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The inter-related roles of the regional and local government in developing local partnerships in Italy

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Abstract

Building partnerships is becoming an important issue at the local level of government in many countries. Different experiences can be traced throughout Europe, as well as in other OECD countries. This is because partnerships, especially when the size of the single local government is small, can help to manage services in a more efficient and effective way.

Nevertheless, building a relation is difficult, nor is it always successful, as many scholars emphasise. For a number of reasons, higher levels of government may then play a significant role in supporting partnerships between different stakeholders.

Given the shortage of empirical studies on this subject, this chapter combines conceptual and empirical analysis, and is based upon:

- the direct observation of a number of partnerships in Italy, with particular reference to those Regions in which the birth and the development of partnerships has been positively influenced by the regional level of government;
- surveys of other partnerships which have been formalised in Italy;
- literature review and analysis of official documents.

The issues analysed most carefully in the chapter are the critical aspects of partnership building, and the role played by higher levels of government in activating or facilitating partnerships. It is in fact clear that higher levels of government may gain considerable benefit from the development of partnerships at the local level.

Finally, the chapter deals with comparative aspects, and investigates the existence of common patterns and trends in the different regional experiences examined.

Keywords: multi-level governance, local partnerships, co-operation strategies, role of Regions, effectiveness of Regional intervention.

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Development and co-operation strategies of municipalities: an overview at national level

The development of partnerships in Italy

During the last few years, the building of partnerships with other local governments (from now on abbreviated to LGs) has become a relevant strategic opportunity for Italian municipalities, since these forms aim to create more effective governance models of public functions at local level, and to better satisfy public needs.

The reasons for the growing interest in partnerships are various and will be dealt with in the present chapter.

The high number of small-sized municipalities (see table 1) is certainly a first important aspect to consider. In effect, Italy is characterised by a high number of small municipalities: almost 6,000 have less than 5,000 inhabitants, and of these some 2,000 have a population of 1,000 units or less.

Table n. 1 – Distribution of Italian municipalities as to population range

Size range of municipality (# of inhabitants)	# of municipalities	% of municipalities
< 1,000	1,951	24.1%
1,000-5,000	3,922	48.4%
5,000-10,000	1,169	14.4%
10,000-50,000	926	11.4%
50,000-100,000	88	1.1%
100,000-500,000	40	0.5%
> 500,000	6	0.1%
Total amount	8,102	100.0%

Source: our elaboration of national data

Historical and cultural reasons explain the presence of a great number of small municipalities with which inhabitants strongly identify themselves.

This is well documented by the poor reaction of LGs to the 1990 Local Government Act (Law 142), which for the first time allowed for the creation of partnerships (see table 2).

Table n. 2 – The results of the 1990 Local Government Act

Forms of partnership allowed
Association (an aggregation model of two or more neighbouring municipalities, prior to a merger)
Merger (a new single local government)
Public support tools
Significant financial incentives from the central government and the Regions
Results
In ten years the overall number of municipalities increased slightly rather than decreased
There have been only 16 associations
The mergers which in fact were created are irrelevant (some units)

Source: own data collection

Nevertheless, during the Nineties a series of phenomena occurred which have deeply altered the frame of reference and urged small municipalities to co-operate:

- a greater number of functions have been assigned to LGs due to the devolution process, which started with the so-called Bassanini reforms;
- central financial contributions have constantly decreased, forcing LGs to apply higher taxes and prices;
- with a higher tax burden, inhabitants now pay more attention to the quality of services, to the efficiency and financial benefits of local public administration and, in general, to the overall accountability of LGs.

In particular, LGs are given new areas of responsibility independently of their dimension, but small bodies can hardly afford to comply with the new provisions, especially when they suffer from financial and professional limitations.

Consequently, small municipalities have recently become more aware of the need to build partnerships in order to establish a strategic and economically viable policy for service delivery.

On the basis of these conditions, the Italian Parliament has taken further action to develop aggregations between municipalities.

The main innovations of the 1999 Act (Law n. 265) relate both to forms of partnership and to the Regions' role.

With reference to the first point, the legislator:

- affirms that the whole partnership process focuses on the voluntary action of LGs;
- removes any time-limit for the association;
- offers a broader and more variegated range of co-operation forms, giving municipalities the possibility to build flexible partnerships, regulated at local level. The LGs can choose the form best suited to the specific local needs.

As regards the second point, the 1999 Act:

- introduces a policy offering a wider negotiation powers and more involvement of LGs in the drawing up of regional territorial plans;
- grants Regions the freedom to regulate and differentiate the partnership forms and the strategy for their development and the financial incentives in further detail.

The main features of the partnership forms provided by the 1999 Act

The partnership and co-operation forms regulated by the 1999 Act can be divided in three main classes, arranged in order of increasing integration of their activities and decision-making processes:

1. the weaker form resorts to solutions of a contractual nature, such as the drawing-up of agreements, joint programs, and conventions for the purpose of joint management. This class includes agreement protocols, conventions and program agreements;
2. the mixed forms, while keeping the identity of the single bodies, provide for the building of “ad-hoc organs” with an inter-municipality authority regulating long-lasting and organised forms. To this class belong the joint management of functions, associations, and mountain communities;
3. the strongest and most institutional form, which reduces the number of bodies by means of mergers.

This chapter focuses on the second class (see table 3), i.e. on long-lasting and organised partnerships whose main aim is to provide services, requiring that the bodies undertake internal reorganisation and not mere contractual relations. Many local governments are now involved in such partnership forms, which therefore represent great empirical evidence.

Table n. 3 – Examined Partnership Forms

<p>Joint management of functions by means of conventions (<i>Esercizio associato di funzioni</i>)</p> <p>This form does not give birth to a new local body.</p> <p>Its main aim is to achieve scale economies and integrate the activities by adopting two different methods, which can coexist in the same partnership: the transfer of staff and the delegation of functions to one of the governments involved.</p> <p>In this kind of joint form, local governments keep a high autonomy (with reference to regional regulation) as regards their organisation and relations with other bodies.</p> <p>The Emilia-Romagna Region has developed this form further and it is now called an Inter-municipal Partnership (<i>Associazione inter-comunale</i>), unique in Italy.</p>
<p>Association (<i>Unione di comuni</i>)</p> <p>This is a new legally-recognised body with full operative capacity on all delegated local government functions.</p> <p>It respects LGs' autonomy, since its institutional organisation is not dictated by the legislator, but by political decisions made by the bodies themselves.</p> <p>The association has the power to freely regulate its own organisation, the execution of assigned functions and also financial relations between the partaking municipalities.</p>
<p>Mountain Community (<i>Comunità montana</i>)</p> <p>The mountain community has the task of serving the mountainous areas, carrying out joint services and functions.</p> <p>Traditionally, this body aimed at the programming and implementation of policies in a specified area. Only now and then, however, joint functions have really been assigned to the mountain communities.</p>

The innovations introduced by the 1999 Act have increased the willingness of LGs to build new partnerships, and to experiment new ways of networking (see table 4).

Table n. 4 – Basic data on partnerships

	Inter-municipal partnerships (the Emilia-Romagna subset of Joint management)	Associations	Mountain Communities	Total	Percentage on national data
Number of structures	21	128	373	522	
Number of associated municipalities	113	568	4,166	4,847	60%
Governed population	1,201,344	1,407,281	10,756,150	13,364,775	23%
Governed territory (km ²)	5,995	10,554	156,110	172,659	57%

Source: our elaboration of national data

The attitude of Regional governments towards partnerships

A model of analysis

The main limitations shown by small bodies lie in their structural and financial weakness and in limited capacity to develop strategies and policies.

Thus, LGs are not spontaneously willing to co-operate, unless other institutions take the lead and ease the construction of partnerships.

The bodies that can take part in this process exist at the central, regional and local government levels.

In this chapter, particular emphasis is given to Regions, which bear the major responsibilities as regards the redefinition of tasks and responsibilities within their territories.

Following the 1999 Act and the 2001 reform of the Constitution, every Region should define the methods for partnership promotion, such as:

- identifying the most suitable dimensions for partnerships, depending on a number of aspects (the geographical distribution of LGs, their homogeneity, the room for economies of scope);
- defining appropriate incentives;
- marketing and effectively supporting partnerships.

Thus, the Regions do not play a supervisory role, but have the task of stimulating, facilitating and co-ordinating the co-operation and association processes.

To corroborate this, Regions can adopt many intervention methods, as shown by the first empirical results. To this aim table 5 defines the criteria to be followed when describing and investigating the behaviour of some tested regions using some key variables.

Table n. 5 – A model of the analysis of the Regions' behaviour

Kinds of tools Regions may use	Specific aspects to consider
Enactment of regulations	Existence of a regional law (from 1999 on) approving the redefinition of tasks and responsibilities of LGs (territory re-organisation plan) and regulating partnership forms; involvement of local governments in the definition of adequate geographical areas for the delivery of services; possibility given to LGs to choose between a variety of partnership forms; detail of the regional regulation as regards the institutional and organisational structure of partnerships; methods used to check a partnership's structural adequacy.
Creation of incentives	Provision of incentives; amount of allocated funds; nature of incentives (contributions, transfers, tax relief, prioritisation of access to other contributions); destination of incentives to different groups of beneficiaries; prioritisation in the destination of incentives to the different kinds of partnerships; phases of a partnership's life cycle in which incentives can be obtained (feasibility studies, constitution of the partnership, functioning).
Creation of support services	Preparation of guidelines and standardised forms to help start-up (Statute, contracts, etc.); identification of techniques and methods for feasibility studies and cost-benefit analyses; constitution of board of advisors working together with the local bodies.
Development of benchmarking and learning networks	Methods used by the Regions in promoting the development of partnerships; methods used by the Regions to benchmark and to disseminate best practices.

Experiences at national level: steps taken by the Regions

The Regional experiences examined in this chapter are identified on the basis of the following criteria:

- structured and articulated regulation, preferably updated to meet the provisions of the 1999 Act, defining partnership forms, their establishment, and promotion tools;
- the allocation of substantial financial resources for partnership promotion;
- the availability of other supporting structures to be seen as real services (technical assistance and advice);
- significant experience in associations of local bodies.

The regions with the greatest number of partnership experiences are Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna and Veneto. These Regions also report the biggest increase in partnerships since the introduction of Law 265 in 1999. It must be noted, furthermore, that Lombardy, Piedmont and Veneto are the Italian Regions with the greatest number of municipalities, whereas Emilia-Romagna is only in ninth place.

Table n. 6 – Partnership distribution in Italian Regions

REGION	PARTNERSHIP FORMS			TOTAL
	Inter-municipality partnerships	Associations of local governments	Mountain Communities	
PIEDMONT	-	23	48	71
LOMBARDY	-	36	30	66
EMILIA-ROMAGNA	21	8	18	47
VENETO	-	26	19	45
LAZIO	-	10	22	32
CAMPANIA	-	1	27	28
CALABRIA	-	1	25	26
SARDINIA	-	1	25	26
ABRUZZO	-	3	19	22
LIGURIA	-	-	19	19
MARCHE	-	6	13	19
<i>Self-governing Province of Bolzano</i>	-	-	8	19
<i>Self-governing Province of Trento</i>	-	-	11	
TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE (total)				
TUSCANY	-	-	18	18
SICILY	-	-	15	15
BASILICATA	-	-	14	14
PUGLIA	-	9	5	14
MOLISE	-	3	10	13
FRIULI-VENEZIA GIULIA	-	-	10	10
UMBRIA	-	1	9	10
VALLE D'AOSTA	-	-	8	8
TOTAL	21	128	373	522

Source: own data collection

Tables 7 and 8 briefly report the basic features of the provisions adopted by these 4 regions for the promotion of partnership forms.

Table n. 7 – Actions taken by Regions for partnership promotion

REGION	REFERENCE REGULATIONS	DISTRIBUTED INCENTIVES	FINANCED PARTNERSHIP PHASE	DISTRIBUTION CRITERIA
EMILIA-ROMAGNA	<p>Regional law n. 11/2001 regulates partnership forms and gives other provisions for local bodies</p> <p>A comprehensive law, enacted following National Law 265/1999</p>	<p>2000: 2.6 million Euro</p> <p>2001: 3 million Euro</p>	<p>Feasibility studies (contribution covering up to 70% of expenditure, VAT excluded)</p> <p>Extraordinary contribution for the start-up</p> <p>5 year contribution for partnership management, decreasing starting from the 3rd year</p>	<p><u>Contribution for feasibility studies:</u> proportional to the number of municipalities involved; priority determined with reference to size of population involved priority for mergers; distribution of contributions finalised to expand existing partnership forms</p> <p><u>Initial contribution:</u> depends on partnership type and form</p> <p><u>Management contribution:</u> depends on partnership function and type, with priority to the integration degree and population density greater contributions for associations and mountain communities; contribution is doubled for mergers</p>
LOMBARDY	<p>Regional law n. 28/1992 regulates municipal districts</p> <p>Regional law n. 1/2000 implements devolution and sets up incentive funds for joint management projects</p> <p>It does not regulate partnership forms in detail</p>		<p>Feasibility studies (contribution covering up to 50% of total expenditure, on condition that the dimensions of the partnership are above a minimum level, suitable to profit from scale economies)</p> <p>Management contribution up to 10 years</p>	<p><u>Contribution for feasibility studies:</u> Proportional to the number of bodies involved</p> <p><u>Management contribution:</u> Different amounts for associations and mergers Homogeneous parameters for fund distribution: - population density - number of municipalities involved - type and number of joint managed functions and services - presence of insolvent municipalities - real need for extraordinary intervention for the creation of the partnership</p> <p>Higher contributions for co-operations not deriving from previous joint management forms</p> <p>Functions and services admitted only if comprised in a regional list</p>

REGION	REFERENCE REGULATIONS	DISTRIBUTED INCENTIVES	FINANCED PARTNERSHIP PHASE	DISTRIBUTION CRITERIA
PIEDMONT	<p>Regional law n. 51/1992 (modified by laws 49/1995, 1/1996 and 13/1997) regulates municipal districts, municipality associations and mergers</p> <p>Regional law n. 44/2000 implements devolution It does not regulate partnership forms in detail</p>	<p>1999: 3 million Euro</p> <p>2000: 5 million Euro</p> <p>2001: 7.7 million Euro</p>	<p>The Association is financed for 3 years. During the 2nd and 3rd year it gets 60% of 1st year grant</p>	<p><u>Contribution for start-up and management:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Different and decreasing as to partnership type - Assigned on the basis of specific and finalised sector plans <p>Grants are distributed on the basis of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - financial position of the LGs - population - number of municipalities involved <p>There is the condition that at least 3 functions be activated</p>
VENETO	<p>Regional law n. 25/1992 dictates norms for province and municipality variations</p> <p>Regional law n. 6/1997 defines the allocation of funds for associations</p> <p>Regional law n. 3/1998 defines further support measures</p> <p>The Regional Government decided in 2001 about criteria and methods for fund granting</p>	<p>2000: 0.8 million Euro for associations</p> <p>2001: 1.8 million Euro for associations 0.9 million Euro for mountain communities and joint management</p>	<p>Contribution to establish partnerships (covering 60% of management and start-up expenditure up to 1 million Euro)</p>	<p>The duration of the joint management shall be at least 5 years</p> <p>In case of funds shortage, priority is given to municipalities counting less than 5,000 inhabitants, and to functions comprised in a regional list</p> <p>No contribution is provided for municipalities which received funds in the previous 5 years</p>

Table n. 8 - Additional tools for promoting and supporting partnerships

REGION	SUPPORT FORMS AND INFORMATION	POLITICAL ORGANS	TECHNICAL ORGANS	INTERNET SITE (area)	SEMINARS AND PUBLICATIONS	OTHER METHODS TO DISSEMINATE THE INNOVATION
EMILIA-ROMAGNA	Creation Guide Feasibility Study Handbook Forum for FAQ Documentation	Regional Committee for Partnership Development, which supports the Regional Government in the definition of partnership development policies. It consists of the chairmen of all partnerships.	Operational staff for partnership decision support and implementation	Joint Management Site organised by the Institutional Affairs Area	Two-monthly report Seminars	Mapping of experiences Diffusion of best practices Technical support structure throughout the territory Updated and effective communication channels
LOMBARDY	Documentation (forms for fund allocation request)			Associations Homepage (organised by service companies connected to the Municipalities representation association)		Register of experiences The Region grants local bodies access to a regional data base and favours the circulation of information
PIEDMONT	Drafts of applications and documents Technical opinions		Consultant staff available for on-site meetings for feasibility studies and reorganisation projects	Site "Comuni in comune" organised by the Region	Publications on local bodies partnerships Seminars and meetings	All local government levels are involved Particular attention given to the municipality level as a territory co-ordination opportunity
VENETO	Drafts of statutes, regulations and constitution acts Association map (Service provided by Veneto section of ANCI, National Association of Italian Municipalities)		The law provides for the intervention of consultants by means of inter-disciplinary technical staff composed of personnel belonging to the City Council and the Regional Council; the staff can co-operate with the Universities located in the Region			

Generally it can be noted that:

- only one out of the four Regions (Emilia-Romagna) has a territory reorganisation law (“legge di riordino territoriale”). This law regulates the institutional structure of the partnership in detail, grants nevertheless a high level of autonomy to local bodies with regard to corporate governance issues (e.g. board membership or minority interest representation);
- two regions (Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy) have provided for a strong and binding relationship among local bodies’ representatives for the application of the territory reorganisation provision, and to take common decisions about such issues as the admitted partnership forms, the amount of the incentives, the rules for their allocation, while Piedmont has limited this co-operation to money allocation;
- the range of provided partnership forms is practically the same, the exception being the innovative inter-municipal partnership regulated by the Emilia-Romagna Region;
- almost all Regions provide for a standard method for the constitution of partnerships;
- the four Regions tend to standardise financial aspects (requests for funds, control of expenditure, partnership’s financial position) and output measurement and evaluation.

Strong similarities can be found in the nature of incentives (all represented by financial contributions), in their beneficiaries (local bodies if the partnership has not been yet constituted or the partnership itself once it exists), in the preferred types of partnership (i.e. association).

On the other hand, the features which are still sometimes very different, are the following:

- the total amount of the allotted funds and the sums effectively allocated for the promotion of partnership forms;
- the promotion of possible application areas. While the Emilia-Romagna Region provides for a financial contribution to be assigned during the different development phases of the partnership project (from the feasibility study to start-up and management), in other cases the funds are destined only to finance the initial operating costs, defined by strong binding rules (the Veneto Region requires the back payment of received funds in the case of premature partnership dissolution, nor does it distribute any funds, unless at least a half of the expected functions are actually put in place);
- the variegated mixture of supporting tools: in some Regions (Emilia-Romagna) these are highly articulated and powerful, while in others (Lombardy and Veneto) these are not directly provided by the regional body but by third parties such as Veneto section of ANCI, National Association of Italian Municipalities.

The Emilia-Romagna experience

The partnership phenomenon in Emilia-Romagna

The analysis of partnerships in the Emilia-Romagna Region requires special attention being paid to some important aspects, so as to understand:

- the number of partnerships and their relevance in local government;
- the main features of the partnership building process;
- some critical inter-institutional relations;
- how effective the different implementation tools provided by the Region have been.

This can be illustrated by an extensive analysis of some partnership experiences, as well as by interviewing board members and managers involved.

The Emilia-Romagna Region has an overall population of approximately 3.9 million inhabitants, which is 6.8% of the national population.

From an economic point of view, this Region represents a rich and dynamic territory, characterised by innovation.

Emilia-Romagna counts 341 municipalities, in 9 provinces; the majority of these municipalities are medium-small.

Table n. 9 – Distribution of municipalities in Emilia-Romagna as regards population

Size range of municipality (# of inhabitants)	# of municipalities	% of municipalities
< 1,000	17	5.0%
1,000-5,000	149	43.7%
5,000-10,000	97	28.4%
10,000-50,000	65	19.1%
50,000-100,000	5	1.5%
100,000-500,000	8	2.3%
> 500,000	-	-
Total	341	100.0%

Source: our elaboration of regional data

There are 47 partnership forms currently active, divided as shown in table 10.

Table n. 10 – Basic data on partnerships in Emilia-Romagna

	Inter-municipal partnerships	Associations	Mountain Communities	Total	% of regional data
Number of structures	21	8	18	47	
Number of associated municipalities	113	32	122	267	78.3%
Governed population	1,201,344	162,641	359,148	1,789,065	44.9%
Governed territory (km ²)	5,995	1,400	8,520	15,915	71.9%

Source: our elaboration of regional data

This Region is characterised by the inter-municipality partnership.

This is not a distinct local body, but a tool for inter-municipality co-operation, involving the integration of defined services and offices. The general responsibility to satisfy citizens' needs remains in the hands of the single partaking local body. The institutional and organisational structure, as well as the financial relations among the bodies, are defined autonomously, except for the minimal legal requirements.

This formula tends to reconcile an economy of service management with relative independence in service policies. It exhibits the features of a structured convention with the creation of common offices.

The partnership is adopted:

- for administrative and political convenience (governing bodies are appointed by the mayors of the municipalities involved);
- for reduced impact on the autonomy of the single body (with respect to alternative forms). For this reason it may represent the best solution for the promotion of partnerships.

Rita Ghidoni, the President of the Inter-municipal partnership *Comuni Modenesi Area Nord*, considers that “the inter-municipal partnership represents a great organisation training field for municipalities (in view of their transformation into associations). The key features of partnerships are flexibility and modularity on the one hand, as conventions must be rewritten every year and therefore the political targets are regularly reset, and their quickness and agility on the other hand. This form is therefore an optimal tool to innovate organisation. The lack of legal recognition, however, makes it necessary to formalise decisions through the city councils of the single municipalities involved, which quite often gives rise to muddled and redundant decision making processes”.

Data gathered from these experiences show that normally the partnership covers a greater area with respect to the association, involving on average a greater number of bodies, sometimes with more than 10,000 inhabitants.

“The inter-municipal partnership embodies a form of co-operation which, taking into account its less stringent ties with respect to the association, is suitable for grouping bodies of different sizes, since small municipalities run a smaller risk of being strongly influenced by big cities” (Giordano Corradini, General Manager of the Inter-municipal partnership involving Carpi, Campogalliano, Novi and Soliera).

Given their basic features, the partnerships normally manage services which do not require a complex production structure (e.g. school transportation) or services with a high information content, where vast territories can be covered by ITC.

The role played by the Emilia-Romagna Region

There are some basic principles which the Emilia-Romagna Region has followed in its partnership promotion policies:

- the application of the subsidiarity principle, increasing the powers of the bodies located within the Region, and adopting the greatest possible integration of structures and services;
- the development of the areas covered, with an increase in the quantity and quality of available services, taking advantage from scale economies and from increased efficiency;
- the fostering of real operational support to partnerships;
- the respect for the organisational autonomy of the bodies, with preference to the flexibility criteria;
- the assignment of financial support only to organised forms of co-operation, which are seen as key structures for the territory reorganisation.

In order to put this strategic plan into practice, the Region has taken the following steps:

1. approval of a structured law regulating a broad range of partnership forms, but at the same time leaving a high level of autonomy to the bodies involved, as to the governance and organisation of partnerships;
2. subsequently, definition of a programme for redistributing tasks and responsibilities, based on the strong involvement of LGs;
3. later on, allocation of financial incentives, to be distributed as the integration between partners grows further;
4. creation of a body (“Nucleo regionale di supporto alle forme associative”) where politicians and managers can meet and discuss, so as to co-ordinate the whole system;
5. provision of technical support by consultants for local authorities;
6. organisation of institutional communication initiatives.
7. development of an Internet site giving information about partnerships and best practices.

As regards the first two points, it may be useful to draw attention to the judgements expressed by some managers and members of the board of local governments involved in partnerships.

Domenico Ferrari, the President of the Inter-municipal partnership *Valluretta*, considers that Emilia-Romagna laws represented “a decisive tool to open the debate and take structured decisions with reference to the joint management of services, offering growth and consolidation perspectives in a clear institutional context”.

At the same time these laws gave “the possibility to formalise existing partnership forms in a more organic and stringent way, giving them a legal statute” (Cesare Beggi, President of *Il tricolore*).

Thus, regional laws, together with the awareness activities undertaken by the Region, can generate a significant stimulus to the development of partnerships, especially if they are engaged in a field culturally prone to co-operation.

The allocation of incentives mainly supports the partnership start-up; in fact, on the one hand, the decision to enter a long-term agreement is very expensive during the creation phase and, on the other, it hardly produces visible results in the short run or within one mayor’s period of office. Consequently, a large initial contribution is allocated in order to finance the partnership start-up; financial support is also granted for the first 5 years, with decreasing amounts after the second year.

The financial support is articulated as follows:

- direct incentives;
- formal undertaking by the Region to give partnerships priority of access to any other financial programme in which the Region has a voice.

It must be noted that funds are actually paid only to those partnerships which can demonstrate an effective integration and joint management and delivery of services.

A Regional Committee for Partnership Development has been created in order to foster the co-operative culture, monitor on-going experiences, and consolidate the communication between Region and LGs. It is made up of the chairmen of all partnerships. It has consultative competencies and carries out supporting functions for the Regional Government in the definition of partnership development policies. It is also important as regards interaction with the operational support staff.

The Region provides technical assistance for institutional decisions and drawing up of ordinances and helps in carrying out the resulting administrative tasks. Furthermore, it provides a free advisory service for the LGs by means of the Operational staff, in order to get round the structural lack of planning capacity of the smaller bodies.

The activities of the staff fall into two areas:

- the start-up phase, when a number of legal, administrative, financial and managerial aspects have to be dealt with. Two or three meetings between the

- partner administrations and the technical staff are generally necessary to provide adequate legal and organisational advice;
- the implementation phase, concerning the application of best practice. This phase involves mainly seminars, where existing or consolidated partnerships can learn from each others' experience.

The Operational staff consists of 20 professionals operating within the Region, and also relies on a network of 17 experts and managers involved in all partnerships. This represents an attempt to capitalise an intensive advisory experience within the Region, generating a structured service, and also provides an important link between the Region and the LGs.

As anticipated, the larger bodies with suitable internal organisational competence, made little use of the consulting support, i.e. regarding aspects related to the institutional structure and constitution procedures.

Even while acknowledging their importance as regards the "point of contact for various experiences for the improvement of the organisational model and the search for better solutions" (Roberto Suzzi, Coordinator of the Inter-municipal partnership *Bassa Romagna*), some bodies preferred the help of consulting companies or university research centres, with the result that the number of partnerships supported by June 2002 is limited to 6.

Furthermore, some people doubt the functionality of the support provided by the regional staff: "sometimes the Operational staff consultants seem to pay more attention to the formal and legal aspects, rather than to the essence of the complex and articulated organisation processes, which underlie the realisation of joint management" (Giordano Corradini, General Manager of the Inter-municipal partnership involving Carpi, Campogalliano, Novi and Soliera).

Some difficulties have also been confirmed by the members of the regional staff itself: "The support activity has sometimes been ineffective because the members of the staff are assigned to managerial tasks within their municipalities and they can hardly find the time to summon the meetings. Furthermore, the costs generated by these consulting activities fall on the body enrolling the manager who, during working hours and authorised by his city mayor, offers his professional competence to the requesting partnerships" (Daniela Ori, General Manager of the Municipality of Copparo and member of the technical support staff).

Finally, as regards steps 6 and 7, the use of the Web in order to provide for institutional communication and best practice dissemination must be particularly stressed.

In fact, one of the major hindrances to the creation of partnership policies, experienced especially by small municipalities, is represented by the lack of information regarding the features of each form and the implementation process.

Thus, the Internet site is an operative tool for those municipalities which decide to start or broaden their partnership experience.

The home page² gives access to a database containing information on the methods of starting up joint management functions and services followed by some

² http://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/gestioni_associate/

partnerships and shows the map of all partnership forms. Furthermore, it contains a guide to the creation of partnerships, illustrating all procedures and local council ordinances necessary to start the proceedings or submit a fund request, as well as a legal advisory service and an information window showing the projects that have generated service improvements or economically viable management patterns, i.e. best practice examples.

This free-access site offers the possibility to follow specific paths, and is therefore divided in three areas.

The first area – documentation – shows national and regional regulations, the role of the Region with regard to financial contributions, the support staff and the committee for partnership development, and presents links to studies and surveys on the matter of partnerships.

The central area, dealing with procedures, offers opinions and advice and illustrates the most significant projects, as well as provides facsimiles of forms and reports. Around 250 statutes, regulations and contracts can be downloaded.

The last area refers to the experiences. It reports data and documents pertaining to the partnerships existing in the Region; the search can be carried out on the legal form of the partnership or managed function. Finally, it contains the map that details the territory extension of the partnerships in the Region, and gives access to data regarding each single partnership.

Along with these main areas, the site also contains service buttons and links; a newsletter is sent regularly to all registered users.

The number of visitors is encouraging, as the 76,000 Internet contacts during the period May-October 2001 confirms.

Outcomes and open issues

From the broad range of positive results from this biennial experience, the following should be emphasised:

- the fast increase in the number of joint-management experiences;
- the broadening of the functions managed by the pioneer partnerships;
- the real possibility of many small bodies to enlarge the range of services offered to their inhabitants, while maintaining a high degree of customisation;
- the attainment of an economically viable size for the production of services, which leads to a better use of financial resources;
- the sharing of technological equipment, know-how development and exchange, a greater availability of skilled human resources;
- the possibility to create synergies for better territory management;
- the increasing willingness of many local bodies to enter a partnership;
- the development of an educational process amongst the bodies involved in partnerships, generating a greater awareness of an organisation's critical aspects and possible corrective measures.

However, the on-going experiences face some relevant problems, which cannot be ignored:

- the continuing tendency of the single municipalities to desire strong autonomy;
- the difficulty of defining a system of checks and balances, so as to accommodate the needs and interests of the different communities involved in the partnership;
- the lack of an organisational approach and the lack of adequate professional skills within many bodies involved, increasing the natural resistance to change.

Summarising, it can be affirmed that the Emilia-Romagna Region has achieved good results from the new approach towards multi-level governance .

This judgement is common to many public managers: “The opportunity offered by the regional legislation (together with the removal of some binding ties in the national legislation), financial incentives, and the support given by the Region to promote the partnership have represented significant stimulating factors. On the other hand, a strong desire and an initial boost to co-operation also came from below, i.e. from the municipalities” (Rita Ghidoni, President of the Inter-municipal partnership *Comuni Modenesi Area Nord*).

In particular, the Region was able to:

- identify and satisfy the long-term needs of municipalities, and of the whole regional area;
- build a strategy for the development of LGs;
- undertake an innovative relation with the local bodies, supporting dialogue and participation and stimulating the spread of a culture of co-operation;
- provide for opportunities and tools, without imposing regionally planned solutions.

Local administrators believe the Region has done pretty well in the initial phase, when partnership had to be built and put in place.

However, we are now in the consolidation phase of this experience, facing a broad diffusion of partnerships in the whole country, and the role of the Region must therefore change.

Managers of partnerships suggest that intervention should now focus mainly on:

- “the introduction of differentiated criteria for the allocation of financial incentives, which should aim to gratify those experiences that have reached the highest integration level among the associated bodies and represent examples of best practice;
- the development of benchmarking actions triggering emulation and competition phenomena and spreading this organisational innovation;

- the promotion of brainstorming activities on specific and relevant issues” (Giordano Corradini, General Manager of the Inter-municipal partnership involving Carpi, Campogalliano, Novi and Soliera);
- “the realisation of educational initiatives both for politicians and civil servants” (Daniela Ori, General Manager of the Municipality of Copparo and member of the technical support staff).

Conclusion

The development of partnerships is currently an important strategic tool for local bodies. Environmental dynamics, the new institutional scenario and the introduction of the subsidiarity principle have developed the self-governing concept credited to the bodies. Consequently, the basic criteria regulating the relations between the various governing levels are also changing, and are now based upon co-operative principles rather than the distinction of areas of formal responsibility.

As regards the inter-institutional relations between regional and local governments specifically, the case of the Emilia-Romagna Region, which in the national overview appears as by far one of the most advanced situations, still suffers the presence of some stickiness in the dialogue between the various parties involved.

In the same time, some of the adopted mechanisms are only partially suitable for ensuring a real involvement and participation of the lower governing level in the decision-making processes.

An examination of the partnership experiences reveals that there are a number of relevant conditions for the success and the stability of these projects; the achievement of these conditions can only be the result of specific actions by the single local bodies, but it can of course be aided by the Regions.

In particular, Regions can have an important role in the definition of adequate geographical areas for the delivery of services, mainly based on the similarity of geo-morphological, economical and social features of the bodies to be involved.

Regions can also help by defining a governance pattern aimed at favouring the mutual adjustment of the interests of the different stakeholders; it can also promote actions directed at strengthening the mutual confidence between the partners.

Finally, Regions can usefully evaluate the consistency of a partnership’s basic elements (involved bodies, main features of the agreement, partnership functioning) and facilitate the integration processes.

Moreover, the empirical evidences shows that in some cases the partnership experiences have a spontaneous development, mainly “bottom up” (for example the Inter-municipal partnerships *Comuni Modenesi Area Nord* and *Il tricolore* or the Association *Adige Guà* located in Verona), whereas in other cases they seem to be the result of the interaction between the Region and local bodies for the definition of administrative decentralisation rules (an example being Inter-municipal partnership *Valluretta*).

Along with final remarks, answers could be given to such questions as:

- What are the common features of methods of regional intervention?
- What role have the Regions assumed in the partnership processes?
- What are the most effective instruments for the pursuit of the aims?
- Do Regions use different intervention models?
- Is it possible to identify best practices?

As regards the first two questions, this study has shown that the Regions have shown very different attitudes, following a continuum, ranging from the simple and sometimes late absorption of national regulation, to the pre-organisation of a great number of prescriptive tools, co-financing, real support and advice, and diffusion of best practices.

The positioning on this continuum depends mainly on two orders of reasoning:

- on the one hand it is the result of a different political approach, i.e. a political view more prone to the subsidiarity principle or based upon criteria of delegation and central co-ordination;
- on the other hand it is also the sign of institutional maturity and sensibility to this matter, so it defines a life cycle of the supporting role of the Region.

It is then possible to assess the effectiveness of the single tools, in relation to the willingness of municipalities to develop partnerships. To this end, table 11 shows a model we used in some Regions to analyse LGs' behaviour.

Table n. 11 – Effectiveness of regional intervention tools

Selected intervention tool	Effect of the tools on municipalities less sensitive to partnership development	Effect of the tools on municipalities more sensitive to partnership development
Approval of a regional law	Limited influence on municipality attitude	Simple activation of more innovative municipalities
Formulation of detailed directives on single partnership forms	Seems to be a further hindrance	Can limit the innovation capacity of the bodies
Allocation of funds	Attractive for municipalities with financial problems; could induce a narrow outlook	Is an element of evaluation in the choice of the partnership form; tends to repeat a traditional multi-level relation model
Provision of advice and support services	Represents a real benefit and does not require any significant planning capacity	Speeds up the aggregation process Favours the development of strategic plans Helps to elaborate solutions for critical issues
Development of relation and benchmarking networks	Represents further stimulus and generates an imitation effect	Tends to spread innovation and best practices

Evidently, the different tools could be illustrated in relation to a partnership's life cycle.

In a phase of promotion and development of the innovation, it is very important for the Regions to play an active role, and to push LGs to deal with this opportunity.

Frequently enough, the creation of aggregations and the results they achieve seem to be strongly affected by the capacity to provide the bodies with real and quantitatively significant benefits.

In a subsequent consolidation phase of partnerships, it could be more advisable to assign a reduced role to Regions, which could usefully support initiatives promoted by other institutions, in particular by LGs.

Coming to the question of models, there is empirical evidence of diverging intervention models, which in the near future could become even more differentiated, because of the ongoing process of making Italy a federal state.

In a first model of intervention, Regions play a co-ordinating role in the process, which can either follow a top-down or a bottom-up approach, while in a second model they rely more on the autonomous initiative of LGs.

Only in the next years, on the basis of structured data of achieved results (number of partnerships, their stability, effective integration, service quality, inhabitant satisfaction, financial performance), judgement can be made on the opportunity of having central management of the process, or assigning the Region an attentive monitoring task.

The question relating to best practices can hardly be answered. The case study documents for Emilia-Romagna represent good practice, in the sense that this Region ensures municipalities enjoy a number of relevant conditions for the success and the stability of this kind of project. Nevertheless it is difficult to demonstrate that the Region has had a direct and precise impact on the number and the success of associations, due to the fact that experiences are still quite recent and that many factors do have an impact on the success of partnerships.

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Internet Sites

Institution or project	Location	URL
Emilia-Romagna Region	Bologna	http://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it
Lombardy Region	Milan	http://www.regione.lombardia.it
Piedmont Region	Turin	http://www.regione.piemonte.it
Veneto Region	Venice	http://www.regione.veneto.it
ANCI, Regional Association of Municipalities	Milan	http://www.anci.lombardia.it
ANCI, Regional Association of Municipalities	Venice	http://www.anci.veneto.it
Emilia-Romagna Region, WEB site for partnerships	Bologna	http://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/gestioni_associate
Ministero degli Interni	Rome	http://www.mininterno.it