

*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

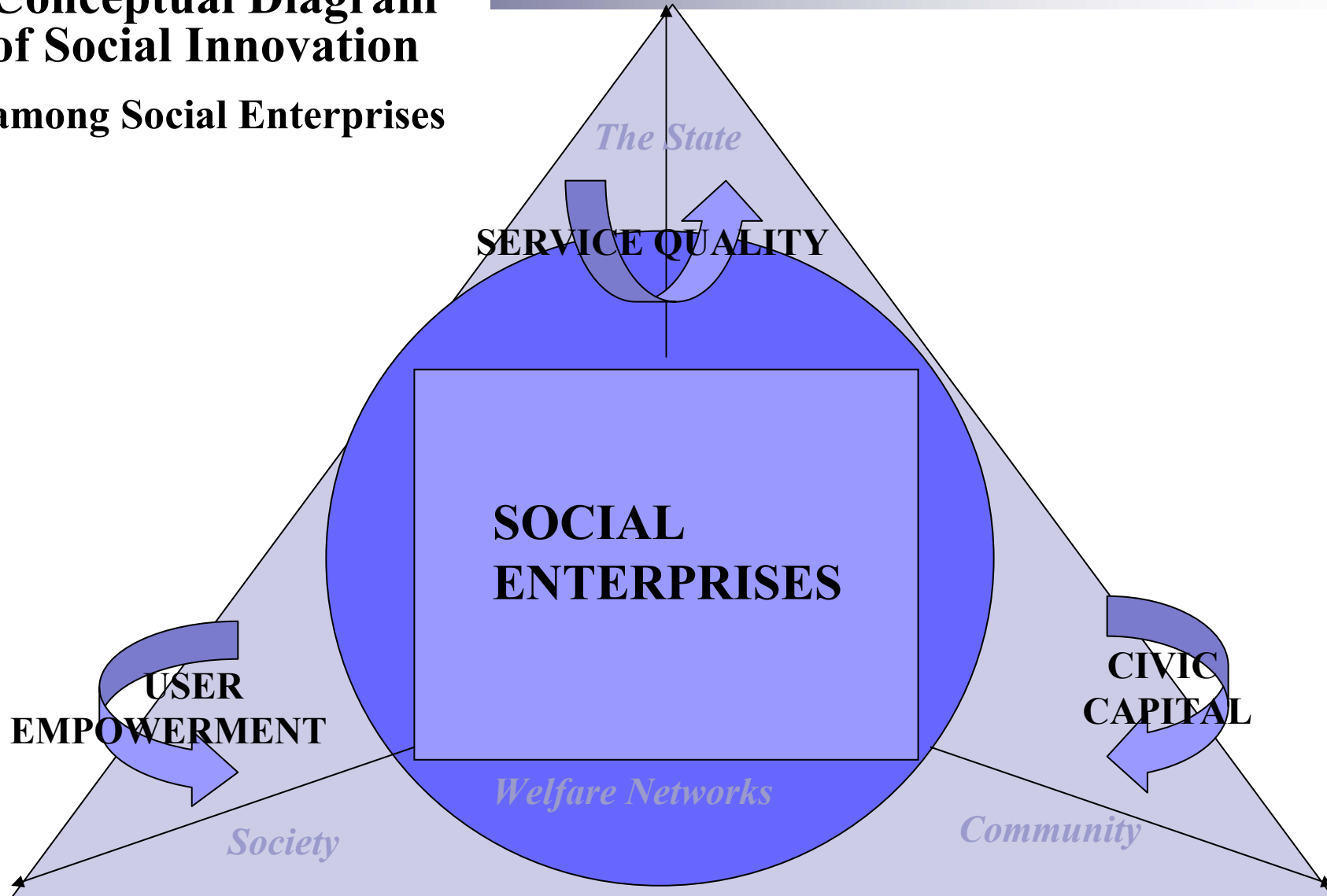
Key Conceptual Questions:

- 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