

**REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY AS THE PROMOTER OF
NETWORK: THE CASE OF THE EMILIA-ROMAGNA¹**

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Abstract

Regarding their dynamics and sources, networks are expected to be an essential component of regional development programs. The initial purpose of the regional development policies was to devolve some responsibilities to the regional authorities in the mid-1970s. However, after the introduction of EU regional development funds, regional development organizations acquired some new properties to provide a ground for network activities. The regional development policies of ERVET, on the other hand, upon Emilian republican culture and participatory politics have represented an exemplary case for inclusionary policies that facilitate the formation of networks since its establishment. The Emilian development networks encompassing associations, chambers, universities, local governments, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations produced considerable positive economic outcomes compared to the rest of Italy. The peculiar development patterns of the region are called the Emilian model and have been extensively studied in terms of economy. On the contrary, this article aims to analyze the model by regarding political and administrative terms as well. In this context, this article will try to explain how the Emilia-Romagna Regional Development Agency (ERVET) accomplished in exploiting the cultural/political values and economic peculiarities in transforming them into successful development networks.

Key Words: *Network, Regional Development Agency, Emilian Model, Region of Emilia-Romagna, ERVET*

**AĞ KURUCUSU OLARAK KALKINMA AJANSLARI: EMİLİA-ROMAGNA
ÖRNEĞİ**

Özet

Çalışma dinamikleri ve ulaşabildiği kaynaklar gözönüne alındığında, ağların bölgesel kalkınma faaliyetlerinin temel unsuru haline gelmesi oldukça güçlü bir ihtimal olarak görünmektedir. 1970'lerin ortalarında şekillenmeye başladığında bölgesel kalkınma politikalarının birincil amacı, bazı yetkileri bölgesel yönetimlere devretmektir. Ancak, AB bölgesel kalkınma fonlarının yürürlüğe girmesinden sonra bölgesel kalkınma ajansları, ağ faaliyetlerine zemin oluşturabilecek yeni özellikler kazanmaya başlamıştır. Oysa ERVET'in Emilian cumhuriyetçi kültür ve katılımcı siyaset anlayışı üzerine kurulu bölgesel kalkınma politikaları, kuruluşundan itibaren ağların

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oluşumunu kolaylaştıran kapsayıcı politikalara örnek teşkil etmektedir. Birlikleri, ticaret odalarını, üniversiteleri, yerel yönetimleri, sendikaları ve sivil toplum kuruluşlarını içeren Emilian kalkınma ağları, İtalya'nın geri kalanı ile kıyaslandığında oldukça olumlu ekonomik sonuçlar elde etmiştir. Bölgenin özgün kalkınma özellikleri Emilian modeli olarak adlandırılmaktadır ve ekonomi bağlamında üzerinde oldukça kapsamlı çalışmalar yapılmıştır. Bu makale, önceki çalışmalardan farklı olarak, modelin siyasi ve idari özelliklerini de incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu bağlamda bu makale, Emilia-Romagna Bölgesel Kalkınma Ajansı (ERVET)'nin bölgenin kültürel/politik değerleri ve ekonomik özelliklerini etkin kalkınma ağlarına nasıl dönüştürdüğünü açıklamaya çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ağ, Kalkınma Ajansı, Emilia Modeli, Emilia-Romagna Bölgesi, ERVET.

1. Introduction

Regional development agencies (RDA) were introduced as an alternative to the centrally planned development and hierarchical coordination. As a consequence central government devolved some responsibilities to the regional authorities in the mid-1970s. As they included various actors, RDAs carried the seeds of network coordination. Moreover, after the introduction of EU regional development funds, regional development organizations gained some properties to provide a solid ground for the flourish of network activities. The regional development policies of ERVET, on the other hand, upon Emilian republican culture and participatory politics have represented an exemplary case for inclusionary policies that facilitate the formation of networks since its establishment. The Emilian development networks encompassing associations, chambers, universities, local governments, trade unions, and non-governmental organizations produced considerable positive economic outcomes, which supported further policies upon networks. In the first part, the theoretical framework of networks will be stated. The second part will focus on how RDAs could function as the leader of the regional development network. The last part will try to clarify the policies and peculiarities of ERVET as a regional development network promoter.

2. Networks

As competitiveness, innovation, and adaptability have become inevitable elements of sustainable economic development, networks started to occupy a crucial position in regional development activities. The increasing importance of networks in regional development activities stemmed from the fact that they bolster the capacities of participants through creating supporting mechanisms for their enterprises. The

significance of networks becomes evident, especially when RDAs suffer from limited competence and constrained financial resources under central governments.

The defining characteristic of networks is to establish linkages among various actors such as public organizations, firms, knowledge-producing institutions, and intermediary organizations. Thus networks enabled the creation of platforms to share sources and knowledge to facilitate reaching individually unattainable sources. Based upon the opportunities offered through networks, individual actors go beyond their own boundaries and could achieve sources for solutions to their particular problems. Through information exchange and resource pooling, networks can enrich the potential of single participants and have been recognized as an essential element in enhancing the competitive advantage of economies (Huggins & Thompson, 2014; Ansell, 2000; Cooke and Morgan, 1994; Benz & Fürst, 2002; Harmaakorpi & Niukkanen, 2007; Gertler 2010; Sotarauta, 2010).

Networks by providing efficient interaction channels could bolster the policy learning capacity of participants. The flow of information and variety of knowledge bases contributed to enhancing the learning capacity of stakeholders in networks. As adopting new patterns is closely correlated with learning capacity, it has a vital effect on the innovative character of the economy (Huggins & Thompson, 2014: 516).

In addition to offering new opportunities for the participants by incorporating actors with distinct backgrounds and sources, the inclusion of a huge variety of actors ensures the binding nature of decisions taken in networks. As the various parts of society take part in the decision-making process and have a voice to shape the framework, the final outcomes become binding for the participants. Participation of a wide variety of representatives in the decision-making processes also ensures efficacious implementation of decisions (Huggins, 1997: 273). What is more, the actor multiplicity of networks, as every actor has its distinct connections outside the network, provides the networks with the ability to perceive the changing conditions instantly and respond to them by adjusting programs or initiating reforms. In sum, actor multiplicity hinders the possibility of acting as an isolated system and neglecting the changes in the global environment.

The emphasis of collective goods over individual interests is a commonly recognized peculiarity of successful networks that overcome conflicting interests. Hence social capital becomes an important element for smoothly functioning networks (Ansell, 2004: 304). Because a commonly shared understanding of collective good served to create an atmosphere within which the actors could give up their demands on behalf of the collective good. Reconciliation of different demands on the ground of attaining common development targets could create the synergy that all participants benefit from. In another saying, when collective good is emphasized in the networks, then networks become a nucleus around which actors gather to bolster local benefits.

Another characteristic that facilitates to reach common framework despite conflicts is the awareness of actors about their joint issues and dependency on mutual resources (Benz & Fürst, 2002: 29) then, networks gain a cooperative orientation paving the way for further collective mechanisms. Such a consciousness about interdependency can function to lever all forms of cooperative platforms and contribute to shaping regional development strategies and growth targets in a consensual manner.

The number of actors is undeniably influential in the structures of networks. The number of actors in networks is determined according to the needed resources of and settled goals. Nonetheless, the competence of actors seems more significant than their numbers in the maintenance of networks. Actors that occupy a critical position to reach huge numbers of people and provide channels to reach scarce resources have critical importance for the success of networks and have to be incorporated in networks (Sotarauta, 2007: 393). Associations, chambers, universities, and credit institutions can be mentioned among such actors. Association, chambers as intermediary institutions could be helpful for the flow of information in a wider spectrum and contribute to the formation of consensus. Universities function in a way to provide recent knowledge to the firms, while banking institutions are vital in regions where firms have scarce financial resources to undertake technological updating and innovation. Moreover, the inclusion of actors having strong external ties can perform vital roles in transferring recent developments and innovative technologies from other countries. As external relations generate additional information not available in a region, the actors closely following external developments could stimulate other partners for changes in critical junctures (Benz & Fürst, 2002: 25,27)

A key actor of regional development networks can influence to shape orientations of other actors if they have a sound position, convincing background, and successful record in implanting successful policies. Their promising position can be influential in establishing intensive communication channels for creating an integrated development framework and persuading distinctive actors with contradictory arguments to take part in networks (Harmaakorpi & Niukkanen, 2007: 83-84; Sotarauta, 2010: 393). In sum RDAs, as competent network leaders, could create frameworks within which collective concerns of actors become a priority over individual interests; their presence is crucial in reconciling cooperative and competitive orientations.

3. RDAs as Leader of Development Networks

Networks can be formed in formal and informal structures, and as rules could not be enforced to conduct the actions of actors in informal networks, the awareness of actors about common needs and the degree of their commitment to the collective aims become the main source to draw a framework for the principles of collective working.

Thus the generation of a rule system in a consensual manner becomes vital for the smooth functioning of networks. In spite of the fact that informal networks can not produce legal decisions and only carry out only intermediary functions, they can play crucial roles by becoming an integrated part of institutionalized regional development structures (Benz & Fürst, 2002: 24). In this point, RDA as a formal institution occupies a core position to strengthen the position of networks by providing an official platform to act. RDAs contributed considerably to legitimizing the decision taken on networks and facilitating the implementation of the decisions by other institutions in the region.

The leading role of RDA enables to disseminate the idea for the need for collective action that paves the way of creation of a shared development framework for regional development encompassing all related actors. RDAs, as key actors in networks, have the capacity to stimulate other actors to take part in programs and undertake the responsibility, thus creating a synergy for regional development (Huggins, 1997: 273; Sotarauta, 2010: 395). Moreover, as the RDAs have the power to influence the orientation of other actors, they can take the initiative when negotiations among the conflicting actors fail to produce a consensus.

By occupying a key node, RDA could ignite the emergence of regional development framework tempting isolated figures to take part in networks. By incorporating passive but potentially powerful figures into networks, RDAs support them to reach their optimum capacity and create a multiplier effect in regional development. For other economic and non-governmental actors, when they are embedded in networks led by RDA, they enhance their capacity to influence the course of development activities. RDA led networks function in a way to bolster the effectiveness of other actors by providing network platforms to attain extra resources and to reach legal grounds. As a consequence, when RDAs take on the leading role in regional development networks, entrepreneurs, associations, universities, and banking institutions feel more responsible for taking part in the implementation of the regionally set development targets.

4. ERVET Networks: Origin, Environment, Leader, and Actors

As the emergence of RDAs in the late 1970s was based upon the acceptance of the failure of the centrally planned Keynesian economy and Weberian hierarchical form of administration, RDAs carried the seeds of alternative administrative patterns. In time by incorporating a wide spectrum of actors, such as various tiers of government, public and private actors, universities, and associations RDAs became examples of network structures.

One of the reasons behind the preference of RER to establish a network form of regional development framework stemmed from the Italian administrative system.

Although the 1948 Constitution introduced the region as an administrative tier (Zariski, 1985: 69; Kogan, 1975: 383; Loughlin, 2001: 215) until the introduction of Article 117 in 1970, ordinary regions had no power. The law authorized ordinary regions to exercise power on vocational training, housing, territorial development, health, agriculture, and artisan production in 1970 (Mazzonis, 1996: 132; Putnam et al., 1983: 57; Ciaffi, 2001: 117). Italian central government maintained to exert potent influence for shaping regional development policies and institutions, even after the introduction of the region in 1970. The central government was reluctant to leave considerable room for the regional actors and strictly controlled their financial resources, and constrained their competencies. Thus central government's strict control over regional development activities forced RER authorities to initiate a networked form of governance (Tuncer, 2021:115-116).

High social capital and participative political culture are emphasized as crucial elements for network formation, and both are abundant in RER (Putnam et al., 1983:63-64; Cooke & Morgan, 1994: 103). Historically grown republican culture is one of the main sources of the tradition of participation in Emilia-Romagna. A strong sense of citizenship brings up active participation in various activities related to public life. Furthermore, extensive group belongings and volunteering for responsibilities have been precious assets of Emilian political culture that paved the way for the presence of huge numbers of associations. Individual preferences and opinions have been carried into public decision-making mechanisms by means of the associations, which are taken into consideration by public authorities as an inevitable actor of decision-making processes. Political authorities generally have preferred inclusionary and consultative policy-making methods that enable them to sustain participatory culture and reach consensus regarding regional affairs (Tuncer, 2021:111).

Financial deficiencies had been one of the main impediments in front of The Emilian SMEs in order to enhance their technological capacity and keep pace with the most updated technologies (Cooke, 1996: 55). Hence the pooling of resources under ERVET networks could provide crucial opportunities for them to advance their technological capacity and improve their production system. The pooled sources and expertise of the ERVET networks were considered as a platform to get support for their structural modification related to acquiring updated production technologies and reaching wider markets (Rinaldi, 2005: 256).

Intermediary organizations like associations could function in crucial roles for networks as they help the flow of information to the further points of the network. As an Emilian peculiarity, associations have a strong position in the economic domain (Mazzonis, 1996: 132; Garmise, 1995: 148; Amin, 1999: 393; Russo et al., 2000: 70); accordingly, the inclusion of the chambers and the associations as stockholders of ERVET (Bellini, 1990: 110; Cooke and Morgan, 1994: 109; Heidenrich, 1996: 408; Cooke and Morgan, 1998: 116,125-127) strengthened the position of ERVET to carry

out regional development activities through its own resources. The integration of associations into its mechanism contributed to ERVET to make up for its limited competency by offering their formal and informal resources and to contribute to the agency to set up effective ties with Emilian small firms. The incorporation of associations into ERVET networks brought a marked dynamism into ERVET.

As a requirement of success in networking, during framing the objectives, the network actors are to be consulted, and their opinions should be reflected in the outcomes. ERVET organized consultation sessions with the related actors during the formation of BSCs (Cooke, 2001: 35); collective needs of SMEs in different industries emerged as a crucial element of the framework.

The consultation sessions resulted in reaching a conclusion that formulating a single program applicable to all industrial districts was not a proper solution; however, BSCs should have been organized in parallel with existing sectors in various industrial districts. Prominent industries of Emilia-Romagna were food processing, clothing, footwear, ceramic, furniture, and mechanical engineering (Brusco, 1982:169; Bianchi and Gualteri, 1990:89; Heidenrich, 1996: 408). In this direction, the first BSC for the textile sector (CITER) was founded by ERVET in 1980 in Modena. In 1983 two new BSCs were established; CESMA and CERCAL. The former for the small firms operating in the sectors of agriculture and machinery in Reggio Emilia, and the latter for shoe production in Forli. QUASCO was established for the construction sector in Bologna and became a member of the ERVET system in 1985 (Bellini, Giordani, and Pasquini, 1990: 174; Cooke and Morgan, 1994: 111)

Through Service Centers, ERVET started to become the key policy node to institutionalize the networking in implanting an innovative culture by providing updated technologies data and qualified staff in order to improve the effectiveness of regional SMEs. ERVET regarded the collective needs of the SMEs as the founding principle of BSCs (Bellini and Pasquini, 1998:259). As an extension of its successful networking capacity, ERVET allowed the permeation of regional firms' preferences and demands into the mechanism of BSCs, which contributed greatly to enhancing the entrepreneurial dynamism of Emilia-Romagna.

One of the characteristics of successful networks is to make necessary amendments related to the targets, framework, and actor composition of networks. In this context, ERVET changed its sectoral framework into a functional one. In this direction, three service centers were established in 1985; ASTER, SVEX, and CERMET, which provided services for the small firms in all sectors. CERMET was designed as a regional research center and providing technical consultation, assuring product quality services, and certifying quality system processes were its defined duties. The mission of ASTER was to give support for technological development, while the main duty of

SVEX was to contribute to small firms to increase their exports (Bellini, Giordani, and Pasquini, 1990: 174-182; Cooke and Morgan, 1994: 111). ERVET networks became a hub to trigger novel strategies for development and disseminate innovations among Emilian companies. As in the successful networks, the networks were not homogenous in the ERVET system; on the contrary, they had different missions and structures (Bellini, Giordani, and Pasquini, 1990: 171).

ERVET's consistent preference for networking was evident in its shareholder composition. ERVET was not the single stockholder of any BSC, and the BSCs were frequently established in partnership with associations, universities, or local governments (Garmise, 1995: 151; Bellini and Pasquini, 1998: 261-262). The multiplicity of shareholders bolstered the capacity of ERVET networks to create a well-integrated policy framework and get the support of a vast number of endogenous actors. In other words, the ERVET networks operated as a magnet to attract various actors to participate in attaining the collectively predetermined targets. The institutionalized ERVET networks, by gathering a wide range of players around common objectives, strengthened the degree of collectivity that enabled the reinforcement of shared peculiar regional development policies rather than the ones prescribed in the capital. Networking activities under BSCs created a grey area to enlarge regional jurisdiction and to slacken the strict supervision of Rome to a certain degree (Bellini and Pasquini, 1998: 258). Through BSCs, ERVET obtained a wider room of maneuver to carry out development policies in the direction of Emilian options instead of centrally determined directives (Bellini, Giordani, and Pasquini, 1990: 173). The networks functioned as a platform for ERVET to obtain a power base and to operate as a core of coordination that kept the constituting actors altogether.

5. Conclusion

ERVET is an example of RDAs that played crucial roles in regional development in spite of its limited competencies and scarce resources. ERVET accomplished in transcending the borders drawn by Rome and became a pole of motivation for the regional business by motivating regional actors to take part in regional networks. The networking success of ERVET is based upon the incorporation of pivotal actors of the Emilian economy, such as associations, chambers, universities, and banking institutions. Moreover, its mutual linkages with the business groups contributed to conceiving the urgent needs and creating compatible programs. Through close linkages and stable cooperation with the business circles, ERVET easily gets their support for further programs. ERVET would be certainly failed to achieve the predetermined development targets without incorporating influential regional actors into its networks. Furthermore, ERVET maintained consultation with the related actors during the decision-making and implementation processes that ignited a growing interest among actors to contribute to ERVET networks.

The driving force of the Emilian economy was vast numbers of SMEs, and as a competent network leader ERVET accomplished in implementing compatible programs and services to satisfy the demands of the SMEs. In a nutshell, providing differentiated services according to the collective needs of SMEs in distinctive sectors became a source of ERVET success.

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