INSTITUTIONS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION BETWEEN FIRMS

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1. Complementarity, co-ordination and regulation costs

The setting up of formal co-operative relationships between competitors, as in providing any club collective good depends on the solution of collective action dilemmas and co-ordination of choice between agents. The expectation of significant advantages from co-operation is in fact not sufficient to ensure that a collective project is put into action. In this article we hypothesize that, apart from free riding and opportunism, there are other reasons for lack or failure of co-operative action. One of these reasons is linked with the

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- 1 J.M. Buchanan, 'Una teoria economica dei club', in J.M. Buchanan, Stato mercato e libertà (Bologna 1989) 147 165; M. Olson, The logic of collective action (Harvard 1965); R. Hardin, Collective action (Baltimore 1982). Cp. E. Sachwald, 'Cooperative agreements and the theory of the firm: focusing on barriers to change', Journal of Economic Behaviour & Organization (1988) vol. 35, 203 225. 'The most striking type of agreements involves competitors () Equity joint ventures are easy to identify, but many co-operative agreements involve joint activities without the creation of a new corporate entity and even without equity shareholding from the parties. A number of studies thus consider that the important point is the existence of a common project, and hence a need for co-ordination over time, rather than a specific type of agreement between parties' (204; emphasis ours). This article examines not-collusive co-operative agreements involving sets of firms unrestricted by number (>3 units) which are formalized at least by deeds of constitution.
- 2 There are various different approaches to this question. One is based on 'constitutional order' (G. Herrigel, 'Industry as form of order: a comparison of the historical development of the machine tool industries in the United States and Ger-

expected costs of definition and adjustment over time of the co-operative project and with the role of these costs in cancelling out the gross benefits of collective action.

This hypothesis is based on the observation that joint initiatives between economically and legally independent organizations are based on the presence of strategic complementarity: the more resources invested in a project and/or the higher the number of agents who agree to align their conduct, the higher the return of the various factors tends to be, at least up to a certain threshold level. Consequently, if all conditions are equal, the benefit for the agent from the realization of a joint project is higher than the individual provision of the same good. Complementarity advantages appear when club goals are pursued. These can be, for example, the fixing of technical standards, the regulation of acquisition of information on overseas markets, access to technological services, joint research and development programmes and centralized purchase of production input.

The presence of positive complementarity alone however is not sufficient to guarantee that it will be exploited. The benefits of co-operation can in fact be considerably reduced or nullified by various costs borne by participants. These include costs of identifying an equilibrium solution that allows individual courses of action to be aligned to the general plan, as well as costs of limiting the risk of hold-up of the benefits from collective action.

many', in J.R. Hollisworth, P.C. Schmitter and W. Streeck (eds.), Governing capitalist economies. Performances and control of economic sectors (New York 1994)). This work relates governing mechanisms in a given set of firms (industry) to the wider preexisting framework of social norms which influence the behaviour of economic actors Another approach is based on the concept of network (B. Axelsson and G. Easton (eds.), Industrial networks: a new view of reality (London 1992)) and another on the role of reputation in community enforcement (J. Bendor and B. Mookherjee, 'Norms, third-party sanctions and cooperation', Journal of Law, Economics and Organizations (1990) vol. 6, 33 - 63; A. Barone, Dilemma del prigioniero e meccanismi che inducono alla cooperazione (Rome 1995)). Yet another approach looks at the legal system and forms of institutional regulation, such as technical standards, in furthering co-operation (C. Lane, 'The social regulation of inter-firm relations in Britain and Germany: market rules, legal norms and technical standards', Cambridge Journal of Economics (1997) vol. 21, no 2, 197 - 216; A. Arrighetti, R. Bachmann and S. Deakin, 'Contract law, social norms and inter-firm cooperation', Cambridge Journal of Economics (1997) vol. 21, no. 2, 171 - 195).

- 3 See for a detailed discussion: A Arrighetti and G Seravalli, *Istituzioni e costi di coordinamento* Working Papers 6, Istituto di Scienze Economiche, Università di Parma (Parma 1999)
- 4 In other words agents have to look, either tacitly or by negotiation, for forms of reciprocal co-ordination on actions to undertake. The decision which gives

Costs of matching individual conduct to the collective plan are generated by the selfsame nature of complementarity advantages. The existence of positive externalities, which increase with the number of agents, the amount of resources invested in the project and the range of initiatives pursued, leads to a multiplicity of equilibriums. So before the common action is started, agents have to be able to order and choose the optimum equilibrium. In other words, they need to identify the alternative that gives the maximum expected benefit, from among a wide range. Participants need to decide how many and which subjects are to be involved, what initiatives to take, what technology to use, what form of organization to adopt, how to plan intervention etc. These decisions often require significant investment in information, transfer of knowledge, comparison of practicable alternatives and negotiation, and can be very costly. Finally they have to bear the cost of adapting individual behaviour to the general plan, which may involve modifying individual plans and setting synchronization mechanisms.⁶

The second category of costs has to do with limiting free riding, which is recognized to be endemic in most collective processes. Once the collective project is defined, individual agents may try to maximize net benefit by lowering their own contribution. Since the advantages of the availability of a public good are shared out among a large group of users, the cost of the individual contribution to the initiative tends to be perceived as higher than the potential individual benefits. Moreover, since collective action inevitably reduces individual freedom, incentives to defection can be latent and only surface over time. These incentives can include opportunities for earning which are in conflict with the collective interest, benefits of breaking common (shared) constraints and advantages of not complying with agreed practices. Pursuing a common objective thus requires a framework of sanctions to ensure respect of the constitutive and regulative rules underlying collective action. It also involves necessary costs of controlling individual agents

lower benefits (or bigger disadvantages) is discordant initiatives. For basic aspects of co-ordination problems see D.K. Lewis, *Convention A philosophical study* (Cambridge 1969); T.C. Schelling, *The strategy of conflict* (Cambridge 1980); Hardin, *Collective action*

- 5 See E. Ostrom, Governing the commons. The evolution of institutions for collective action (Cambridge 1990) who emphasises that 'making the switch (.) from independent to co-ordinated or collective action is a non-trivial problem. The costs involved in transforming a situation from one in which individuals act independently to one in which they co-ordinate activities can be quite high' (40)
 - 6 Arrighetti and Seravalli, Istituzioni e costi di coordinamento.
- 7 L Parri, 'I giochi della cooperazione tra piccoli imprenditori: i consorzi di vendita come istituzioni', Quaderni di sociologia (1997) vol. 41, 109 139.

realize that they will not enjoy all the benefits of their own investment and will tend to under-invest. And a spread of this phenomenon leads to the failure of collective action.

The start up of a co-operative project thus depends on the simultaneous solution of different problems: measuring expected benefits of complementarity, advance quantification of co-ordination costs and development of formal ties and sanction mechanisms to detect and punish opportunism. The sum of complementarity benefits, i.e. net co-ordination and regulation costs, needs to be positive in order for a collective action to be started.

2. Start-up and consolidation of a co-operative project

The need for strongly binding agreements, the fact that investment in knowledge made before the start of the initiative is sunk and the size of informational obstacles8 mean that few collective agreements are made spontaneously. Our proposed framework shows a) factors that influence the starting phase of the initiative and thus the result of the evaluation process preceding the activation of the collective project and b) obstacles that affect the development of the co-operative solution itself over time. Regarding the former factors, the positive correlation between the level of benefits and the costs of the considered variables make the dilemmas of collective action more problematic. Frequently in fact the complementarity effects are higher, the lower net return of individual action (absence of private alternatives). 10 But if the return from individual action is low or negative, agents, who lack economic incentives to start an activity autonomously, have little experience themselves in managing such a production process and thus have little knowledge of technological and organizational alternatives to be evaluated, the optimum input level to choose and net profits to be made. Consequently, overcoming incompleteness in information leads to an increase in co-ordination and regulation costs, which is sometimes proportionally higher compared to the possible benefit.

- 8 The structural uncertainty of many co-operative projects between firms and the consequent information problems are described in detail in A. Mody, 'Learning through alliances', Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization (1993) vol. 20, 151 170.
- 9 There is much evidence for the difficulty of starting up and the unstable nature of co-operative agreements; see B Kogut, 'The stability of joint venture: reciprocity and competitive rivalry', *Journal of Industrial Economics* (1989) vol 38, no 2, 183 198.
 - 10 Hardin, Collective action.

It has moreover been observed that the value of complementarity tends to be higher between firms that are technologically different than between technologically similar firms. ¹¹ But the greater the difference between firms the more serious are informational and communication problems and difficulties of accurately evaluating potential benefit of the collective action. These again push up the level of co-ordination and regulation costs. An increased co-ordination difficulty between individual agents makes regulation more expensive. Shortages of information, which raise the cost of synchronization and of selecting the equilibrium, also tend to raise the cost of designing efficient sanction mechanisms against opportunism.

The correlation between complementarity benefits and co-ordination and regulation costs is important for the start-up of the co-operation project, but these variables become even more important in the evolution and continuity over time of the project. In fact if it is assumed that learning, the emergence of differentiated technological opportunities between firms and the dynamics of the information capital alter the evolution of each economic organization, it can be hypothesized that the benefits of co-operation are variable over time. ¹² Incentives to collective action can appear high at one stage in a firm's development and much less significant or even cancelled out by the advantages of individual action in subsequent stages, and vice versa.

Our framework shows two main dimensions of the problem: the dynamics between the size of co-operation costs and benefits and the fact that they can change asymmetrically. The impact of such variables on incentives to co-operation between firms can be examined through a simple assurance game.

At the first stage, two players, realising the existence of complementarity effects, have identified the optimum equilibrium and measured the benefit of overall complementarity. This result has been reached by paying co-ordination and regulation costs, which although they reduce the co-operation surplus, ensure in any case a positive value for net complementarity, higher than the alternative of individual production of the good. In order to generalize, it is assumed that the agents are able to produce the good collectively and individually and that they are free to do either at any point in the game, and that in the case of co-operation they also continue to produce a share of the good individually.

- 11 K.R. Harrigan, Managing for joint ventures success (Lexington 1986).
- 12 See R. Gulati, T. Khanna and N. Nohria, 'Unilateral commitments and the importance of process in alliances', Sloan Management Review (Spring 1994) 61 69.
- 13 The assurance game seems more appropriate than the prisoner's dilemma in representing the strategic relations between firms. A. Sen, 'A game theoretical analysis of theories of collectivism in allocation', in T. Majumdar (ed.), Growth and choice (Oxford 1969); Parri, 'I giochi della cooperazione tra piccoli imprenditori'; R. Cortazar, 'Non-redundant groups, the assurance game and the origins of collective ac-

To counteract the risk of unilateral defection, the parties agree on the automatic application of a sanction mechanism by which the defector has to pay all co-ordination and regulation costs borne by the other party during the time period the agreement is considered binding. At the end of each period, the agreement can be renewed or dissolved with no further obligations for each party. Sanctions are applied only where one party defects; there are no penalties in cases where both parties decide to abandon the agreement.

It is also assumed that the players have acquired in the first period the experience necessary to supply sufficiently accurate estimates for complementarity benefits and co-ordination and regulation costs of the second period

On the hypothesis that benefits and costs are invariable, the game in the second period will be identical to that in the first period. Table 1 shows the payoff matrix where complementary benefits are $B_c = 3$, co-ordination and regulation costs $C_{cx} = 2$, profit from individual action $B_i = 3$, and the sanction is S = 2.

Table 1: Assurance game 1

P_2		
	C	I
C	4,4	3,1
P_{i}		
I	1,3	3,3

Table 2: Assurance game 2

P_2		
	C.	I
C	4,2	3,1
P_i		
I	-1,3	3,3

The game shows two equilibria: either both agents opt for the co-operative solution, that is, collective production of the good together with individual production (C,C) or they refuse the co-operative solution and the good is only produced individually (I,I). Given that I,I is strictly inferior to C,C (4.4 > 3.3), rational agents will adopt co-operation.¹⁴

The result is significantly different when assumption of invariability of costs and benefits among players is relaxed and if it is hypothesized that co-operation costs and benefits are differentiated. The game in Table 2 shows that there is much less incentive for co-operation where co-ordination and regulation costs are asymmetrical.

The increase of C_{cr} for P_2 , while C_{cr} remains stable for P_1 , leads to two different equilibria, neither of which is strictly superior to the other. The consequence is that the co-operative agreement is not renewed for the second period by P_{rr} , and that the collective activity is interrupted.

3. The hypotheses of heterogeneity

The negative result for co-operation in Game 2 can be avoided in two ways: a) by reformulating the hypotheses of agents' behaviour, and b) by introducing an institutional actor into the game. Solution a) is linked to the concept of heterogeneity and critical mass presented in Oliver, Marwell and Teixeira (1985), Oliver and Marwell (1985) and Marwell, Oliver and Prahl (1985). Significant variation in the distribution of advantages from availability of the collective good between actors can push a subset of potential participants into the role of catalysing agent (or critical mass) of co-operation as they make significant contribution to the start-up or maintenance of collective action. 'If an interest group is heterogeneous, there may be some highly interested or highly resourceful people available for a critical mass even when the mean interest or resource level is rather low'. ¹⁶ Given that the agents can

tion', *Public Choice* (1997) vol. 92, 41 - 53. For an analysis of the shortcomings of the prisoner's dilemma in interpreting the evolution of alliances between firms see also Gulati et al., '*Unilateral commitments*'

14 M. Taylor, The possibility of cooperation (Cambridge 1987)

15 P. Oliver, G. Marwell and R.A. Teixeira, 'Theory of the critical mass I. Interdependence, group heterogeneity, and the production of collective action', American Journal of Sociology (1985) vol. 91, no. 3, 522 - 556; P. Oliver and G. Marwell, 'The paradox of group size in collective action: a theory of the critical mass II', Americal Sociological Review (1985) vol. 53, no. 1, 1 - 8; G. Marwell, P. Oliver and R. Prahl, 'Social networks and collective action. A theory of the critical mass III', American Journal of Sociology (1988) vol. 94, no. 3, 502 - 534

16 Oliver and Marwell, 'The paradox of group size in collective action', 529

draw different levels of advantage from collective action, some of them may in fact find it useful to modify individual behaviour compared to average behaviour, and thus make possible a co-operative result that would otherwise be impossible to achieve or maintain.

The hypothesis of heterogeneity means that the result of Game 2 can be inverted and favourable conditions for collective action can be re-established. If a form of co-operative precommitment is reached¹⁷, P₁ could pay a large share of the increase in overall co-ordination and regulation costs previously paid by P₂, 'forcing' it thus towards C,C (see Table 3).¹⁸

Table 3: Assurance game 3

P_2		
	C	I
C.	4,4	3,-1
Ρ,		
I	1,3	3,3

Equilibrium I,I thus becomes strictly inferior to C,C and collective production of the good again becomes advantageous for both players. This solution is however subject to the condition that P₁ receives a higher complementarity benefit than at the start. This makes the solution less easy to generalize; it can only be adopted in certain contexts.

4. The role of institutional action

The second solution inserts an institutional actor external to the initial setup of the game and has wider application. In traditional literature, institutional subjects essentially have the function of regulating with the aim of overcoming market failure and limiting free riding.²⁰ This function can be

- 17 Taylor, The possibility of cooperation
- 18 See R. Gulati et al, 'Unilateral commitments' for the importance of unilateral commitments in the development of co-operative relations.
 - 19 In Assurance Game 3, B, of P, goes from 3 to 5
 - 20 R.S. Scott, Institutions and organizations (London 1995).

carried out either by central institutional agencies, or less commonly by local structures. Central institutions include national agencies such as those responsible for fixing technical standards, which control the application of consumer protection laws and which regulate competition. Local structures can be certification centres and boards regulating typical local products. From the point of view of regulation, their institutional activity is similar to that of a 'third party', which arbitrates conflicts and safeguards contracts. A more general interpretation of their role is that of reducing uncertainty and supporting firm capital formation.²¹ This is because they introduce into the market system informational infrastructures and behavioural obligations that favour exchange between economic agents and safeguard their ownership rights.

This interpretation means that regulatory institutions contribute to solving the problems inherent in collective action, for example through the reduction of the cost of direct sanctions for defection. They do this even though they and their contribution are external to the definition and direct operation of the co-operative project.

The problems of the collective production of club goods, as we have tried to show, cannot however be circumscribed to the deterrence of opportunism and laying down of sanction mechanisms. The introduction into the analytical model of co-ordination problems as a variable influencing start-up and continuation of collective action shows clearly the importance of other costs: information collection and transmission, identification of participants, comparison and selection of practicable alternatives, and definition and maintenance of project organization. Overcoming problems of co-ordination is thus a pre-condition for the start-up of collective action. The level of costs of identifying the optimum solution influences the final outcome. Any solution that allows co-ordination costs to be reduced thus makes a collective action more likely to be successful. Institutional organizations, for various reasons, are able to act in this direction.

Observations on how the collective projects are planned and their relation to co-ordination costs warrant this conclusion. In general the solution of the problem of co-ordination lies in a decentralized mechanism or through centralized procedures. In a decentralized mechanism, each agent participates

²¹ D.C. North, Institutions, institutional change, and economic performance (Cambridge 1990); D.C. North, 'Institutions and credible commitment', Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics (1993) no. 1, 11 - 23.

²² For a discussion of the relationship between co-ordination costs and institutional action see Arrighetti and Seravalli, *Istituzioni e costi di coordinamento*; A Arrighetti and G Seravalli (eds.), *Istituzioni intermedie e sviluppo locale* (Rome 1999)

directly in drawing up the co-operative project,²¹ whereas in a centralized procedure, a limited representative subset of agents identifies the optimum plan for co-operative initiative. This centralized procedure is sometimes more efficient than decentralization, as the project is planned by a small number of subjects, with homogenous information resources and skills. This in fact reduces the information exchange and simplifies the decisional process, with positive effects on overall co-ordination costs.²⁴

These advantages of the centralized solution raise the net payoff for cooperation and this explains why it is often a small group of promoters who originate and operate collective action. In our hypothesis, unlike in the hypothesis of 'critical mass', agents who expect higher than average benefits from co-operation do not necessarily carry out promotion. Rather these agents tend to have the following characteristics:

- i) They have better co-ordination resources, more information²⁵ and higher (non-financial) incentives to collective action than other participants in the project;
- ii) They are able to ensure a fair distribution of the benefits of the collective good between the participants.
- In many cases these are the characteristics of institutional administrations and organizations, particularly local ones such as chambers of commerce, town halls, business interest associations, local banks, etc.²⁶ Institutional actors in fact have the following characteristics:
- i) By their nature they carry out centralized co-ordination functions (provision of categorical collective goods).
- 23 The main points of the theory of self-organized collective action are covered in Ostrom, *Governing the commons*.
- 24 The centralized mechanism proves superior to the decentralized in some cases. These can be where there are significant differences between preferences and information possessed by participants and also when the efficient equilibrium can be reached through a number of technological solutions which all appear equivalent, at least at the start. Arrighetti and Seravalli (eds.), Istituzioni intermedie e sviluppo locale.
- 25 Obviously, it cannot be taken for granted that institutional authority in effect has adequate information available (see Ostrom, *Governing the commons*)
- 26 See A. Guenzi, 'Istituzioni intermedie e sviluppo locale: un approccio di storia e economica', in Arrighetti and Seravalli (eds.), Istituzioni intermedie e sviluppo locale; M. Belfanti, 'Istituzioni intermedie e sviluppo locale in prospettiva storica', in Arrighetti and Seravalli (eds.), Istituzioni intermedie e sviluppo locale; S. Magagnoli, 'Autorevolezza municipale e architettura istituzionale intermedia', in Arrighetti and Seravalli (eds.), Istituzioni intermedie e sviluppo locale for a discussion of this from an economic historical angle.

- ii) They ensure the non-excludability of benefits as a constitutive element and norm in their action.
- iii) They already carry out data collection as part of their administrative duties.
- iv) Unlike private subjects, they show a zero or negative opportunity cost for defection or abandonment of collective action.²⁷

The insertion of an institutional third party into the co-operative agreement can help prevent the difficulties encountered in Game 2. The institution's role of 'promotion' is the absorption and especially the reduction of the overall level of co-ordination and regulation costs. Consequently, below a certain level of these costs, even asymmetry between the parties is compatible with a co-operative result. Table 4 shows that I,I becomes significantly lower than C.C.

Table 4: Assurance game 4

P_z		
	С	I
C	6,4	3,3
P_t		
I	1,3	3,3

Moreover, if we look at the evolution of co-operation, the institutional actor has for the most part negative benefits from the interruption of collective

- 27 Institutional subject receives from its participation in the collective project benefits essentially in terms of legitimization and consensus. These advantages can be enjoyed exclusively through the continuation of the collective action. A move to individual solutions leads inevitably to a loss of influence and role.
- 28 G Seravalli, Innovazione e istituzioni (Università di Parma, Parma 1999), achieves a similar result showing that in the case of interdependence between two subjects in the exploitation of an innovation, individual incentives to innovation are aligned towards collective incentives only in the presence of an institutional third party which carries out an indispensable function of co-ordination by funding a reward for innovation.

action,29 and will thus have higher incentives than the private actor to continue with the initiative once it is started. This point leads to two observations. The first concerns the time dimension of the project: the presence of an institutional actor, helping to push forward in time the 'shadow of the future' increases stability over time. 10 The second observation concerns the dynamics of complementarity effects. As was hypothesized above, not only co-ordination and regulation costs, but also benefits of co-operation, vary considerably over time. The trend towards decline of collective action advantages,31 shown in the empirical evidence presented in the next pages, indicates that even where co-ordination and regulation costs do not vary, the probability of the collective project being abandoned increases over time The continuation of the collective project therefore requires the constant revision of the range of programmed activities and the substitution/diversification of the content of the initiative itself, so that complementarity advantages are not progressively eroded. In this case too, institutional subjects can make an important contribution. The main restrictions on leaving, together with the lower costs of co-ordination, are an incentive for the institutions to extend co-operative activity to other sectors apart from the initial ones, to adjust the formal structure and to maintain the project.

5. Institutions and forms of co-operation between entrepreneurs: the production system of the spectacles sector in Cadore

The analytical framework outlined in Section 2-4 can be used to interpret co-operation arrangements between firms in local production systems. Early results of the research currently being undertaken indicate that:

- a) co-operation between entrepreneurs is a significant variable in explaining local industrialization processes over the long term, and
- b) intermediate institutions play an important role in promoting co-operative initiatives and affecting their development over time.

In empirical analysis, a series of case studies regarding industrial districts of *Terza Italia*, (the area of Italy where small firms are prevalent and flourishing) show that co-operation between entrepreneurs, which includes vocational training, local bank action and land planning carried out by local authorities, is an important instrument in understanding the origin and nature of such a development model.³² This article looks at the relationship be-

- 29 See footnote 27
- 30 R. Axelrod, The evolution of cooperation (New York 1984)
- 31 Different hypotheses on the progressive reduction of co-operation advantages are discussed in Sachwald, 'Cooperative agreements'
 - 32 Guenzi, 'Istituzioni intermedie e sviluppo locale'

tween the emergence of inter-firm co-operation, the behaviour of local institutional actors and the formation of institutional spin-off in solving problems of collective action.

The case of the Cadore spectacle industry appears to represent one of the most advanced models of firm co-operation based on a system of local institutions able to grow and reform according to new requirements.

Cadore is in the Alps area and includes seventeen *comuni* or local administrative areas. It covers 1500 square kilometres and is in the northern part of Belluno province. In 1997 the area had 175 large and medium firms and 900 artisan firms, which all together employed approximately 13,000 people.

The origin of the area goes back to Angelo Frescura, who founded the first firm in 1878. In the early years of the twentieth century, Fresura's partners and ex-employees set up nine new firms. By 1940 there were 17 firms and three artisan firms employing more than a thousand people.³³ The war saw little change; in 1945 there were 17 firms with almost 1200 employees. But it was during the years of post-war reconstruction that growth was increasingly impressive. In Table 5 figures from industrial censuses illustrate take-off and subsequent growth: from the 1970s it becomes clear that growth is especially based on artisan and small and medium firms. This is shown by the big fall in the average number of employees per firm.

Table 5: Number of local units in spectacle district by size (number of employees)

	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991
1-10	46	37	82	412	630
11-50	29	42	42	76	78
51-100	3	6	7	10	15
>100	3	4	6	5	10
Local units	81	89	137	503	733
Employees	1852	2429	2600	4268	8903
Average number of employees per local unit	23	27	19	9	12

Source: Industrial Censuses 1951-1991

33 G. Bevilacqua, L'occhialeria in Cadore (San Vito di Cadore 1942); E. De Lotto, Dallo smeraldo di Nerone agli occhiali del Cadore (Belluno 1956); I. Diamanti, Il distretto dell'occhiale in Cadore (Vicenza 1996); C. Pellegrini, Le istituzioni intermedie nello sviluppo locale. Il distretto dell'occhiale del Cadore (Belluno) (Parma 1999)

In the mid 1990s, there was growth in large firms (Luxottica, Safilo, Marcolin and De Rigo), which have a total of 5,350 employees in 11 different factories, and in medium firms, which have a total of 2,500 employees in 900 different factories. Between 1991 and 1995 annual exports rose from 425 billion to 1,470 billion lire.

These figures are important because the take-off and subsequent growth can in this case be connected with the start and continuation of a system of local institutions. The system in Cadore is among the best developed in number and complexity of links among all those hitherto examined in Italy. The history of the district in this respect can be divided into three different phases. During the first phase, the three organizations representing respectively large, medium and artisan firms equipped themselves with structures for supporting their members. The second phase started in the mid 1970s; institutions for the spectacles sector were promoted autonomously by various organizations but were made available to help all firms. The third phase, during the 1990s, saw the initiatives being combined and jointly managed by business representatives.

We now examine these three different phases in detail. In the first phase, the following institutions played an important role.

Associazione degli industriali della Provincia di Belluno (Belluno Province Employers' Organization) This was founded in 1945 and nowadays includes almost all the firms of the province (633 out of a total of 780). It runs a service agency for the training of entrepreneurs (REVIVISCAR) and a consortium of credit guarantors (CONFIDI) founded in 1968 and extended several times. This consortium provides smaller firms with a guarantee for short- and medium-term credit. The Employers' Organization has been organized into different sections for different activities since its beginning. Spectacle firms could thus use the SIPAO (spectacle and other eyewear article manufactures section), which represented the sector interests and organized services. SI-PAO currently represents approximately 160 firms all in the Cadore area and deals with trade union relations, legal advice and facilitated credit access 34 Since the formation in 1975 of the consortium 'Dolomiti Export', SIPAO has collaborated with artisan associations in the creation of sector institutions

tion of Small and Artisan Firms). This association was founded in the 1950s and is a member of the CNA, (the National Confederation of Artisan Firms.) It represents small and medium firms. Since the 1970s it has spawned several structures: APPIA Firm Services for accounting and bookkeeping, ECIPA the training organization and CONFIDART, a consortium for facilitated credit access. 35 APPIA has approximately 200 members in the spectacle sector.

APPIA Associazione provinciale piccole industrie e artigianato (Province Associa-

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Unione Artigiani (Artisans' Union). This was founded immediately after the war and since the 1970s has offered the widest and most interesting variety of initiatives. These range from traditional initiatives for an artisan association to more advanced ones. The more traditional initiatives include the Cooperativa artigiana di garanzia (Artisan Guarantor Co-operative) (1972) for facilitated credit Feinar (1972), bookkeeping and accountancy service, Consortium Centre (1981) for the promotion and co-ordination of consortia and Artigianfidi (1983) for facilitated credit. The more advanced initiatives include Tecno Innovazione (1986) to encourage innovation, Consorzio Ambiente, (the Environment Consortium) (1988) which deals with safety, storage of toxic waste and waste water disposal and Dimensione Impresa (1995) advanced services for firms (CCCIAA Belluno 1984 and 1995). The Artisans' Union is a large system of associations spread over the area. There are about 600 spectacle firm members registered with the office in Pieve di Cadore. Since the 1960s, the Union has extended its activities beyond traditional ones. It supports vocational training by financing new branches of the Belluno Brustolon Institute of Training in the smaller towns of Pieve and Santo Stefano. It promotes the creation of consortia to help manufacturing firms by providing a bridge with local administrations, and here it has achieved significant results. More generally the Artisans' Union has played a role, often decisive and always important, in creating all the institutions of the industrial district.

The second phase, characterized by institutions dealing with problems of all firms (large, medium, small and artisan units) saw the foundation of several new organizations.

Consorzio Dolomiti Export (The Dolomite Export Consortium). This was the first organization to experiment with co-operation between different employers' organizations. It was created in 1975 for a nine-year period; both large and

artisan firms became members. In 1984 it was renewed for another sixteen years up to the year 2000. The consortium is reported to have brought immediate benefits; by the end of the 1970s exports accounted for about 70% of the district's output.

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Consorzio centro occhileria (Consortium centre for spectacles) This consortium also grouped larger and artisan firms. Its 1984 statute laid down that it was to promote and support activities such as the training of entrepreneurs and quality trademarks etc. In reality its function was to coordinate a relevant share of the economic transactions involving small and large firms of the industry (CCIAA Belluno 1995)

Centro servizi occhialeria (Spectacle service centre) This was formed in 1985 by the Unione Artigiani (National Union of Artisans). Its aims were training, technical assistance and promotion. Especially important was the foundation in 1990 of the Spectacle Museum in Pieve di Cadore, with a collection of approximately 2,000 pairs of spectacles from prestigious collections. With this museum the artisans aimed to build a cultural identity for the district by emphasising tradition and its links with local production. The district was to appear the exclusive repository of ancient craft and knowledge, cultivated for centuries in the workshops of European capitals. The implicit message is to emphasize the inimitable qualities of the Cadore product and thus maintain a high quality profile and an explicit differentiation from competitors

Certottica. This is a mixed public and private consortium between organizations belonging to the national Confindustria, the employers' association, and local institutions. It is however financed by big firms in the district. It was officially founded in 1992 in compliance with European legislation, but became functional only in 1995. Although it was started up in a climate of uncertainty, today it provides certification for products made by approximately 250 firms. It is thus an established point of reference both for big and small firms of the district (CCIAA Belluno 1997)

The third phase began in the 1990s, with the foundation of the Comitato di iniziativa per lo sviluppo dell'occhialeria (Committee for the Initiatives in Development of Spectacle Manufacturing) in Belluno. This was an organization grouping business organizations, trade unions and intermediate local institutions, in other words the provincial authorities and the mountain area administration. Its brief was to draw up a plan for reorganization of the system of intermediate institutions present in the industrial district, with the declared intent of emphasising complementarity existing in the local system (Assindustria Belluno 1995). The project, named 'Cittadella dell'occhiale' ('Spectacle fortress') concerned five different structures corresponding to five in-

stitutions, in part new and in part already existing. These were the Osservatorio sulle dinamiche del distretto (Observatory of Industrial District Dynamics), Certottica, Centro servizi occhialeria, (the Centre for Spectacle Services), Scuola dell'Occhiale (the Spectacle School) and the Fondazione per il museo dell'occhiale (the Spectacle Museum Foundation). Financed by the Veneto Regional Authority the Committee completed its work by setting up in 1996 a new institution, the 'Operatore collettivo per l'occhialeria bellunese' (the Collective Operator for Spectacles in the Belluno Area). This umbrella organization includes three public bodies, the Chamber of Commerce and two mountain area administrations, and three private ones, Confindustria (the Employers' Association), APPIA and the Artisans' Union The Collective Operator also receives EU funding (Leader II) and works with the five structures listed above. It provides all normal services but is especially important in diffusion of technical know-how and economic and trading information. Certottica has a decisive role in training as it communicates information on innovation in quality standards. The Service Centre guarantees horizontal communication, again regarding technological innovation, between firms. The new School, Scaola dell'Occhiale, has two levels: the first aims to incorporate more academic scientific knowledge into the District through the Diploma in Spectacle Technology at the Engineering Faculty of Padua, held at Feltre. The second level, run by Certottica, encourages life-long education of management and skilled workers

6. Verification of the hypotheses and closing observations

The information available and the evidence collected show several regularities in the nature of collective action dilemmas faced and in the solutions adopted by firms and institutional entities. Conclusions drawn from evidence appear consistent with the interpretation framework proposed in the previous sections. There appear to be three important themes for analysis. The first concerns the role of local institutions, particularly business associations, in drawing up and promoting collective plans and in carrying out adaptation as the plans are put into action. The second theme concerns the importance of reducing co-ordination costs compared to the cost of lowering the risk of free riding in management of collective action. The third theme concerns the instability and thus the variety of problems of collective action, which appear over time.

The role of institutional subjects

Empirical verification confirms the hypothesis developed in Section 4, which attributed a function of limiting uncertainty and synchronization costs to local institutions. The presence of information advantages and positive incentives for the continuation of collective action allowed some institutional actors (like business interest associations) to lower coordination costs and thus increase the net benefits of complementarity. The consequence was an increase in the propensity of firms to participate in common initiatives

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The history of the spectacle production system in Cadore shows the emergence of differentiated complementarity effects which are sometimes markedly heterogeneous. In spite of this, institutional initiative plays a constant and critical role in the activation of collective action between firms.

As we saw, up to the 1970s the main problem of co-ordination concerned the establishment of collective structures able to reduce costs of supplying specific services (accounting, tax consultancy, salary and insurance contribution, bookkeeping, etc.), and able to widen access to particularly scarce resources (commercial credit and fixed capital investment financing). The centralization of these activities in trade associations or organizations created by trade associations, such as consortia of debt guarantors, allowed the exploitation of scale economies and containment of financial risk with important consequences for the costs and the availability of these collective goods for firms in the industry overall.

In the 1980s, new structures to solve a second co-ordination problem were added. This problem involved information management and reaching a sufficient level of local supply of intermediate inputs to make deverticalization of a significant share of production of larger firms possible and economically advantageous. In this case strategic complementarity is linked to incompleteness of markets. Even though the expected benefits for large and small firms appeared great, obstacles of dispersion in the artisan sector and the limited nature of information on the potential of individual supplier firms possessed by the outsourcing firm hampered externalization. Moreover, small firms also needed to make simultaneous large investments given that technological and organization resources were in most cases clearly below quality standards required by the big firm. These requirements could only be met with considerable difficulty if exclusively ordinary contractual mechanisms were used. In fact, especially in the start-up phase of a large-scale process, resorting to arm's-length contracting, because of the high levels of uncertainty about continuity of the trade over time, gives the supplier firm only limited incentives for making the necessary supplementary investments. Consequently, although positive benefits can be expected, there is frequently no co-ordination between agents, and necessary additional resources to support collective action are not produced.

Moreover, deverticalization was hampered by serious problems of indivisibility Given the limited production capacity of each individual firm, the number of artisan firms involved in externalized production needed to be very high. The decision to make recourse to the market was therefore economically advantageous only when almost all artisan firms were involved in the process.

The diverse components of the problem of co-ordination meant that a decentralized solution was complex. A centralized co-ordination mechanism was more successful. The double objective of, on one side, ensuring continuity in trade relationships and stability of supply over time and, on the other, achieving a sufficient level of supply, was pursued through the creation of the Consorzio Centro Occhialeria. Promoted by the artisan and industry associations, this structure acted as intermediate contractual party between the large firms and the artisans. It also guaranteed medium-term stability of contractual relationships and promoted the process of technological adjustment by smaller firms to the requirements of the larger firms.

More recently, a new co-ordination problem has appeared in addition to the above. New large firm policies, such as increasing attention to brand names, large investment in advertising and reduction of the intermediate stages of trading, have reduced market space for smaller firms. One measure to counter this tendency involved groups of small to medium firms joining in consortia or firm groups that were large enough for organization and production to make possible differentiation policies similar to those operated by large firms. It is generally agreed that this objective could be pursued and maintained over time only on condition that the consortium or joint venture was created in order to protect a club good such as a common line of products. Firms adhering to the initiative should initially supply finances to support planning of the new line and its marketing, and subsequently participate in the sharing out of orders, and contribute to production on the basis of their technological specializations

The first problem of collective action in this type of initiative concerned the simultaneous identification of the brand policy to be developed, the division of labour between firms to be enacted and the distribution model to follow. The number of participants and the level and destination of investments depended on these decisions.

Evidence so far shows that in these circumstances selecting the optimum equilibrium requires the mobilization of significant resources to find information, to plan and to compare the different hypotheses. The cost of this investment and uncertainty about the possibility of reaching a positive result made a decentralized decision-making process difficult to set up. Recourse to a centralized model, where business interests sustained initial planning expenses and co-ordinated investment in finding information necessary for starting the initiative, proved less costly.

Moreover, in projects which require particularly high investment in coordination before start-up, the risks of collective failure remain high independent of the expected net benefits. It was in fact noted that for a long phase with the increase of co-ordination costs, there is no corresponding reduction in uncertainty as to the final result of the collective action, nor a reasonable increase in the profitability of the investment. Incentives for participation in collective action are thus low over the long term, while the delayed entry into the consortium remains the most efficient alternative, if, as often happens, firms participating from the beginning cannot count on economic rewards from learning processes or exclusion of new contributors. This means that in cases where costs and benefits of collective action are unbalanced over the long term, the presence of a high risk of interruption of the project requires the intervention of institutional actors, not only to reduce co-ordination costs as was the case in the 1970s and 1980s, but also to advance initial investment and keep the incentive for developing the common project sufficiently high.

Co-ordination costs vs. regulation costs

The solution to the problem of collective action was seen to depend on the sanction mechanisms that agents establish before the collective action starts. In our interpretation, these costs are important, but there is also a second type. These are co-ordination costs and are based in the necessary investment for selecting the optimum equilibrium and making agents' individually converge in a single overall plan. The amount of these costs affects the startup and the continuation of collective action, given that change in their level reflects on net co-operation benefits which agents gain from harmonising their action. In other words, such costs influence the value of the difference between benefits from collective action and individual action and thus provide incentive for agents' behaviour toward one solution or the other. An adequate regulation structure ensures division of the benefits corresponding to expectation or agreements. But it becomes important only when participants in collective action have been able to verify the existence of a solution towards which they want to harmonize their behaviour, and a positive net benefit from co-operation higher than individual action would bring

This conclusion was confirmed empirically by evidence presented in this article. In the planning and start-up phases of consortium initiatives described in the previous section, adherence to the initiative was essentially determined by the expectation that collective action would be able to generate a limited level of net benefit, constant over time, rather than by strictness and fairness of benefits-sharing principles. The definition of binding redistribution criteria and the possibility of applying sanctions against free riding were important in ensuring the initiative's duration, but enforcement capacity was not perceived as a preliminary condition for the start-up of collective activity. Sanctioning was viewed rather as an automatic corollary of the availability of

information on participants which the decision-making body is compelled to collect in order to carry out its function of co-ordination and management of collective action, and as an inevitable appendix to its role in day-to-day management of the consortium. To put it briefly, unlike circumstances where respect for regulations and adoption of appropriate conduct ensures stability and predictability of the benefits of collective action, in the cases we examined the problem of distribution appears secondary to the problem of ensuring a sufficiently large surplus to divide amongst participants.

Instability in co-ordination problems

As we have emphasized, consortia and associations between firms are characterized by marked instability of incentives for joint action. The benefits of co-operation can decline because of improvements in prospects for individual action or simply because complementarity effects become smaller. Benefits can also decline because the co-ordination problem changes nature and includes new variables, which cannot be dealt with by the existing co-ordination structure. This leads us to a third regularity in evolution over time of the initiatives examined. In order to face new co-ordination problems and in order to make specialization economies worthwhile, associations tend over time to organize an increasing variety of initiatives. Consequently institutional subjects, as well as managing existing activities, are repeatedly engaged in planning new initiatives to supplement and renew the supply of collective goods of a selective nature present in the industry.

Between new and existing initiatives moreover there is complex interdependence. Past achievement of positive results by joint action encourages the planning of new intervention and strengthens the capacity of intermediate institutions to mobilize and lead. The evidence found here in fact unanimously confirms that the start-up of what we called 'second phase' initiatives depends to a great extent on good results of collective goods production in the first phase.

There is however a double causal link. The efficient administration of activities and services already supplied to firms in fact depends on the institutions' capacity to deal with new co-ordination problems emerging in the industry. The organization of new initiatives in fact allows institutions to gather information on the dynamics of complementarity, to identify variables sensitive to competition and to understand the direction of technological progress. This information is a useful element in adapting the efficiency of services already supplied such as technical assistance, vocational training and organ-

ization consultancy. It is also useful in directing quality certification (see the example of *Certottica* in the previous section) and avoiding investing resources in activities with decreasing returns. ³⁶

Information gathered for new intervention, together with the strengthening of legitimization as a 'co-operation' actor, emphasizes the institutional characteristics of promoters (see Section 4). Consequently co-ordination and regulation costs are limited and thus positive results of collective action further encouraged. Of course, analogous considerations in the opposite sense are true where promoters fail to co-ordinate new joint action. In this sense it can be observed that the greater the complementarity effects of new initiatives, the more serious will be the negative impact of the failure of collective action in developing the sector. The lower growth is, the more limited will be the opportunities of making available collective goods, and so lower the gross benefits from collective action undertaken in the past.

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³⁶ An example is Dolomiti Export which at one time was important in sector growth. Recently however as competition has moved from design to brands Dolomiti Export is no longer able to efficiently support trade initiatives by smaller firms on foreign markets.

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