Collaboration, knowledge and innovation toward a welfare society: the case of the Board of Social Farming in Valdera (Tuscany), Italy

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Through an analysis of a social farming (SF) case study, this article investigates how collaboration and knowledge co-creation between different actors can support the process of rural transition in order to stimulate innovation in the welfare system using agricultural resources.

Methodology: We used the 'Antecedent-Process-Outcome Framework' developed by Wood and Gray [1991. "Toward a Comprehensive Theory of Collaboration." The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science 27 (2): 139-162] and adapted by Thomson and Perry [2006. "Collaboration Processes: Inside the Black Box." Public Administration Review 66 (s1): 20-32], to analyse the collaborative process within the Board of Social Farming (BSF) in Valdera, Italy. The BSF in Valdera is particularly important as it was the first transition arena developed in Italy for SF development.

Findings: The article highlights the difficulties and opportunities encountered by the BSF in the knowledge co-creation and collaboration, and identifies key elements to facilitate innovation in SF and more generally in transition processes.

Practical implications: The article aims to generalize crucial practical elements in the relationship between collaborative approaches and innovation in the field of innovative welfare society, which is increasingly key to rural transition.

Theoretical implications: Innovation in SF is complex due to the need to identify new knowledge, diverse kinds of organizations and innovative interactions among many private and public stakeholders. The article explores the concept of collaboration in SF in order to re-define the production of public and private goods within local and rural communities.

Originality: The article aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of collaboration in order to reinforce rural transition pathways.

1. Introduction

The importance of collaboration has always been analysed over time and from diverse perspectives. Yet collaboration and learning dynamics are at the centre of the international

debate due to the rising importance of multi-actor transition pathways in supporting inno-vative solutions to address complex challenges (Hermans, Klerkx, and Roep 2015). This is also true in rural areas where the creation of economic, social and environmental values is under debate, and where innovative solutions might emerge through the collaboration among various actors with different competencies and from different sectors (Knickel et al. 2009). EU rural areas are faced with tremendous challenges in the reorganization of their transition pathways. Social elements together with the re-organization of the local welfare system are under debate in the light of population ageing, migratory flows and the reform of public expenditure (Carbonaro et al. 2016). The EU 2020 strategy thus focuses on social innovation in order to tackle challenges in the economic, social and environmental domains (Hobza and Mourre 2010). This approach also includes the reorganization of the welfare state in Europe, which has been taking place in most EU countries in the last few years.

As analysed by many authors, the traditional post-war European welfare state has been part of the European life model (Barié, Thode, and Bartels 2015). However, this model is now under threat due to profound changes occurring at socio-economic and environ-mental levels such as: the changing of economic regimes linked to the global economy; the fiscal crises of some States and the demand for a converging economy in accordance with common financial rules; an ageing society and increasing migratory flows; and climate change and its possible direct and indirect social and economic impacts. All these aspects require a thorough re-formulation of the welfare system with a better focus on the current needs of the people.

Also in rural areas welfare reform and the presence of rural services are becoming crucial. Since 2002, there has been a growing debate at the European level on the use of agricultural resources to provide innovative services in both rural and peri-urban areas. Today collaboration is thus considered at the root of the innovation of the EU welfare model in order to reshape knowledge, strategic visions and to mobilize resources among traditional paths of intervention in line with a holistic socio-economic and environmental frame (Barié, Thode, and Bartels 2015). The idea of social farming (SF) has been increasingly consolidated in various European countries (Di Iacovo and O'Connor 2009), although with some differences (Di Iacovo et al. 2014a). SF can be seen as a process of social innovation where agricultural and rural resources are mobilized in an unconventional way to respond to local social needs (Di Iacovo and O'Connor 2009; Di Iacovo et al. 2013, 2014a, 2014b).

Thus, the idea behind SF is that agricultural and rural resources can be used not only to produce food but also to tackle social needs (Di Iacovo and O'Connor 2009; Di Iacovo et al. 2014b). This concept is closely linked to the model of multifunctional agriculture (Wilson 2007), which re-emphasizes that beyond its primary function of producing food and fibre, agriculture can also produce a wide variety of public goods and services, including social services (Van der Ploeg and Roep 2003).

Hence, within the framework of reducing public expenditure, SF uses agricultural and rural resources in an innovative way in order to reinforce the health/social protection nets at the community level and support families and diverse kinds of users, both in rural and peri-urban areas. However, as observed by Di Iacovo et al. (2014a), SF demands a plurality of different stakeholders, with diverse specializations and competencies. These stake-holders are involved in an intense collaboration organized within hybrid transition

arenas. The aim is to achieve a common understanding and solve the emerging personal and societal needs related to the provision of innovative social/health services.

This article explores the collaborative process that takes place inside hybrid transition arenas in order to create viable and sustainable rural and peri-urban areas and to support an innovative kind of welfare society. It is also evident that collaboration in SF might open up a larger discussion on rural adaptation and transition in different fields and not only related to rural welfare. We thus focused on three specific objectives. First, we performed a literature review to analyse the concept of collaboration and its link with knowledge co-creation and social innovation, with a particular focus on SF (objective 1). We then ana-lysed collaboration in a specific SF transition arena in order to observe how it functions (objective 2) but also to highlight its limitations and outcomes. We believe that this analy-sis will contribute (objective 3) to the on-going discussion on collaboration within the fra-mework of rural transition, where community approaches and participatory processes can help lead to unexpected but positive solutions.

2. Material and methods

In this article the concept of collaboration is based on a review of the literature in order to analyse the value and meaning of collaboration in terms of knowledge co-creation, social learning and innovation (objective 1). Thus, starting with a general definition of collabor-ation, we reviewed peer-reviewed articles across a wide range of disciplines, including public and business management, public health, behavioural sciences, social welfare, inter-national relations, agriculture and rural development. To do this we conducted a key word search using a wide variety of terms, including 'collaboration', 'collaborative process', 'col-laborative governance', 'stakeholder collaboration', 'collaborative management', 'collabor-ation and learning', 'collaboration and innovation' and 'social learning'. We then focused on the significance of collaboration processes within the SF framework.

This literature review was thus not a systematic analysis of all publications regarding collaboration, but provided an overview of the benefits of collaboration within SF initiat-ives. Hence, to support this overview, we decided to analyse a collaborative process devel-oped within a local transition arena for SF (objective 2). The proposed analysis was then the base to learn lessons from this case study (objective 3).

The case study presented is the Board of Social Farming (BSF) in Valdera. Valdera is an area with 120,000 inhabitants and 15 municipalities not far from Pisa, Tuscany, Italy. The Valdera area includes both rural and more urban contexts. In 2002, a pilot initiative high-lighted the possibility of using agricultural and rural resources for social services. With the support of public authorities, a network was developed of institutions, farms, associations, research centres, training agencies and other private actors. The overall aim was to define and provide innovative social services for diverse vulnerable target groups in the area.

The Valdera case was selected because, in our experience[1] it represents one of the oldest and most evolved practices of SF governance in Italy. Since 2003 the University of Pisa (UniPi) group has been active in the Valdera with several SF research initiatives related. These research initiatives have been developed in accordance with transition and tran-sition management theory (Murray, Caulier-Grice, and Mulgan 2010) following four steps: arena (1) and agenda (2) settings, pilot initiatives (3) development and, reflection on results and creation of new knowledge (4).

In Valdera, the BSF was set up with the agreement of local public and private stake-holders, while the UniPi group took on the role of 'relationship manager' in order to support the collaborative process and the brokerage of the emerging knowledge among the actors involved. Hence, we have had the opportunity to collect information on their collaborative experiences in the BSF directly from the different stakeholders involved (Di Iacovo et al. 2014b, 2016).

The data gathering was both quantitative and qualitative involving countless interviews, focus groups and surveys with different aims. The data and information collected as well as the main outcomes are presented in Table 1.

As indicated in Figure 1, the development of the collaborative process in Valdera is depicted using the 'Antecedent–Process–Outcome Framework' developed by Wood and Gray (1991). This framework offers a way to capture the reasons (antecedents) and the consequences (outcomes), and the processes through which the collaboration process in the BSF has developed. However, for the analysis of the collaboration process, we used a conceptual collaboration approach developed by Thomson and Perry (2006). According to these authors collaboration is 'a multidimensional, variable construct composed of five key dimensions, two of which are structural in nature (governance and adminis-tration), two of which are social capital dimensions (mutuality and norms), and one of which involves agency (organizational autonomy)' (Thomson, Perry, and Miller 2009, 3).

The five key dimensions considered in the analysis of the case study were:

Table 1. Data-gathering tools and information collected on the BSF case study.

| Area and period of investigation	Data-gathering tools used	Actors involved	Steps, activities	Main outcomes
Era Valley SF experience (Pisa, Tuscany, Italy), 2003–today	Direct participation, Direct observations, Focus groups, Key informant interviews, Personal information	Local Health authority and head of local health services (disabilities, addiction, autism, ex-prisoners), Union of local municipalities, Farmers, Farmer's Unions, Association of volunteers, Training agencies, Research centres, Social cooperatives. The number of actors involved increased along the way	Organization of the BSF, meetings and workshops, co-planning activities, training initiatives, fund raising, innovative SF projects, dialogue between health services and other stakeholders	Sharing principles and criteria: Chart for SF Agreement on roles, working rules and tasks inside the BSF: MoU Norms of functions of SF activities carried out within the BSF: codification of different SF typologies; procedures regulating the process of social inclusion; monitoring and evaluation of SF activities Results of the BSF activities: minutes of the meetings; Web page of SF in Valdera; number of SF projects funded; number of users involved in SF projects; marketing activities for local products
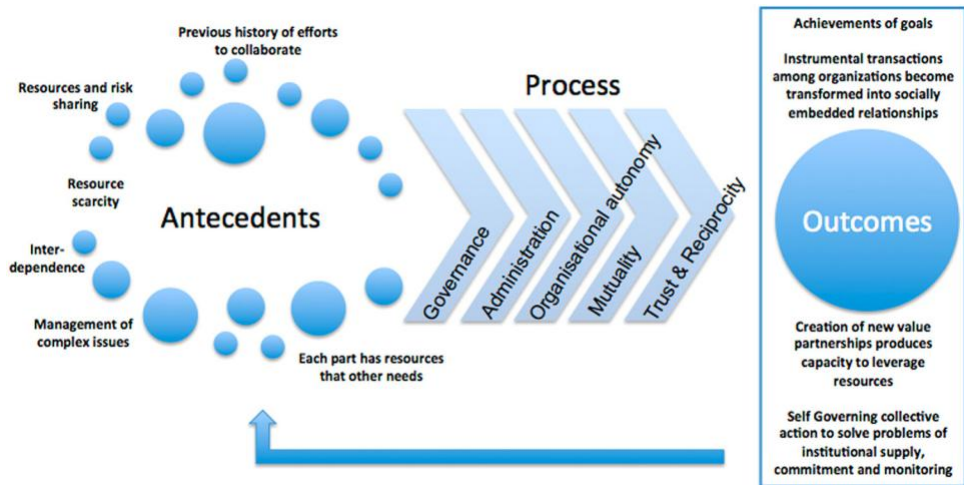
Figure 1. The antecedent–process–outcome framework. Source: Adaptation from Wood and Gray (1991).

- Governance: ways in which participants work together to make joint decisions regard-ing rules that govern their behaviours and relationships. This process involves reaching a general consensus and the negotiation of an equilibrium. This is where conflicts between partners still occur but are managed through a larger framework of agreement on the appropriateness of jointly determined rules that ensure a collaborative environ-ment (Thomson, Perry, and Miller 2009).
- Administration: collaboration needs some kind of administrative structure or operating system – implementation and management – which helps to move from governance to action. The administrative structure includes the clarity of roles and responsibilities, communication channels that enhance coordination, and mechanisms to monitor each other's activities in relation to roles and responsibilities (Thomson and Perry 2006). Organizational autonomy: the organizational autonomy dimension contrasts shared control with individual control. It represents the essence of collaboration as organiz-ations, which are characterized by their own organizational boundaries and goals, and collaborate to solve problems that they cannot solve alone. The biggest cost of inter-organizational collaboration is the potential loss of organizational autonomy (Huxham 1996; Thomson and Perry 2006).
- Mutuality: is the glue of collaboration and represents the reason for collaboration. As Wood and Gray (1991, p.161) observed 'collaboration can occur as long as stakeholders can satisfy one another's differing interests without loss to themselves'. In collaboration, organizations must experience mutually beneficial interdependencies based either on differing interests/complementarities or on shared interests. According to Thomson, Perry, and Miller (2009) 'this is usually based on homogeneity or an appreciation and passion for an issue that goes beyond an individual organization's mission (such as the moral imperative of environmental degradation or a humanitarian crisis)'.
- Norms of trust and reciprocity: this dimension highlights the importance of reciprocity and trust, which are conceptually closely related. For Ostrom (1998), collective action

depends on three key core relationships: trust, reciprocity and reputation. In collaboration, partners often demonstrate a willingness to interact collaboratively only if other partners demonstrate the same willingness. In the short run, reciprocity is a 'tit-for-tat' strategy (Thomson and Perry 2006, 27) where beneficial outcomes drive partners to collaborate with each other. In the long run, trust, defined by Ostrom (1998 p.12) as 'the expectations individuals have about others' behaviour that affect their choice, when an action must be taken before the action of others are known', supports the establishment of a long-term view of the relationship between partners (Thomson and Perry 2006). Trust also reduces the transaction cost of collaboration and helps to overcome short-term disproportionality as partners believe in the honesty of other partners who will pay them back in the future.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Collaborative processes for social learning and innovation

For a long time collaborative processes have been the focus of rich theoretical and empiri-cal studies at different analytical levels and with a range of various theoretical and meth-odological perspectives (Gray and Wood 1991; Austin 2000; Collazos et al. 2002; Thomson and Perry 2006; Savage et al. 2010; Gulati, Wohlgezogen, and Zhelyazkov 2012; Doberstein 2016). As a consequence the literature on collaboration is widely dispersed over several disciplines including economics, organizational management, health promotion, psychology, public health, sociology and public administration (El Ansari, Phillips, and Hammick 2001; Thomson and Perry 2006; Gulati, Wohlgezogen, and Zhelyazkov 2012).

Despite the different approaches, the various perspectives are all rooted around a common view of collaboration, that is, 'a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible' (Gray 1989, 5).

Thus, collaborative processes are the way in which groups, inter-organizational or multi-organizational alliances or coalitions try to address complex problems that cannot be solved easily by individual organizations (Poocharoen and Ting 2015). Agranoff and McGuire (2003) noted that collaboration regards the selection of actors and resources, the construction of networks, and development of ways to cope with strategic and operational complexity. Again various authors have highlighted different aspects such as resource dependence, social exchange, legitimization, efficiency, strategic collaboration and corporate social performance, and governance needs (Austin 2000; Ansell and Gash 2008; Doberstein 2016). These aspects impact on the organizations (e.g. private enterprises, public actors, civil society organizations and individuals) involved in the col-laborative process as well as on how the collaborative process develops. In this light it is possible to observe how the collaborative processes develop among actors based on their compatibility in terms of resources, knowledge, power or network position (Van der Valk 2007), and coherence of objectives.

Collaborative processes support the development of new ideas (Burt 2005; Powell and Grodal 2005) by stimulating an active exchange and by reinforcing learning processes among the actors involved. Collaboration and learning are thus an important source of new knowledge and are at the root of the promotion of creativity and innovation

(Hermans, Klerkx, and Roep 2015). In terms of 'social learning' within collaborative pro-cesses, people need to align their personal mental models into a shared group model. This enables people to learn from each other and form new relationships, and thus to develop the capacity to take collective action also as a common reaction to emerging challenges and instabilities (Reed et al. 2010; Beers et al. 2014; Moschitz and Home 2014). However, despite collaboration and learning being closely entwined in facilitating inno-vation in different fields, effective learning and collaboration are embedded in technologi-cal, social, economic and cultural differences among the actors participating in the collaboration process (Klerkx et al. 2012).

Several authors argue that new organizational and social structures are increasingly emerging as a consequence of the proliferation of collaborative processes stimulated by factors such as public and private devolution, increasingly rapid changes in technology, the scarcity of resources and increasing organizational interdependence (Thomson and Perry 2006; Thomson, Perry, and Miller 2009; Savage et al. 2010; Doberstein 2016). This has also been experienced by the social welfare sector across the western world (Bode 2006).

Thus, as observed by Doberstein (2016), in the last 30 years the practice of government has changed from being exclusive toward a more collaborative form of governance that is more horizontally distributed among state and civil society in order to share responsibil-ities and activate new resources.

Collaborative governance, which is defined as 'a method of collective decision-making where public agencies and non-state stakeholders engage each other in a consensus-oriented deliberative process for inventing and implementing public policies and pro-cedures for managing public resources' (Johnston et al. 2010, 699), has been proliferating to address the increasing complexity and importance of emerging environmental, econ-omic and social issues in a more holistic and less sectorial way. These kinds of collabora-tive governance processes, developed as transition paths, require an appropriate management system in order to foster useful results (Di Iacovo et al. 2014a). During these transition paths, many actors converge in an arena where they share a vision and strategies, define a common working agenda and build innovative pilot experiences. This framework is the basis of an effective collaboration and reflexive collective learning. As observed by Edelenbos and Klijn (2006), the parties involved in effective collaboration benefit from new knowledge and ideas, while new solutions can arise. Transition pathways move away from the routine approaches and ways of doing towards new-shared patterns which are better equipped to face challenges. However, such a circular social interaction process is highly demanding in terms of collaborative skills, attitudes and reciprocal trust among the actors involved.

3.2. Collaboration in SF

As a result of the new social demands and the scarcity in public resources due to global economic crises particularly in Italy – there has been a growing devolution of functions from central governments to the local level and from the public to the private sectors (Ongaro 2006; Di Iacovo 2014). This trend is evident in the reform of the welfare system that is taking place in several European countries. Rural areas, in Italy as well as in other EU countries, are particularly affected and are facing a critical phase in terms

of health and social services. New welfare models are being discussed in order to achieve a more inclusive welfare society through co-production based on the construction of a strong relation between diverse public and private actors (Boyle and Harris 2009; Di Iacovo et al. 2014a).

This change in the public and private interests often requires the creation of hybrid environments (transition arenas) where collaborative processes are able to find new solutions and activate new resources. Within such arenas, collaborative processes require multi-stakeholders initiatives where innovative visions increase interdependence and reconcile personal and collective interests through a revitalization of trust and reciprocity (Knickel et al. 2009; Hermans et al. 2013). This also takes place in the agricultural sector and in rural areas, where there is a complex debate on sustainable development and human well-being.

It is a similar case with SF, where collaboration usually occurs through the formal or informal interaction of autonomous or semi-autonomous actors, from different sectors and disciplines, in a process that supports shared norms and mutually beneficial interactions.

In SF innovation stems from the use of nature and rural environments to support the quality of life of the least empowered people under diverse circumstances (Di Iacovo and O'Connor 2009; Sempik, Hine, and Wilcox 2010). The organization of SF initiatives involves a large number of diverse actors who normally do not collaborate. They include farmers, third sector users and their families, local health institutions, municipa-lities, local consumers and civil society involved in the organization of alternative local networks where local resource are mobilized following a diverse culture, rules, attitudes and tools.

SF practices in Europe are designed according to local rules, welfare systems and levels of state intervention, regulatory models of the health social sector, civic and administrative behaviours, knowledge and ways of doing, and by diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus SF practices offer different innovative services to sustain and promote health care, education, employment, vocational training, rehabilitation and social inclusion for vulnerable groups. Services include rehabilitation, therapy, sheltered employment, lifelong education, civil services and other activities that reinforce social protection and promote social inclusion and the quality of life of local inhabitants (Di Iacovo and O'Connor 2009). In Europe the main target groups are people who have difficulty getting full-time contracts and who are often marginalized, such as people with mental or physical disabilities, the elderly, chil-dren, refugees, prisoners, drug addicts, long-term unemployed, people with learning dif-ficulties, disaffected youth, as well as women in difficult situations such as young single mothers, ex-prostitutes, victims of mental or physical violence and victims of trafficking.

Despite this variability, co-production and collaboration often co-exist in SF practices. As recognized by Poocharoen and Ting (2015), the idea of co-production has been studied by different authors from disciplines such as economics, politics and service-specific areas (Pestoff 2009). In SF co-production could be defined as the involvement of private farmers, public social-care services, the third sector, and citizens in co-designing innova-tive public services for rural and sub-urban areas. Thus, in SF, through co-production, actors explore new mechanisms to mobilize community resources which would otherwise not be available (Di Iacovo et al. 2014a). Thus, co-production requires the organization of a new set of values and attitudes among the public and private actors involved in SF. For

farmers it implies the definition of new entrepreneurial attitudes, based more on reputation and responsibility in relation to local communities. For professional workers traditionally involved in the organization of health/social services, it regards a new blend of competences where a new understanding of agriculture, marketing and value creation is needed to benefit the least empowered but also to produce a common goal for the whole community.

There is thus a substantial difference between co-production and collaboration in SF. Co-production is a milestone in each SF practice, while collaboration emerges at the organizational-level when SF practices become better structured and actors start their dialogue within transition arenas. In other words, collaboration in SF develops when and where new structures emerge and social and organizational capital is built. Collaboration sees actors and SF stakeholders working together towards a common goal whilst at the same time trying to obtain their individual goals. It is thus possible to achieve an additional common result which can be a better social outcome, a better coordination of services but also an innovative way to create both economic and social values at the same time.

3.3. The experience of BSF in Valdera

SF in Tuscany emerged in 2002 thanks to a joint research project between the University of Pisa and the Regional Agency for Agricultural Development (ARSIA). Tuscany was one of the first regions in Italy where SF was introduced and openly debated among researchers, practitioners and politicians in a transdisciplinary process. In 2010, Tuscany was the first Italian region to define a law on SF, and the experience of Valdera played an important role. In fact the first formal codification and recognition of SF initiatives in Italy was in 2007 thanks to the 'Valdera Health Society'.[2] This process took about two years (from 2003 to 2005) and was the consequence of a long debate supported by the analysis of pilot initiatives involving farmers, a voluntary association and the local public services.

Given the success of Valdera, neighbouring areas started to show an interest in SF, par-ticularly Pisa and Val di Cecina, Consequently, in these three areas of Tuscany (Valdera, Pisa and Val di Cecina) SF achieved a strong level of definition, integration, formalization and institutional support based on an important level of co-production and some emer-ging elements of the civic economy (Di Iacovo et al. 2016).

3.3.1. The starting point

SF in Valdera developed thanks to a pilot initiative set up in 2002 by a voluntary association named ORISS aimed at verifying how agricultural resources could be used for people with mental disabilities. After organizing a small initiative on an abandoned public piece of land, the association decided to involve local farmers in the co-therapy and the educational/vocational training of the people involved (seven people of differing ages and sex). The pilot initiative was quite successful in supporting the capabilities of the users involved (active part in the agricultural processes and/or able to earn an income for the work done on the farm). A key element of the success was due to the voluntary involve-ment of a private farmer (BioColombini farm). Despite the additional cost to the farm, in a mutual agreement with ORISS, BioColombini actively employed other people from the psychiatric centre, who were selected with help from the local social and health services. Thus, the collaboration between these two actors started without any immediate rewards

but with the willingness to produce a social service and a collective benefit for the community of Valdera. This 'gift' from the farm to the community was crucial in opening up a collaboration based on reciprocity and trust. As a result people from the local services started to purchase agricultural products directly from the farm. The benefits achieved through the direct contact with the consumers promoted a shift in the farm business model to work in the local value chain.

After such positive results, the SF pilot attracted growing interest from the health and agricultural sectors in relation to promoting alternative ways of treating and managing people with psychiatric disorders.

The success of this initial collaborative process (Table 2) reinforced the willingness of actors to look for win–win solutions through the complimentary activation of resources from agriculture and social/health sectors. The actors involved found a way to mediate between their individual and collective interests through a shared vision together with the reinforcement of their interdependence in the provision of social and health services and quality food production. Over time, for the actors involved, the marginal cost of col-laboration became equivalent to the marginal benefit of taking part in the process. For the voluntary association, the collaborative experience represented a possibility to improve their tools in dealing with mental health issues and achieving visibility in the area. For the social/health services as well as for the users' families, this widened their opportunity to take care of and treat their users/relatives in an inclusive way. Finally, the collaborative process for the farmer was a valuable opportunity to be involved in new networks, to be recognized as an active member of the community and to benefit from the reorganization of short food supply chains to sell products.

In this light, the key elements for the success of the collaborative process were farmer's reputation and visibility. Both of these elements promoted an overall sense of reciprocity in the community and facilitated the re-design of the local market for agricultural products based on civic engagement.

Table 2. Starting phase in SF in Valdera.

	Competences	Expectations	Achievements
Oriss	Competences in health and psychiatric disorders, territorial approaches to health provision	To test the use of agriculture with people with psychiatric disorders, to collaborate with the community and their actors, to design a new model for health provision able to reconnect the production of diverse values in the community with the support of private and public actors	Positive outcomes on the users involved, growing collaboration with a large number of actors in the area, first element in an innovative welfare model in the area
Farms	Competences in agricultural production and market management	To explore innovation in a wide sense, to be supportive for the local community	Definition of a new business model based on reputation and responsibility, formal recognition with financial reward, and from the local society
Health services of the area	Specialized competences in services provision	To test innovative paths in health management	Definition of new service models in collaboration with the local actors
Municipalities	Management of public services	No specific expectation in the starting phase	Unexpected results from the pilot initiative, willing to support the process in the near future

As a result a collaborative attitude emerged among traditional (public, third sector) and new actors (private farmers) in support of innovative ways of producing services and food in the entire community of Valdera.

As observed in Figure 2, which summarizes all the antecedents at the root of the SF development in the Valdera area to date, the collaborative process for SF in Valdera resulted in 2005 in the implementation of an ad hoc institution called the Board of Social Farming (BSF). BSF can be defined as a local arena where various actors are involved in a collaborative process regarding SF. Those actors are representatives of the institutions and of civil society, the world of private enterprises and of the third sector. In the BSF actors share their knowledge, define their plans and increase their collective knowledge through reflective attitudes (internal collaboration).

Within the BSF, knowledge, rules and norms are jointly created. Thus, the relations among the actors are regulated by a shared path based on mutually beneficial interactions.

In the case of Valdera, the BSF involved the participation of an increasing number of public and private actors in order to innovate local services in relation to welfare society that proactively creates new opportunities and reduces the dependency of the least empowered people on public support. Thus the Valdera SF model shows how the use of agricultural resources and the involvement of private farmers have supported these new inclusive pathways, and have also increased social justice and capabilities at the local level.

3.3.2. Collaboration in Valdera BSF

The collaborative process within the BSF developed in Valdera was analysed according to the five interdependent dimensions defined by Thomson and Perry (2006).

Governance: the BSF in Valdera is an evolved form of public–private co-governance of SF practices in the local area, a useful place to promote dialogue, facilitate comparisons between actors, encourage the negotiation of roles and visions, and promoting SF inno-vation. Participants jointly make decisions about rules that govern their behaviour and relationships. The BSF in Valdera is regulated through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that has to be signed by the actors, which enables them to become formally involved. The aim of MoU is to clarify the following features within the BFS:

- Clarity of purpose: the nature of the BSF should be both technical and political, repre-senting a place of collective knowledge training and co-decisions;
- Co-ownership culture: co-ownership is regarded as a win–win opportunity for each actor involved in the BSF;
- Transparent and shared decision-making: the BSF develops an approach aimed at con-sensus and collective decision-making, based on the coordination of multiple levels and sectors;
- Cooperation versus collaboration: each actor not only performs a specific task but also needs to be involved in the overall organization. In this way the different actors not only achieve a common goal but they enter into a relationship based on support and reciprocity;
- Co-planning: project strategies and implementation are aimed at developing a SF system and for the promotion of welfare (e.g. social justice, social inclusion, health,
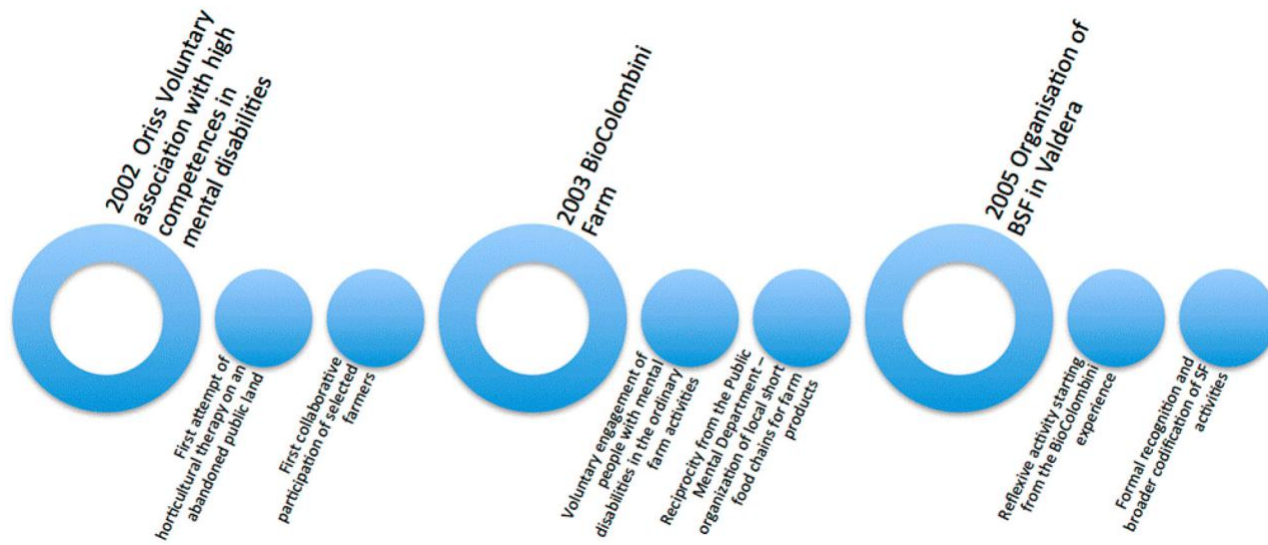
Figure 2. The antecedents in SF in the Valdera area (Tuscany), Italy. Source: Authors.

economic viability of local agricultural production, enhanced environmental approach);

- Co-design and user participation: co-design and user participation are required to mobilize specialized resources available in the local area such as agricultural resources, and other intangible ones such as ethical and civil resources.

There are therefore five aims that guide the work of the BSF in Valdera:

- overcome mistrust and diversity of skills and backgrounds in favour of the definition of a new-shared knowledge;
- limit/cancel the risks of possible competition among the agricultural sector, the third sector and social cooperatives, and at the same time facilitate the consolidation of part-nerships to promote SF innovation;
- encourage collective knowledge and comparison between actors with different affilia-tions and expertise;
- discuss, support and promote adequate policies, facilitating access to tools and resources but also helping to clarify which tools and resources are potentially available.

Administration: BSF has its own internal operating rules that clarify roles and respon-sibilities, instruments of coordination and collaboration, and mechanisms to monitor each other's activities in relation to roles and responsibilities. Common knowledge is also codi-fied into new tools and procedures. These help to stabilize the innovation and to share information with newcomers and external actors.

Organizational autonomy: the actors involved in the BSF in Valdera started collaborat-ing voluntarily in order to solve problems that they could not solve alone. They balanced personal and organizational interests with collective interests. They resolved operational problems (taking advantage of different experiences and knowledge of the actors working on SF). At the same time they mediated innovation and facilitated the dissemina-tion of SF and the adoption of new-shared and codified procedures. Thus in the organiz-ational dimension there are two different trends: actors were able to create a balance between external and internal aims, and they could also reorganize their internal culture and goals with the shared ones.

Autonomy and participation have always been balanced in this open process of collab-oration. The management of BSF in Valdera has involved competence area leaders, refer-ence group coordinators and sometimes specialist support. Each person within the arena is also responsible for being a contact person between the BSF management and his/her own organization. Some actors take part in the BSF without a deep commitment to the process. This mainly happens when the shared values are far from the individual/organizational ones, and/or when the participants are not able to negotiate the new value within their own organization. The latter was the case for certain organizational actors from the agri-cultural sector as well as from specific health divisions. This scarce involvement of some actors has affected the collaborative process within the BSF in Valdera by slowing down and frustrating the achievement of the expected results.

Mutuality: the actors involved in the BSF have started to experience mutually beneficial interdependencies based both on different interests/complementarities and/or on shared interests. The mutuality has been increasingly achieved within the BSF through a

progressive increase in the multidisciplinary of its participants. This is typical in SF initiatives as it represents the diverse perspectives and resources made available by the different types of actors involved (e.g. farm land, agricultural processes, inclusive activities, job placements, health initiatives, tutoring, agricultural products). Today four different kinds of actors are represented in the Valdera BSF. These are: private firms (farmers, farmer associations), third sector actors (social cooperatives, voluntary associations); public sector (municipalities; social/health services); research centres; training agencies. Thus, these participants basically represent the key sectors and different disciplines involved in SF: agriculture and rural development; psychiatry; psychology; sociology; administration and management; job placements; policy-making. In the Valdera BSF mutuality has emerged in many ways: by complementing sectorial competences within a new-shared col-lective knowledge in support of natural resources to improve local welfare; by mixing net-works and channelling new resources into them; by complementing policy tools in a new mix adapted for SF initiatives; by reinforcing and broadening the cooperation among sta-keholders through the development of common actions and community based decisions.

The multidisciplinary within the BSF has also had a considerable influence on the quality of the recommendations and decisions together with the formal design of new con-cepts and norms.

Norms of trust and reciprocity: these elements were key for the collaborative pattern in order to ensure an appropriate collaboration within the Valdera BSF. Thanks to the norms of trust and reciprocity, the BSF in Valdera has become:

- a place for real discussion and confrontation, where the various actors redefine the knowledge and ways of acting;
- the tool used to facilitate access to SF;
- in relation to the specific local needs, a space for sharing experiences from other areas and local networks;
- an opportunity to re-design the value creation system in the local area which is moving away from state dependency toward the re-organization of the welfare practices at the community level.

3.3.3. The collaborative outcomes

The transition path in the Valdera area is still on-going and involves some discontinuity. The reiteration of meetings, planning, initiative-taking and reflexive exercises have been organized into a continuous cycle. The process has been affected both by internal as well as external challenges related to changes in the political environment, especially in terms of norms and regulations affecting SF. At the same time different outcomes have been achieved due to collaborative processes within the BSF. This is illustrated by the active participation of the actors involved, and their willingness to share and co-create knowledge and values.

The main achievements are summarized in Table 3, grouped into the five dimensions of the collaborative process:

- Governance: creation of the BSF as a transition arena for co-producing values where power is balanced among participants, purposes are clear, working rules and tasks are defined, and participants have an open approach and a problem-solving attitude.

. Administration: developing a new common knowledge and its codification through guidelines and procedures regulating the BSF activities which help to define common ways for the formal recognition of SF initiatives, and also for their monitoring and evaluation. Specifically, the BSF in Valdera has worked on the following:

. codification of about 10 typologies of SF services developed through participatory approaches and consensus methods. In particular, the codification specified require-ments (especially for farms), procedures and guidelines for the participation of new actors in the SF network in the area;

. procedures to regulate the social inclusion of the users and to manage the relation-ships between public services and farms;

. tools for the monitoring and evaluation both for individual initiatives and the general development of SF in the area. The evaluation system considered seven dimensions regarding the overall impact of the initiative (users, families, project holders, public services, local planning, consumers, local networks and social capital) (Di Iacovo et al. 2014a).

. Organizational autonomy: development of a balance between internal and collective interests of most of the actors involved. In particular:

. definition of win–win solutions in public–private/economic-social value creation and problem-solving attitudes for most of the actors involved;

. the drafting of a charter for SF containing the main shared principles related to the SF initiatives. Signing the charter represented a formal agreement among partici-pants in the BSF in the recognition of these shared principles;

. organization of a shared identity, related to the collaborative process, involving an increasing number of actors, such as schools, students and others from civil society, to collaborate in the BSF but also in diverse SF initiatives together with the project holders.

. Mutuality: in the Valdera BSF there was a constant increase in competence sharing, but also an enhancement in the complementarity among public and private resources, both from agriculture and social areas, and from researchers and practitioners.

. Norms of trust and reciprocity: the collaborative process in the Valdera BSF led to a reduction in the transaction costs of organizing SF actions, a willingness to be involved also without direct rewards; new-shared attitudes, visions and principles based on a larger collaboration in value creation; and the definition of new principles based on exchange, reciprocity, co-production, civic economy. These attitudes of trust and reci-procity produced an important shift in the reputation of actors participating in the SF activities as demonstrated by the growing consumer interest in SF products, the devel-opment of ethic markets based on reputation, but also by the growing interest that the SF in Valdera sparked in other areas both nationally and internationally.

3.3.4. Challenges

The collaborative process within the BSF in Valdera has also highlighted various chal-lenges in all of the five dimensions considered:

. Governance: despite the BSF being an experimental transition arena, which was pro-gressively able to consolidate its approach to SF, especially in relation to the initiatives

Table 3. Evolution of the collaborative process and its achievements in Valdera BSF.

Collaboration: key dimensions according with Thomson and Perry (2006)	Collaborative results of BSF in Valdera			
	Initial phase	Intermediate phase	Today	Expected challenges
(1) Governance				
(1a) Clarity of purpose	Desire to learn and to codify emerging lessons from the pilot initiatives, to improve the local provision of local services by mobilizing agricultural resources	Step by step intermediate objectives were set up according to the emerging needs in the BSF	The BSF has clear rules, the partnership has been extended and the MOU redefined accordingly	The process has experienced challenges in terms of the ordinary decisional processes in health institutions
(1b) Co-ownership culture	The open door principle has been adopted since the beginning, all debates in the BSF involved the open participation of all actors who were involved in defining their set of values in agreement others	More and more of the actors involved managed to find a place in the BSF for co-planning and co-producing collective actions	The BSF is a stable place where actors can share and co-produce new paths of welfare	
(1c) Transparent and shared decision-making	Since the beginning the process has been totally open in terms of participation and decision-making procedures			
(1d) Cooperation versus collaboration	At the starting point the actors were all involved in achieving a common goal in order to stabilize SF in the area	The collaboration was strengthened in the BSF as well as on the ground by enforcing new associations and collaborative procedures	The collaboration has been organized within the BSF in accordance with the topics required (procedures, selection of new participants, promotion of local products, organization of innovative source for funding, etc.)	The organization of a set of policies at the regional level able to support social innovation in service provision and in SF has increased the tension with new actors who manipulate the issue in order to achieve funds and resources
(1e) Co-planning	Initially co-planning was mainly aimed at codifying rather different initiatives related to SF projects	The definition of a charter with principles, guidelines and procedures of diverse possible services represented an important intermediate result for the BSF	Co-planning has been extended to the promotion of SF products, initiatives with schools and youngsters to increase the awareness of the local areas about the SF initiatives and their potential results	The involvement of a broader range of project holders is still under debate in order to increase the opportunity provided in terms of services in the area
(1f) Co-design and user	Since the beginning the co-design of			A better involvement of users and

(2)	Administration The BSF concentrated its starting activities on codifying SF activities and the possible services in the area	Guidelines and routines were stabilized	The BSF was the first in Italy to codify SF Initiatives in detail at a local level	The organization of rules and norms at the national level created risks for local initiatives when not well understood
(3) Organizational autonomy	Prompt definition of a chart of values containing shared principles among the actors involved	Actors involved maintained their own autonomy, but they increased the number of initiatives and projects in order to increase the results for the whole project as well as for their particular goals	The actors involved have been increasingly able to share and collaborate to achieve organizational and common results, in many case re-defining their own identity thanks to the collaboration inside the BSF	
(4) Mutuality	To share resources in order to test innovative paths for local welfare	Definition of a set of common and shared values in order to reinforce the actions of the actors involved thanks to collaboration within the BSF	Organization of new services in the area and restructuring of local social protection net thanks to the mobilization of resources from agriculture as well as from diverse actors	To extend the scale and the results of the actions by reinforcing the net and the active participation of members
(5) Norms of trust and reciprocity	Initially the actors involved were mainly well known within the BSF, thus making the collaboration easier	The number and range of actors has increased the level of sharing activities as well as the achievements thanks to the higher level of common understanding of the actors involved. No free riding was detected along the way	The BSF is considered as a place for sharing visions and ideas in order to appropriately answer the emerging challenges. The actors involved have extended the scale of collaboration also in fields other than SF	

that were more rooted in the local areas its capacity to be integrated and impact on planning and managing health/social services in the area was problematic.

- Administration: although a certain level of agreement has been developed, specific health services tend to oppose and/or to recognize the BSF governance only partially by not adopting directions and shared documents aimed at maintaining ordinary routines. Organizational autonomy: despite the agreement achieved within the BSF, in some cir-cumstances, certain decisions were not accepted and thus not approved by the partici-pants' home organizations due to their own personal interests.
- Mutuality: in some cases larger organizations and new actors, attracted by the growing interest in SF, seem to take part in the BSF in an instrumental way. In other cases, various actors have not been willing to share the values produced in the BSF with others and to actively strengthen the process of change. As a consequence the potential impact of the innovation has been reduced.
- Norms of trust and reciprocity: although new policy tools are greatly needed for the BSF and more generally the SF development, the growing focus on SF has been attracting the interest of policy-makers and planners who have started to actively use the existing policy tools in order to support the introduction and diffusion of such practices.

4. Conclusions and lessons learned

The experience in the Valdera BSF has influenced many other areas in Tuscany where other BSFs have already been developed such as in Pisa, Val di Cecina, Val di Nievole, Amiata and Grosseto. Other experiences based on similar transition arenas are also active in different parts of Italy (Di Iacovo et al. 2014a). Despite the collaborative process, the results achieved as well as the internal constraints differ depending on the history of each BSF and their working environment. In our opinion the analysis of the col-laborative process in the Valdera BSF represents a useful case study for both on-going and future initiatives based on similar transition processes in services provision but also in other fields. The Valdera case study also helps us to understand the main strengths and challenges involved in inter-organizational collaboration and in the management of the transition processes involving various stakeholders and communities.

As seen in the case of Valdera, BSF is an innovative and hybrid arena which enables participants to achieve collectively what they are not able to do individually. It is a place where actors can reinforce their networks and communication channels as well as transfer and share information and knowledge. BSF also enables actors with diverse com-petences and backgrounds to create a shared vision and values in order mobilize local resources and to define innovative solutions. The BSF in Valdera has been designed col-laboratively with the contributions of its participants.

One of the most significant achievements of the BSF in Valdera is related to its capacity to redesign and reconnect the local welfare system with society. This has been possible through:

- the strong collaboration between public and private actors in the community;
- the willingness of participants to co-design innovative services based on the co-pro-duction of economic and social values (e.g. food and social inclusion) and on win–

win solutions. Thus agricultural resources, which are multifunctional, are rediscovered in order to co-design services but also to co-produce public and private goods at the same time (e.g. products and services delivered to the market as well as public goods made accessible to members of the community). Thus, the mobilization of agricultural resources in SF, as well as the alternative use of agricultural activities and structures, is the basis of the provision of more effective and less expensive services for the commu-nity. Thus, the co-design of innovative solutions in the Valdera BSF aims to respond more effectively, with non-specialist and less costly resources, to the needs of the community.

. the promotion of a results-based approach that stimulates activities within the con-straints of economic sustainability but aimed at obtaining important social outcomes via the elaboration of a 'for project' vision that stimulates the organization of activities working under the constraints of the economic sustainability but aims to obtain rel-evant social outcomes. Far from the profit economy, this vision is founded on the ideas of civic economy which consider the creation of economic value as a result of an extensive, active and responsible cooperation within the community while business attitudes are responsible. Thus this 'for project' vision promotes the inclusion of social values into economic processes within production processes as is the case of agricultural markets developed through SF initiatives, which are based on reputation, trust and on the creation of new consumption networks. This is the real innovation behind health and social services within SF initiatives. This outcome is thus not only the direct result of the collaborative attitudes stimulated within the BSF, but the collaborative process within the BSF is a precondition for this achievement.

However there are also two main challenges in relation to the collaboration within the Valdera BSF: one is the interface between the BSF and the actors involved, and the other is between the actors.

BSF is a multidisciplinary environment where participants with diverse backgrounds, from different sectors and organizations, collaborate. However, participants sometimes consider the work in the BSF as optional because it does not contribute to career develop-ment in their own organization. At the same, the work in the BSF often requires the approval from the participants' organizations but when these organizations are part of a large and complex group, the decision processes can be extensive and time consuming.

There are also challenges related to the interfaces between the participants involved in BSF. People are continuously encouraged to share knowledge, despite using different ter-minologies and having different perceptions. Some participants want to contribute to the overall knowledge generation, while others only focus on their own benefits. This means that many participants struggle to feel a part of BSF, and only identify themselves with their home organizations.

As with any path of change, also in SF the process of innovation is contested and open to instrumentalism. The divide is evident between collaboration and innovation on the one side and competition and power achievement on the other.

In the light of transition theory and in accordance with the local social and institutional environment, the collaborative process within the BSF in Valdera offers a valid and alternative path to SF practices. More generally collaboration facilitates the management

and governance of the transition process in terms of social innovation and of approaches that tackle societal challenges and meet local needs.

The Valdera case study contributes to creating novel answers to emerging challenges in welfare provision and broader rural changes. Below are the three key elements in relation to fostering collaboration among diverse actors with diverse competences and resources in order to provide radically innovative solutions as in the SF case:

- The BSF was formally supported by public authorities and its results were formally recognized. Thus the creation of an arena able to foster innovation and create the space for further formalization was crucial in the Valdera case and can apply to other fields of action.
- The collective knowledge that follows the process of collaboration should be supported with competences by actors involved. In the BSF in Valdera the university played an important role and increased the value of the process itself and mediated the diverse initial positions of the actors involved towards a common understanding, trust and mutuality. In any case the mediation of the process of change should be facilitated by an actor fully recognized by the participating stakeholders as a third party in relation to the paths for change.
- During the transition process, the key elements of innovation need to be carefully preserved from any possible instrumentalism. At the same time it became increasingly important to involve actors who were normally in charge of policy-making and who might be initially suspicious of radical innovation. The balance between radical innovation and its principles on the one side and the possibility of openly involving actors with a wide influence on the process of transition might encourage inno-vative solutions and reinforce the possibilities for more responsive societies in rural areas.

Notes

1. Our research group has become a reference in the field of SF at national and EU levels. Since 1999, we started by exploring the demand for social development in rural areas and the need for innovative services, particularly in terms of the use of agriculture in the provision of inno-vative services in rural areas. Then we explored and studied the development of SF in various Italian and European regions (Di Iacovo and O'Connor 2009; Di Iacovo et al. 2014a, 2016) by using action-research methods (Lewin 1946) and in many cases accompanying and provok-ing transition pathways in diverse National and EU realities.
2. Valdera Health Society is a public consortium of different municipalities and the local health authority (AUSL) of the Valdera area. It is mainly responsible for the organization of social services.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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