

*What Role Do Social Enterprises  
Play in Empowering Users?  
Observations from Social  
Cooperatives in Lombardia and  
Emilia Romagna*

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# ANALYZING USER EMPOWERMENT

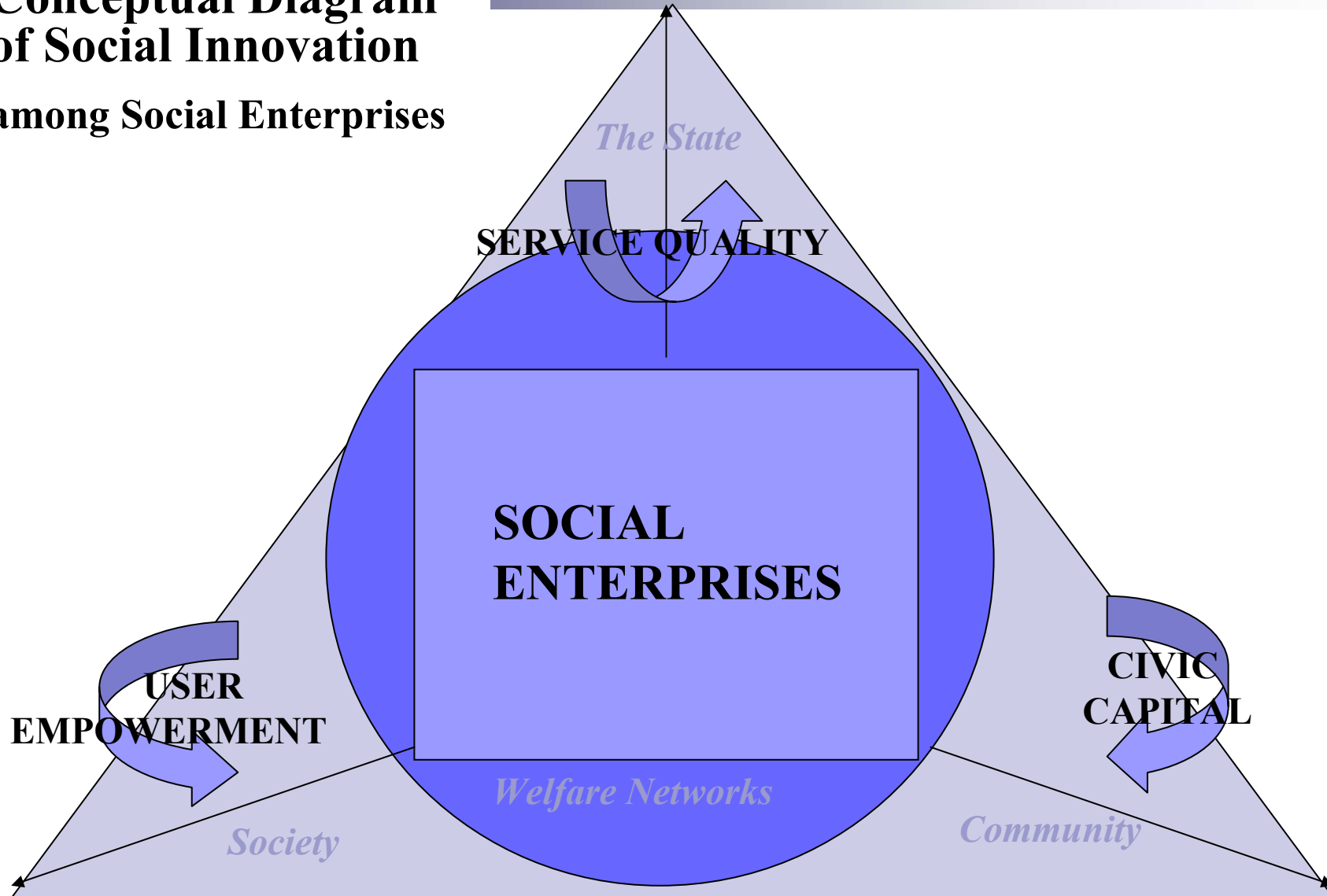
## Key Conceptual Questions:

- What role can social enterprises play in empowering users?
- How should we understand empowerment in the context of combating social exclusion?

## Key Empirical Questions

- 1) Are social cooperatives empowering users and if so, how?
- 2) What are the key factors underpinning empowerment capacity?
- 3) What can be learned about promoting user empowerment in the future?

# Conceptual Diagram of Social Innovation among Social Enterprises





# USER EMPOWERMENT AS A FORM OF SOCIAL INNOVATION

**EMPOWERMENT:** enabling individuals or groups of individuals to develop competencies or capabilities

## Consumer Empowerment

Social Production Dimension:

- Conceptualizes users as service beneficiaries
- Taps capacity to foster personal autonomy and reduce key informational and institutional barriers to social integration.
- Key Indicators
  - Diversity of Services
  - Customization of Services
  - User Input In Service Delivery

## Deep Empowerment

Social Mobilization Dimension:

- Conceptualizing service users as marginalized citizens
- Taps capacity to foster collective competency and overcome key cultural and psychological barriers to social integration
- Key Indicators
  - User Participation
  - Advocacy

# EVALUATING USER EMPOWERMENT IN NORTHERN ITALY

- Study of 140 Type A social cooperatives in:
  - *Emilia Romagna (Bologna, Reggio Emilia, Parma, Ferrera)*
  - *Lombardia (Milano, Brescia, Cremona, Lecco)*
- Regions most likely to be indicative of best practices





# RESULTS

Overall, Italian social cooperatives do not appear to be serving as primary engines of user empowerment

## DEEP EMPOWERMENT

Particularly weak capacity

- Only about 18% of SC demonstrate high capacity
- Weak advocacy
- Moderate Consciousness Raising Activity
- Weak, yet somewhat varied participation in governance
  - Slightly higher levels in E-R

## CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

Moderate Capacity, yet highly varied overall

- 40% of the social cooperatives demonstrate a high capacity for promoting consumer empowerment, yet performance varies significantly
- Limited formal mechanisms for generating user input
  - Slightly higher in E-R
- More extensive informal mechanisms
  - More user involvement in decision making regarding service output than input
- Service diversity and customization highly variable



# **EXPLAINING (LACK OF) CAPACITY TO FOSTER USER EMPOWERMENT**

## **Necessary yet insufficient factors.....**

- Sensitivity to issues confronting marginalized citizens
- Commitment to protecting and promoting rights' to self determination and/or diminishing barriers to integration
- Age and Identity; a legacy of activism

## **Key factors undermining capacity**

- Heavy dependency on public administrators
  - Contracting
  - Funding
- Asymmetrical embeddedness in extended social networks
  - Ties to the cooperative movement dominate



# **EXPLAINING VARIATION IN CAPACITY TO PROMOTE CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT**

## **Public Governance Structures as critical**

- **Public-private partnerships**
  - Assets: Concertation, Project Centered Services, SCs as co-producers
  - Problems: Global contracting, Lack of public monitoring and control
  
- **Regulatory Structures that Emphasize Users**
  - The Exception to the Rule: ASL's and the "Carta dei servizi"
  
- **Revenue Streams**
  - Asset: On average slight increase in portion of municipal budgets dedicated to social spending
  - Problem: Great bulk of local social service spending comes from municipal budgets, social cooperatives chronically underfunded



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Consumer Empowerment**

- Build public regulatory frameworks that increase user accountability
- Promote more user-friendly quality control measures
- Increase public and private funding streams

## **Deep Empowerment**

- Cultivate an ideological commitment to promoting a culture of social citizenship
- Forge a distinctive social movement identity
- Extend and strengthen ties to grass roots advocacy groups