in Naples

To address its research objectives, this paper adopts a case study approach that focuses on the Quartieri Spagnoli, a small neighborhood in the southern Italian city of Naples. Italy is a fruitful context for our analysis. On the one hand, after 2009 this country experienced the sharpest reduction in total social protection expenditures anywhere in the Eurozone (Pavolini et al. 2016). On the other hand, Italian national law No. 328/2000 defined the role of TSOs in providing social services, identifying public calls for tenders as the most suitable way to select the organizations that would be tasked with providing social services, enhancing the projectification phenomenon described in the previous section and incentivizing the development of relationships between TSOs.

Using a specific case study, namely the Quartieri Spagnoli neighborhood of Naples, enables us to investigate TSO networking in depth through the collection of data that are not included in official statistics (Yin 1994). The Quartieri Spagnoli neighborhood is located in the center of Naples on a rising slope. Built in 1536 to house the Spanish soldiers garrisoned in Naples (which was then part of the Spanish Empire), it consists of a set of similar urban blocks arranged in a regular grid plan and delimited by six parallel and many orthogonal streets. The neighborhood was originally structured as a kind of enclave, a typical military quarter separated from the rest of the town and its social and urban functions (Di Maio and Rostirolla 2008). However, the Naples City Renovation Plan, adopted in the late nineteenth century, moved the city's main center for trade and arrivals from the harbor to the Quartieri Spagnoli, effectively making the neighborhood a blind alley for the port of Naples. This privileged function of entrance gate for merchants was strengthened during the twentieth century when the Quartieri Spagnoli acquired a visibly multi-ethnic appearance due to an increase in immigration.

Nowadays, the Quartieri Spagnoli includes 170 blocks of different buildings made of narrow stairwells and small rooms, which house around 14,000 people. The total area is 0.8 square kilometers.

Generally speaking, it is a poor neighborhood. Because of low rents and house prices, a small portion of the area is inhabited by the new upper and middle class and by the lower-medium working class. However, most of the residents endure difficult socioeconomic conditions. Laino (2012) suggests that Quartieri Spagnoli inhabitants include: those characterized by non-continuous and unofficial involvement in the labor market and affected by limited but existing cases of deviance; problematic, socially excluded families, with children frequently absent from school, and sustained by informal and even illicit networks; and immigrants, mostly from the Indian Subcontinent (Tamils, Singhalese, Bangladeshis, and Pakistanis), who live in the old depots left empty by abandoned workshops. The neighborhood has various social problems, for instance, children who leave school early, a high incidence of criminal activities, and paltry occupational opportunities. During the 1980s, many footwear and shoemaking shops were located in this neighborhood, and in the 1990s, it was also home to many leather goods workshops. However, in subsequent years craftsmanship activities moved out of central neighborhoods (similar to other Italian and European cities), a situation that in the Quartieri Spagnoli was further encouraged by logistical difficulties due to the area's peculiar layout and topography (Caianiello et al. 1998). In subsequent decades, the workshops made way for new activities dedicated to tourists (B&Bs, wineries, and restaurants). This phenomenon mainly concerns the zones bordering the heart of the revitalized city center (Discepolo 2008).

There is a long tradition of intervention by TSOs in the area. For example, one of the most renowned organizations, the Quartieri Spagnoli Association (AQS, coded TSO 01 in the following analysis), has been working there since the end of the 1970s (Wagenaar et al. 2015). TSOs working in the area have been severely affected by the reduction in public funding for social protection that has been experienced in recent times. In spite of this, the following section shows that nowadays there is a large number of TSOs working in the small area of the Quartieri Spagnoli.

Data Collection

To identify the stakeholders operating in the field of social protection within the Quartieri Spagnoli, we adopted a reputational approach, which uses the 'judgments of knowledgeable informants in delimiting participant actors' (Laumann et al. 1992: 67). Because of the presence of

multiple stakeholders in this area, each one involved in different activities, we relied on the judgments of knowledgeable informants. We, therefore, contacted the *Fondazione di Comunità del Centro Storico di Napoli*—one of the most important Neapolitan foundations supporting the development of social projects (coded FO 02)—to obtain information about the stakeholders active in the Quartieri Spagnoli. The *Fondazione* suggested an initial list of around 40 relevant stakeholders, which was subsequently expanded to 55 after consulting public documents on social projects activated in the neighborhood and taking the advice of local opinion leaders.

To the best of our knowledge, these 55 organizations represent the complete set of actors working in the social protection field in the area. With the population of the Quartieri Spagnoli at approximately 14,000 inhabitants, this means 255 residents per organization. In comparison, the same index calculated for the entire Campania region (i.e., the NUTS 2 region including Naples) reports 1870 inhabitants per organization.³

To collect information about the stakeholders' activities, between July 2014 and October 2015 we had them complete a dedicated questionnaire and conducted semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was created to collect quantitative data on the stakeholders' organizational structure, their (self-assessed) competencies, and their relationships, and was pre-tested with the representatives of the *Fondazione di Comunità del Centro Storico di Napoli*. Contextually, semi-structured interviews of approximately 90 min were undertaken to obtain qualitative data from the representatives of the organizations involved in planning, managing, and providing social services in the Quartieri Spagnoli.

At the end of the data collection phase, 14 organizations were involved in both the qualitative analysis and the quantitative analysis, 10 in the qualitative analysis only, and 11 in the quantitative analysis only. This means that 35 organizations out of the 55 operating in the Quartieri Spagnoli were involved in the study. Table 1 provides an overview of these organizations. They include Public Authorities (9, from PA 01a–e to PA 05), TSOs (16, TSO 01–TSO 16), Foundations (4, FO 01–FO 04), Schools (3, SC 01–SC 03), and Religious Organizations, namely local parishes (3, RO 01–RO 03).

³ According to official records, in Campania there are 1821 parishes, 508 primary schools, 237 TSOs, 6 foundations, and 550 public authorities. This means 3122 organizations of the kind considered in the present study, serving a community of 5,839,084 (data from Italian National Institute of Statistics, ISTAT).

Table 1 Respondents to qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (completion of the questionnaire) analysis

ID	Organization/stakeholder	Type of organization/ stakeholder	Size of the organization/ stakeholder	Date of the interview	Completion of the questionnaire
PA 01a	Municipality of Naples, Center for Youth Aggregation	Public authority	Large	December 11th, 2014	No
PA 01b	Municipality of Naples, District II (Involving QS)	Public authority	Large	December 9th, 2014	Yes
PA 01c	Municipality of Naples, Welfare dept.	Public authority	Large	December 9th, 2014	Yes
PA 01d	Municipality of Naples, City Planning Dept.	Public authority	Large	January 19th, 2015	No
PA 01e	Municipality of Naples, Education Dept.	Public authority	Large	March 25th, 2015	No
PA 02	Campania Regional government, Welfare Dept.	Public authority	Large	December 9th, 2014	No
PA 03	National Police	Public authority	Large	March 20th, 2015	No
PA 04	ASL Napoli 1 (Public health authority District 1 Naples)	Public authority	Large	July 9th, 2014	No
PA 05	Fondazione Banco di Napoli per l'infanzia	Public authority	Medium	March 24th, 2015	Yes
TSO 01	Associazione Quartieri Spagnoli (AQS)	Third Sector Organization	Medium	July 10th, 2014	Yes
TSO 02	Associazione Maestri di Strada	Third Sector Organization	Medium	January 21st, 2015	Yes
TSO 03	Associazione Ariete	Third Sector Organization	Medium	January 19th, 2015	Yes
TSO 04	Action Aid	Third Sector Organization	Large	January 19th, 2015	Yes
TSO 05	Associazione Efraim	Third Sector Organization	Small	March 25th, 2015	Yes
TSO 06	Save the Children ONLUS	Third Sector Organization	Large	November 6th, 2014	Yes
TSO 07	Associazione Cavalcavia	Third Sector Organization	Small	September 22nd, 2014	Yes
TSO 08	Associazione ABC	Third Sector Organization	Small	No	Yes
TSO 09	ScalzaBanda ONLUS	Third Sector Organization	Small	No	Yes
TSO 10	Associazione di volontariato 'Un uovo mondo'	Third Sector Organization	Small	No	Yes
TSO 11	Filosofia Fuori le Mura	Third Sector Organization	Small	No	Yes
TSO 12	Il Millepiedi (Cooperativa Sociale)	Third Sector Organization	Small	No	Yes
TSO 13	Centro Studi Ksenia	Third Sector Organization	Small	No	Yes
TSO 14	AGESCI (scout) NA 2	Third Sector Organization	Large	No	Yes
TSO 15	Associazione AEMAS	Third Sector Organization	Small	No	Yes
TSO 16	Associazione Socialmente pericolosi	Third Sector Organization	Small	January 20st, 2015	No
FO 01	Fondazione con il Sud	Foundation	Large	October 8th, 2015	No

Table 1 continued

ID	Organization/stakeholder	Type of organization/ stakeholder	Size of the organization/ stakeholder	Date of the interview	Completion of the questionnaire
FO 02	Fondazione di Comunità del Centro Storico di Napoli	Foundation	Medium	July 9th, 2014	Yes
FO 03	Fondazione Quartieri Spagnoli - FOQUS	Foundation	Small	May 15th, 2015	Yes
FO 04	Fondazione Valenzi	Foundation	Small	No	Yes
SC 01	IC D'Aosta-Scura	Public Primary School	Medium	September 23th, 2014	Yes
SC 02	Scuola Media Statale Carlo Poerio	Public Secondary School	Medium	March 23th, 2015	No
SC 03	IC Ristori	Public Primary School	Medium	March 18th, 2015	No
RO 01	Parrocchia di Santa Maria del Carmine alla Concordia	Religious organization	Small	March 18th, 2015	Yes
RO 02	Parrocchia Concezione a Montecalvario	Religious organization	Small	No	Yes
RO 03	Parrocchia SS Francesco e Matteo	Religious organization	Small	No	Yes

Methodology

The analysis is based on a partially mixed-methods approach (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2009), which allows us to examine case studies through quantitative and qualitative data. Unlike the fully mixed-methods approach, the quantitative and qualitative data analyses are conducted separately—either concurrently or sequentially—before being mixed in the data interpretation stage. The decision to use a partially mixed-methods approach is based on the idea that using different types of data makes it possible to gain a deeper understanding of TSO networking while overcoming the weaknesses inherent in using a quantitative or qualitative data analysis approach by itself (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2002). For this reason, we decided to inform the quantitative phase by conducting a qualitative phase, based on the idea that a singular conclusion drawn by findings corroborated through different approaches inspires greater confidence (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004).

The quantitative analysis is carried out by applying social network analysis (SNA) to the relational data collected through the questionnaire mentioned in Sect. 4. As reported above, 25 organizations were involved in the SNA (details are reported in Table 1). The qualitative analysis is based on an examination of the face-to-face semi-structured interviews described in Sect. 4. As described above, 24 organizations were involved in this part of the analysis (details are reported in Table 1). Finally, results are discussed in an integrated quantitative–qualitative framework.

SNA is used to investigate actors' relational patterns and their effects on actors' activities (Scott and Carrington 2011). In our study, we focus on the network relationships of the Quartieri Spagnoli stakeholders that are involved in the provision of social protection services; therefore, in addition to TSOs, we also included foundations (FOs), public authorities (PAs), religious organizations (ROs), and schools (SCs) as network actors. To collect primary data in specific contexts, network studies rely on surveys and questionnaires (Marsden 2005); in the present instance network data were collected through a questionnaire using a roster method, which enables the collection of full network data on a pre-defined population (Scott and Carrington 2011). We included the complete list of 55 stakeholders (roster) signaled as operating in Quartieri Spagnoli and asked the respondents (i.e., the individuals in charge of responding for the organization) to indicate the stakeholders with whom their organization had relationships from 2011 to 2014. The first Regional Social Plan (*Piano Sociale Regionale*), aimed at the development of local social activities, ended in 2011 (Regione Campania, 2009); hence, we used this threshold to analyze what happened next. Although we are aware that memory bias could affect the stakeholders' responses, providing a roster with all the stakeholders operating in the Quartieri Spagnoli reduces the problem of forgetting past relationships since respondents can identify each stakeholder. Large rosters present problems of data collection bias due to the reduced concentration of respondents (Marsden 2005);

however, our roster included only 55 stakeholders, and so we were able to create an easily readable one-sheet matrix. As regards the time window, three years is a reasonable period for recalling past activities related to inter-organizational networks in a local context,⁴ since the involvement of stakeholders in such activities can be particularly intense.

As regards relationship types, we mapped informal and formal networks (Biermann and Harsch 2016) by distinguishing between:

- the exchange of information between stakeholders (informal network);
- the sharing of resources (human resources and facilities) between stakeholders (formal network);
- the presence of formal project-based agreements between stakeholders (formal network).

These networks are represented by three symmetric adjacency matrices. An adjacency matrix Y is a square matrix where Y_{ij} represents the relation between actor i and actor j , which assumes a value equal to one if there is a relation between actor i and actor j , and zero otherwise (Scott and Carrington 2011). To investigate drivers of inter-organizational collaboration networks among stakeholders, we apply exponential random graph models (ERGMs). ERGMs are used in SNA to explore what drives the formation of ties (Robins et al. 2007). ERGMs overcome the problem of non-independency of network data while providing an estimation process that includes the structural network configurations and actor and dyadic attributes to estimate the probability that a tie exists.

The general form of an ERGM is as follows (Lusher et al. 2012):

$$\Pr(Y = y) = \left(\frac{1}{k}\right) \exp\left\{\sum_B \eta_B g_B(y)\right\}$$

The probability that the observed network y is identical to the randomly generated network Y is given by an exponential model, assuming that η_B is the parameter corresponding to network configuration B , and $g_{B(y)}$ is the network statistic corresponding to configuration B . K is a normalizing quantity that ensures a proper probability distribution of the ERGM. Different ERGMs are estimated for each one of the three informal and formal networks. The following network configurations, actor and dyadic attributes are included in the models:

- EDGE: a variable that controls for the number of edges in the network (comparable to the constant in regression models);

- TSO: an actor attribute (dummy variable) to take into account the distinction between TSOs and other organizations (1 = TSOs and 0 = other organizations);
- SIZE: an actor attribute (continuous variable) that relates to the size of the organization, expressed as the number of employees and volunteers;
- BALANCE: a network statistic equal to the number of triads in the network that are balanced (types 102 or 300 in the categorization of Davis and Leinhardt (1972)). This statistic controls for the presence of triads where organizations show a balanced relational structure;
- FINANCE: a dyadic attribute equal to one if two organizations share the same source of funding (public or private), and zero otherwise;
- ORG_FORM: a dyadic attribute equal to one if two organizations share the same organizational form (foundation; public authority; religious organization; school; TSO), and zero otherwise;
- EXPERTISE: an index of similarity between two organizations created by comparing the self-assessed competences of the organizations on providing specific social services.⁵ The higher the value between two organizations, the lower the level of similarity between them.

The qualitative part of the analysis is based on interviews with representatives of the organizations involved. By using the information gathered through the interviews in combination with the SNA results, we were able to explore actors' perspectives and analyze what they meant, giving us a more detailed understanding of their opinions about networking. As they are embedded in the local context, they can contribute a good deal of information about the described phenomenon, as well as about the dynamics and the process through which TSOs have implemented their networking strategies. The qualitative data, meanwhile, are based on the interviewers' categories: through the semi-structured interviews, key actors were guided to explore and show how phenomena occur, based on their own experience.

⁵ We asked respondents to fill in a Likert scale from one (no competences) to five (strong competences) for each of the following fields of activity: training; prevention of school dropout; support for work-related problems; family support; poverty reduction; recreational-educational activities; job placement; project management for local development. Each respondent had to complete the questionnaire on behalf of her/his organization. The index values for each pair of organizations were estimated using the DISSIM Stata Module (Cox 1999). We are aware that self-perceived and objectively measured competences might differ. Nevertheless, self-perception of one's own competences and of competences held by other organizations may be a driver of decisions about building inter-organizational relationships. In this perspective, relying on self-perceived competences is adequate for our study.

⁴ See the seminal work by Giuliani and Pietrobelli (2011) about SNA methodologies for evaluating cluster development programs.

During the interviews, a conceptual guide grid was used to structure the interviews, considering a certain variation for specific actors. Three main topics were investigated: (i) the activities carried out in the Quartieri Spagnoli; (ii) funding sources; and (iii) the nature of the interactions among local stakeholders. As regards activities, each interview was focused on the specific needs of the Quartieri Spagnoli, the instruments used by the organization, and the presence/absence of the public institutions in the area. For funding sources, the interviews focused on the distinction between public and private sources, and the use of direct grants, public calls for tenders, and differences between national and European projects. Finally, researchers asked about interactions with the other organizations, focusing on factors that could foster or impede them, and on the frequency and nature of interactions.

After the data collection phase, the researchers read and coded the transcriptions, selecting words, phrases, and sentences that addressed the networking strategy issues. Following Saldana (2012: 3), a code was taken to be 'most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language or visual data.' To explore the SNA results in depth, we regrouped the codes into a smaller number of categories: the rationale behind networking, its nature, and the mechanisms of governance on which networking is based. Each data analysis table was completed with the relevant codes, and direct quotes from the interviews were used to illustrate them. In a subsequent step of the research, each scholar wrote an analytic memo addressing the research questions. A discussion among researchers based on the analytic memos allowed us to evaluate the most effective way to highlight the stories told by the interviewees concerning the TSOs' activities in the Quartieri Spagnoli.

Results

Results from the Quantitative Analysis of the Questionnaire Data

As highlighted above, of the 55 listed organizations working in the Quartieri Spagnoli, 25 completed the questionnaire. The resulting response rate (45%) is higher than that reported by other similar studies (e.g., Guo and Acar 2005). Furthermore, although we do not cover the whole network, there are no substantial differences in the composition of respondents and non-respondents. Public schools (SCes) are the only stakeholders that are under-represented in our dataset, as we have one respondent out of four potential respondents/schools operating in the neighborhood.

The final dataset includes fifteen TSOs, three FOs, three PAs, three ROs, and one SC. Three TSOs can be considered as large organizations, with more than 100 employees and/or volunteers. They operate at a national and international level and have a completely different organizational structure to the other TSOs operating in the area. Most of the respondents rely predominantly on private funds (76%) to finance their activities. These activities appear to have a degree of heterogeneity; respondents seem particularly strong in organizing and managing recreational-educational activities (4.24 over 5), as well as activities for preventing children from dropping out of school (3.88 over 5), which is one of the most critical social problems in the area. In contrast, activities dedicated to professional training and job placement present the lowest scores (2.48 and 2.36 over 5, respectively). This is indicative of the specificities of the local environment: as described in Sect. 3, the Quartieri Spagnoli is characterized by problematic families that need support for their children, to avoid their involvement in illicit networks (Laino 2012); therefore, stakeholders with the capacities to organize recreational-educational activities supporting students are particularly relevant in this context. At the same time, stakeholders with the capacity to support unemployed people are equally important in the Quartieri Spagnoli, although the problematic situation afflicting the job market in southern Italian cities such as Naples (high unemployment rates, lack of qualified jobs, and a large amount of undeclared work),⁶ is too complex to be managed in a single neighborhood.

Table 2 illustrates the main descriptive statistics calculated by looking at our sample.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the graphs representing, respectively, the information exchange network, the resource sharing network, and the project-based network. At first glance, there is a high similarity between these three networks, which is confirmed by the network statistics presented in Table 3: density, number of observed ties, and average number of connections are similar across all three networks.

Moreover, quadratic assignment procedure (QAP) correlation results (Table 4) confirm this similarity: the information exchange network is positively correlated with the resource sharing (0.665) and project-based networks (0.744); moreover, the resource sharing and project-based networks are also strongly correlated (0.680). This finding suggests that sharing information, resources, and projects are almost inseparable.

The ERGMs results are illustrated in Table 5. Models 1a-1c only include the control variables, i.e., the number of

⁶ For a review on undeclared work in southern Italy, see Stame (2004).

Table 2 Respondents to the questionnaire; descriptive statistics

Variable	Variable description	Variable type	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Size	Number of employees/volunteers	Continuous	22	35	52	1	230
Finance	Prevailing type of financing	Dummy (0 = public; 1 = private)	25	0.76	0.44	0	1
Org_form	Type of organization	Categorical	25	15 TSOs 3 foundations 3 public authorities 3 religious organizations 1 public school			
Expertise: professional training	Self-assessment about the organization's expertise on professional training activities	Ordered scale (1 = no competences; 5 = strong competences)	25	2.48	1.39	1	5
Expertise: school dropout	Self-assessment about the organization's expertise on preventing school dropout	Ordered scale (1 = no competences; 5 = strong competences)	25	3.88	1.16	1	5
Expertise: support to work-related problems	Self-assessment about the organization's expertise on activities dedicated to work-related problems	Ordered scale (1 = no competences; 5 = strong competences)	25	2.72	1.24	1	4
Expertise: poverty reduction	Self-assessment about the organization's expertise on poverty reduction activities	Ordered scale (1 = no competences; 5 = strong competences)	25	2.96	1.40	1	5
Expertise: family support service	Self-assessment about the organization's expertise on family support service	Ordered scale (1 = no competences; 5 = strong competences)	25	3.28	1.57	1	5
Expertise: recreational-educational activities	Self-assessment about the organization's expertise on recreational-educational activities	Ordered scale (1 = no competences; 5 = strong competences)	25	4.24	0.97	1	5
Expertise: job placement	Self-assessment about the organization's expertise on job placement	Ordered scale (1 = no competences; 5 = strong competences)	25	2.36	1.19	1	5
Expertise: project management	Self-assessment about the organization's expertise on project management	Ordered scale (1 = no competences; 5 = strong competences)	25	3.09	1.38	1	5

edges in the network (EDGE), the dummy variable that identifies TSOs (TSO), the size of the organizations (SIZE), and the variable that observes the presence of balanced relational structures in the network (BALANCE). Models 2a–2c also consider the edge attributes that observe whether the organizations share the same form of funding (FINANCE), the same organizational form (ORG_FORM), and one variable that measures dissimilarity in the organizations' expertise (EXPERTISE). These are the drivers of networking that are highlighted by the RDT literature and whose impact we want to investigate specifically. The estimated coefficients of the parameters reflect the change in the log-odds likelihood of a tie for a unit change in the predictors; i.e., the exponential function is used for conversion into a probability.

As regards the control variables, the results of Models 1a–1c show that TSO has a negative sign in all models, but only has a statistically significant effect for the establishment of project-based collaborations. In other words, being a TSO per se negatively influences the networking behavior in the case of project-based relationships. This result may be due to the lack of incentives to become involved in intense collaborations; these organizations perceive flexibility as an asset, and a constrictive (from a bureaucratic perspective) agreement would have to include very favorable terms to be considered.

The size of an organization has no particular effects, while the observation of a balanced relational structure in the network always has a negative impact; i.e., the more balanced a network's structures are (i.e., the more balanced the distribution of power is within the network), the less

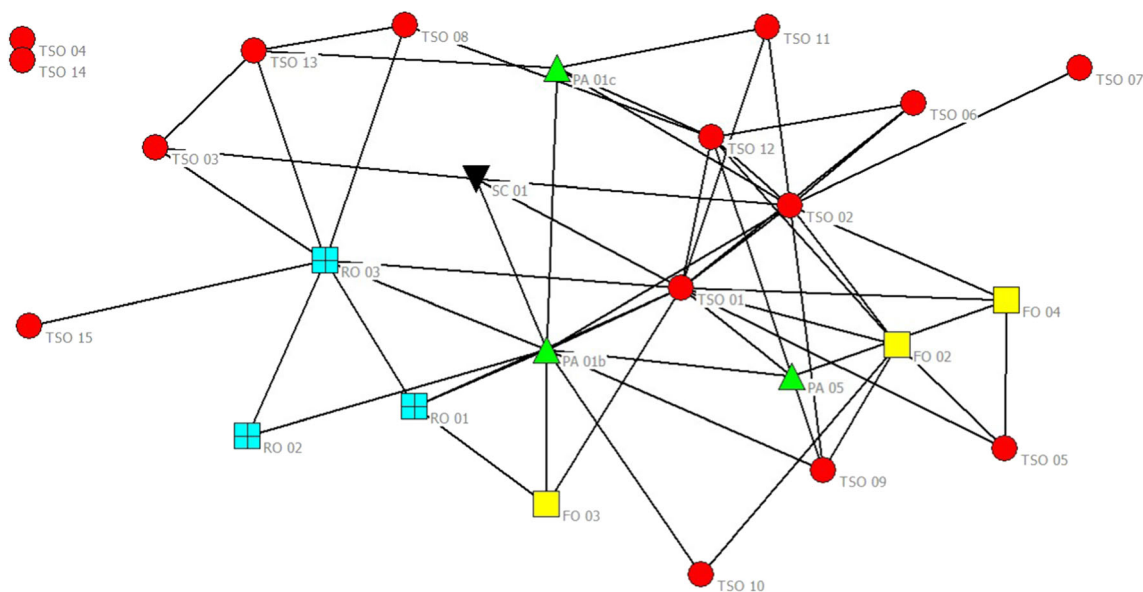


Fig. 1 Information exchange network. *Legend:* red circle nodes are TSOs; yellow square nodes are foundations; green up triangle nodes are public authorities; light blue box nodes are religious organizations; black down triangle nodes are schools (Color figure online)

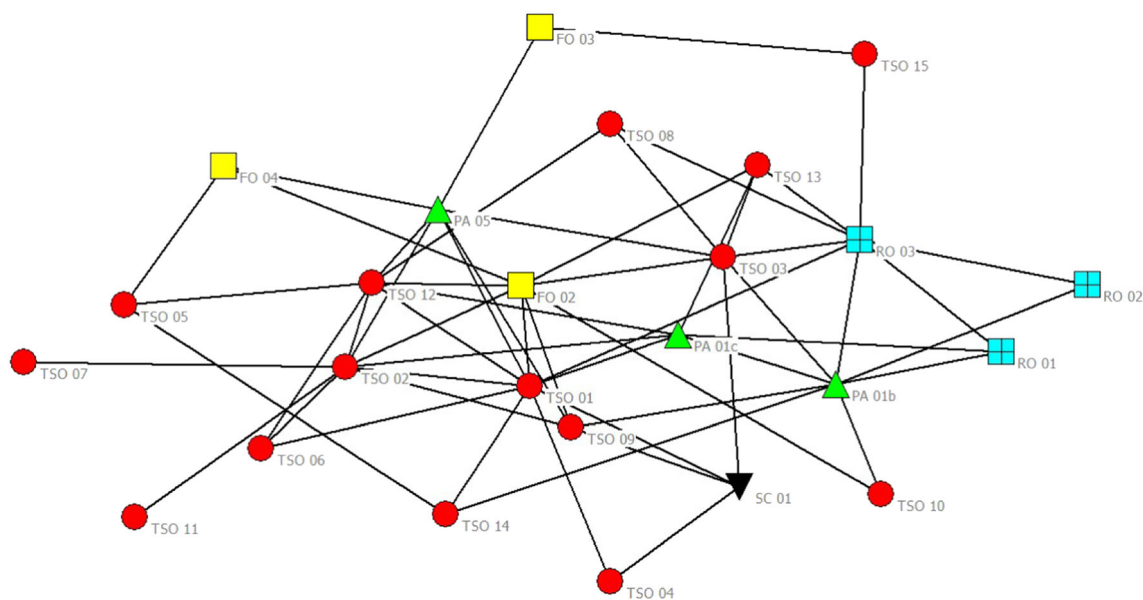


Fig. 2 Resources sharing network. *Legend:* red circle nodes are TSOs; yellow square nodes are foundations; green up triangle nodes are public authorities; light blue box nodes are religious organizations; black down triangle nodes are schools (Color figure online)

willing the stakeholders will be to establish relationships. A possible interpretation of this result is that a balanced distribution of power translates into a higher degree of competition, rather than deeper collaboration. In this perspective, stakeholders prefer the presence of a leader, who coordinates the others and manages the presence of unbalanced internal responsibilities.

The introduction of edge attributes in ERGMs (Models 2a–2c) results in a new picture. If stakeholders compete for the same (public or private) source of funding

(‘FINANCE’), the propensity to network is negative and statistically significant. This is true when looking at the exchange of information networks (Model 2a) and project-based collaborations (Model 2c). Regarding the former, trust is an essential component in the exchange of information: sharing information with a competitor for resources, therefore, prevents stakeholders from establishing these relationships because of the lack of trust. The latter suggests that stakeholders perceive each other as

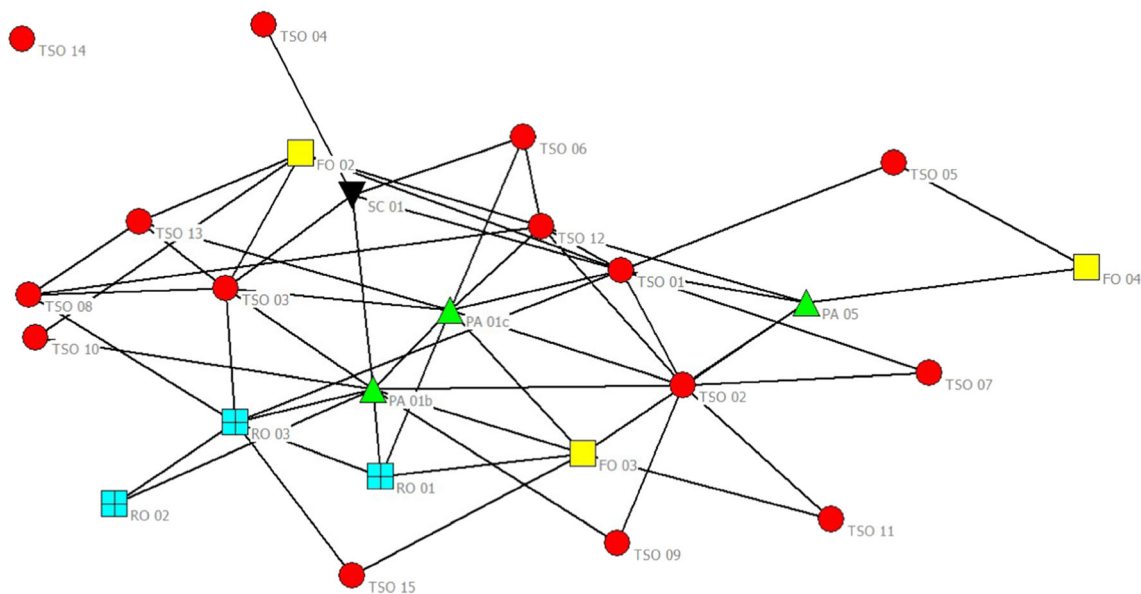


Fig. 3 Project-based network. *Legend:* red circle nodes are TSOs; yellow square nodes are foundations; green up triangle nodes are public authorities; light blue box nodes are religious organizations; black down triangle nodes are schools (Color figure online)

Table 3 Networks descriptive statistics

	Density	Number of ties	Average degree
Information exchange	0.092	55	2.200
Resources sharing	0.095	57	2.280
Project based	0.092	55	2.200

competitors in the funding market, rather than allies or potential allies.

Sharing the same organizational form ('ORG_FORM') has a negative effect both on the information exchange and the resource sharing networks, but not on the development of project-based collaborations. Therefore, we can assume that TSOs prefer to exchange information and share resources with stakeholders other than TSOs, although project-based collaborations are created irrespective of the type of participating stakeholders.

Finally, when stakeholders present the same expertise level on the provision of specific social services ('EXPERTISE'), there is a generalized tendency to reduce both formal and informal relationships. A possible

explanation may stem from the idea that in any type of networking activity (exchanging information, sharing resources, or developing project-based collaborations) stakeholders prefer to rely on those who have complementary skills, to differentiate their offer and acquire new competencies. This would be a result consistent with that found for the variable that measures balance in the network (BALANCE).

Results from the Qualitative Analysis

The semi-structured interviews underscored the high complexity of inter-organizational networks, as well as the actors' mixed feelings about existing inter-organizational bonds.

The analysis of the interviews furthers the insights taken from the SNA but focuses on one-to-one relationships rather than the general picture considered in the previous section. The information collected through the interviews was organized to understand what role the interviewed actors play in the three networks explored (information sharing, resource sharing, and project-based networks). In this way, the description of the networking interactions that

Table 4 QAP correlations

	Information exchange	Resources sharing	Project based
Information exchange	1.000		
Resources sharing	0.665***	1.000	
Project-based	0.744***	0.680***	1.000

* $p \leq 0.05$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

Table 5 ERGMs results

	Model 1a: Information exchange	Model 1b: Resources sharing	Model 1c: Project-based	Model 2a: Information exchange	Model 2b: Resources sharing	Model 2c: Project-based
EDGE	– 1.441	– 0.473***	– 0.511***	0.759***	0.305***	0.563***
TSO	– 0.210	– 0.147	– 0.322*	– 0.109	0.023	– 0.379**
SIZE	– 0.000	0.000	0.000	– 0.000	– 0.000	0.000
BALANCE	– 0.126***	– 0.097***	– 0.076***	– 0.112***	– 0.093***	– 0.070**
FINANCE				– 0.541**	– 0.321	– 0.390***
ORG_FORM				– 0.239***	– 0.301***	0.070
EXPERTISE				– 0.155***	– 0.145**	– 0.174***
AIC	277.1	291.2	281.8	274.3	293.1	282.7
BIC	291.9	306.1	296.6	300.2	319.0	308.6

Statistical significance: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$

arises from the interviews allows us to inspect the features of the interactions from a given organization's point of view. Data extracted from the interviews are presented in the following subsections. For each quotation, a code that identifies the corresponding organization is reported in squared brackets.

The Information Sharing Network

The ERGM findings highlight that TSOs tend to interact with other organizations. Hence, different organizations speak a 'common language' that allows them to establish a relationship. Information collected through the interviews reveals that informal networks operating in the Quartieri Spagnoli consist of the personal networks of the volunteers and of the civil servants working in the neighborhood, who act as bridges among organizations. All this mixing is fostered by a strong sense of community in the area.

Relationships are Naples' great strength; we are always in a relationship with someone else. The network is essential; it is 'the educating community' (schools, territory and municipalities, parishes and private social) [TSO 05].

The central organizations in the information sharing network are the *Quartieri Spagnoli Association*, or AQS (TSO 01), the District II of the Municipality of Naples (PA 01b), and the *Maestri di Strada Association* (TSO 02). These organizations are crucial in maintaining relationships with others. They show a large number of interactions (10–11), while those of other organizations are much lower (3–4 connections each). While District II of the Municipality of Naples is the closest public actor to the neighborhood's citizens, AQS and *Maestri di Strada Association* are both associations that have been deeply rooted in the area for decades.

Funded in the 1980s, the AQS has been recognized as a central actor in the neighborhood's dynamics because of its ability to capture and translate the needs of the neighborhood's inhabitants. During the 1980s it dealt principally with the prostitution issue, while during the 1990s it acquired legitimacy among the inhabitants with the creation of a social point of contact for vulnerable people (*Sportello Sociale*), and thanks also to its work on early school dropouts, one of the area's most pronounced social problems in recent years [TSO 03, TSO 04, PA 05]. The AQS has been particularly good at recognizing that inhabitants of the Quartieri Spagnoli have material needs and that, due to their lower levels of education and social integration, they find it hard to contact public institutions successfully to ask for support. Since the beginning of its activities, the AQS has tried to channel citizens' requests to relevant institutional bodies.

The organization serves as a filter between the inhabitants and the local public authorities, in particular the center for social services⁷ [PA 01c].

The public authorities recognize that the AQS is the glue holding together the local network [PA 01c]:

They return twice as much as they take [PA 01a].

Maestri di Strada was originally developed by the AQS in 1998 as a project to fight school dropouts. Nowadays, it is an autonomous association, still closely linked to the AQS, and also connected to other TSOs. Children leaving school early is a serious problem in the neighborhood, and for remedial actions to work properly, collaboration is needed among all the actors involved, including social services, public authorities, schools, and TSOs. These

⁷ Our own translation from the Italian transcription of the interview; the same applies to the following statements.

actors work together to reduce the number of pupils who drop out before the end of secondary education, and for this reason, schools contact social workers and volunteers from local TSOs directly to signal the most vulnerable children and potential beneficiaries of assistance.

More generally, the semi-structured interviews revealed that TSOs are identified as legitimized actors in the area, and as 'territorial references.' 'The public authorities recognize the central role that TSOs play as front-line organizations, and the role played by informality and trust in maintaining citizens' support' [PA 01b].

The local associations represent a barricade against crime [PA 03].

For these reasons, exchanging information with them is perceived as being particularly important. Indeed, institutions often address difficult cases to the existing TSOs and also inform them about specific cases that need particular attention. Furthermore, they frequently exchange information with the local parishes (RO 01, RO 02, RO 03), especially to develop child services [PA 01c].

Resource Sharing Network

The resource sharing network appears to be very similar to the information sharing network. Nevertheless, in this case, a couple of associations are more prominent than others. This is the case of the social cooperative *Millepiedi* (TSO 12) and of the *Ariete Onlus* Association (TSO 03); both these organizations, together with the AQS and *Maestri di Strada* association, are demonstrated as being central in the resource sharing network.

The resources most commonly exchanged are spaces where activities can be carried out, as well as human resources.

Ariete Onlus is linked with the *ABC association* (TSO 08), the *d'Aosta-Scura* public school (SC 1), and District II of the Municipality of Naples (PA 01b). The school offers its spaces, classrooms, and materials to carry out activities that involve young students after school. This activity has always been one of the most successful in the neighborhood.

Another example of a TSO that exchanges resources is the *Efraim* association (TSO 05). Founded by nuns, the organization is closely connected to the Catholic organizations that exist in the area. A space for developing its activities is provided by the church, free of charge. It carries out projects that support minors and works in close collaboration with the parish and the Scouts (*AGESCI scout Naples 2* – TSO 14). The Scouts volunteer in a number of activities, such as the *Una Finestra sul Mestiere* (A *Window on a Craft*) workshop, where young people can learn craft trades, and *Fratello Maggiore* (*Elder Brother*),

where teenagers are called upon to act as tutors to primary school children.

As regards the exchange of human resources, the semi-structured interviews revealed that the inter-organizational collaborations are characterized by sectoral expertise, since most of the organizations mentioned above work on projects directed against children dropping out of school. The AQS is at the heart of the network of human resources exchange. As it is the oldest TSO working in the area, it has often been the first employer for social workers who are now active in other TSOs or public authorities, such as District II.

We all come from AQS, one way or another [TSO 16].

Indeed, it worth noting that human resources sharing among the organizations working in the Quartieri Spagnoli is determined by a complex overlapping of individuals' roles. On the one hand, volunteers working in the area are frequently also civil servants; on the other hand, sometimes, after years of precarious employment in TSOs, social workers obtain permanent positions in the public sector that allow them to continue working on the Quartieri Spagnoli.

Projects Based Network

National reforms carried out at the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s strongly encouraged the implementation of welfare policies through local public–private partnerships activated by a call for projects. On the one hand, this strategy increased transparency in the allocation of public resources; on the other hand, it involved a set of procedures (such as participating in the call to tender, reporting activities, accounting) that are a significant burden on the organizations. Three main considerations about project-based networks arose from the interviews.

First, most of the TSO representatives we interviewed reported significant difficulties in developing new projects [TSO 03, TSO 07, FO 01, PA 05]. In particular, they thought that participating in calls for projects set by the European Union required administrative and managerial skills that were beyond their capabilities [TSO 05]. Small TSOs, which cannot undergo organizational restructuring, are not able to allocate resources for developing these kinds of projects at all [TSO 01].

Second, the call for proposal mechanism of funding was perceived as limited. Indeed, calls for proposals often require innovative projects. In other words, innovation is prioritized, even at the price of losing adherence to the context and the ability to support the real needs of the neighborhood [FO 01]. In consequence, organizations have to struggle to focus on outcomes rather than outputs, and

innovation comes at the expense of continuity [PA 01b]). Furthermore:

Over and over, the projects that were implemented failed to take into account the real needs of the neighborhood. They were not widely shared, and failed to achieve the expected results [PA 01b].

Third, uncertainty is perceived as a serious problem. Organizations adapt to the context: they grow and shrink in size depending on the available funds. The case of the AQS is emblematic: during the 1990s, it experienced a period of growth, in terms of activities and number of employees, which has changed drastically in the last two decades. The dependency of projects on public funds influences TSO activities. On the one hand, the activities financed by projects do not necessarily correspond to the original activities performed by the organizations. A significant 'mission drift' has been observed in many cases (in particular for the AQS, the *Fondazione Banco Napoli per l'Infanzia*, and the *Associazione Ariete*). Furthermore, the trend of securing funding while compromising the initial organizational objectives has also been confirmed by the large number of projects that focus on the same issue (school dropouts), even though other serious social issues characterize the neighborhood. On the other hand, once projects are finished, it is difficult to maintain a standard in the provision of services without receiving further public financing. Because of this, projects sometimes end simply because organizations are not able to continue the activity independently and not because of their inability to reach the targets [TSO 01, PA 05, PA 01a, PA 01b, PA 01c]. Therefore, the sector is characterized by high and problematic discontinuity and fragmentation in the provision of services.

In this context, networking is considered as an opportunity [TSO 01, TSO 02], because: (i) it could be a way to overcome the difficulties that TSOs experience in participating in calls for projects; (ii) it assists the development of new and innovative projects; and (iii) it allows organizations to cope with the resource uncertainty that derives from the dependency of projects on public funds, which are by no means guaranteed to continue indefinitely.

Nevertheless, formal networking through the share of resources and the establishment of project-based networks are not perceived as being totally positive. The stability of networks is a necessary condition to be eligible for calls for projects, and therefore to access funding. In this respect, the criteria for eligibility to participate in calls are very stringent and leave little freedom of choice [TSO 01, PA 01c].

Overall, the interviews confirm the tendency of TSOs to compete rather than collaborate [TSO 02]. Rivalry for

access to financial resources is very common. This finding corroborates the ERGM results.

There is a market for social services... there's a slightly unhealthy dynamic in the world of volunteering [TSO 05].

The interviewees also indicated a propensity for hierarchy, which leaves little room for the co-creation of policies aimed at the provision of social services [TSO 01].

An example is the PON F3 '*Studiamo Insieme*' [Let's study together]. In this project, the need to realize a strong horizontal network, emphasized at the beginning, was disavowed by the system of implementation. A coordination group was appointed to enable 'school polycratic governance,' and support the implementation of this project by exchanging information and developing guidance. And yet under the leading partner, we witnessed a resurgence of monocratic direction [TSO 02].

For this reason, some organizations, in particular newcomers, prefer not to become involved in several networks [TSO 03, TSO 05], or projects.

Often calls for proposals require projects with fixed schemes to be proposed even before needs become evident. On the contrary, we intercept the needs and start the projects. Then we think about how to finance them [TSO 05].

Consequently, the inter-organizational mechanisms described by the respondents do not translate into the co-creation of services or the process of programming as a shared perspective.

Nevertheless, the information collected through the semi-structured interviews confirms that organizations enter into networks to meet material needs, even if this strategy sometimes turns out to be a double-edged sword.

Conclusions

In recent years, TSOs have faced increasing difficulties in remaining economically sustainable, due to the decrease in public resources devolved to social policies (Pape et al. 2016). As an adapting strategy to challenge this problem, TSOs may be encouraged to establish relational networks among each other or with other organizations (Proulx et al. 2014). Resource Dependence Theory (Friedland and Alford 1991; Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) claims that networking might allow TSOs to achieve stability and institutional recognition, thereby reducing uncertainty and dependence. However, scholars suggest that network embeddedness is not a positive condition per se (see

Witesman and Heiss 2017) since it could be due to necessity instead of opportunity.

Our investigation of the TSOs working in the Quartieri Spagnoli, a problematic neighborhood in the city of Naples (Italy) where public resources for social protection interventions have declined in recent years, suggests that local TSOs have managed to create inter-organizational networks that enable heterogeneous relationships, both informal (information exchange) and more structured (resource sharing and project-based networks).

Dissimilarity in terms of funding sources and organizational structures is a fundamental driver of networking among the organizations analyzed. Sharing the same funding source, the same organizational features and the same expertise translates into perceiving each other as competitors and this, in turn, reduces the propensity to collaborate.

Our analysis also reveals that TSOs are more likely to relate with other organizations based on formal projects. Building informal networks is considered a beneficial strategy, while opinions about being formally involved in partnerships are less positive. As a matter of fact, TSOs perceive that project dependency with other organizations can produce a lock-in effect on their daily activities. Nevertheless, the analysis highlights that the innovative projects requested by public calls require heterogeneous competencies that drive formal networking.

These findings confirm that establishing networks is a valuable instrument for enhancing TSOs' territorial anchorage, supporting TSOs' activities and legitimacy, and, in line with Resource Dependency Theory, creating a mixed resource base for achieving economic stability. Nevertheless, our study also reveals that sometimes networks are built merely to obtain funding opportunities because it is explicitly requested by calls. Therefore, as demonstrated by recent studies on the implementation of network associations in the third sector (Kallman 2017; Williamson 2012), there is a risk of failures in innovating strategies because of the inadequacy of network governance, which inhibits the adoption of shared practices and creates a locked system that produces problems of access to resources. TSO behavior is therefore biased by these distortions that prevent them from making decisions on a sound basis related to specific needs.

This paper contributes to filling the gap in the literature on the TSO networking strategy; however, it is not without limitations. First, our analysis does not consider the presence of possible intra-organizational issues, like leadership problems and job satisfaction, as well as external political elements that influence the relational system of the local stakeholders. Second, we have collected data referring to a specific point in time, while a longitudinal study would provide new insights on network evolution and the

temporal interactions between one form of networking strategy and the others. Third, we have not accounted for the effects on the provision of social services of establishing one or more networks between stakeholders. Therefore, we encourage future research to explore new evaluation methods to achieve this objective, linking network properties and outcome performance.

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