

“Social Accountability and Responsibility for Italian Social Cooperatives: the experience of the Marche region”.

Francesca Scocchera
Cooss Marche Onlus, Italy

Social Cooperative: a model of organisation

Since the beginning of '90, the Italian so called “Third Sector” or “Social Economy” has been demonstrating its vitality and has been gaining acknowledgment in Europe as a possible model for the Welfare State. It is a thriving and growing collection of organizations that exist between the traditional private sector on the one hand, and the public sector on the other.

A set of rules and social developments contributed to enhance the importance of such non-profit organizations; nowadays, it is recognised that it plays a fundamental role in the construction of the social capital and in the organization of quality services.

Such a system of Welfare offers a great potential for the social enterprise, a model of Social Entrepreneurship that can be seen as a professional, innovative and sustainable approach to systemic change. Such a model of social entrepreneurship is an example of interaction and engagement amongst public and private, as well as a sort of experimentation field for the measurement of the social impact. In fact, the social enterprise associates its economic mission (linked to market logics) with its social mission (social purpose, social objective).

The Social Economy have been rapidly developing since beginning of 90', thanks to some national laws; in particular, the law 381/91 recognised legally and commercially the “social cooperatives” model, giving them the overall purpose of addressing the overall community concerns for human promotion and social integration of citizens.

Under such a law, two different types of social cooperatives are established, both with a social mission, a social objective.

- Type A cooperative: it manages social, health and educational services;
- Type B cooperative: it creates new jobs opportunities for disadvantaged people.

Social Cooperatives are based on values of self-responsibility, democracy, equity, solidarity; all principles that refer to Social Responsibility attitudes and that characterise the social cooperative as a natural example of socially responsible enterprise.

In 1999 the International Cooperative Alliance agreed on a Declaration of Cooperative Identity and defined a set of principles and values that highlight how the Social Responsible is the ‘natural vocation’ of the cooperative entrepreneurial model.

The principles are:

- Free and voluntary adhesion
- Democratic control by members/partners
- Economic participation of members/partners (Capital equity)
- Autonomy and independency
- Training, Education, Information
- Cooperation amongst cooperatives

- Engagement towards the community

Moreover, the Cooperative Identity is a crucial factor; it represents its mission, its nature, and it can be explained in terms of motivation, participation, and membership.

But the challenge, today, is to be able to maintain such a socially responsible *identity*, to reinforce it, to demonstrate it, to make the social cooperative added value visible and transparent, to participate (or to lead) the process of Welfare Community.

The contribution of the Social Cooperatives to the SR approach

The Social Cooperative represents nowadays a fundamental actor in the welfare planning. The national Law 328/2000 (developing an integrated system of intervention and social services) foresees a new approach of welfare, with new forms of relation and collaboration within local public administrations and organisations of the Third Sector.

Since then, Third Sector organisations (in primis, the social cooperatives) participate actively and directly into the planning of the welfare system and of the social interventions in the community.

Public administrations and Third Sector organisations, representative of the local dimension, work together in the elaboration of the *District Plan*, the instruments for the social local planning. The District Plan defines and reports the social needs of the population of the local area, the priorities of intervention that have to be activated, the organisational modalities of such interventions, the forms of collaboration and cooperation with all stakeholders engaged in the welfare system (public, private, non profit, not for profit).

Public and private organisation (local authorities and Third Sector organisation, as for social cooperatives, voluntary association) plan and implement together the social interventions needed by a territory; this means a strategic responsibility of all actors and stakeholders towards the community.

And such an approach it is not only developed in terms of social policies, but, more in general, it is a way of intervention as for the territorial policies as well as for the local development. In fact, the social fragmentation and the multiplying of interests ask for participated and shared planning process, to be undertaken after the identification of all actors and stakeholders involved. The District Plan (law 328), as well as the Agenda 21 Locale initiatives and the *Neighbourhood Contracts*, are all examples of policies in which the social enterprises of the Third Sector, in particular the social cooperatives, are playing a remarkable role, in interaction with the other stakeholders.

This is the way towards the Welfare Community: a system able to answer to the question of individual protection, through a plurality of public and private channel, institutional and of solidarity. So, all the existing potentiality of a territory are mobilised, in order to provide the community with efficient and efficacy social services.

And this is an opportunity of Social Responsibility within the community, as a factor of growth or, at least, of stability. Social Responsibility approach sustain the actors of such process, giving them a common principles and values, reinforcing the engagement and the commitment, improving the relationships and the communication channels amongst them; in a word, enhancing the added value of the *cooperation*.