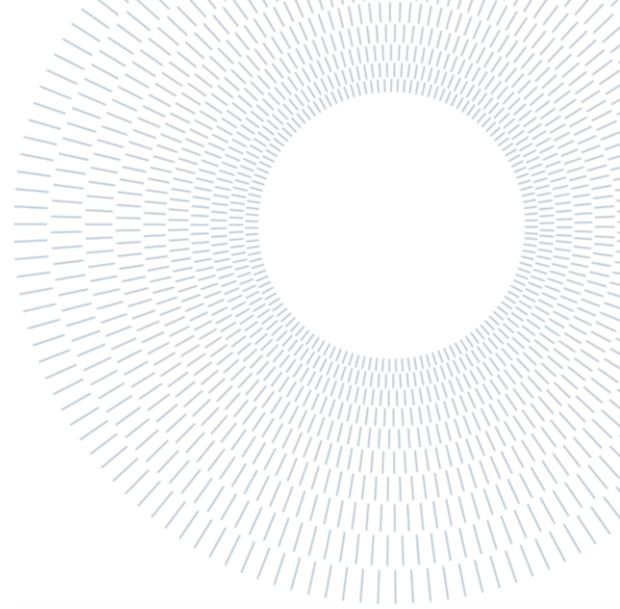




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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

Partnerships for impact in the domain of work integration of disabled people: an empirical investigation

TESI MAGISTRALE IN MANAGEMENT ENGINEERING – INGEGNERIA GESTIONALE

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1. Introduction and Research objective

In an environment that encourages competition rather than collaboration, it is essential to change the paradigm and recognize as a priority challenge the lack of interconnection between resources from different sectors and organizations, in favor of new ways of bringing them together.

Partnering to address complex problems

The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs highlight the key role of each sector in achieving the goals, but more importantly they are built on the idea that linkages and collaboration between business, NGOs, civil society and all other players determine the achievement of the targets. Indeed, moving towards concrete and long-term sustainable changes requires the involvement and collaboration of all actors. In this context, cross-sectoral partnerships allow the partners to acquire

various critical resources, including reputation, knowledge and social capital [1], and concurrently are a means of combining resources to address complex problems, maximizing the resources' value and achieving greater impact. In this regard, companies play a key role as they can actively promote environmental, economic and social wellbeing by doing business responsibly, inclusively and sustainably. Adopting this perspective about the importance of collaboration and recognizing the leading role of companies, the study focuses on the case of partnerships between firms and NPOs for work inclusion of disabled people.

Work inclusion of disabled people: the rationale for selecting the application field

Work inclusion of disabled people is a relevant issue in the national and international panorama, addressed in several treaties and strategies and connected to Sustainable Development Goal 8¹ and 10². Despite the inalienability of the right to work and the policies aimed to promote the inclusion of

¹ Goal 8: "Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all" [4]

² Goal 10: "Reduce inequalities within and among countries" [4]

disabled people, as the establishment of a reserved quota of jobs for persons with disabilities as per Law 68/1999 in Italy, inequities are still widespread. Disabled people encounter several barriers, both of a personal and systemic nature, which severely affect concrete opportunities to enter the labour market, resulting in 29%³ of reserved quotas still unfulfilled. Along with the relevance of the topic, this application field has been selected due to the peculiarities that make it especially suitable for the implementation of cross-sectoral partnerships. If all cross-sectoral partnerships are essentially driven by the necessity of the two partners to acquire critical and valuable resources one from the other, this aspect is especially prominent in the case of work inclusion of people with disabilities. Companies have to fulfil a legal obligation reserving a certain number of jobs for disabled people but lack the knowledge and know-how necessary to develop compliant and effective projects. On the other side, NPOs working with disabled people have the necessary knowledge and skills but lack the employment potential and means to realize concrete projects of work integration. Hence, in addition to the drivers typical of cross-sectoral partnerships, partners mobilize distinctive and complementary resources, which is a key antecedent of value creation [2] and makes work inclusion a concrete example of how, in a collaboration, resources are combined in a synergistic way to increase the value created.

Research objective

In light of the key role that partnerships have in addressing complex problems and of the relevance of work integration of disabled, the aim of this study is to investigate the distinctive features of partnerships between firms and NPOs in the domain of work inclusion of disabled people, understanding why and how these collaborations are developed and how the projects are configured. Key aspects as drivers, barriers, critical success factors, outcomes of the collaboration and the main practices of partnership management and evaluation are examined, together with the main choices made in the perimeter of the collaboration, including project activities and actors involved. The development of a comprehensive framework and the interpretation

of the results finally prove a general understanding and representation of the phenomenon.

2. Methodology

Two methods have been adopted to conduct the research: literature review to explore the existing knowledge, and empirical investigation to gather primary data and new meaningful insights.

Literature review

A literature review has been conducted to systematically analyse the existing knowledge about cross-sectoral partnerships between firms and NPOs. Predominantly through Scopus, 714 sources have been identified and then selected based on title, abstract and full reading. Then, a research about firm-NPO partnerships in the domain of work inclusion of disabled people revealed insufficient material on the topic to conduct a literature review. Finally, a research has been performed to analyse the state of the art on work inclusion of disabled people, to build an overview of the context and explain the rationale behind the choice of this application field. Overall, the literature review served a two-fold purpose: systematically presenting the existing knowledge on the topic, and leading to the identification of literature gap and research questions.

Empirical investigation: multiple case studies

The main methodology adopted is the empirical investigation. Multiple case studies have been selected among the possible research strategies, to analyse in depth an issue exploring the nuances and identifying the key features. The unit of analysis are projects aimed to work inclusion of disabled people developed through partnerships between NPOs and firms: the final set is made by 9 cases with a total of 17 organisations involved. Semi-structured interviews represent the principal technique for gathering primary data, combined with the analysis of secondary data as social reports. 17 interviews have been conducted between September 2021 and January 2022, with an average length of 43 minutes and 21 interviewees involved. Data analysis was carried out through the thematic coding: "Theory-driven topics" (e.g.,

³ Source: Fondazione Studi Consulenti del Lavoro (2019). *L'inclusione lavorativa delle persone con disabilità in Italia*.

“Drivers” and “Barriers”) were defined with an inductive approach, which guarantees a strong link to the literature while providing the needed flexibility. Subsequently, the “Data-driven codes” identified for each “Theory-driven topic” were analyzed and categorized: the process, exemplified in Figure 1, has allowed to systematise, synthesise and generalize the empirical material collected, providing meaningful insights about each area of analysis and about the relations between them.

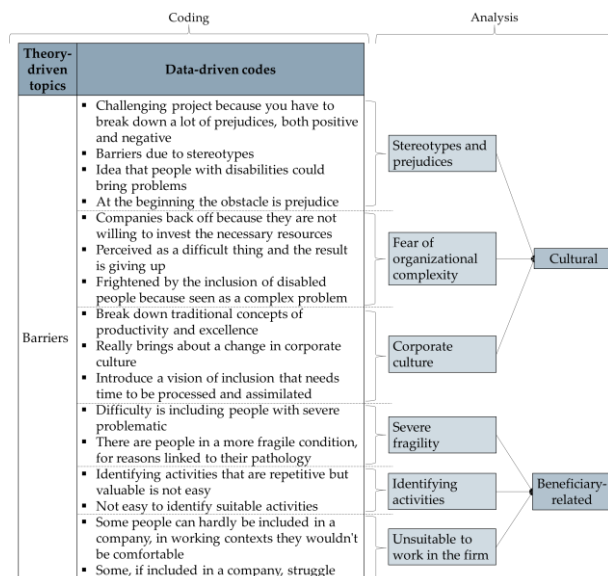


Figure 1: Example of analysis of primary data

3. A framework for understanding firm-NPO partnerships for work inclusion of disabled people

The study led to the elaboration of a framework which provides a synthetic but complete vision of partnerships between firms and NPOs for work inclusion of disabled people (Figure 2). The framework is divided in three phases (“Before”, “During” and “Downstream of” the partnership), highlights the different actors involved (e.g., firm and NPO) and explores different domains (e.g., drivers and barriers). The result is a versatile and meaningful tool, which captures how each domain is declined in each phase for each actor, and allows to analyse a phase in its totality as well as to investigate the evolution of elements over time.

Before the partnership

In the phase preceding the development of the partnership, it is primarily crucial to focus on the drivers. NPOs are led from the need to access the

employment potential of the private sector, need to guarantee stability to the beneficiaries and want to increase both their own visibility and collective awareness regarding work inclusion of disabled people. Besides, companies’ need to be compliant with the legal obligation often represents the first push towards the idea of partnering, on which other drivers are founded, including the need to access the know-how held by NPOs necessary to develop effective inclusion projects for both the beneficiaries and the firm itself. In summary, the desire to implement these partnerships results from the convergence of various drivers, arising from individual and distinct processes of the two partners. Among the barriers which occur in this phase, prejudices towards the partner and cultural barriers stand out. Prejudices translate into the third sector being seen as “second class” by the corporate world, and vice versa in companies perceived as only looking for an image return. Cultural barriers are stereotypes and prejudices towards disability, fear of the organisational complexity of partnerships for work inclusion and incongruity with the corporate culture. Finally, a number of critical success factors were identified: if present before the partnership, sensitivity of employees to the topic and company’s vision of work inclusion as a potential opportunity and not only as an obligation favour the partnership’ success helping to overcome the barriers.

During the partnership

In this phase, the barriers encountered are mainly related to the *misalignment* between firm and NPO in terms of objectives, background, dimension, and management practices. The strategies to manage these difficulties differ from the initial to the execution phase: in the initial phase, the critical success factors include the presence of shared goals, the adoption of a structured approach to planning and monitoring activities and the design of a quality project, while management is based on protocols and definitions of formal roles and rules, aimed at limiting the divergences building a common ground in a formal way. On the contrary, in the execution phase potential misalignment is addressed through commitment, mutual trust, good interpersonal relationships and ongoing support, and the collaboration is primarily

managed through frequent unscheduled contacts and meetings to exchange ideas and perceptions, to promote speed and flexibility. The first phase is functional to the second: once the formal aspects have been defined and agreed upon, it is possible to leverage on the flexibility and speed necessary for the operational management of the partnership. In addition, during the execution phase two types of evaluation are conducted to monitor the partnership: the first examines the collaboration and the progress of the relationship with the partner, while the second focuses on the evolution of each single integration. Regarding the modalities, formal and informal practices coexist: if well-defined moments with the involvement of high-level management are needed to monitor the partnership from a strategic point of view, informal practices guarantee to timely intercept the criticalities and to promptly define the necessary actions. In both cases, however, the practices described are almost always qualitative.

Downstream of the partnership

The last phase allows to focus on the effects of the partnerships at micro, meso and macro level. "Micro" level refers to the benefits for individuals: due to the contamination with the corporate world, NPO employees acquire a more specific language property and improve their networking skills. Company employees are exposed to different values and cultures, develop a greater attention to the topic overcoming initial prejudices, stereotypes and fears, and enhance their adaptability and flexibility. The most high-impact outcomes are related to the beneficiaries: work is a tool for social inclusion, which creates a virtuous circle made of improved economic independence, development of relational capacities, increased self-esteem and so forth. At meso level, outcomes for NPOs are financial support, needed to fulfil their mission in an economically sustainable way, visibility, expansion of their network and improvement of the services offered. Companies, from their side, comply with the legal obligation without dealing with all the aspects outside their competence and knowledge, from legal aspects to actual inclusion; in addition, diversity inclusion is a lever on consumers, and gives a great ability to retain and attract new talents. At macro level, partnerships contribute to disseminate and spread the culture of inclusion, contributing to raise awareness in

society and to overcome the stigma and taboo of frailty and disability. Despite the presence of significant and numerous outcomes, the impacts of collaboration are rarely measured quantitatively, due to the lack of expertise and experience in data collection and information management, lack of standards, and difficult quantifiability and measurability of many aspects. Even when a quantitative evaluation is performed, multi-dimensional structured dashboards are not employed; rather, individual indicators are used to investigate precise aspects, without however building an overall vision capable of directing possible improvement actions.

4. Discussion

At this point, it is possible to interpret the results identifying the aspects specifically related to the domain of work inclusion of disabled people and recognizing their impact on the partnership.

Impact of inclusion-specific drivers on partnership success

Comparing the findings with literature on firms-NPOs partnerships, it emerges that some barriers and risks discussed in previous research are not reflected in this context. Firstly, collaboration with firms does not compromise NPO's legitimacy, or public approval, but rather improves its credibility and reputation. In addition, power imbalance is considered a critical aspect for partnerships between NPOs and companies, as the power of firms can lead to misuse of resources, reduce the autonomy of the partner and compromise the collaboration' success. However, the findings agree with the theory that power imbalance is rooted in the bias that attributes greater importance to economic resources than to others [3]. Therefore, power imbalance is not a risk as long as the NPO's contribution is perceived and recognized as valuable by companies, as it happens in the case of firm-NPO partnerships for work inclusion of disabled people. "Inclusion-specific" drivers – as higher employment potential for NPOs and need to comply with the legal obligation but lack of adequate knowledge for firms – show a mutual need of the two organizations to access resources possessed by the partner and otherwise not available. Recognizing the value of these resources contributes to reduce the power imbalance, enabling the establishment of a balanced relationship. Besides leading to the

A comprehensive framework to describe firm-NPO partnerships for inclusion of people with disabilities in the labour market

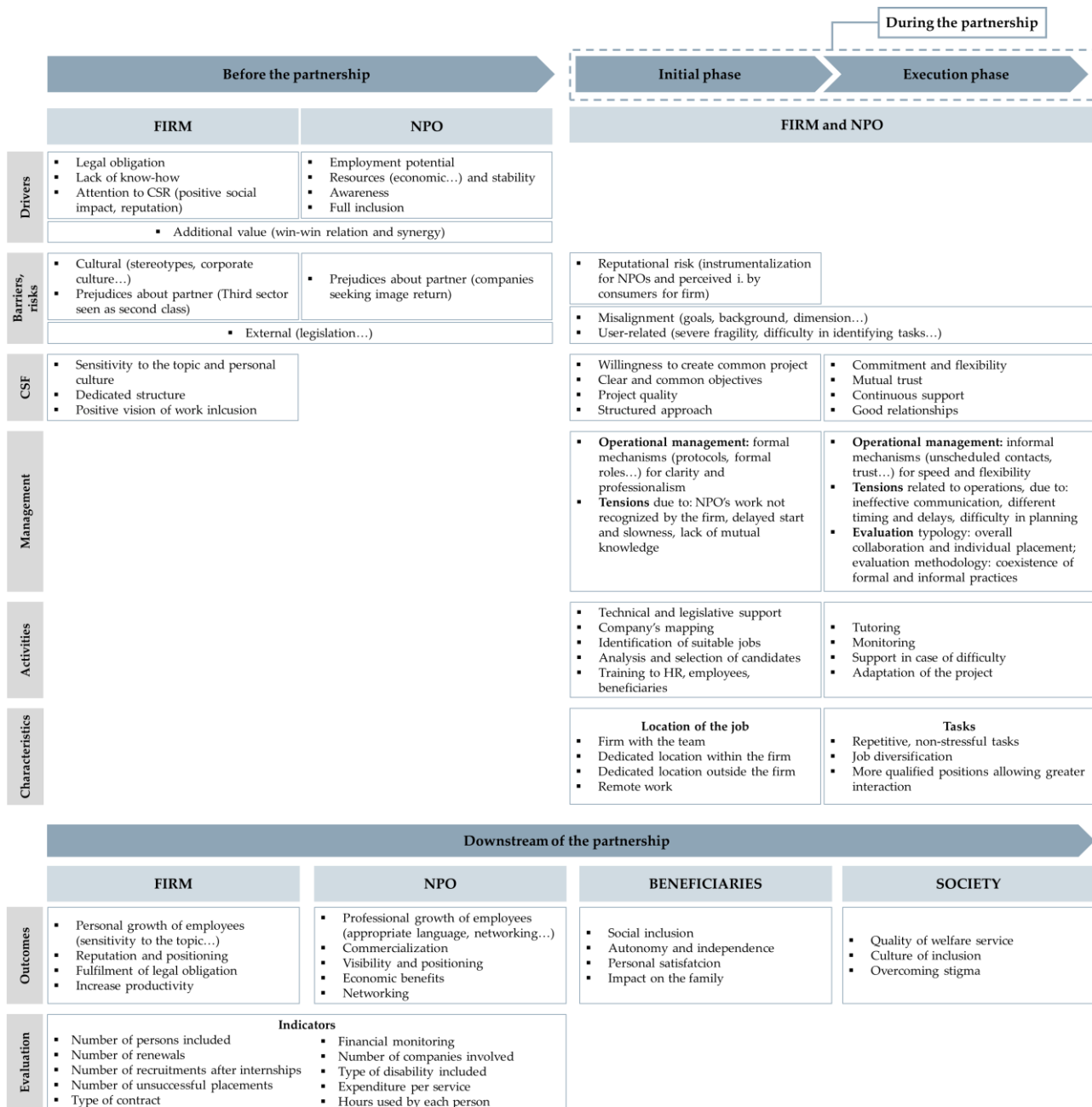


Figure 2: A comprehensive framework about firm-NPO partnerships in the domain of work inclusion of disabled people

absence of certain barriers, the presence of "inclusion-specific" drivers limits the negative impact of other.

For instance, it is theorized that misalignment results in a greater potential for conflict: however, even though in firm-NPO partnerships for work

inclusion of disabled people misalignment is present and causes some tension between the two partners, they do not result in particularly conflictual situations. Thus, a link between the emerging drivers and the absent barriers emerges: each partner receives critical and valuable

resources from the other, triggering a virtuous mechanism which leads to the absence of certain risks (as power imbalance) and to the minimization of the negative impact of other, favoring both the partners and the beneficiaries.

New barriers: cultural element in partnerships for work inclusion of disabled people

Emerging barriers, although concerning different aspects, are linked to ideas, perceptions, habits and assumptions and are therefore defined “*cultural barriers*”. They range from the presence of prejudices and stereotypes about disability to fear of organisational complexity, with partnerships for work inclusion considered incompatible with the company’s daily work, too demanding in terms of resources and not capable of generating value. Even if cultural barriers are pervasive and deep, there are choices, activities and actions which contribute to limit their impact, leading to the development of successful partnerships. Besides a number of critical success factors, including the personal culture of the company’s employees which mitigate the presence of stereotypes and prejudices and contribute to create an inclusive environment, the configuration of the partnership plays a crucial role in addressing the cultural barriers. A meaningful example are the training activities conducted by the NPO to the company, which provide indications on how to relate and behave in common situations, raising awareness and providing theoretical knowledge and practical tools to overcome fears, stereotypes and prejudices. Furthermore, the presence of a dedicated non-profit tutor within the company facilitates the relations with the whole team, allows a prompt intervention in case of operational and relational needs and follows up the training activities in the perspective of continuous improvement. In conclusion, recognizing the emerging barriers allowed to investigate how the cultural element is declined in all aspects of the collaboration and what effect it has, bringing to light the elements that contribute to overcome the barriers and to implement successful collaboration.

5. Conclusion

The study contributes to fill the knowledge gap about partnerships between firms and NPOs for work inclusion of disabled people, gathering and systematizing extensive knowledge on the subject from the concrete experience of organizations that

have these partnerships in place. The framework (Figure 2) details in a comprehensive way all the most relevant areas (e.g., drivers and outcomes) and allows to observe how they are declined in each phase for each actor, finally arriving at a general representation of the phenomenon. It also provides shared good practices regarding the project’s configuration (e.g., activities and location) which can give a practical contribution for future projects and for assessing the existing ones in the perspective of continuous improvement. Finally, the impact of the peculiarities of work inclusion on the partnership is investigated, grasping the links between the different aspects. Overall, the study offers the opportunity to expand the research and raise interest in the topic, to improve the understanding of cross-sectoral collaborations and their role in value creation and in addressing complex issues.

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