

The Role of Non-Profit Organizations For Innovating Urban Regeneration Strategies. Four case studies in the USA¹

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Synopsis

The main purpose of this contribution is to highlight the potential of non-profit organizations and their effective role in the emerging forms of virtuous partnerships in urban regeneration strategies in the United States. Within the general framework of the public-private partnership issue in urban redevelopment, specific non-profit models and tools are analysed through various case studies of successful projects in Boston, Massachusetts, and San Diego, California, in order to understand what lessons can be learned for the European context, particularly in the 'civil law' juridical culture, such as in Italy or France.

1. Urban Regeneration, Partnership Implications and Stakeholder Involvement

The core issues of these reflections are focused on the exploration of public-private partnership (PPP) tools, particularly based on non-profit organizations (NPOs), and their effects on urban regeneration strategies.

With regard to the new *Europe 2020* strategy, the European Union is increasingly interested in pursuing innovative PPP models for urban regeneration policies: this work is linked to a EU research project in progress², the general target of which is the exploration of new tools for regenerating activity in various districts and in general, the urban fabric.

Some examples in the United States, particularly in the urban areas of Boston and San Diego, show interesting potential for innovating strategies and partnership styles in a typical 'common law' context, and for rethinking the role of NPOs in European 'civil law' domains, such as Italy or France.

In the last few decades in OECD Countries - particularly in the United States and Western Europe - urban regeneration strategies have represented a major goal of urban policies. Major cities have been supporting significant efforts to renovate public spaces and improve the attractiveness and accessibility of deprived urban areas, while reinforcing the sense of community and confronting discouraging economic performance, deteriorating physical conditions, crime and safety concerns, social exclusion, and environmental degradation.

The evolutionary path from the obsolete, socially perverse 'renewal' rationale in the nineteen-fifties to the more recent, inclusive 'regeneration' dimension can be identified in the transition from 'place-oriented' to 'people-oriented' strategies through which, by strengthening the social vector, the idea of physical, economic, and environmental regeneration is enriched by new opportunities in order to pursue an authentic holistic approach to the city and its enlarged community.

As scientific literature has shown, it is a complex and multifaceted evolution, starting with the 'urban renewal' approach and developing throughout the second part of the 20th century with the maturation of specific models identified with different definitions (Berg, Braun, Meer 1998), from the so-called 'urban revitalization', mainly connected to the North American domain (Sutton, 2008), to the correctly named 'urban regeneration' policies, mostly in reference to a European context, despite its deep cultural diversity (Wall, 2013).

Among the different styles of success regeneration policies and actions, a common 'DNA' can be identified in the concept of integration: programs and projects show a virtuous mix of activities, services, infrastructures, funding and forms of governance with flexible partnerships among actors as representative as possible of the richness and vitality of the urban communities.

The issue of innovative partnerships within the current crisis has become critical for governments, called on to promote and implement effective transformations of urban and natural contexts through a virtuous cooperative vision, involving not only the traditional privileged subjects of the private domain, but also small businesses, community associations, and other fragmented, weaker stakeholders.

Urban regeneration may be defined as a comprehensive and integrated vision which leads to the resolution of urban problems and aims to achieve improvements in the economic, physical, social and environmental conditions of the area that is being transformed (Roberts and Sykes, 2006). Thus it is evident that its success is in most cases strongly influenced by the ability to face the challenge and 'invent' innovative forms of partnership, enhancing broader participation in the entire project cycle.

It is therefore important to discuss the nature of some of the specific tools pertinent to PPPs in the USA – particularly those belonging to the non-profit sector – to explore their evolution since their introduction some decades ago, and consider their present role in order to pursue virtuous scenarios and define innovative models in Urban regeneration strategies.

In the United States, "PPP's are central to national and state-government initiatives to regenerate local urban communities" (Osborne, 2000); from the 1950s, several US federal programs were approved to support public-private cooperation – the Urban Renewal Program (1949-1974), Community Development Block Grants (CDBG, since 1974), Urban Development Action Grants (UDAG - terminated) – and finally in the 1970s PPP was directly supported by the Carter administration and its National Urban Policy (1978).

In the 1990s PPP was established as a key public policy tool across the world (Aspen Institute, 1997; Podziba 1998; Jones, 1998; Osborne, 2000). Generally across Europe there is an increasing political consensus about the importance of encouraging and implementing PPP models, although comparing the two sides of the Atlantic, different cultures, models and styles are evident. In European 'common law' country domains, for instance, over the last decades the UK Government has promoted multi-sectoral partnerships as a key factor in achieving urban regeneration and as an important way to deal with the most severe urban welfare problems (Lawless, 1991; Bailey, 1995; Falconer and Ross, 1998). In countries built on 'civil law' juridical culture (Italy, France, Spain), the connection between NPOs and private investors remains comparatively fragile (Jacobs, 1987) and in most cases those European non-profits show a high degree of economic dependency from the public authorities, since they tend to represent organizational tools for providing social services.

The importance of involving multiple stakeholders in urban regeneration processes has been widely investigated and some schools have already highlighted how public-private interactions can support urban competitiveness and cohesion (Healey, 1996, 1997; Osborne, 2000; Reuschke, 2001; Wall, 2013). Residents and community organizations have long sought out new formulas to guarantee wider participation in urban redevelopment initiatives and new forms of cooperation with the public sector.

Such an effort should be considered even more important today because of the decreasing availability of public financial resources, which have driven local authorities to pursue a general partnership approach, and to support strong relationships with local and external stakeholders.

On these premises, the main objective of these reflections is to argue the role of public and private subjects in the partnerships that support urban regeneration and the structure of the relationships between them, with specific focus on the innovative role of NPOs in progress in US. The investigation, based on the analysis of four case-studies, aims to highlight the issue of the 'flexible geometry' in roles of public, private and non-profit actors, and the different approaches that might be adopted to reconsider the leading role of municipal governments while proposing community-based solutions to public problems.

The exploration of these case studies is not limited to highlighting the traditional features of some good practices – for example quality performance in delivering infrastructure, services and facilities or in supporting local community involvement (and empowerment) in decision-making processes – but also seeks to demonstrate some of the problems connected with partnerships that involve community and public sector organizations, such as the sometimes primary and sometimes complementary role of public authorities, NPOs or other actors in the successful implementation of the project cycle.

In the author's opinion the case studies are able to draw a compelling picture of PPPs in overcoming divisions that previously undermined the urban regeneration process; they attempt to illustrate different economic implications for the involvement of the private and the public sectors, and to point out the decisive role of NPOs when social issues are the main weaknesses while simultaneously being the major driving force for the regeneration process.

2. The Essence of Public-Private Partnership: a Short Overview

In the United States the tradition of PPP is well established. As briefly mentioned in the introduction, its first applications date back to the 1950s, but it gained wider application from the 1970s onwards, with the spread of downtown redevelopment projects (Osborne, 2000).

PPP can be described as a "contractual arrangement between a public sector agency and private sector concern, whereby resources and risks are shared for the purpose of delivering a public service, or for developing public infrastructure. (...) The intent, in any case, is to combine the resources of the public and private sectors, in the quest of providing services at optimal levels to the public" (Akintoye et al., 2008, p. 31). Actors involved in PPP are usually seeking for ambitions "they could not complete alone", which means that a 'true' venture is the one in which mutually risk-sharing and mutually beneficial goals drive towards jointly owned products (Sagalyn, 2007). In other words, the PPP approach aims at bringing the resources and skills of the private sector to a number of different development projects which the public sector could not afford if it stood alone (Sagalyn, 2007).

The theoretical background of the PPP approach, especially in the US, is extremely wide as it gets to the very bottom of the same American economic and political tradition (Barnekov, *et al*, 1989), and is furthermore very controversial (Newman, 2001). Focusing only on the last decades, and according to many authors, PPP could be read as an opportunity to deepen democracy because of its potential to develop new forms of community participation in the affairs that directly concern the community itself (Coaffe and Healy, 2003; Newman, 2005). In fact, through both participation of different actors and cooperative practices, the task of synthesizing the pluralistic views typical of modern societies can find optimal resolution, at the same time reflecting a more effective and adequate governance (Kooiman, 1993; Rhodes, 1996).

In the context of urban studies, PPPs supporting urban regeneration operate as a strategic factor in the empowerment of individuals, communities and organizations to provide public

services, thus transforming them into “self-sufficient, active, productive, and participatory citizens” (Cruikshank, 1994, p. 35), namely “active subjects” influencing and helping to shape government practice (Taylor, 2007).

Moreover, the rationale underlying the PPP approach can be also traced to the same origin as the communicative approach, in which “a communicative conception of rationality (...) replaces that of the self-conscious autonomous subject using principles of logic and scientifically formulated empirical knowledge to guide actions. This new conception of reasoning is arrived at by an intersubjective effort at mutual understanding. This refocuses the practices of planning to enable purposes to be communicatively discovered” (Healey, 1996, p. 239).

Despite this optimistic view, some controversial facets of PPP have been highlighted by critical literature, which points out weaknesses and threats that may afflict the composition process.

On one hand, some authors point out how the benefits coming from the interaction between different actors and different concerns need to be managed appropriately in order to translate the intervention of private actors in a proper social benefit (Fainstein, 2001; Sagalyn, 2007; Kokx, 2011); on the other hand, other scholars observe the topic with a more skeptical view, underlining the incompatibility between market-oriented forces and public interests.

In the most recent experiences of composition and relationships of different actors Swyngedouw (2005) interprets the affirmation of neoliberal policies as creating more social disparities than social benefits. Newman (2001) and Clarke (2004) focus on the difference between the goals of short-term pragmatism versus those of public governance, pointing out that a performance-driven rationale might not be always appropriate with long-term sustainable goals.

In the United States non-profits are part of an extensive network involving non-governmental institutions in the integration of local activist organizations and other groups into ‘traditional’ processes (Jacobs, 1987). The strategic role of NPOs in the United States has been increasing following the urban uprisings of the mid-1960s and early 1970s, around a “notion of ‘corporate responsibility’ [which] allowed companies to pursue their quest for profit while at the same time being ‘responsible’ within the urban communities (...)” (Jacobs, 1987, p. 31).

NPOs have become a new form of governance which institutionalize the roles of a range of actors in shaping the city through formal and informal politics (Ward and Imbroscio, 2011). The same authors recognize the roles of these organizations in expanding the definition of planning practice “including informal practices of urban dwellers and poor citizens, and recognize the role of citizens in constructing their neighborhoods, cities and livelihoods”.

As broad as the topic of PPP is, literature about NPOs and their role in defining spatial policies and practices is controversial. In fact, as argued by Rathgeb Smith (2000), a lacuna in actual theory still exists, and the role of non-profits in enhancing social welfare has probably been overemphasized, especially with respect to explicitly politically significant functions that non-profits are fulfilling in urban areas.

3. Four case studies in the United States

As mentioned in the introduction, the main goal of the research this paper is dealing with is to explore the potential of NPOs within PPP urban redevelopment-driven models, building linkages between US models and the European condition.

The key questions are: what is the role of NPOs for innovating PPP tools in urban regeneration policies in USA? And what are the possible lessons for European countries, particularly those which belong to the ‘civil law’ domain?

Considering the adopted inductive method, and to thoroughly analyse the multifaceted nature of PPPs supporting urban regeneration processes, both at theoretical and empirical level, a 'grounded theory' approach was adopted.

In order to avoid basing hypotheses on theoretical grounds – and thus in order not to allow unexpected results to emerge from the investigation itself – quantitative and qualitative data were collected through several methods and different sources. First of all, the analysis of statistics from the Census Bureau was carried out to identify useful data on the demographic, social and economic features of selected neighbourhoods. A review of community plans, redevelopment initiatives, zoning and land use was useful to identify the planning perspective and the most significant changes in the case-study areas. At the same time, critical overviews on related literature and press were carried out to discover connections, outcomes and possible weaknesses in the interventions and PPPs supporting the redevelopment process. Finally, qualitative data were gathered from interviews with selected stakeholders in order to identify and fully understand the different driving forces involved in the process and in the PPP themselves.

In more detail, three different urban redevelopment-oriented models of NPOs in the US were investigated - Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)³, Main Street Organizations (MSOs)⁴ and Community Development Corporations (CDCs)⁵ - within two different contexts: Boston, Massachusetts, and San Diego, California.

The four cases studies described in the following paragraphs (*Downtown Boston Improvement District*, *Washington Gateway Main Street Program* in Boston South End, *Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative* in Boston Roxbury, *North Park BID/Main Street* in San Diego) were selected in order to analyse differences in urban regeneration models, in partnership composition, and in the role played by participating stakeholders.

3.1 *Downtown Boston BID*

The *Downtown Boston Business Improvement District* was established in 2011 after fifteen challenging years, and it represents the strength of an ultimately solid partnership.

As a non-profit development initiative, it is committed to offer supplemental services to support long-term maintenance, while encouraging a general economic revitalization of Downtown Boston, where the mix of commercial, hospitality, institutional and residential properties demanded a higher level of elementary yet consequential public services than the City of Boston provided.

While the *BID* management entity is a non-profit organization of private property owners located in the district, the whole initiative is a solid and long-pursued partnership between local authorities and quasi-governmental entities, private owners and local stakeholders. As with any other *BID*, the *Downtown Boston BID* is publicly authorized and privately managed, but it has been unusually promoted and supported in the start-up process and in its early stages: the City of Boston and the *Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA)* played a leading and strategic role during the start-up, strongly championing the initiative and supporting the creation of the partnership.

Undoubtedly, the *Downtown Boston BID* is a successful PPP and it represents an important turning point for the area. A wide range of stakeholders was involved at all stages, and strong public leadership encouraged dialogue between the actors involved: public meetings, official discussions with local stakeholders, and face-to-face campaigns of persuasion were necessary to overcome short- and long-term problems and to decrease tension. Therefore, since this *BID* exists in deep relation with local authorities and public actors, it may be considered part of the collective action determining urban policies.

Moreover, since Downtown Boston was facing more demanding issues – the decline affecting the area had causes and implications that a BID has little influence over – public involvement was crucial to support the non-profit in its challenging goal of transforming Downtown Boston into a cleaner, safer, and more attractive place.

However, it may be questioned if such an involvement of the public authorities might compromise the BID's self-management and its non-profit autonomy. In fact, this initiative continues the positive development trend started by previous redevelopment initiatives promoted by the public authority, but it is hard to distinguish these previous actions and the good outcomes they produced from the BID's general strategy.

3.2 *Washington Gateway Main Street (Boston)*

Washington Gateway Main Street is a NPO implementing the Boston Main Streets Program. Set up in 1997 as an outgrowth of the intense work of a 40-member task force appointed by Mayor Menino, it aims to revitalize the neighborhood from decades of decline while sustaining the economic vitality of its commercial and residential areas.

Over more than 15 years, many results have been achieved and the initiative has been supported by intense volunteer work and a strong partnership – guided by the *Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA)* – public sector), a pool of private developers, and diverse local communities, in a joint effort to revitalize the entire neighbourhood. This began from the perspective of commerce, but gave great importance to social and infrastructural issues as well. At the same time, the *Washington Gateway* initiative was strongly supported by the community, with the involvement of diverse representatives and committees – business associations, religious leaders, artists, retailers, bank representatives and residents.

Thanks to the strong connection between all the stakeholders involved in the process, *Washington Gateway* has been extremely successful in the implementation of the regeneration strategy.

Probably the most remarkable factor has been the cooperation between the public sector and the non-profit organization itself. Since the initiative is part of the *Boston Main Streets Program*, the role of *BRA* has been crucial. Nevertheless, the *Main Streets* program itself played a significant role in the decision-making process, developing a strong and comprehensive vision with the involvement of the community and the main stakeholders. This 'visioning' process has been assured thanks to a wide participation and a broad consensus, both made possible by the creation of an *ad hoc* Volunteer Committee – significantly, more than 22,600 hours of volunteer work, which greatly contributed to the accomplishments of the program.

Moreover, the special composition of the Board of Directors, proved extremely important for the building of partnerships.

The strategic role of public and private foundations and committees helping in the redevelopment process should also be highlighted. Once the interests of the private sector had increased, *Washington Gateway's* Design Committee worked with developers to review proposals and to preserve many of the historical, social and economic aspects of the area, matching different needs and solutions.

3.3 *Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative (Boston)*

Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) is a non-profit community planning and intergenerational organizing entity operating in the neighbourhood of Roxbury, Boston, Massachusetts. One of the most renowned initiatives of its kind in the United States, DSNI was formed in 1984 when elders and youths joined forces in an effort to claim back their

neighbourhood after a period of abandonment and despair. Ever since, it has been operating in the neighbourhood, with a social and economic purpose.

At the basis of the actions and initiatives undertaken by DSNI is a close partnership with different actors and subjects that range from NPOs to governmental agencies and other private actors.

The rationale behind the collaboration between the various partners is that DSNI does not have enough financial resources to carry out all the initiatives proposed, and thus needs support from different actors. DSNI therefore creates appropriate partnerships with different actors, decided on the basis of the initiatives undertaken and promoted, and does not set up privileged or specific partnerships.

It may be claimed therefore that its role is mainly to propose, put forward and support new initiatives, which are then carried out by other agencies.

Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative represents a unique case, from several different points of view. Although it is a community-based organization and even though it has all the characteristics common to a CDC, it is not a Community Development Corporation. This has certain advantages on the actions and initiatives proposed by the organization, especially in housing development schemes and in the achievement of the public good. A characteristic of such great flexibility allows DSNI to select the best partner on the basis of different criteria, different goals to be achieved, and different human resources to be engaged.

Evidently, it can be claimed that DSNI as a community-based organization plays a crucial role in urban planning and regeneration initiatives within the area. Its special status as an eminent domain authority organization represents a unique case for which it is difficult to make a comparison to any other cases where a private organization has been granted such a fundamental power for the planning activity. Its role within the community is very active and its involvement in almost all of the planning and urban regeneration projects undertaken within the neighbourhood ensures that the community interest is always taken into consideration. It is thus a good example of non-profit community planning and organizing entity which reflects the general role that such organizations have within the USA.

3.4 North Park Main Street and BID (San Diego)

North Park Main Street is an interesting case of the participation of different associations and varied initiatives in the same area; indeed, it is a BID – established in 1985 by the City of San Diego – and a Main Street affiliated with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which was established in 1996 when the City selected the existing BID to be the pilot project for the national Main Street program. As a volunteer-based NPO, *North Park Main Street* administers the BID (a non-profit itself) and promotes the development of the area while preserving its integrity and encouraging an urban pedestrian-friendly environment.

North Park was one of the oldest and most established historical and cultural communities in San Diego, with an ongoing commercial decline while simultaneously expressing a strong wish to become a vibrant and attractive area for young people. The reasons behind the collaboration of public and private partners in this initiative were the diversified strategy promoted by the Main Street itself, the 'ex ante' lack of adequate financial resources, and varied social and economic demands.

North Park Main Street was supported by a large amount of volunteer work, strong involvement of the community, and a solid partnership – involving the City of San Diego and the *Redevelopment Agency*⁶, almost 500 business and retailers, private developers and local organizations – in a joint effort to revitalize the entire neighbourhood, beginning with from commerce but imbuing great importance to cultural issues.

A distinctive feature of the initiative is the strong connection between two non-profits (the BID and the Main Street) with different missions and tools but sharing the same Board of Directors. Indeed, while the BID was crucial to the involvement of local businesses paying an annual fee to support the enhancement of services, infrastructure, security, etc., the Main Street played the major role in involving the community, in supporting projects and programs in the area, and in finding funds and grants for implementing the regeneration strategy.

Moreover, the public sector was deeply involved in the physical redevelopment, while the community strongly supported the redevelopment process in its starting stage, also taking advantage of the many professionals living in North Park (architects, planners, artists).

A significant role was also played by the *Community Planning Group*, a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization – which played a major role in expressing the demands of the local community and acting as a go-between to the community, the private sector, and the public authorities.

4 Lessons and Perspectives

As highlighted in the case studies, within urban redevelopment policies and practices, innovation in PPP models has become increasingly important; the significance of partnerships between the public and private sectors lies in the possibility to overcome dialectics that had previously conditioned virtuous interpretations of the urban regeneration idea. In emerging scenarios, NPOs may play a strategic role, in cases where they are able to achieve a balance between public and private interests and the demands of the community. Within the general framework of urban redevelopment strategies in the US, reflections and case studies have therefore been focused on the exploration of diverse ‘PPP architectures’, in which the changing roles of public and private stakeholders have been highlighted.

It has been seen that a well-established PPP may support a redevelopment process and strongly affect its success, particularly with respect to the quality of its performance in providing social services and community facilities, and in its support for local community involvement and empowerment in decision-making processes.

Nevertheless, the investigation shows that in some cases strong partnerships and successful redevelopment processes have been possible when the central government and public authorities have promoted, encouraged and financially supported ‘ad hoc’ NPOs.



Figure 1: Some pictures after the implementation of North Park Main Street Initiative, San Diego, California, 2013

However, the leading role of public authorities in supporting specific interests might also be interpreted as something of an interference. If a strong partnership has the potential to be a key factor in the redevelopment processes, this potential may be undermined by an institutional framework that hinders the ability of the involved stakeholders to make choices and to address the main challenges. Under certain circumstances PPP may be highly restrictive, representing only a narrow composition, or being opaque in its dynamics.

The role of the public sector was crucial for *Downtown Boston BID* where the PPP championed by the public authorities was the decisive condition to overcome long-standing difficulties and repeated failed attempts; however such an institutional involvement was also responsible for incomplete support from the private sector. Indeed, when in 2010 the BID petition was presented to the City Council, it was signed by around 60% of the property owners in the district, but some of the most important stakeholders and owners refused to join the NPO. Thus they represented a significant drawback for the BID's strategy and an important restriction in the PPP itself.

In the involvement of the private and the public sectors, though, the case studies illustrate different economic implications.

As pointed out in the literature, private stakeholders are often the key factor in providing substantial levels of funding to non-profits. In *Washington Gateway Main Street*, economic interests in constructing and restoring commercial and residential buildings called for the involvement of the private sector - relevant since the very beginning of the project both financially and operationally - while the public authorities were in charge of convincing private stakeholders to invest in the neighbourhood, and of deciding which publicly owned vacant land and parcels were to be restored.

By contrast was the financial leader in the physical redevelopment – the City of San Diego and the *Redevelopment Agency* funded most of the interventions carried out in the area – but the public involvement was merely a consequence of the community strongly supporting the redevelopment process and overcoming the initial resistance of the City of San Diego.

Finally, it may be seen that in some cases the NPOs are the real driving force for the regeneration process, exceeding the role of private and public actors and decisively affecting the PPP.

In the *Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI)*, the fragile balance between public and private sectors was managed by the 'leading' role of the NPO and the success of the redevelopment process was based on the involvement of multiple and varied stakeholders, with the scant presence of public authorities. The latter did not take part in the decision-making process and was not proactive, but was instead involved in initiatives with regard to general goals, the general financial conditions, and the specific contribution the public sector may produce for the non-profit strategy.

In such cases, when social problems are both the critical issues and the major driving force for the regeneration process, the possibility of adopting a flexible partnership model – with a partnership composition depending on the specific project, with varied stakeholders bringing different expectations to the process and different emphases to their conceptions of how the process should work – may be crucial.

An interesting exception to the ordinary CDC model, DSNI is a 'variable geometry' NPO: a 'hub' which identifies from time to time different partners for implementing single projects. In a way it represents a 'horizontal' platform with a role that can stimulate endogenous and exogenous stakeholders and agencies.

Additionally, the Main Street (MS) model represents a significant contribution to 'integrated area-based PPP'. Its effectiveness is closely linked to the critical mass of available budget as show by the experiences of the Boston Washington Gateway and the San Diego North Park.

In both the CDC and MS models, the hybridization of the 'civil law' approach with that of the 'common law' can occasionally allow the Public sector to be seen in a mutating role, changing from being a 'resource provider' to a 'resource broker', and a facilitator for the involvement of private investors and other fragmented stakeholders in the redevelopment process. In this sense, CDC and MS projects cannot do without the direct and active involvement and cooperation of the entire local community in a flexible context of regeneration strategies.

Returning to the 'key questions' (see point 3) and referring these findings to the general landscape depicted by the scientific literature, it is possible to argue that in the US the urban revitalization-oriented NPOs are increasingly involved in a mature integration process, keeping together the original 'community welfare goals' with a professional, sometimes almost 'for profit' approach, with increasing expertise, skills and management capabilities in order to run complex processes.

Is there a possible 'lesson' from the recent US NPO generation for European Countries (and particularly the 'civil law' ones)?

The recent American experience of NPOs may represent a privileged vector for urban regeneration policies, tackling the fragmentation of actions between different levels of government. At the same time, the effectiveness of NPO action is guaranteed and empowered by the crucial involvement of the public administration.

The historic, original models are passing through an intriguing process of hybridization: in the US a new generation of NPOs appears to be more effective if the public government is more a 'turbine' and a 'driver' than a mere 'referee'; almost the opposite of what has been going on since some decades in the Mediterranean European countries for specific cultural reasons.

Within this physiological trend it is crucial to join a 'flexible geometry' approach, interpreting the changing conditions of local culture, economy, society, time, and space. The 'NPO architectures' we explored are particularly interesting in 'civil law' countries like Italy, in which even today NPOs are able to deliver social services, but are not allowed to run and manage urban regeneration programs and/or projects.

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Notes

¹ This work represents an author's personal evolution of a paper preprinted in the Proceedings of the 49th ISOCARP Congress, representing a piece of research carried out by the author, together with Alessia Ferretti, Alessandro Boca, Enrica Polizzi di Sorrentino, and Enzo Falco.

² The general goal of the research project "CLUDS" (Commercial Local Urban Districts), Seventh Framework Programme, Marie Curie Actions People IRSES, 2011-2014 (www.cluds-7fp.unirc.it), is focused on exploring the potential of new tools for urban regeneration through the strategic role of small retails, reinforcing the sense of community, reducing transportation costs and contributing to the creation of attractive urban environment, thus increasing private investments. The main axes of the research program deal with the evolution of innovative 'Public Private Partnership' forms and 'Urban-Rural' relationships for regenerating urban deprived areas and their 'territorial *milieu*'. The program implementation is based on networking University units, four from European Union ("Mediterranea" Reggio Calabria, "Sapienza" Roma, "Aalto" Helsinki, "Salford" Manchester) and two from USA (Northeastern University Boston and San Diego State University).

³ Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) belong to the wide range of policies internationally implemented to improve the economic vibrancy of urban communities and to foster revitalization in urban areas while promoting an innovative approach to the delivery of elementary yet consequential public services (Mac Donald et. al, 2010; Mitchell, 2001).

⁴ Launched in 1977 by the National Trust of Historic Preservation, the *Main Street Approach* is "a preservation-based economic development tool that enables communities to revitalize downtown and neighbourhood business districts by leveraging local assets – from historic, cultural, and architectural resources to local enterprises and community pride" [National Trust of Historic Preservation].

⁵ *Community Development Corporations* (CDCs) are known throughout the United States as NPOs which aim at social and economic development in low income and distressed communities. The use of CDCs is part of "a strategy designed to solve many of the problems of discrimination, poverty, lack of citizen participation, and the failure of governmental institutions" (Goodpaster, 1968, p. 645).

⁶ The *Redevelopment Agencies* of the City of San Diego (Centre City Development Corporation CCDC, and Southeastern Economic Development Corporation, SEDC) were dissolved in 2012 by the Governor of California; the City of San Diego, serving as their successor agency, has assumed the former assets, rights, and obligations under the California Community Redevelopment Law. At the moment, the former Agency's affairs and actions are carried on by *Civic San Diego*, a city-owned non-profit that is the entrepreneurial development partner for targeted urban neighborhoods.