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Social Innovation and Social Entrepreneurship in Early Childhood Education and Care. Lessons from Three Case Studies of Innovative Services in Emilia-Romagna, Italy

ABSTRACT

The paper presents the results of an eight-month research program undertaken under the InnoSI project framework, funded under the European Research Program Horizon 2020. We adopt the theoretical framework of social innovation of Westley and Antadze (2010), applying the four-dimensional scheme of social innovation elaborated by Hochgerner (2011): resources, authority flows, routine and beliefs (Bassi, 2011). We also refer to the typology of social innovations in the field of welfare policy emerging from the research of Evers, Ewert and Brandsen (2014). We use a multiple case study research model (Yin, 1993; 1994) that highlights the relationships among the micro, meso, and macro level of analysis of a program, project, and intervention at the local level. The case study analyses the integrated system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services in Emilia-Romagna as an example of how increasing the accessibility and quality of ECEC provision could be pursued through a partnership between the public and private not-for-profit initiatives which pro-actively engage with local actors. The rationale for selecting the units of analysis, three early childhood services distributed across the regional territory, is therefore linked to the social demands underlying services' implementation: reconciliation of family and working life responsibilities for parents; equal educational opportunities for children's development and growth; and participation of groups which are at risk of social exclusion (low-income families, children from ethnic minority background).

KEY-WORDS

SOCIAL INNOVATION, SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP, PARTICIPATION, WELFARE POLICY, PARTNERSHIP

1. Introduction

The article analyses the early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, one of the core policy areas of the Social Investment Package¹ (SIP) (European Commission [EC], 2013a) as pointed by the Europe 2020 Strategy as an essential requirement to achieve smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth. The so called “Social Investment welfare paradigm” is based on the idea that welfare states must invest to strengthen skills and capacities, beginning in early life. Social Investment therefore refers to policies and interventions that aim to build the productive capacities of citizens. Typical examples include labour market activation and early years education and care (Hemerijck, 2015).

Results from an eight-month research study conducted under the InnoSI² Project framework are presented in this article. The research looked into three main objectives of ECEC:

- Proving that ECEC services are beneficial to a wide array of actors: children, families, and society at large.
- Collecting knowledge aimed at improving quality and effectiveness (equitable access) of ECEC system to reach a higher level of growth and to guarantee children’s academic results and employability in the future.
- Analysing, through a case study approach, the integrated ECEC services’ system in the Emilia-Romagna region as a possible best-practice of social innovation with regard to the partnership between public, private for-profit and non-profit actors. Namely, local actors, including children, their families and the communities pro-actively engage in social economy initiatives.

We adopt the Westley and Antadze’s (2010) social innovation theoretical framework and apply Hochgerner’s (2011) four-dimensional scheme of social innovation: resources, authority flows, routine and beliefs (Bassi, 2011). The study is additionally informed by Evers, Ewert and Brandsen (2014)’s categorization of social innovation in the field of welfare policy. We use a multiple case study research model (Yin, 1993; 1994) that highlights the relationships among the micro, meso, and macro level of analysis of a program, project, and intervention at the local level. In addition,

¹ The so-called “Social Investment Package” consist of two main documents of the European Commission (and a series of Staff Working Documents): a) a communication “Towards Social Investment for Growth and Cohesion”, COM (2013) 83; b) a recommendation “Investing in Children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage”, C (2013) 778, which provides a policy framework for redirecting member states’ policies towards social investment throughout life. Together with the European Parliament resolution on Social Investment Pact (20 November 2012), it encourages the member states to pursue the modernisation of their social protection systems, on the top of ensuring their effectiveness, adequacy, and sustainability.

² This research was supported by the European Commission, Research Executive Agency, upon the Horizon 2020 Programme within the project “Innovative Social Investment: Strengthening communities in Europe” (InnoSI). The presented article presents the main results of the line of action of InnoSI research project that considers the role of social economy organizations in supporting, reinforcing, implementing, and social innovations initiatives (projects, programs, pilot, etc.) at the local and/or regional level in the context of welfare reforms aiming at implementing the “social investment approach”.

when addressing the issues of sustainability and accessibility, the case studies shed light on how innovative forms of public governance (local and regional networks, partnerships with parents, coalitions for policy advocacy, inter-agency collaboration) laid groundwork for creating the co-creation and sharing of knowledge, expertise, and experiences that subsequently contributed to achieving the high pedagogical quality of ECEC.

The ECEC services system of Emilia-Romagna region (focusing specifically on the services addressed to children aged 0 to 3 and their families) is selected as a case because of the significant presence of partnership with social economy actors such as social cooperatives. This case study provides some important implications that could be generalized to other social investment policies. In addition, when addressing the issues of sustainability and accessibility, the case studies shed light on how innovative forms of public governance (local and regional networks, partnerships with parents, coalitions for policy advocacy, inter-agency collaboration) laid groundwork for creating the co-creation and sharing of knowledge, expertise, and experiences that subsequently contributed to achieving the high pedagogical quality of ECEC.

The analysis of the data collected through interviews with managers of ECEC services (delivering organizations and local decision-makers) showed that no-one model fits all. This field of the study has suffered from a lack of a comprehensive framework of public policies that addresses the needs of each community, while striving for universalism. A comprehensive framework is needed to take into account the flexible combination of different funding sources (coming from the public sector – as well as from the non-profit sector and private enterprises). This case study addresses how ECEC provision succeeds in serving the diverse needs of the local community, in particular regarding accessibility and economic sustainability.

2. The institutional and theoretical framework

Social innovation is an emerging field searching for dominantly accepted definitions. For this research project, we took into consideration the definitional debate going on both at the European institutional level and in the academic community (The Young Foundation, 2006; Mulgan et al., 2007; European Union [EU] and The Young Foundation, 2010; Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan, 2010; EC, 2012).

For this study, we start from the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA) definition:

“Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance society’s capacity to act.” (BEPA, 2011: 9)

“The process of social interactions between individuals undertaken to reach certain outcomes is participative, involves a number of actors and stakeholders who have a vested interest in solving a social problem, and empowers the beneficiaries. It is in itself an outcome as it produces social capital.” (BEPA, 2011: 10)

Moreover, the BEPA report affirms that given this process, social innovations can be classified into three broad categories:

- grassroots social innovations (micro level)
- societal challenges (meso level)
- systemic type (macro level).

The first type concerns pressing social demands for vulnerable groups in society not addressed by the market or the state. The second group includes social innovation initiatives dealing with challenges that occur at a broader level of society, concerning the interconnection of economic, social and political dimensions. Finally, the third typology refers to social innovations that activate deep changes in attitudes and values of the population, in organizational structures and processes of main social institutions, or in the power of actors involved in networks/systems of services delivering.

The European Commission states:

“Social innovation can be defined as the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services, and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations. It represents new responses to pressing social demands, which affect the process of social interactions. It is aimed at improving human well-being. Social innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. They are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance individuals’ capacity to act.” (EC, 2013b: 6)

The “processual” dimension of social innovation, indicating a sort of cycle where new social needs are detected, new responses are elaborated, concrete actions and activities are delivered, better social outcomes are implemented and finally effective solutions are scaled up also could be suggested.

Referring to the welfare fields of action, in a recently published report of a research project funded under the FP7 European Research Program (Wilco), Evers, Ewert and Brandsen (2014) recognize at least:

“Five dimensions of social innovation in welfare systems: 1. innovations in services and their ways to address users; 2. innovations in regulations and rights; 3. innovations in governance; 4. innovations in modes of working and financing; 5. innovations concerning the entity of (local) welfare systems.” (Evers, Ewert and Brandsen, 2014: 16)

This typology is very useful because not only is it easy to understand but also applicable to empirical research in the field of welfare. In particular, the five-dimension framework and the twenty sub-dimensions (see Table 1) could be the first step in the identification of social innovations indicators at the empirical level. Indicators that can be measured through the variety of methods (quantitative and qualitative) developed by the social sciences, especially in the long tradition of “action-research” or “intervention research” or “evaluation research”. The typology that emerged from the Wilco research project has been used as a point of reference throughout the InnoSI research project and, more in particular, can be also used for case studies.

The dimensions elaborated by Evers, Ewert and Brandsen (2014) were collected in a two columns template as shown in Table 1 in order to allow the reader to have a complete picture of

their results in a single scheme. This could serve as a useful tool for scholars and researchers because they could come up with social innovation indicators relating to the specificity of their research design and add them under the list of the twenty sub-dimensions.

Table 1. Dimensions and sub-dimensions of social innovation in welfare policy

Dimensions	Sub-dimensions
1. Innovations in services and their ways to address users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Investing in capabilities rather than spotting deficits b) Preference for open approaches, avoiding targeting with stigmatizing effects c) Concern for bridging the gaps between professional services and people's life worlds d) Service offers that connect otherwise often separated forms of support and access, allowing for personalized bundles of support
2. Innovations in regulations and rights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Creating flexible forms of ad hoc support b) Developing offers that meet newly emerging risks, beyond fixed social and participation rights and entitlements c) Working by kind of "social contracts" with individuals and groups
3. Innovations in governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Fostering units and types of organization that operate in more embedded and networked ways b) Giving new concerns and groups a voice in the public domain c) Organizing more intense forms of public debate and opinion-building around existing challenges in cohesion policies d) Building issue-related coalitions and partnerships
4. Innovations in modes of working and financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Flexicurity in working contracts; levels of institutionalization and security below traditional standards b) Different working collectives – professional teams and voluntary commitments as part of the projects and approaches c) A strong mission profile and a professionalism that combines formerly fragmented knowledge d) Short-term and time-limited funding, combining resources from different stakeholders
5. Innovations concerning the entity of (local) welfare systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Reaching out to all sectors of local welfare systems; a lesser state focus b) Aiming at less standardized, more diverse and localized welfare arrangements c) Upgrading the community component in mixed welfare systems (families, support networks, etc.) d) Integrating economic and social logics (entrepreneurial action, developmental welfare) e) Integrating welfare and urban politics

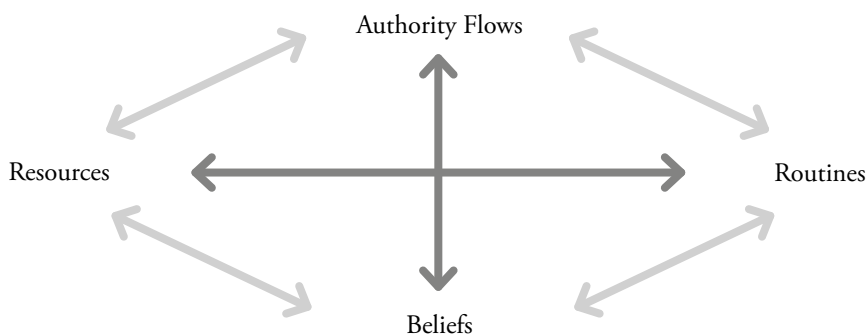
Source: Author's elaboration from Evers, Ewert and Brandsen (2014).

In our research project we also adopt the definition of social innovation elaborated by Westley and Antadze (2010), because of their holistic approach (Bassi, 2011):

“Social innovation is a complex process of introducing new products, processes or programs that profoundly change the basic routines, resource and authority flows, or beliefs of the social system in which the innovation occurs. Such successful social innovations have durability and broad impact.” (Westley and Antadze, 2010: 2)

Figure 1 represents the “social innovation compass”. It is a heuristic tool that can guide the researcher during the “research on the field” in the collection of data useful to find out if a program, a project, a service, and an organization is an example of social innovation or not. Figure 1 shows in which sequence should he/she conduct a case study and what kind of data he/she needs to gather for each dimension of the social innovation process.

Figure 1. The social innovation compass



Source: Author's elaboration from Westley and Antadze (2010).

The four poles/dimensions of the process have three sub-dimensions (fields of analysis) and each dimension has empirical indicators for the “measurement” of the social innovation level shown by the case study under analysis. It must be said that social innovation is not a fixed “property” that can be present or absent in the specific initiative under study, but rather it is an emergent property of the process that can be measured along a continuum, from low level to high level of social innovation for each pole of the compass. Following this line of thought at the end of our research project, it can be obtained that the initiative under examinations shows different level of social innovation in each pole: for instance, a “high level” in the resources activation and allocation process (left pole); a “medium level” in the power/authority allocation process (middle left pole) and in the routines change process (middle right pole); and finally a “low level” in the beliefs change process (right pole).

To analyse the social innovation process even more accurately, we should consider three levels/dimensions of analysis: micro (social interaction), meso (organization interaction) and macro

(system interaction). If we crosstab the sub-dimensions of the four poles of social innovation process with the three levels dimensions of social life we obtain a 36 cells matrix (see Table 2) that could be very helpful in order to organize the data collection and analysis for the case study under scrutiny. For each cell, the researcher can suggest a certain number of the empirical indicator in order to measure the presence or the absence of social innovation, and eventually the level of presence.

As we will see in Section 4 of this article, the three case studies carried on represent examples of innovative services in respect of several of the above mentioned dimensions and sub-dimensions of social innovation.

Table 2. Logic scheme of the theoretical model for social innovation research

	Resources			Power/authority Governance			Routines			Beliefs		
	Material	Human capital	Economic/ financial	Networks	Coalitions	Partnerships	Ways to organize	Ways to work	Ways to produce/ deliver goods /services	Ideas/ Concepts	Values	Frame/ Narrative
MICRO (Social demands)												
MESO (Societal challenges)												
MACRO (Systemic change)												

3. Methodological issues

This section outlines the main results of an in-depth analysis of ECEC services in Emilia Romagna region, adopting a “realist evaluation approach”. In order to demonstrate how ECEC services could be a potential social innovation in Emilia Romagna, we will present the methodology employed in this study, proceed to the case analysis focusing on three ECEC services (“Filonido” in the city of Bologna; “Il girotondo intorno al bosco” in the village of Serramazzone (Modena); “La gabianella” and “L’albero delle meraviglie” in the small town of Comacchio (Ferrara)), and suggest what implications do results of the analysis suggest in terms of our research question.

In order to verify the potentialities in term of social innovation of the ECEC services in the Emilia-Romagna region, we opted for the adoption of the “case studies” research technique. The case-study approach could be defined in the following way:

“Case study methods encompass a range of research techniques that are used to examine social phenomena. Researchers primarily focus their study on the micro level, concentrating on individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, and/or events. The analysis is aimed at investigating contemporary issues or events within their real-life setting. A case study is considered a specific approach or strategy that can be used as a unit of analysis and also the means by which data have been gathered, organized, and presented.” (Wolff, 2007: 2976)

This approach is particularly useful when examining changes in policies or practices. Investigators conduct research following the progression of change from the policy formation stage adoption through the implementation process, and finally to the policy outcomes. The unit of analysis for this study are the services provided.

As far as the identification of the services to be analysed, we proceeded as follows. First, we contacted the director of the ECEC services system in the Emilia-Romagna region. We explained the research design and asked him for the participatory support of the ECEC services offices. Then we elaborated on the criteria to select the services to be included in our case study and we had a meeting with the public official working in the ECEC services office at the regional level.

Three cases of the research were selected following four main criteria (variables)³:

- geographic distribution: west (mountain/hills), centre (plain), east (sea-side) areas of the Emilia-Romagna region
- municipality dimension: small (up to 15,000 inhabitants); medium (up to 100,000 inhabitants) and big cities (metropolitan area, from 250,000 to 500,000 inhabitants)
- ownership structure (principal delivering organization): public, private forprofit, private non-profit
- services typology: following the classification defined by the Emilia-Romagna regional government (nurseries/kindergartens, integrative/complementary services, home services, experimental services).

Once we agreed on the criteria, they selected 12 out of the 1,206 active services for the school year 2013/2014⁴. The research team ultimately chose six case studies from the 12 they had selected (2nd March 2016).

Following the selection of the six case studies (4th March 2016), the ECEC services office confirmed with the public official in charge of the coordination of the ECEC services in the administrative area concerned (usually a municipality) for acceptance (24th March 2016). Finally,

³ By crossing the first two criteria, “geographic distribution” and “municipality dimension”, we obtained a two columns - nine cells matrix inside which situate the ECEC services. Then, in order to choose the case to be analysed we took into consideration the other two criteria: “ownership structure” and “service typology” with the aim of having at least one case representative for each state of the variables/criteria: one public, one private for profit and one private non-profit; and at the same time one nursery, one integrative service, and one home service. Since the fourth typology “experimental service” at the time has not being implemented yet.

⁴ The number of 12 is determined in the following way: we agreed to have at least one service/initiative for each of the nine provinces of the region, except for three biggest provinces (both in term of population and ECEC services units), namely: Bologna, Modena e Parma, where we included two cases each.

upon receipt of all letters of acceptance (15th April 2016) we started to contact the persons in charge of the ECEC services coordination, in order to carry out the research. The first on-site visit was conducted on the 22nd April 2016.

We decided in agreement with the public official responsible for the ECEC services of the Emilia-Romagna region to reduce our case studies to three. We selected services representing each ECEC main typology: nurseries/kindergartens, integrative-complementary services, and home services: Filonido in the city of Bologna (387,500 inhabitants) for the first type; La gabbianella and L'albero delle meraviglie in the town of Comacchio (22,600 inhabitants), for the second type; Il girotondo intorno al bosco in the village of Serramazzoni (8,200 inhabitants), for the third type.

We also took into consideration the other abovementioned variables, such as: geographic distribution: Bologna (plain, centre), Comacchio (sea-side, east), Serramazzoni (mountain/hills, west); municipality dimension: Bologna (big), Comacchio (medium), Serramazzoni (small); ownership structure: Bologna (big social enterprises consortium), Comacchio (medium non-profit organization), Serramazzoni (small for profit business). It was not possible to include in the sample a public ECEC service centre.

Given the characteristics of the “case study method”, we utilized both qualitative and quantitative sources of data. Among them, we selected: a) official documents (i.e., laws enacted by the regional government and regulations enacted by municipalities); b) unofficial documents (i.e., bylaws of non-profit organizations and minutes of board of directors of for profit enterprises involved in corporate welfare programs); c) grey material (i.e., research reports and evaluation reports published by public bodies and research institutions); d) face to face interviews with representatives from public administration, non-profit organizations, private corporations, parents associations, etc.; e) focus group interviews with representatives of the above mentioned organizations; f) on-site observation of ECEC services centres.

In order to collect the information of the abovementioned letters d, e and f, we applied several research tools, such as outline for face to face interviews (or focus group) with:

- ECEC public official
- ECEC services workers (educators)
- ECEC services parents
- managers of corporations and public authorities involved in “Corporate Welfare Activities”

and a template for “on the field” observation of daily activities in the ECEC services.

3.1 The home-care ECEC service in Serramazzoni

The city of Serramazzoni is situated in the first buttress between the plains and the mountains of the Modena province. The educational service known as Il girotondo intorno al bosco (“Wandering around the woods”) was founded in 2005 by an agreement between the municipality of Serramazzoni and a private entity, which met the requirements of the regional law (no. 1/2000). The law required

the manager to comply with the following rules: organizing and providing the necessary means for the execution of the service; providing educator staff and personnel of general services required by the legislation; providing the necessary tools for the service; providing the purchase of equipment and furniture, and the ordinary and extraordinary maintenance of the location.

The municipality has responsibilities for the organizational and administrative support service for everything related to the organization and its management including passenger information and receipt of entries, the formation of the lists for admission to the service, and the determination of the monthly rates charged to families.

Il girotondo intorno al bosco is an educational facility located inside a 17th century historical building with typical characteristics of the mountain area. It breeds children from nine months to three years, in order to complement and support the role of parents. The program provides two services: a) a so-called “small educational group” in an apartment at the ground floor and b) a so-called “educator homecare” placed in the home next door.

The service operates five days a week, from Monday to Friday, 8:00 to 16:00. The “small group educational” service offers a course for seven children from the age of 9 up to 36 months led by two educators; the “educator homecare” service offers a course for five children from the age of 12 up to 36 months led by two educators.

3.2 The complementary ECEC service in Comacchio

The town of Comacchio is composed of thirteen small islands, and it is located at the mouth of the Po River. The town had to base its urban and economic development on water-related activities. Comacchio is a major commercial and historic centre along the Po River.

The municipal childhood centre called *L'albero delle meraviglie* (“Wonder Tree”) was founded in 1988 as a pilot experience. This centre was the first time that the town of Comacchio undertook direct responsibility for early childhood education. Comacchio became interested in early childhood education due to the problems related to the growth of boys and girls in the early years, the support of parents’ role and facilitation of parent-child relationship (Andreoli and Cambi, 2001). Initially, volunteers were young mothers (hereafter, “voluntary moms”) who had worked to encourage the initiative, some of them possessing basic training in education. Comacchio’s early childhood program was delivered in the building of a local elementary school for the first two years. After the second year mark, the school director withdrew support from the initiative. As a result of the loss of support, in 1992, the “voluntary moms” founded “*Libellula*”. *Libellula* is an association of volunteers (charitable organization) registered in the regional register. The registration requires skills regarding care and allowed the municipal school and education office to entrust the management of *L'albero delle meraviglie* for the next four years.

In 1997, *Libellula* had to give up the management of the service. Today, *Libellula* continues its educational and outreach activities in the territory, addressing the parents with training sessions and pre-birth courses, and changed its institutional and statutory structure, transforming itself into

a Cooperative called “Girogirotondo”.

From the school year 1998-1999, Girogirotondo took over the management of childhood centre L'albero delle meraviglie. The Girogirotondo leaders gradually expanded the range of offers, extending their activities also in the neighbouring territories with various initiatives aimed at different types of users (Andreoli and Cambi, 2001). The positive effects of this service were two-fold: first, it provided growth opportunities for the youngest in the territory (which was largely lacking); and, second, it created an opportunity for professional training and job placement for young women.

The centre for children and parents L'albero delle meraviglie is open every afternoon from Monday to Saturday from 16:30 to 19:30 (every afternoon reserved for the different age groups) and on Saturday, from 9:30 to 12:30.

The centre for “children and parents” is a type of service characterized by the interaction between children and parents (or other adult family members). The centre could, therefore, be regarded as a “co-educational” site, a system in which each part (space, time, the role of adults, relationships) evolves and changes in relation to others in a reciprocal relationship. The centre promotes opportunities for socializing and playing in a meeting space designed to encourage the processes of growth and development of skills by creating an atmosphere of sociability and trust, both through experience in the peer group and in the relationship with adults (Musatti, 2004).

The children's daycare service La Gabbianella (“Little seagull”) founded in 1999 is an educational service run by the Girogirotondo cooperative. The program was developed in response to the needs of fostering a care service for young children.

The service could afford up to 24 children aged from 12 to 36 months who are entrusted by educators for up to five hours daily period. When the service first started out, it was provided only during one semester. However, the service began to be provided all year soon to meet demands originated from a tourism-dependent economy. This yearly opening period is a major improvement, aiming at strengthening the “educational offer” and helping parents to work in tourist accommodation services (beaches, restaurants, etc.) during the summer. Today, the service has become an alternative/integrative service for those families, who want a part-time care in which their children can make significant experiences of socialization, playing, exploration, and first separation from family environment and parents.

3.3 The nursery Filonido in Bologna

Filonido is a “corporate welfare” nursery centre, founded in September 2011. It is the 10th early childhood facility built and managed in the province of Bologna by a cooperatives consortium called “Karabak”⁵.

⁵ The consortia cooperative Karabak is a special purpose company for the design, construction and management of educational services for children. Karabak could serve as an entrepreneurial tool to initiate the proposed construction of public services in cooperation with local governments.

The challenge to create the new organization started from customer demand expressed by the following actors: the municipality of Bologna, the Emilia Romagna region, some trade companies located in the so called “fair district” and from one local context study concerning the needs, desires and medium-long term perspectives of corporate welfare. Thus, the Filonido project was preceded by an analysis aimed at describing the specific characteristics in terms of city planning and socio-economic background of the Bologna’s San Donato quarter as well as identifying the demand for educational services for early childhood.

In 2009, the Emilia-Romagna region and the municipality of Bologna signed an agreement for the construction of a public and “corporate welfare” nursery located in the San Donato quarter in Bologna, open to the community.

For the construction of the nursery, the region invested two million Euro and the municipality of Bologna made available the land where it is built. Moreover, the municipality designated the Karabak consortium as a project manager and supervisor for thirty years by means of a public tendering procedure. Five cooperatives took part in the Karabak consortium. Two social cooperatives (Dolce and Cadiai), one catering cooperative (Camst), one construction cooperative (Manutencoop) and a maintenance cooperative (CIPEA). The agreement includes also three private companies: Unipol Finance Group, Legacoop and Hera Group. Based on that, the nursery Filonido hosts a certain number of children of the workers (mainly mothers) of these companies/organizations.

The agreement approved by the Emilia-Romagna region, the municipality of Bologna, and three participating services companies lay down the commitment of the partners to pay directly to the dealer, for the children of its employees, the fee required to cover costs related to an integration of the fees paid by the employees themselves⁶. At the end of the concession, the building will be owned by the city of Bologna. The partnership between the public and private institutions makes the Filonido project possible. The participants had a common goal: giving families some concrete solutions to the families’ work-life balance needs. Filonido represents an exemplary implementation of *community welfare* through a net of different organizations.

The nursery is a public educational social service that works with families and it aims at educating the children following the municipal educational guidelines. Filonido accommodates 81 children aged 3 to 36 months, including 20 places agreed upon with the municipality of Bologna, 12 with private or voucher and 49 with Emilia Romagna region and some companies belonging to Bologna exhibition centre (Unipol Finance Group, Legacoop Bologna and Hera Group).

⁶ The average cost of a child place in a nursery is about EUR 800 a month. The fee paid by the families is determined by an “income-scale” base. The remaining amount up to the cost covering is in charge of the municipality. In our case study, the difference of cost related to the places reserved to the employees of the corporations is paid by the corporation themselves.

4. Key findings: Social innovation why and how?

This section summarises the main findings emerging from the three in-depth case studies.

Are the three case studies examples of “social investment” policies?

The answer is a positive one but with unique differences in each. The Bologna ECEC service centre is a clear example of a “social investment policy” given the fact that it offers a very high-quality nursery service at the price established by the local authority, to a significant number of working women (the centre has the capacity to host up to 81 children 0-3 years old). The centre is located in a very high density offices district (the so-called “Fiera district”) that is characterised by the concentration of many private enterprises (consultancy, financial, and commercial intermediaries), cooperative enterprises (insurance, bank services, and consumer cooperatives), and public agencies (the regional government), with a high level of women workforce. A very modern and functional nurse service makes parents trust the service – with a flexible time schedule – near their work, which allows them to conciliate their working life with their family life, and to achieve work life balance. Most of the beneficiaries of the nursery are women who are middle-class and have middle-high level skills. They can get access to the service precisely because the nursery is located at the centre of the financial district.

The two Comacchio ECEC service centres are different examples of “social investment policy” in the sense that they offer a “space”, where people of different generations, ethnicity, religions, and cultures can meet in a safe and controlled environment for pursuing a common goal, the education of their children. It is a particularly important facility, especially for a traditionally deprived and isolated geographical area. In this regard, two Comacchio ECEC could be regarded as a key actor of the community to build an inclusive and cohesive society.

The Serramazzoni ECEC service centre is also a distinctive example of “social investment policy” given that it offers a nursery service – in a small, informal, friendly and familiar setting – to families that otherwise would not have the possibility to care their children in a highly qualified way. Considering that the municipality of Serramazzoni is a small village on the hills outside the big city of Modena where many young families do not have relatives in the neighbourhood who could provide cares instead of them, the home centre provides opportunities for the parents to conciliate their job careers (especially for women/mothers) with having children. As it appears in many interviews: “*if the home centre was not there, I would not have been able to work. I would have been forced to stay at home, caring for my children*”, said a lady who has three children of different ages, and all of them have been enrolled in the home centre.

Are the three case studies examples of “social innovation”?

We can answer affirmatively to the above question, but each case relates to specific dimensions. The idea behind the theoretical framework (showed in Figure 1) is that social innovation happens when it is activated by an actor (individual or collective) located in the system of interaction and it produces

a change, in at least one of the four dimensions of the relational field of action (resources, power, routines, beliefs). A change that is able to “activate” a positive feedback in the relational network.

Only “when” and “if” the changes interact with each other reaching a certain level of intensity (scale) the entire system of interaction changes (saturation effect) in a substantial, stable, and somehow permanent way.

In order to start a social innovation process, we need a socially innovative entrepreneur, but in order to allow the social innovation to diffuse and reach a sufficient scale (critical mass) and to become adopted by the majority of the actors in the system of interaction, it is necessary that a certain number of pre-condition should be complied.

As it is a long-standing process with several forward and backward steps, the final success of a social innovation process is related to the level of “path-dependency” or “path-breaking” orientation presents in the system of interaction.

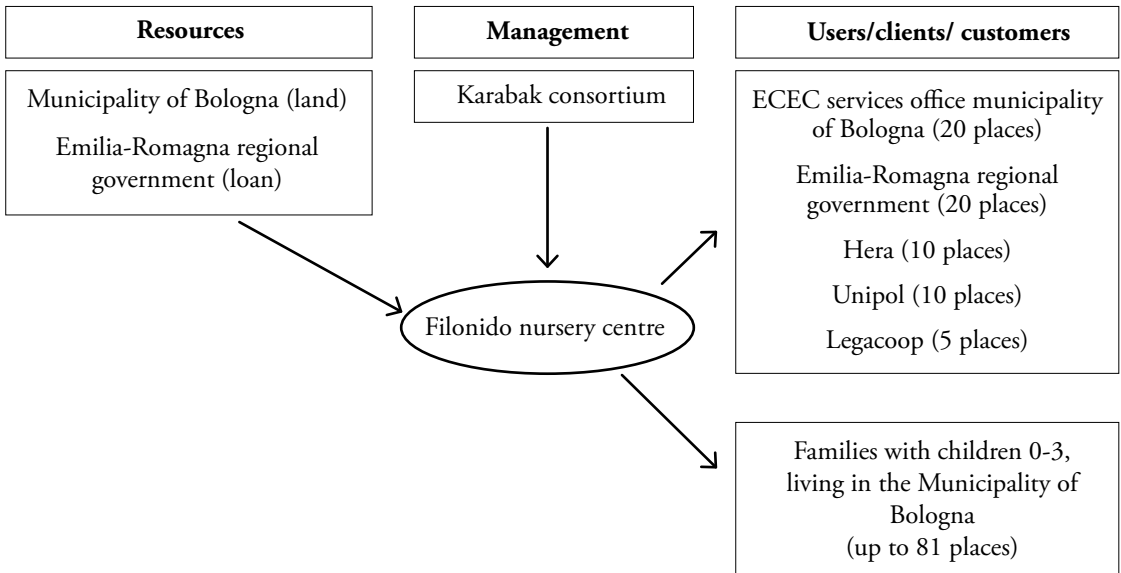
The Bologna ECEC service centre

The Bologna case study could be understood as an outstanding example of an unusual combination of economic and financial resources (see the “left quadrant” in Figure 1). In this chart, we represented the social innovation process as an “emerging phenomenon” that arise from the interaction (virtuous circles) between four main dimensions of social action: resources, authority flows, routines, and beliefs.

As illustrated in Section 3.3, the peculiarity of the nursery Filonido is the very innovative arrangement of public, private for profit and private non-profit actors that made it possible to (literally) build a new nursery centre in the “Fiera District area” in the city of Bologna. The main actors involved in the project have been the following ones, each of them playing a different role in the network:

- the Bologna municipality gave the land (for a thirty years period)
- the Emilia-Romagna regional government gave a loan of 2 million Euro
- the cooperative movement set up a consortium (of five members)
- the consortium Karabak built the new Centre
- the cooperative Dolce run the Centre
- the cooperative Camst supply the food service
- the Emilia-Romagna region, the Hera corporation, the Unipol Corporation, and the Legacoop umbrella association pay for a certain number of places in the nursery for the children of their employees.

Figure 2. Networks of actors involved in the Filonido nursery centre



The Comacchio ECEC service centres

The main social innovation element of the Comacchio case study consists of an attempt to modify the “cultural orientations” and the “beliefs and values” of the local community towards childhood and adolescence (see the “bottom quadrant” in Figure 1).

Until the end of the 1980s, the territory suffered from a lack of attention to early childhood education; there were literally no services dealing with problems regarding the development in infancy, the support of parents’ role, and facilitation of parent-child relationship.

Only the successful interaction of international (the Bernard Van Leer Foundation), national (the Ministry of Education), regional (the regional government) and local actors (the Municipality and civil society organizations) could create the fertile environment which facilitates a bunch of activities and projects that could persist for many years, and that were able to develop into a plurality of ECEC services and facilities.

The Serramazzoni ECEC service centre

The main contribution in term of social innovation of the Serramazzoni case concerns its ability to change how the local government exerts its power or authority in regards to the system of services benefiting childhood (see the “upper quadrant” in Figure 1).

The demographic trends of the early 2000’s, with the increasing number of young families with infant children and both parents working outside the home without relatives living nearby, pressed the local administration to implement ECEC services. The impossibility to build a nursery centre pushed the municipality to promote the research of new settlement and innovative solutions and the solutions are supported by the new regulation framework enacted by the regional government

in 2000. The new law (n.1 of January 2000) at the art. 3 diversified ECEC services and introduced “home educator service”. In this vein, the Serramazzone case study suggests a clear example of a combination of different elements that changes the flow of authority in the local community, giving voice to the requests of families with infant children, and creating a “new market” for ECEC services in which new private providers can find an opportunity to develop their businesses.

What are the main commonalities that the three case studies share?

From the abovementioned considerations, it appears that the process of activation of innovative ECEC services follows a common pathway that can be summarized in the following phases.

In the first place an “activist” or a civil society association (women, parents, workers’ union, neighbourhood committees, social movement, etc.) initiated an advocacy campaign, pushing the local administration (municipality) towards the adoption of deliberation that activated ECEC services (Forno and Graziano, 2014). After a long period of negotiation, the public administrator enacted a resolution that institutionalized the ECEC service, sometimes in the form of policy experimentation (for a limited period of time, usually from one up to three years).

There are also counter-powers. Usually the institutional regulation framework is not favourable of experimentations, pilot projects, and innovative services. Especially bureaucrats tried to impede any kind of deviation from the established routine (“business as usual” way of working).

When the ECEC services turned out to be very successful, coalitions of supporters of the initiatives were formed and the municipality was forced to extend the period of experimentation and even to institutionalize them.

Even care delivery workers who first opposed the service recognized the program’s success and actively accepted the policies.

Once the ECEC service became institutionalized, usually, the care delivery workers, complied with expending service hours and providing additional complimentary services (Guidi and Andretta, 2015).

This process shows several features as follows:

- It is clearly a bottom-up process (starting in the civil society and moving towards the public administration).
- It requires the presence of a “social” entrepreneur (usually a woman or a group of women).
- It puts in place a multi-level interaction system with a plurality of actors (global, national, regional and local).
- It activates a complex set of interwoven networks (economic, political, social, and cultural) of relationships and exchanges.
- It consists of an “emerging” phenomenon that shows up in an unintended and unexpected way.
- It requires the combination of several pre-conditions, among which a very key role is played by the bundle of resources present in the territory.
- It represents an institutionalisation process through which new practices and way of thinking enter into the mainstream policy.

5. Lessons to be learnt and policy implications

Several “lessons to be learnt” from the three case studies could be suggested as follows.

First, social innovation initiatives are highly “context-dependent”. In that social innovations are strictly interwoven together with a network of actors (that we defined the “relational system of interaction”) and are embedded in a specific economic-political-social-cultural environment.

Second, the public sector is not always an obstacle to the development and the diffusion of social innovations. On the other hand, effective, stable (scaling-up), durable, and sustainable social innovations require a crucial role to be played by the different agencies of the public administration.

Third, the private for profit sector can play an important role in social innovation initiatives, but usually – in the field of social, health and education services – is not the actor who starts the experimentation process that gives way to the social innovation initiative.

Fourth, civil society organizations at a different level of social action– micro, meso and macro – play a crucial and central role in the beginning of small, locally based, experimental, and pilot projects, that create the favourable environment in which social innovations can start, grow and develop.

Fifth, social innovations are more effective (and sustainable) when they are able to trigger a virtuous circle that activate processes involving all the four dimensions of the “social innovation diamond” (or compass): a) resources distribution; b) authority flows, regulation, actors’ roles; c) routines, social norms and relationships; d) values and beliefs.

Finally, social innovations often emerge as “unintended consequences” of social action initiated by social actors who want to solve an immediate, concrete, and urgent need of their individual members (or families).

Usually, at the beginning of a social innovation process, there is the role of “entrepreneurs”, not only nor primarily in an economic sense of the term, but more widely from a social, political and cultural perspective.

The lessons learnt from the case studies analysis point out that certain conditions are needed for the successful development of social innovation in the ECEC field. Such conditions encompass the following elements.

The presence of a coherent system of a regulatory framework regarding whether funding is systematically distributed to the public and private non-for-profit organizations on the basis of accessibility and required quality satisfaction (e.g., inclusion of children with special needs, income-related fees favouring the participation of low-income families, reasonable adult/child ratio, pedagogical coordination, amount of paid working hours without children allowing staff to participate in collegial meetings and ongoing professional development activities).

A shared commitment to ECEC as a public good at all level of governance is necessary. That encourages bottom-up policy advocacy and sustains innovation through responsive policy-making processes.

The analysis of the data collected through interviews to key-stakeholders also highlights that social innovation in ECEC is more likely to happen in the following contexts: traditions of civic engagement and educational activism are present or emerging in the local community and the

initiatives aiming to the development of ECEC services are driven by a commitment to children's rights and social justice (starting from parents and communities groups) rather than from a "return of investment" rationale (e.g., ECEC as profitable assets).

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