

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION, NETWORKS, MULTILEVEL GOVERNANCE AND THE ROLE OF THE EU

By M. VALERIANI

The challenges arising from today's complex world require the EU to be able to navigate efficiently a series of intricate networks. Among these challenges, in order to reach a higher impact internally and externally, the EU should recognise its key role as a facilitator for network-building across the different sectors of European society.

Recently, I have realised an [interactive network](#) (IT) for the online platform Open Cooperazione (Open cooperation). The network is based on the platform's data on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). Based on an annually updated survey, the dataset sees hundreds of organisations publish their information for the sake of transparency that characterises the third sector worldwide.

I am using the data to conduct my doctoral research, as it is one of the most precise and complete available. Among the information provided, the survey includes a space where organisations can identify their partners. Using this entry, I was able to connect the various Italian NGOs active in the cooperation and development sector. While a more concrete analysis will be part of my thesis (together with a network on partnerships with the private sector as soon as data will be available), the network already shows an intricate web of partnerships that is coherent with the networked nature of civil society often discussed in the literature.

Partnerships and the creation of networks are key to achieving efficiency and better results within the sector and beyond. This was also confirmed during the International Cooperation Expo (Exco) held in Rome between the 15th and 17th of May 2019. At the Exco, both the background of the participants and the panels organised showed how complex the system is. International, national and local institutions and authorities were all represented, together with for-profit and non-profit

organisations, research institutes, and universities. A nexus of diverse actors all looking for the best way to achieve better results and to have a higher impact. In the recurrent framework set by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations Agenda 2030, discussions have often focused on the importance of partnerships across the different sectors of society, in order to enhance cooperation, compensate deficiencies of specific actors and to achieve common goals.



Manfredi Valeriani at the Exco 2019

When the system increases in complexity, the academic research agenda needs to also adapt properly. The third sector is again an important example of this need. The contemporary debate over civil society is getting more and more hybrid, borrowing concepts from management, law, political science, and sociology. The need for this

more eclectic approach follows what people working on the field ask for. Indeed, there is an increasing willingness to see the fading away of the old image of civil society as the antagonist or watcher of the state and the for-profit sector. Partnerships are the best tool to use. However, they require a common language to speak and a common framework to act.

In this framework, institutions at different levels of governance – from international and European to national and local – play an important role. First, they provide concrete resources to foster the sector through a series of programs. Second, they have the regulatory power to guide the sector towards specific directions. However, institutional capacity is nothing without coordination, and unfortunately the EU seems to be falling behind when it comes to the third sector. On the one hand, the Agenda 2030 sets high standards in terms of collaboration, giving strength to all sectors of society. On the

other hand, national legislations are slowly trying to homogenise and modernise their regulations of the sector. In these regards, the lack of a consistent and common European framework is a missed opportunity. Standing between the global and the national, the EU may have the capacity to build a common language that could foster the cross-sector partnerships required to address today's challenges. Policies, dialogues as well as data gathering, and analysis should be the tools used. The EU already has a series of initiatives that go in this direction across its different departments (DG DEVCO and DG TRADE *in primis*) however, a more consistent and coordinated approach may produce better outputs beyond the European civil society, increasing the EU internal and external impact.

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