



# **Exploring the Crisis. Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Investigations**

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# Towards Innovative Practices of Networking among Volunteer Organizations

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## 1. Networks “Matter”

For some time now, use of the expression “networking” has started to become widespread, including in the vast universe of volunteerism, to indicate a work strategy that is common to different organizations, aimed at “joining forces” for achieving objectives that, on their own, none of those organizations would be capable of reaching. Awareness of the importance of “working within a network” or “net-working” has by now established itself in many sectors, both in the area of social intervention and in that of economic production: many companies have affiliated themselves with inter-organizational networks to confront the changes in, and challenges of, the market, in order to be more competitive and to reduce their costs of production. Within the social services, forms of integration for intervention, which envision the collaboration of a multiplicity of professional figures and entities, are being implemented, with the aim of offering more effective services in respect to the increasing complexity of social, family, and personal needs<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, civil society organizes itself in forms of collective mobilization which imply significant levels of interconnection among subjects, including at a distance, a circumstance that is facilitated and supported by the spread of mobile communication technologies (internet and mobile phones<sup>2</sup>). If we think about it, every one of us is inserted within social networks of various natures; but here we mustn’t think about online social networks in which more and more people can enroll, such as Facebook or Twitter, but rather

<sup>1</sup> Cfr. A. Salvini, *Connettere. L’analisi di rete nel servizio sociale*, Pisa, ETS, 2012a.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. L. Rainie, B. Wellman, *Networked, The New Social Operating System*, Cambridge, MA, The Mit Press, 2012.

of what we might refer to as natural relational contexts, which constitute the scenarios of our everyday existence: networks of family, friendship, and professions represent the most important environments in which our daily actions take place, and from those relations and those contexts draw their value. From time to time, precisely these relational networks, which we often hardly even think about, favor or, at times, obstruct the realization of our plans. In synthesis, the whole of the relations in which people and collective entities (such as public and private organizations) are embedded are very important for reaching the objectives that these subjects pose for themselves in their own existence and in their everyday activities<sup>3</sup>.

As was stated, in volunteerism, too, awareness has begun to expand regarding the importance of “entering into a network” for rendering more efficacious the activities of organizations; many interesting experiences which have taken place a little bit everywhere over the last few years could be cited, in fact, in which organizations of various kinds have forged agreements of collaboration for the initiation and development of particularly innovative projects. Nevertheless, we must observe that these experiences, although significant in themselves, are not yet very numerous, and that “networking” constitutes a strategic objective still to be promoted and diffused; from this we can take away that, if networking is today considered a useful strategy for the development of volunteerism, and therefore something to be promoted with greater determination, in the current conditions volunteer organizations continue to show a limited propensity towards collaborative and joint effort with other organizations. In effect, no volunteer organization operates in complete isolation; it could perhaps be affirmed that, on the contrary, every organization – at least in Tuscany – maintains relations of communication, or of exchange, with other organizations and institutions, but often in an exclusive form, that is in the form of one-to-one, dyadic tie. This is the case, for example, of conventions with public entities or of project partnerships, in which the forms of interaction are often limited to the relationship between a subject and the organization of which he's a part (and frequently in only a nominal way).

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. A.L. Barabási, *Linked. The New Science of Networks*, Perseus Books Group, New York, 2002; N. Christakis, J. Fowler, *Connected. The Amazing Power of Social networks and How They Shape Our Lives*, London, HarperPress, 2011.

## 2. What are the Reasons for which “Networking” is not a Widespread Practice within Volunteerism?

Recent studies carried out in Tuscany by Cesvot have shown that collaborative initiatives between volunteer organizations present very particular characteristics: first of all, network *density* is very low; this means that the degree of connection among volunteer organizations is quite limited. Secondly, the degree of *centralization* is very high, meaning that in these networks there are few organizations which constitute the point of reference for the many others, and towards which the major part of exchanges and collaborative efforts are concentrated. A further, interesting, characteristic of networks among volunteer organizations comes from the fact that the level of *reciprocity* within their exchanges is quite limited, which confirms that there are organizations (a small number) which are asked for support, backing, advice, and information, but which themselves do not turn to others because, being larger organizations, and endowed with many resources, they have no need to do so<sup>4</sup>. When these find themselves having the necessity to activate relations of exchange or collaboration, they “choose” partners with similar characteristics to their own, because in this way they can expect to obtain significant resources for satisfying their own needs<sup>5</sup>.

In synthesis, if we consider the existing network of exchange and collaboration among volunteer organizations, we have to underscore the following aspects:

1. the number of subjects involved in stable non-dyadic networks is extremely limited;
2. the objectives for which those relationships are established are prevalently temporary in nature, as are the forms of organization of such collaborations;
3. the structure of these networks presents a limited degree of connection and reciprocity, and a high degree of centralization, a circumstance which describes the substantial dependency of many organizations on the exchange of resources with a limited number of others – with the latter of which therefore maintaining a role of particular centrality. These networks are, for this reason, extremely unbalanced and asymmetrical;
4. such an asymmetry produces a substantial inequality in volunteerism within the territory, since the “stronger” organizations tend to collaborate more frequently with other equally “strong” organizations, as this guarantees access to resources considered to be effectively useful.

<sup>4</sup> Density and centralization are network measures, while reciprocity is a tie measure. See S.P. Borgatti, M.G. Everett, J.C. Johnson, *Analyzing Social Networks*, Sage, London, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> A. Salvini, L. Corchia (a cura di), *Il volontariato inatteso. Nuove identità nella solidarietà organizzata in Toscana*, Cesvot, Firenze, I Quaderni, 2012.

Although studies have yet to be performed that would allow us to understand what the effects of these aspects are on the dynamics of “survival” or, on the contrary, of “development” of volunteerism, we may hypothesize that such a situation could hardly favor an increase in the social cohesion among volunteer organizations, and, therefore, of its further consolidation within the territory. On the contrary, as we have seen, there is the risk that what might increase are imbalances and internal fragmentation. But the most important aspect to consider is the impact on cohesion and on overall social development within the territory. Many theoretical and empirical studies performed over the last twenty years have underscored that the social wealth of a territory (what is often referred to as “social capital”) doesn’t depend solely on the quantity of organized subjects operating within civil society, but more than anything on their capacity to enter into relationships, creating structures of interdependence and of collaboration that are more greatly capable of confronting the complexities of changing social needs<sup>6</sup>. In other words, it depends on the practice of “networking”<sup>7</sup>. In effect, the characteristics that volunteerism has taken on over the last few decades do not seem to favor a spread of the culture and of the practice of collaborative effort. One of these characteristics is, without doubt, the fragmentation existing within the area of volunteer organizations, which is the result of a considerable increase in the number of organizations operating within the territory, combined with specialization in the mission and activities of these organizations<sup>8</sup>. As the theory of social networks teaches, an increase in the number of nodes in a network, that is, subjects which take part, renders it more difficult to maintain connection among all its members, since the effort that each subject must exert for initiating a relationship with “new arrivals” is not “supported” by the available resources. For this reason, it is easier to simply reinforce the relations and collaborations already existing with a small number of other subjects, whom are, however, trusted because their characteristics are known. We must not, however, underestimate the cultural factor in determining the scanty propensity within volunteerism to “work together”; on one side, we have to underline how the deep roots of organizations operating within the local territory and their

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. I. Psaroudakis, *Network Perspectives for Community Building*, in *Interactions, Health and Community*, edited by Salvini A., Andersen J.A., Pisa University Press, Pisa, 2011b.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. P. Anklam, *Net Work. A Practical Guide to Creating and Sustaining Networks at Work and in the World*, Oxford, Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007; N. Lin, *Social Capital. A Theory of Social Structure and Action*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2001; R. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work. Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993; I. Psaroudakis, *Network Perspectives for Community Building*, cit.; D. Cordaz, *Volontariato e coesione sociale*, in *Zoon Politikon. Politiche sociali e partecipazione*, edited by Toscano M.A., Firenze, Le Lettere, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> A. Salvini, *Il volontariato oltre il Welfare State*, in Toscano M.A. (a cura di), *Zoon Politikon. Politiche sociali e partecipazione*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2010a; *Forme e dinamiche del volontariato in Italia*, edited by Salvini A., «Sociologia e ricerca sociale», Vol. 32, N. 96, (2011).

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history of ideological competition following the Second World War have certainly reinforced a disinclination and diffidence towards other organizations, which were often seen (and this sometimes happens even today) as competitors with regard to activities practiced and access to resources. On the other side, in more recent times we have witnessed a general decline in the sense of the collectivity in favor of greater attention towards subjectivity and individuality. It is worth noting that organizations tend to consider themselves to be carriers of identity, values, and operative proposals which are completely original and unique, making it difficult to find points of agreement with the characteristics (equally considered to be original and unique) of other organizations. We may define this aspect as *presumption of exclusivity*, which is not only quite widespread, but also represents the principal obstacle to the promotion of a culture of collaboration and of “networking”. We must also not overlook a couple of more “pragmatic” factors which have reinforced the relative isolation in which volunteer organizations operate. First, it has to be recognized that collaboration with other organizations can be quite difficult, as well as draining in terms of resources; in fact, meeting and coming to know others requires a certain “pedagogical patience” and an openness to “putting oneself in play”, qualities which, in their turn, need to be practiced and matured over time. “Networking” implies a certain expenditure of psychological and relational energy, an investment of time and money, and, especially, an openness in terms of trust shown towards the other members of the network, as well as a readiness to share, and sometimes to expand one’s own horizons in respect to values and method of operation, including going beyond the limited boundaries, as important as they are, of identity of the single organizations. Quite often, volunteer organizations, both due to the already-mentioned cultural reasons, and due to their limited resources, are not open to investments which do not have the immediate aim of benefitting their “own” clients or of pursuing their own specific organizational objectives.

Here, however, we must introduce the second “pragmatic” factor which we indicated above: often, volunteer organizations are hesitant to invest in collaboration because it isn’t clear to them what the benefits of working within a network might be, not just in reference to so-called “third-party beneficiaries” and to the community served, but also in reference to their own organization. In other words, collaboration with others is often perceived as a way of squandering resources (or, worse yet, of “giving them away” to others) without seeing any appreciable “returns” for the community or for themselves, and therefore as something not useful, if not damaging. Further, even when the conditions for initiating work within a network are present, a certain disorientation can be perceived with respect to the individuation of the most efficacious means of organizing, consolidating, and rendering effective a network of collaboration.

To synthesize what we have stated to this point, we can say that the limited propensity to be found in volunteerism to work within a network depends substantially on three factors: the first, of a structural nature, refers to the processes of fragmen-

tation which characterize the current dynamic of change; the second, of a cultural nature, essentially regards the *presumption of exclusivity*, on the basis of which organizations believe themselves to be carriers of elements of originality and uniqueness that are not easily integrated with those of other organizations, and that these elements have to be integrally preserved over time; the third refers to the *assumption of uselessness* regarding working within a network, which is seen as an unprofitable way of investing resources, without returns which could justify the effort<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. The Changes Underway

Obviously, as was stated at the beginning of this paper, things are gradually changing, and slowly intentional and structured initiatives of networks of collaboration are emerging in the most diverse areas of intervention. A research study sponsored by Cesvot in 2013 and carried out by the Center for Studies on Volunteerism of the Department of Political Science at the University of Pisa, regarding forms of organization within networks of volunteerism situated within the territory of Tuscany, yielded new and interesting results that are worth taking a moment to consider. In substance, the results showed that in our region there are many experiences of synergy and collaboration among volunteer organizations, but that these experiences take on forms of organization which are different from those of a “network”. Let’s examine this more closely.

The first thing we find, as might seem obvious, regards the circumstance for which by far the most widespread organizational form of volunteerism in Tuscany (and not only in Tuscany) is the single organization, which is formally constituted with an organizational structure that is codified in its statute, and having a hierarchical form of governance, of an isomorphic type compared to, for example, businesses or political parties<sup>10</sup>. When we look at second level organizations – the so-called “associations of associations” -, we find that these take on essentially one of two forms: either that of a “coordinated group” or, obviously, that of an association. A coordinated group, beyond its formal definition, is constituted by an organism of representation of the different adhering associations, an organism which is formed and acts in function of the pursuance of the specific objectives for which the original decision was made to coordinate with one another.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. A. Salvini, *Volontariato come interazione. Come cambia la solidarietà organizzata in Italia*, Pisa, Pisa University Press, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> I. Psaroudakis, *Il volontariato: una mappa concettuale*, in «Sociologia e ricerca sociale», Vol. 32, N. 96, 2011.

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A coordinated group, in general, foresees a “mixed” form of governance in which a “spokesman” is indicated, as well as, possibly, other functional positions. A coordinated group is a sort of “catalyzer” of collective activities, we might say an entity of “synthesis”, to which the organizations taking part assign a “greater authority” in respect to each individual member (but only as regards those activities which are performed in synergy); this is seen especially in terms of pressure or negotiation in respect to possible interlocutors (the territory in the larger sense, or, more frequently, institutions).

Quiet often a coordinated group is assigned a role of representation, especially when dealing with institutional entities. But not always do we find among the members taking part in the group those dynamics regarding the exchange of resources that, in effect, characterize networks. On the other hand, in the absence of an effective exchange of resources among its members, a network would remain a mere formal construction; its substantial dynamism comes specifically from the flow of internal resources, facilitated, moreover, by “entering into a network”. The structural dimension constitutes the way, the form, by which flows (that is, exchanges) can be realized in the most efficacious and effective way, due to reciprocal support in the pursuance of activities. Without this essential dimension, we cannot speak in terms of network, if not just in a metaphorical or a formal sense.

Still more widespread is the form of “association” among second level associations. In other words, when it is formed, the “network” is immediately codified and submitted to a system of governance which foresees the activation of a decision-making structure of a formal-hierarchical type that reproduces the standards typical of volunteer organizations: a President, a Vice-President, a Treasurer, possibly a Director, a Directing Board, an Assembly of Members. These can be characterized by multiple channels of coordination.

The most interesting aspect is that in the institutional statutes of these second level associations there is no mention made of the network as a specific organizational modality. On the contrary, in their statutes, standards are laid out regarding modalities of adhesion to, and participation in, the association, and the structural nature of the organization as well as the decision-making strategies (normally of an upper-management type: Board of Directors – President) are defined. Even where we find forms of effective collaboration, they are not always officially formalized among the objectives of the new association, which instead more prevalently feature concrete goals (that is, those for which the decision was made to establish the new association). In fact, by rule, their statute must indicate that the association (of the second level) is constituted to give impetus to the achievement of concrete objectives.

Put another way, volunteer organizations which are constituted into coordinated groups or into second-level associations are not formally networks.

To put a bit of order in these definitions, we have to distinguish between:



- Coordinated groups intended as mere entities of “representation” of the member organizations (which do not constitute themselves into second level associations, and do not include forms of internal exchange);
- Coordinated groups that constitute themselves into second level associations and that realize objectives that are both concrete and of representation (and carry out an exchange of resources among all or a part of the adhering associations) – these come close to the “network model”, but, in effect, are not yet quite that;
- Second level associations that realize concrete objectives (and which carry out an exchange of resources among all or a part of the adhering associations);
- Networks of organizations that do not constitute themselves into second-level associations (and that carry out an exchange of resources among all or a part of the adhering associations).

Quite rare are those cases where we can identify volunteer organizations deciding to initiate an exchange of resources and forms of collaboration without giving themselves a form of governance different from that of second-level associations (in other words, that of a network). What we see formalized in the statutes of associations is the articulation of functional “levels” and of decision-making hierarchies, rather than a definition of any modality of interaction (for example: how decisions are to be made) and of exchange (for example: who makes available which resources, and in virtue of what principle of exchange). In other words, a form of governing of the hierarchical – decisional type is established rather than governance of a peer-based – functional type. Since, as we have seen, the flow of resources within a network (as well as the management of exchanges taking place) constitutes an essential dimension for defining a network, the question of governance becomes a strategic one.

Let us attempt to make this clearer. We must, first of all, distinguish the “government” of an organization from the “governance” of a network. The process of “governing” an organization necessarily develops in a hierarchical type of context, characterized by the fact that the higher levels of the structure shape and determine the lower levels, via channels of command of a top-down nature. The “governance” of a network, instead, is realized in a context of a “heterarchical” type, that is, characterized by a composite structure built of multiple levels that, in part, overlap each other and, in part, determine one another. In contrast to the top-down type of hierarchy, and to the bottom-up processes which are seen in horizontal structures, heterarchical structures operate on the basis of multiple relations which come from both the base and from above, as well as being partially localized, in virtue of the multiple connections which can be constituted among the different levels of the structure<sup>11</sup>. Networks, then, do not substitute bureau-

<sup>11</sup> K. Kontopoulos, *The Logics of Social Structures*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993.

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cratic organizations of a hierarchical type, but rather superimpose themselves onto these, adding layers (or “levels”) of increasing complexity to the strategies of action constructed around a public function or problem. In general, it has to be stressed that the relationships characterized by parity that are created in such non-formalized networks are based on a reciprocal recognition of the importance of the “vocational” specificity of the single organizations, an aspect that diminishes the potency of any (potential) claims to power of a traditional type (like those based on size or on prestige).

It is nevertheless worth noting two further modalities of organization to be seen within the already-mentioned hierarchical – associative model, these being:

- a. that which is characterized by functional groups within the intra-organizational structure;
- b. that of the “core-periphery” type.

In the first case, widely seen in many “networks”, the associations create for themselves, along with the traditional decision-making hierarchy (president – coordination – assembly), intermediary functional structures, or “functional groups”, which have the specific task of realizing associative activities, either when these activities are differentiated internally, or when, for the realization of a single event, or to achieve an objective, it is necessary to perform different activities simultaneously<sup>12</sup>. These functional groups are directed towards managing dimensions of a technical – operative nature, and not those of a political – decisional type, and they represent the best means through which to realize both an exchange of resources and those dynamics of collaboration which have not been formalized. It is here where the intertwining of interactions among volunteers from different organizations, and therefore among the organizations themselves, takes place. In line with the theory of *communities of practice*, it is within the practice of everyday activities where the dynamics of reciprocal learning, of exchange and sharing, are verified, that is, where *net-work (network activity)* is realized<sup>13</sup>. Unfortunately, it is not very clear how much of this shared experience goes toward the construction of the social memory and social capital of the network on a general level.

The core-periphery model foresees the existence of both a central part, a nucleus within the network composed of those organizations which most frequently and most intensively interact among themselves, and a less central part, more external and peripheral, composed of the organizations that not only interact less intensely

<sup>12</sup> V. Krebs, J. Holley, *Building Smart Communities through Network Weaving*, www.orgnet.com, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> I. Psaroudakis, *Le reti sociali in ambito scolastico: una risorsa per il cambiamento della scuola*, in *Reti per le scuole. Prospettiva di rete e valutazione dell'autonomia scolastica nel “Progetto Hercules” a Lucca*, edited by Salvini A., Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2012.

with one another, but are also much less connected with the center of the network, through interactions that are often dyadic<sup>14</sup>. This type of network model guarantees a marked network solidity, in that it is based on the concentrated and interconnected activity of the nucleus, which, in its turn, may benefit from the “targeted” collaboration of the volunteer organizations residing on the periphery, with these last providing “new” resources in respect to those already circulating within the nucleus.

#### **4. What are the Principal Conclusions Derived from an Empirical Analysis of “Networking” Experiences among Volunteer Organizations?**

From the preceding observations, derived from an empirical analysis of the “networking” experiences carried out in Tuscany, we can draw six conclusions regarding their modality of operation:

1. The practice of “networking” does not contemporarily, or even necessarily, involve all of the organizations belonging to the network itself, but can see the participation of a part of these organizations according to: a) the different activities to be performed; b) the different position held within the network (center – periphery);
2. The internal dynamics of the birth and development of a network normally foresee the following steps:
  - a. individuation of project objectives to be pursued, and definition of the concrete and operative activities to be performed;
  - b. definition of the resources and of the competencies necessary for the realization of those activities;
  - c. individuation of the nodes that are available for “entering into a network” for the effectuation of those activities, and for the sharing of the necessary resources for carrying them out;
  - d. the creation of functional groups and realization of their activities.
3. The nucleus of the network guarantees a greater mobilization of the resources to be employed for reaching the objectives; sometimes, however, the co-opting towards the network’s “center” of other subjects can produce a “lessening” in motivation and cohesive tension. This element underscores the importance of face-to-face interactions in the construction and development of a network, among those who take part, at the different lev-

<sup>14</sup> V. Krebs, J. Holley, *Building Smart Communities through Network Weaving*, cit.; P. Anklam, *Net Work. A Practical Guide to Creating and Sustaining Networks at Work and in the World*, cit.

els of participation. Only an intense and periodic frequency in encounters within the network can guarantee the establishment of those conditions essential for the success of the network (acquaintance, reciprocity, trust). In some cases it happens that the members of an organization of a network participate in the activities of other organizations, a practice which helps to facilitate the internal cohesion of the network.

4. Attention must be given to a couple of risks within the networks of volunteer organizations: one relative to a potential manipulation of the network, and the other relative to the utilization of the network for individual aims. The first case (“manipulation”) refers to those situations in which the network is utilized by a part of its members either to obtain results of interest to, or to support the initiatives of, a single member organization, as can happen, for example, in interactions with external interlocutors. The second case refers to those situations in which some volunteer organizations use their own position within the network to gain immediate advantage by accessing resources placed at their disposal by other subjects, without offering, in turn, their own resources to other members. It’s clear that such a situation cannot be sustained by the network, which bases its strength, as well as its probability of survival and development, precisely on reciprocity. By “being in a network”, those organizations that are less endowed of resources may benefit precisely in virtue of having that access, while the larger organizations have the possibility to benefit from specific operative competencies, from innovative knowledge, and from human resources necessary for the performance of complex activities which have to be repeated over time.
5. There is a further element to keep in mind, one which brings into the picture the two-tiered level of interaction which “operates” within the networks of volunteer organizations. The first level is obviously that of the organizations which voluntarily decide to adhere to (or to found!) a network; the second is that of the effective subjects (that is, the individuals) who enter concretely into interactions in representation of their own organization. It sometimes happens, when there is a turnover of some of the individuals within the network, that the formal order remains unmodified (the organizations all remain adherent to the network), but changes are seen in ways of interacting, for example in motivations, in the “atmosphere”, in ways of communicating, etc. On the other hand, it may happen that what is deliberated by people interacting within the network is revised, or even rejected, at the level of the decision-making structures of the single organizations. The only way to obviate such situations is that of consolidating the relationship of trust among the representatives of the single organizations (within the networks) and their decision-making structures, even if these steps, as is easy to understand, introduce a marked degree of

complication because the deliberative levels multiply in number, and the process of negotiation becomes more articulated.

6. At the base of this discussion the importance of a “cultural revolution” within volunteerism must be emphasized, aimed at introducing sensitivity, attention, and motivation regarding entering into a network, that is, towards collaboration. Often it is considered that participating in a network implies having to give up some resource or some “degree of freedom” of movement or of decision-making power; however, what is not adequately focused on is the fact that precisely this active participation in a network acts as a multiplier of opportunities, and therefore of resources, generating “dividends” of an intensity and a quality that are often unforeseen and unforeseeable, capable of adequately repaying any investment put forth. Furthermore, “entering into a network” presupposes having a competency in “project planning”, that is, the capacity to identify project objectives, including quite ambitious ones, and to evaluate how these can be reached through the sharing of resources coming from different subjects. This competency must also be flanked by the capacity to individuate the reasons (the benefits!) in base of which a given organization should enter into, and become a part of, a network.

## **5. Why is “Networking” always more Important for Volunteer Organizations?**

“Intentional networks” are created and developed because the adhering members feel that they need one another to share and to effectively exploit the advantages of joint action, while, at the same time, realizing their own objectives. This is not, obviously, a particularly innovative idea, and yet it is precisely this simple consideration that has shaped, over the last few years, the entire discussion regarding the nature and functioning of volunteer networks. These have the characteristic of being intentionally established for the pursuit of a common interest at the network nodes; moreover, the pursuit of these common interests does not impede, but rather favors, the achievement of specific objectives of the single organizations which comprise the network, and generates a collective identity through the sharing of communicative and symbolic elements within the dynamics of interaction. It follows that these networks have boundaries which are defined by the interactions among the participants in the network itself, who establish, through opportune dynamics of negotiation, the rules of membership, thereby guaranteeing for themselves a certain continuity and stability over time. It is precisely these interactions, repeated over time and “in situation”, that generate the identity, the values, and the norms that are constantly being negotiated within the “organiza-

tional practices”, on the basis of a reciprocal influence among the actors in the network and of the position that each of these holds within it.

The advantage of the construction of volunteer networks resides fundamentally in their potential capacity to produce results on the level of the local community which could not be realized through the disjointed action of single organizational entities, as well-endowed as these might be. In other words, networks can play an effective role in community building, on the condition that they comprehend the modality in which best to function and the connections between their structural characteristics and the desired outcomes, both in terms of performance and in terms of results.

The whole of the activities involved in the structuring and the functioning of the network yields at least two types of effect: the first is external to the network, and regards the community being served, as a function of the project of intervention realized by the network; the second is the effect within the network, intended as the benefits both for the network as an organized system, and for every single member organization of that network. It is completely natural that those subjects having the sincere intention to promote a network of volunteer organizations ask themselves if it is truly worth the trouble investing so many resources (human, economic, temporal) in being a part of such a *meta-organization*, which, although pursuing ambitious and noble objectives, offers no guarantee that the costs to be sustained will at least be covered and, at some time later point, “pay dividends”. The first, and most immediate, answer to this question, as we have already seen, consists in arguing that the investment can be compensated by the fact that the achievement of the project objective would be impossible, or at least greatly more expensive, if pursued singularly by each of the members. If the different parts, during their “negotiations” of adhesion, recognize in one another a shared vision and, in particular, recognize that the project objective of the network is strategic on the “external” level – that is, it regards the community to be served -, then adhesion and consequent investment should be, so to speak, “a given”. But in the great majority of cases, an appeal to “external” reasons is not enough to convince the interlocutors to adhere to a network; the possibility that the costs to be borne can, in any case, be very high, as well as the initial difficulty of evaluating the effective benefit, both external and internal, can push potential adherents to decline the invitation and to go back to the more secure – though more limited and circumscribed – daily activities of their own organization.

As we previously stated, then, it would be simplistic to affirm that working within a network constitutes a strategy for better confronting the current crisis, because that would be to risk limiting the efficacy of a network merely to situations of social and economic emergency. On the contrary, our starting assumption should be that the construction of networks of collaboration and exchange among volunteer organizations constitutes the most suitable strategy for the future de-

velopment of volunteerism itself. All of the areas in which volunteer organizations operate have been, for some time now, subjected to important change, on both the normative and operative fronts. Social needs are growing ever more complex and articulated, their causes being multiform, difficult to individuate and to “tackle” in a univocal way. Moreover, it can be perceived with ever greater clarity that there are different “dimensions” and “levels” in which to operate in order to be more effective, which implies the necessity of actions of intervention of differing degrees of complexity. The current social, economic, and cultural crisis, while causing a reduction in the resources available for such actions of intervention, amplifies a sense of impotence regarding the capacity to adequately intervene in everyday situations, especially in those in which hardship is most evident.

Network collaboration among volunteer organizations should be activated with the aim of pursuing with greater effectiveness common objectives, the complexity of which would not allow any organization working on its own to seriously consider confronting. Furthermore, this would not only guarantee an autonomy of identity and of action to the single organizations involved, but would generate indirect benefits for the community being served, due to the operation of both the network in its entirety and each single organization involved<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, adhesion to a network of collaboration among volunteer organizations must not be seen as only a way of realizing more efficaciously relevant change within the community served, that is, a way of obtaining an “external” benefit. Such adhesion must be considered as a concrete and effective opportunity for each individual organization taking part in the network in consideration of the following aspects:

- a. coming together and collaborating with other subjects opens the possibility of a widening of cultural and operational horizons, allowing a qualitative leap forward in the way of confronting everyday problems, diminishing uncertainty regarding the available choices;
- b. taking part in a network constitutes an opportunity for learning from the experiences of other members, and to more effectively utilize one’s own experiences through the creation of common practices;
- c. adhering to a network also allows the exchange of information, as well as of human and economic resources which would otherwise be impossible to have access to;
- d. participation in network activities permits the acquisition of specific competencies linked to project contents, as well as the management of networks of collaboration, which can be transmitted throughout the organization, and then be re-proposed in later experiences;

<sup>15</sup> A. Salvini, *Volontariato come interazione*, cit.

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- e. adhering to and actively participating in a network helps to improve the reputation of an organization, both within the network itself and externally; as much as it may seem an aspect of secondary importance in the life of an organization, its reputation constitutes a source of “value” that can be employed in relations with other subjects, both individual (for example, it can act as an incentive for new volunteers to join the organization) and collective (it can, for example, lend more legitimacy to an organization in their relations with institutions); in other words, “entering into a network” increases or consolidates the social prestige of the members of the network itself;
- f. adhering to a network allows the reduction of costs deriving from a potential duplication of actions of intervention within the same sector performed by different organizations, and generates a reduction in expenses – or better, their rationalization; the freed-up resources can then be employed in the activation of other services or for sustaining the network itself,
- g. it allows the acquisition of capability in the management of communication technologies, and more in general it gives access to important innovations in the field of project development and intervention;

To activate a network it is also necessary to have a well-thought-out idea of the new organized subject that one has decided to promote, as well as of the objectives, the processes, and the things that must be done and taken into consideration in order to consolidate the structure and its development over time<sup>16</sup>. In short, in some measure the success of networking depends also on reaching an awareness of not only “why it is important”, but also of “how to do it” and of the minimum level of competence needed for practicing it with a certain efficacy, even if only to avoid the frustration which may come from any failure and consequent sense of its uselessness.

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<sup>16</sup> I. Psaroudakis, *Network Perspectives for Community Building*, cit.



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