

Bridging social innovation and business. A co-design experience for a community welfare project.

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to investigate the competences and methodologies that can support the construction of a codesign process. This is intended to be a continuous and strategic dialogue between organizations from different sectors – business and not for profit – and communities in developing socially innovative services related to welfare.

Complex social needs, as the ones tackled by social innovation, require integrated and innovative approaches able to combine and manage the contributions of different actors. In particular, private sector is called upon to acquire an active role through a stronger recognition of its potential and by sharing all its resources – not only economic ones. By presenting an on-going Italian project on communitarian and cross-sectorial welfare, the paper reflects on how the design approach could play a crucial role especially in structuring such multi-stakeholder processes.

Keywords: Strategic design, Codesign, Social Innovation, Community Welfare

1. Introduction

Building on the debate on social innovation and on its related phenomena (Meroni, 2015) and for the purpose of this paper, two dimensions create the background for discussion. The first one is related to the scale of the problems or challenges that social innovation aims to address: indeed, usually bottom-up initiatives start locally in response to needs expressed by groups of citizens who try to solve specific problems. Besides their local dimension, however, such mobilizations are often symptoms of broader challenges that imply a wider cross-sectorial action that involve a larger number of players to produce a real and long-term change. Moreover, looking at the areas in which social innovation operates (education, health, housing, migration, nutrition, etc.), it appears clear that to face such complex and broad challenges we need a common and coordinated intervention.

The second dimension we need to address refers to the hybrid nature of social innovation, which is explicit in both the solutions it provides and in the process generating them. The contamination between different sectors and organizations appears to be both the innovative way to respond to a societal challenge as well as the enzyme for starting the (scaling of a) project.

According to Mulgan (2007), “social innovations are usually new combinations or hybrids of existing elements that cross different organizational, sectorial or disciplinary boundaries”. This implies the need for a more systemic approach to design relationships between the various stakeholders involved in a solution, especially if we consider the economic and social growth of a context produced by the scaling up of local initiatives. As stated by Jenson (2013) and Murray et al. (2010),

social innovation can be considered as a device for changing and improving relationships and blurring boundaries between the state, the market, family and community in response to welfare challenges. Moreover, as stated by Caulier-Grice et al. (2012), apart from improving the existing relations, social innovation also fosters the creation of new relationships between different stakeholders.

Within this complex framework, the role of business is indeed attracting more and more attention: companies are being increasingly called upon to provide a contribution towards the co-creation of innovative sustainable solutions, providing and mobilizing their material and immaterial resources for the common good (Council of Europe, 2014).

Given all that, a new systemic approach is needed to allow every actor/stakeholder to gain a common perspective on strategies, methods and tools to tackle shared societal issues, and to be empowered towards a more collaborative and structured way of operating. Thus restoring the awareness of the benefits of working together.

This paper proposes a new framework of design processes that involve different sectors of society, including the private sector (paragraph 2). As explained in paragraph 3, design tools can help in managing this complex system of stakeholders and building different and innovative models of collaborations towards common social challenges. In paragraph 4, an Italian project will be presented in order to describe how design methodologies can be used to solve communitarian needs, in particular those related to work-life balance, and how innovative welfare services can be developed through cross-sector collaborations.

2. Integrating social innovation and the for-profit sector

In 2015 the UN Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development proclaimed the importance to call on all businesses to apply their creativity and innovation to solving sustainable development challenges (UN, 2015). The private sector has been recognized as a vital partner to turn the commitments into long-term concrete practices and to respond in a new and effective way to local and global problems. However, it needs to be engaged in collaborative processes alongside all the social actors in order to share its resources and to fully express its transformative capacity. An inclusive growth is indeed subject to the ability to build shared strategies that promote the action of several actors and the efficient interconnection of resources. For this reason companies, alongside non-profit and civil society, are encouraged to seek for collaborative processes towards common sustainable goals.

For several years companies have been called upon to adopt a “responsible approach” to give a stronger contribution to local development. Greater attention has been placed on “the responsibility of enterprises for their impacts on society” and on the positive relationship that the company can (and must) build with the whole system of stakeholders (EU Green Paper, 2001). Thus companies have started to acknowledge the importance of dealing with their stakeholders adopting practices that would meet their expectations (Freeman, 2010), and to create new channels of communication with them in order to give information about economic, environmental, social and governance performance.

This attitude has enabled companies to move from “doing less harm”, according to a defensive strategy, to “doing more good”. Long-term social progress indeed does not depend on philanthropy or occasional supports to communities, rather on integrated business strategies that incorporate competitive advantage with social value (Porter, Kramer, 2011). A deep reconciliation between

business success and social progress is required: creating economic value in a way that also generates value for society by addressing its needs and challenges (Ibidem).

This view reconfigures the role of business, defining a new paradigm in which private companies can contribute to both community and firm's prosperity enabling social changes through innovating their actions for sustainability (Caroli, 2017).

Such approach, belonging to those companies that "view community needs as opportunities to develop ideas and demonstrate business technologies, to find and serve new markets, and to solve long-standing business problems", has been summarized by Kanter (1988) under the term "Corporate Social Innovation" (CSI). Over the years a stronger connection between corporate social innovations and core businesses has been recognized, describing CSI as "a strategy that combines the unique set of corporate assets (entrepreneurial skills, innovation capacities, managerial acumen, ability to scale, etc.) in collaboration with the assets of other sectors to co-create breakthrough solutions to complex social, economic, and environmental issues that impact the sustainability of both business and society" (Mirvis and Googins, 2012).

This radical change of perspective assumes therefore the company as one of the subjects operating within an ecosystem, able to produce value but also to benefit from the relations established. Moreover, it implies the opportunity to transform CSR into a catalyst for innovation, creating competitive advantage by institutionalizing corporate social innovation (Herrera, 2015), starting from developing new relational capacities through the innovation of "stakeholder engagement" mechanisms.

Social innovation is about changes in the relationships between different actors, and concerns therefore primarily the modalities of action, and not necessarily only the actions themselves. This approach can be applied also to the relations between stakeholders and firms in the context of sustainable development. In particular, here innovation refers to the improvement and effectiveness of the inclusion of stakeholders in the firms' strategies for sustainable development (Caroli, 2017).

As stated by Kozati (2016) Gebaner (2013) and Ayuso (2011) it is possible and desirable that firms co-create innovations that benefit both themselves and the external subjects involved. To this end however, the firm must be able to:

- Assimilate the insights, ideas and indications coming from stakeholders, overcoming the classical perspective of unidirectional communication;
- Work in a peer to peer logic, providing its assets and resources to stakeholders and defining with them the problems and the possible solutions (Caroli, 2016).

There are four fields within which we can distinguish the degree of innovation of stakeholder engagement: i) modality, which should provide a full strategic involvement of the parts to share the modalities of sustainable development; ii) tools, which should include an interactive communication finalized at co-design and co-development; iii) focus areas, which should contain those relevant to the firms' competitiveness and its impact on sustainable development; and iv) subjects, which should include the totality of stakeholders, included those more peripheral within the firm's network (ibidem).

The adoption of the approach delineated above allows companies to identify social innovation opportunities while enhancing their competitive advantage, representing an essential step to foster an organizational culture devoted to innovation and sustainability. As stated by Mirvis (2016), the main challenges faced by companies in dealing with social innovation relate to both the context in which social innovation occurs as well as to the nature of such kind of innovations. The "unfamiliar

culture and context” as well as the weak legitimacy to operate within local communities and “non-traditional customers” demand for new processes of collaboration between business and non-business partners as well as for new capabilities and tools to manage such processes (Ibidem).

In this sense, co-creation processes, supported by design methodologies, become essential means to foster business-non business collaborations towards common goals.

3. The transformative role of design

The design discipline contributes to shaping collaborative paths between business and non-business by leveraging on 3 peculiar capacities related to: “systemic thinking, sense making and capacity building”. As stated by Cautela et al. (2015) designers embody a “transformational role”, in the way they “empower people to invent solutions together” (European Commission, 2013).

In particular these 3 capacities are crucial when applied on social innovation processes that aim at 1) intentionally involving a multiple group of stakeholders from the early stages, often with conflicting interests and motivations, and 2) let the areas of intervention emerge from within the design conversation, i.e.: through the emergence of local needs, the identification of common and promising fields of work, the synergies between resources, assets and competences, and the creation of shared action plans.

The Systemic Thinking skill “incorporates strategic thinking and the capacity to work with communities representing diverse interests and positions, to make them align and eventually converge into a joint initiative” (Cautela, et al. 2015). The present paper aims at building on the Community Centered Design (Meroni, 2014) concept, which implies the presence of designers within a community and their active immersion in the context in order to gain a deep body of knowledge. It aims to understand if and how to adapt it to the peculiar kind of Community in which social enterprises and private companies work in contact with citizens and in which the cooperatives and third sector operate as touchpoints between citizens and companies.

The Sense Making capacity is here adopted in the designerly way of building objects of conversation, that represent and describe new ways of organizing relations and services. Designers here assume the role of “intermediaries” between companies, organization and citizens, as described by Zurlo and Bohemia (2014). Through their capacity to envision opportunities and shape initial rough service solutions, designers here contribute also to activate the interest of stakeholders. As regards specifically the business sector, the capacity of Sense Making may result in highlighting new opportunities for innovation as well as of new field of future corporate research and development.

Capacity Building. The nature of social innovation in the form here presented, forces any stakeholder to leave her comfort zone and to start adopting new languages, new competencies, new tools that support collaboration. More specifically, it asks for a new set of specific capabilities, strongly related to the:

- identification of social needs and priorities;
- collaboration and negotiation with unconventional stakeholders;
- coordination of immersive and participative processes;
- management of long return horizon goals;
- multi-business unit involvement.

The codesign and design thinking approaches facilitate the contribution of different stakeholder and empower them to take action and participate in the process of social innovation. At the same time, service design competencies contribute in shaping innovative social forms and value creation systems, contributing to support social innovations in the peculiar forms services (Corubolo, Meroni, 2015).

The case study here presented aims at applying design skills as well as strategic and service design disciplines to a community welfare project in Milan, exploring both the challenges of structuring a multi-stakeholder project, as well as the creation of collaborative services.

4. Case study discussion: a “community welfare” project

Milano Sei l'Altro is a community welfare project that has been launched in 2016 in the Italian city of Milan. Winner of the call “Welfare in Action” promoted and funded by Fondazione Cariplo and led by Consorzio SIS and a network of partners including social enterprises, associations, a research foundation, the municipality of Milan and companies, the project aims at experimenting new community welfare services by engaging local actors - institutions, third sector, social enterprises, communities and businesses - into a collaborative process of design and implementation. In particular, Milano Sei l'Altro addresses the issue of work-life balance in environments with scarce socio-economic resources.

In recent years, especially in the Italian context, we could observe the rise of new and articulate social needs, which cannot find concrete answers in the current public welfare system. The socio-economic crisis has caused an increased fragility of family-based systems: by provoking a material impoverishment and reducing the perspectives of larger sectors of the population, especially women and unemployed people, it contributed to make social ties and relationships increasingly fragile. This scenario highlights a new concept of “vulnerability” that refers to categories of people who “slide silently downward from a life of economic dignity to a state of poverty as a result of biographical events that until recently were considered natural occurrences in a person’s life, and yet today often severely disrupt the lives of these people, not only because welfare support is insufficient, but mostly because social ties are weak” (Mazzoli, 2012).

In this context, Milano Sei l'Altro aims to provide original solutions to the new welfare and occupational needs, such as innovative forms of work-life-family balance and social services to favour the integration of unemployed and non-employed people into the labour market. Considering the structural fragmentation of the territorial resources and the specificities of the Milanese context, the project intends to reach an effective engagement and empowerment of those vulnerable groups, especially women, who suffer from a lack of balance between work and private life caused by difficulties in the management of their care loads (elderly and/or disabled relatives and children).

The project consists of 3 main actions:

- the involvement, since the early stages, of all the local actors (institutions, non-profit organizations, civil society and also companies), especially those who are not traditionally considered responsible for the provision of welfare services, whether they are profit, non-profit, public or private entities (citizens, workers, young start-ups) to ensure a more integrated and structured system;

- the ideation and experimentation of innovative design methodologies to foster the co-creation of new solutions, encouraging the different social actors, and especially firms, to adopt the new model of stakeholders' interaction, communication and effective collaboration which is the milestone of (corporate) social innovation;
- the creation of tools supporting the connection and aggregation of actors and resources, such as: "community hubs" where citizens, associations, not for profit organizations and businesses may also find a physical space to gather and co-produce services; and the new professional position of the "community manager", who plays a crucial role in mediating and facilitating dialogue between the actors, creating relationships, aggregating the social needs of community and promoting the transformation of the welfare offer.

The project scenario is built onto two main pillars-issues:

- Aggregating existing resources - goods, services, competences - in order to systematize and direct them towards an offer of high-quality and effective welfare services based on a logic of re-distribution of value;
- Improving and innovating the offer system through personalized and collaborative services by matching supply and demand and by introducing innovative forms of design and management of services.

For the purpose of this paper, we focus our discussion on the design process developed by the project to effectively engage the local actors, and in particular the private sector, since its early stages. Milano Sei l'Altro is indeed an innovative project in the Italian context, especially since it considers business as one of the several subjects that participate to the discussion and definition of solutions within a rigid and traditional field of work (work-life balance). It challenges the private sector to evolve from a logic of "employee welfare", in which the goal is limited to support and facilitate the life of the workers and, at its best, to make these services available to a small percentage of the local community: on the contrary, it invites companies to adopt a more open and collaborative approach and to fulfil their responsibility in joining a broader and multifaceted "design team", addressing the needs of society, and therefore also those of companies' employees. At the same time, Milano Sei l'Altro encourages social enterprises, cooperatives and the third sector to perceive themselves as co-designers of such solutions, and not as mere "suppliers of social services" for the public or private sector (Borzaga, 2004).

In particular, the design contribution provided by the POLIMI DESIS Lab aims to support for-profit companies in:

- Fully recognize the elements with greatest potential within their own business in order to respond to social needs (resources, experiences, know-how, tools), not only through activities of mere philanthropy, yet in a logic of authentic integration;
- Rethink their relationship with local stakeholders in a more strategic and structured way, making sense of their needs and linking them with existing corporate solutions, or getting involved in the co-design and co-creation of new ones;
- Contribute to structure and support fragile and often fragmented multi-stakeholder collaborative processes, which still represent useful sources of external knowledge that may be integrated within the internal structure and thus become a trigger for innovation (Mirvis, 2016).

5. The ‘Milano Sei l’Altro’ process

The process is still ongoing, as more and more companies and organizations are joining the project. This means that continuous improvements and adaptations are still being done to better refine the model.

We will here introduce the main phases that compose the process (Figure 1) by presenting: the main objectives as well as the challenges we faced, the competencies we introduced and the different combination of stakeholders involved in each phase.

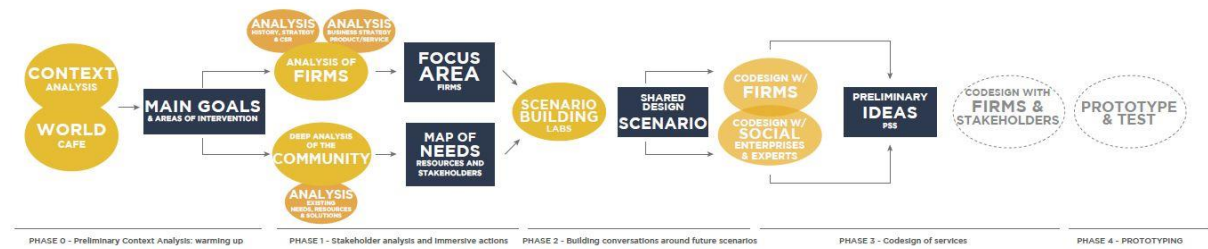


Figure 1. The process developed within the Milano Sei l’Altro project.

Phase 0. Preliminary Context Analysis: warming up

The preliminary context research had the main purposes of connecting theoretical and practical knowledge related to welfare sector and of involving stakeholders in a first open discussion.

Being among the main players providing services of care and home assistance, the core partners of Milano Sei l’Altro are, indeed, involved in both basic and applied research projects that explore the evolution of such services. A desk analysis of literature data and of the results of previous and ongoing projects contributed to creating a baseline knowledge, which was shared among the group. In addition to this analysis, we mapped local social innovative practices, experimenting with work-life balance solutions, such as bottom-up initiatives, neighbourhood projects, informal groups and more.

By leveraging on this existing wide knowledge, a World Cafe (Figure 2) was organized in order to start engaging relevant actors. At this point, private companies were invited together with representatives from the municipality, social innovators, start-ups, cooperatives and social enterprises. Organized around 3 topics (resources, networks and innovation for collaborative processes), the World Cafe gave us insights on the barriers and drivers in establishing cross-sector collaborations as well as connections to existing good practices and projects. This helped us also to better identify the targets and their needs and to reframe the macro areas of intervention.



Figure 2. The World Cafe organized to collect insights on the barriers and drivers in establishing cross-sector collaborations.

Phase 1. Stakeholder analysis and immersive actions

In order to detail and integrate the data collected in Phase 0, the first steps into the Milano Sei l'Altro project were dedicated to gain a deeper and more structured knowledge of the specificities of the Milanese areas involved in the project and to identify the most promising areas of work.

Public, profit and not for profit organizations were interviewed with the aim to explore both needs and resources related to the work-life balance issue. This phase consisted of two parallel processes:

- **Immersion in the communities.** 8 Community Manager immersed themselves in the communities and conducted more than 100 interviews, addressed at 70 different social actors, i.e. social cooperatives, associations, public services, informal movements, private citizens. The interviews investigated: specific needs expressed by the targets, existing or missing solutions, and potentially available resources. As result, a **Map of Needs** (Figure 3) has been realized with the aim to represent the main work-life balance related necessities and problems expressed by the communities.
- **Analysis of the private companies.** Businesses have been analysed through 2 actions: a desk analysis of companies' key documents (Sustainability Report and Annual Report) to deeply investigate their approach towards sustainability and welfare; a design conversation to managers and/or key functions, with the aim to deepen the understanding of the competencies in the sustainability and social innovation sectors as well as their will to collaborate in the project. Meetings with the companies can be considered a form of light co-design sessions, as we invite them to rethink their projects through the principles of Milano Sei l'Altro and to evaluate promising areas of work. The outcome was a report called "Focus Areas".

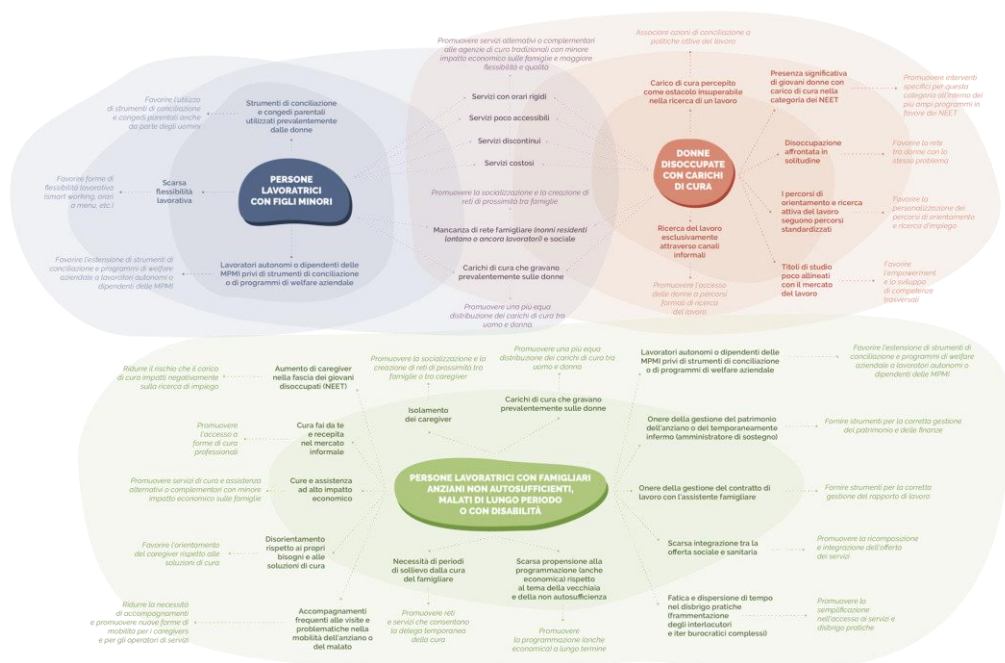


Figure 3. Maps of Needs representing the main necessities and problems expressed by the communities.

This double level of investigation gave us the opportunity to evaluate potential synergies among the stakeholders and related to the project. This was indeed a crucial phase in which designers, by

systematizing the data and interpreting them, contributed to highlight common objectives between company and communities.

Such process of intersection between the level of business and the level of the communities allowed for the identification of Opportunity Areas, represented then in a map.

The process has been repeated for all the companies and stakeholders involved into the process, thus identifying those opportunities where multiple actors expressed interest, knowledge or expertise.

Phase 2. Building conversations around future scenarios

As anticipated, the second phase was dedicated to overlapping the level of business analysis to the territorial one. From this “integrated map”, we could make visible (and sharable) the specific areas of intervention within the biggest Map of Needs.

The focus of the design work was here the interpretation and transformation of “opportunities”, expressed through needs, into “objects of conversation” (Zurlo, 2012, Jegou and Manzini, 2008) able to describe future situations and trigger the collaboration.

In order to move from the present situation to the future, we organized a series of mini-workshops, inviting the core partners of Milano Sei l’Altro to explore their strategic visions within each opportunity area. This internal knowledge was transformed into a series of stories describing future scenarios and in a map of stakeholders to be involved in the process.

This material, together with a set of existing inspirational practices, nourished the “Milano Sei l’Altro Labs” (Figure 4 and 5), a series of workshops that involved the core partners, the community managers and the private companies but that were also opened to the contribution of local stakeholders, public servants and domain experts.



Figure 4. The Milano Sei l’Altro Labs exploring and discussing the scenarios.

During the labs, participants were guided to discuss, modify, reinforce, and transform the initial scenarios and to give their interpretation of them, negotiating roles, exploring conflicts, and sharing resources. The results of the Labs were actually a series of strategic design actions, where the object was not creating a solution for a client (the invited company or the local cooperative), rather a

common vision on how to tackle a need expressed by the communities; for example, the planning for the elderly, in terms of financial, housing and social programming.

This is indeed a radical change of perspective for the actors involved: from designing a strategy responding to the mission of one leading stakeholder, to a co-interpretation of local needs developed in a shared strategy.



Figure 5. The Milano Sei l'Altro Labs exploring and discussing the scenarios.

Phase 3. Codesign of services.

Building on the outcomes of Phase 3, we entered the phase of co-designing services. From the scenarios, populated with a series of micro-actions, we created again 2 parallel paths. On the one side we supported the private sector to interpreting the results in terms of integration or connection to existing corporate solutions, resources or assets, encouraging the collaboration even between different business units and functions; on the other side the results entered a series of meetings held in the community hubs and engaging local cooperatives and citizens in order to promote bottom-up interventions in the areas.

Following the first path, the team that participated in the “Milano Sei L’altro Labs” was reconfigured again around the specific scenarios, in order to build a “design team”, in which non-expert designers from the core partners and private companies collaborate with expert designers in the codesign of integrated solutions (Manzini, 2015). Differently from the “community level” path, the design action was more focused on developing complex solutions, which require the contribution of experts and organization, more than the activation of the communities (e.g.: the creation of funding schemes or the development of new professional roles).

The upcoming phase of the process, which is still on going, relates to the prototyping and testing of the solutions. This part aims to transform initial ideas of services from the stage of concepts to the level of local experimentations.

6. Conclusions

This still experimental phase of Milano Sei l’Altro aimed at identifying a set of processes and tools to build collaborations between conventional (non profit organizations) and unconventional (businesses) actors, involved in local welfare projects. Looking at the overall route, we can notice

how the main path follows 2 different but parallel directions: one more related to the community and third sector level, therefore more strongly attached to the context, the other one more connected to the private sector. By mirroring the main activities, the 2 paths re-join at specific moments in the process, in order to then converge as long as we proceed with the project.

In the first part of the process, this iterative process of divergence and convergence is conceived to assure:

- A deep understanding of the needs and opportunities expressed by the various stakeholders;
- The progressive engagement of specific actors and functions both on communities and organizations levels;
- The emergence of overlapping areas on which to focus the design action.

In the second part of the process, divergence moments were designed, firstly, to validate the service ideas and, secondly, to reinforce and modify them according to the motivations, competences, resources and skills of the different actors.

Two main groups of service ideas clearly emerge:

- Solutions that directly connect to on going activities of one of the partners (or a small group of them), and therefore work as extension, integration or innovation of a existing experience (i.e. building on previous knowledge);
- Solutions still without any (or with a low) degree of ownership and that need to be amplified (Corubolo, Meroni, 2015) in the sense of finding an opportunity of development in the creation of new partnerships. This closely relates to the trajectories of scaling undertaken by social innovation (Westley & Andaze, 2013).

We can see how the overall design process involves a wider or narrower design community at different stages of service concept, development and prototyping. This iterative and creative process sets the conditions to constantly test and reformulate the emerging solutions, thus aligning them to the contexts, the available resources, the actors and the actual demand for innovation (Drayton, 2010).

Moreover the collaborative and cross-sectorial process, established among the partners, raised the following preliminary reflections on how collaboration may impact and generate innovation:

- Inside the organizations: the approach adopted fostered greater collaboration between the business units and functions within the single organizations, leading them to a convergence of objectives and a sharing of expertise;
- Across the organizations: the processes allowed to trigger “mutual learning processes” that innovates the ability of companies to relate to the territory and vice versa. Profit and non-profit organizations had therefore the opportunity to experiment new mechanisms of dialogue and exchange that allowed them to reach reciprocal advantages. On the one hand, companies obtained a deeper knowledge of local needs through a direct co-operation with social actors operating within the communities, thus establishing new partnership models. On the other hand, *not for profit organizations* acquired skills to relate to major economic actors and to manage complex processes, thus increasing the opportunities to achieve changes and innovations on a larger scale.

Future investigations may focus on the specific actors which enable such ecosystems of social innovation, deepening the understanding on which entity can play the role of promoter or catalyser

of the process, and which are the main competencies, that complement the design skills here presented, finding connections with the research on the role of intermediaries and umbrella organisations in the spread and growth of social innovations (Davies & Simon 2013).

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