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A more efficient match between firms' demand, VET supply and human capital capacities through bottom-up, participative governance

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Abstract. One of the main challenges facing EU territories is the development of strategies to better adapt to changing global socio-economic trends. Lifelong education and training is a main strategic tool and a key component in the achievement of EU goals. One component of the lifelong education concept is Vocational Education and Training (VET), aimed at closing the gap between workers' skills and qualification and changing demand in labour markets. Although local partnerships seem to be an adequate tool to implement VET strategies, some authors identify obstacles that can be attributed to bad practices. Thus, more evidence is needed to support the idea that local development and public-private partnerships are optimal organisational environments for the design and implementation of VET strategies and actions at local and sub-regional levels. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to an analysis of the state of the art as regards local VET partnerships in Europe and to provide recommendations for the process of initiation and management of expert VET partnerships.

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1. Introduction

One of the main challenges currently facing EU territories is the development of strategies to better adapt to changing and more demanding global socio-economic trends. Lifelong education and training is a main strategic tool and indeed a key component in the achievement of the EU strategy goals. One component of the lifelong education and training concept is the Vocational Education and Training (VET), aimed at closing the gap between workers' skills and qualification, and changing demand in the labour market. Although VET has proved its capacity to increase efficiency and productivity, not everything offered under this “label” is good. It is, therefore, necessary to establish mechanisms to ensure quality and efficiency of what VET offers. According to the European Common Quality Assurance Framework for VET, this could be measured in terms of increasing employability, improving the match between supply and demand, and promoting better access to lifelong training, especially for disadvantaged people (CEDEFOP, 2009a).

In order to achieve quality and efficiency in VET, there are two main requirements. On the one hand, to have suitable instruments to comprehend and measure the components defining VET supply and demand, and to ensure that information is updated and accessible to different sectors. On the other hand, to have efficient instruments to work for the identification of VET needs and the promotion of lifelong learning within companies. Although it seems that local partnerships are an appropriate

tool to design and implement VET strategies and actions, some authors have pointed out challenges and potential damage that can be attributed to partnership bad practices. Thus, more evidence is needed to support the idea that local development and public-private partnerships (PPPs) are optimal organisational environments for the design and implementation of VET strategies and actions at local and sub-regional levels. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to contribute to an analysis of the state of the art as regards local VET partnerships in Europe and to provide recommendations for decision makers, practitioners and other stakeholders in the process of initiation and management of expert VET partnerships. These guidelines have been tested in VET partnerships in the territories participating in the Let's Adapt Project, namely (set-up date in brackets): *Chambre de Metiers* (France, 1931), *Arad* (Romania, 2001), *Cascais* (Portugal, 2004), *Békés* (Hungary, 2006), *Confservizi Lazio* (Italy, 2009), *Ayuntamiento de Gandia* (Spain, 2009).

VET partnerships are conceived as information and advice tools useful for the design of vocational training policies and actions, adapted to the needs of a territory or productive sector. The partnership is a working group comprising representatives of those organisations and institutions involved in the supply and demand of vocational training. The interaction among these stakeholders encourages more accurate decisions regarding the provision of vocational training needed by a territory or industry. These partnerships are also created with a sustainability aim, that is, they will remain in the

territories concerned, continuously monitoring VET quality in those areas. The creation of a partnership aims at ensuring the involvement and commitment of main economic and social actors in VET.

2. A more effective labour market through VET

Greater global competition, the presence of a high percentage of low skilled labour in the EU, an increasingly ageing population, and the rigidities of educational systems are only some of the challenges faced by European society. The different spheres evolving within economy-driven processes and the educational system generate maladjustments between the working skills needed by companies and the training profiles offered (Pike et al., 2006). In many local labour markets, these challenges strongly influence the extent to which local economies become competitive. Accordingly, an appropriate response to these challenges will result in increasing levels of welfare and employment. This is in contrast to an inadequate or negligent response which can result in the greater loss of competitiveness of enterprises and the associated risk of relocation, increased unemployment and a general loss of competitive positioning.

The EU decided some years ago that common action in the field of VET would be essential to improve the match between job and skill demands. This statement gave rise to a Council Resolution on the 19th December 2002 regarding the promotion of enhanced European cooperation in VET (2003/C 13/02). This document acknowledges the relevance of VET “*for promoting employability, social cohesion, active citizenship, and personal as well as professional fulfilment*” (Council of the European Union, 2002, p. 7). It also emphasises the importance of providing opportunities for the achievement of adequate skills and training for everybody in order to ensure that the European labour market “is open and accessible to all”.

The relevance of VET is established in relation to the ongoing transition of the European economy into a knowledge-based economy: “*the transition towards a knowledge-based economy capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion brings new challenges to*

the development of human resources” (Council of the European Union, 2002, p. 4). The document also recognises that the current context calls for traditional ways of training (i.e. initial training) and also for the more innovative concept of lifelong learning. In that document, the Council reaffirms its commitment to enhanced cooperation in vocational education and training in order to remove obstacles to occupational and geographic mobility and to promote access to lifelong learning (CEDEFOP, 2009b).

The Council of Europe Resolution, also known as the Copenhagen Declaration, acknowledges that priority should be given to certain aspects: first, “*strengthening the European dimension in VET with the aim of improving closer cooperation in order to facilitate and promote mobility and the development of inter-institutional cooperation, partnerships and other trans-national initiatives*” (Council of the European Union, 2002, p. 2); (ii) second, information and guidance through increasing transparency in VET and strengthening policies, systems and practices that support information, guidance and counselling; (iii) third, the recognition of competences and qualifications, through actions such as investigating transparency, comparability, transferability between different countries and at different levels; (iv) fourth, quality assurance through promoting cooperation with a particular focus on the exchange of models and methods, among other actions. The Declaration has been followed by biannual reviews of the process.

This process has allowed for the development of a number of tools to support stakeholders (i.e. citizens, learning providers, companies, guidance counsellors and educational authorities) and has to exploit some of the potentials of the European lifelong learning area and the EU-wide labour market. These instruments are (http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc40_en.htm, DoA: 26 December 2012):

- The European Framework of Key Competences, which identifies the skills that people need to lead successful lives in today’s world.
- The European Qualification Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) aimed at linking countries’ qualification systems by acting as a translation device for qualifications across different EU Member States, employers and individuals, thus making it easier for individuals to work or study abroad.

- Europass, which helps people make their qualifications and skills better understood and recognised throughout Europe.
- The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which provides a common basis for formally recognising study periods abroad.
- The National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC), which are contact points for information about the academic recognition of diplomas and periods of study abroad.
- The European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET), which is a system under development, for the transfer, accumulation and recognition of learning outcomes in Europe, including those outside the formal training system.
- The European Quality Assurance Reference framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQARF), which is a reference instrument to help Member States promote and monitor the continuous improvement of their VET systems, based on common European references.

This particularly favourable institutional and political framework makes appropriate development of tools to support managers and decision makers in the field of VET.

3. The role of PPPs in the achievement of a more sustainable development

Local, public-private VET partnerships are increasingly used for designing and delivering VET policies and strategies. The concept of local partnership is closely linked to the paradigm of local development, in which the involvement of local society in the development process is a key aspect. The following paragraphs present the philosophy of local partnerships as an essential tool of the new governance, contributing to more effective and sustainable delivery of policies.

3.1. The emergence of the local development approach

The process of globalisation and the subsequent increasing competition between territories, and the emergence of flexible patterns of production have contributed greatly to the enhancement

of local development approaches for policy design and implementation that complement traditional “top down” practices. Stöhr (1990) points out some key processes that characterise the new model of post-production fostering the consolidation of local development strategies: the rapid emergence of new production technologies and communication, the new forms of “relocated” business organisation, increasing competition between regions to attract business, the need for increased participation in markets through improved productivity due to the inconsistency of many markets and the inefficiency of many traditional development policies that are not flexible or sufficiently innovative.

This newer approach to development “from the territories and their societies” (Noguera, 2010) has several *specific features* in relation to *policy design and management* (Silva Lira, 2003): first, development processes and their actions emerge from local society and need the existence of leadership to optimise the resources of local development; second, development strategy is based upon solidarity with the territory through cultural identity, allowing for differentiation and the creation of a territorial brand; third, policy actions are managed from “below” with the participation of representatives of interest groups; fourth, local leadership is essential to implement the development strategy through animation and social cohesion; fifth, the local development strategy combines the potential of an area, from an integrated approach, by harnessing all available resources so that it can attract, as far as possible, external resources that conform to the predefined strategy; finally, the management of the strategy must be sufficiently flexible to enhance labour resources through creative and innovative actions.

Other important principles can be added to those stated. On the one hand, local development processes are in most cases endogenous and therefore voluntary. So their success very much depends upon whether society perceives the local development strategy as its own, and this is very much related to the extent to which society has had the opportunity to participate. On the other hand, because of the endogenous and voluntary nature of local development processes, the commitment of public and private actors is essential, so as to acquire the ability to execute financial operations under the development strategy (Esparcia et al., 2000) (Table 1).

Table 1. Conceptualisation of the local development approach

What is LD?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From an economic focus to an integrated approach • Variability depending on time and space • Variability depending on social groups and on culture of territory (principles and values)
What is it for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve quality of life of citizens • Deciding on the future of the territory by defining actions in the present
Who is it for?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local development strategies may benefit particular groups and harm other. Local development must try to promote interests if all local groups (consensus decisions)
What should be?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An integrated, coordinated and sustainable action from all local actors, deriving from a common vision of the future, finding win-win situations and based on consensus

Source: Own elaboration

3.2. New forms of governance and the rise of participation

The concept of “governance” is broad and includes not only the institutional framework and public relations, but also private organisations and associations, and the relationships between them. Lakso and Kahila (2002) state that causal relationships between the type and quality of governance and regional economic dynamics are often described as correlations, possibly being indirect relationships between structure and function, expressed in more direct links with policy and its implementation.

Models and styles of governance vary considerably. National cultures and traditions have an important impact on the type of governance structure, on the distribution of powers between different levels of decision-making and upon the presence and characteristics of private organisations and associations. One of the concepts of governance refers to “representations or theoretical interactions between social systems”. Interaction with the social system involves the adaptation of governance through the development of new processes, new power structures and new methods of governance (Rhodes, 1996). Often this adjustment involves the inclusion of private and community sectors in new forms of government.

The “capacity” of governance in a territory is expressed by the possibility of integrating the interests of different local groups in developing strategies and consensual policies (Le Gales, 1998). This ability is frequently limited and frustrated by resource limitations.

3.3. PPPs for new governance: consensus development paths through collaborative strategies and inclusive leaderships

Until the 1980’s there was an overall consensus about the role of State intervention as a means of attenuating the effects of uneven economic and social restructuring (Bowler, Lewis, 1991). “Development” was the business of the State. Those approaches were sectoral and undertaken by individual government departments. Improvements achieved did not reach everybody, only particular groups. In fact, it has been said that many of the problems facing local societies arise from the structure of government decision-making based on vertical sectors and individual departments (Wright, 1992). Issues such as partnerships, community involvement, capacity building and empowerment are crucial in this context (Griffin, Curtin, 2007). Empowerment has been defined as the “process by which disadvantaged communities define their own needs and determine the response that is made to them” (Barr, 1995).

Empowerment is a continuous process that enables people to understand, upgrade and use their capacity to better control and gain power over their own lives. Some authors regard the process of capacity building and community involvement as empowering and decisive in any community development process (Waterhouse et al., 2006). Capacity building consists of raising people’s knowledge, awareness and skills to use their own capacity to tackle their needs; it implies understanding, communication and the ability to take decisions. Em-

powerment, capacity building and community involvement are closely inter-related processes, all of which need the emphasis placed upon justification; what makes the difference between involving people or not? A series of rationales for community involvement have been set out, following the basis of good practice in territorial development (Bryden, 1997): (i) advancement of democratic practice in society and increasing the legitimacy of public action; (ii) meeting the needs of clients, consumers and communities; (iii) recognising and tapping local knowledge and involving “stakeholders” who have the power to act locally; (iv) controlling dissent and desiring to change individual and social behaviour; (v) educating the public; (vi) encouraging negotiated outcomes in situations where there are conflicts of interest; and (vii) gaining “local ownership” of projects and encouraging self-reliance through “empowerment”. In fact, it has been recognised that many localities face a situation which requires the support of an institutional framework, if a bottom-up approach is to be initiated (Espania, Noguera, 1995). For example, some regulatory issues are often critical aspects that can only be solved by legislative changes at national or European levels. Nevertheless, when local circumstances do not provide the necessary conditions for communities to identify their needs and to determine, or at least influence, the responses to them, then a capacity building process needs to be promoted by those bodies that have the technical support and the institutional credibility to do so. Within this context, partnerships were promoted directly by the European Commission early on the Structural Funds Review in 1992 as very relevant tools to promote sustainable development.

This tendency is now widely recognised by most EU countries, particularly with regard to changes in institutional structure. As early as 1990, the OECD described the following common “emerging” features in governance (OECD, 1990): (i) major participation in the process of formulating policies and programmes at all levels of government; (ii) changes in the distribution of policy formulation responsibilities among different departments within the government, reflecting the need for integrated action for policy formulation; (iii) recognition that decentralisation is not enough to rectify institutional rigidities when formulating policies;

and (iv) growing cooperation between public and private sectors when addressing development problems.

The European Commission recognises the utility of partnerships as instruments to promote cooperation amongst different parties, so as to increase the effectiveness of policy formulation and implementation. Partnership is the key principle in the Structural Funds reform, as it determines the implementation of the four other principles. Implementing partnership requires close cooperation between all parties pursuing a common goal. This bottom-up, participative approach has created high expectations among local actors and decision makers and seems to have the potential to make it advisable to extend further this philosophy of development. The PRIDE research project (1999–2001) brought together academic research teams in six European countries to study how (and how far) the “local partnership approach”, as a distinctive way of management of development policies, really does promote development and what might be done to improve its effectiveness in this respect.

The PRIDE research project concluded that there were four main ideas with regard to the role of partnerships in local development processes: first, most partnerships are created as a consequence of a funding opportunity, usually external. This means that their “life cycle” is closely linked to the project or activity supplying the funding. So the potential for local partnerships to act as centres for long-term strategic development and the benefits of cooperation are only secondary to the availability of external funding. Second, as a consequence, local partnerships become the guardians of “project-oriented” cooperation, rather than strategic cooperation. Third, in most cases, the leading role of public institutions is fundamental, at least during the initial stages. This is due to their major capacity for action and the resources available to them to promote local cooperation and because of their greater links with regional and national institutions that distribute funding for local cooperation. Fourth, despite the above-mentioned weaknesses, local partnerships possess several benefits for local communities, the most important being the improvement of cooperation, mutual understanding and the exchange of information in areas where individualism previously ruled (Table 2).

Table 2. Main strengths and constraints of PPP for rural development. PRIDE project

Strengths (ranked in relevance)	Constraints (ranked in relevance)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Composition and characteristics of management staff • Atmosphere of cooperation • Concern and implications to local society • Availability of funding • Existence of key actors • Existence of potential resources • Efficient management • Existence of cooperative culture • Consensus within the partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of funding • Lack of social concern and motivation • External difficulties and obstacles • Bureaucracy • Lack of internal coordination • Time • Lack of consensus (strategies, objectives, etc.) • Local political conflicts • Inadequate planning • Lack of skilled human resources

Source: Esparcia et al. (2000)

Local partnerships, as tools of the new governance, add value to development processes. This is well described by Moseley (2003) for the case of rural development (see Fig. 1), but we consider the principles equally valid for other environments and, in particular, the planning and management of VET at local and regional levels. Intrinsic characteristics of local partnerships (bringing together local actors and creating a neutral institutional space) lead to the potential development of valuable capabilities in the local environment. These include, amongst others, the following: necessary skills and attitudes for joint working and cooperation, potential to pool resources and generate common action, generation of neutral institutional space where decisions can be taken by consensus, opportunity to think and act in more strategic terms, and greater flexibility in decision-making and management.

These capabilities can be “locked” or “unlocked” depending upon the features of several “key elements” (see Fig. 1):

- **Partners:** are partners representative of the main visions? Are all stakeholders represented? Do they hold a shared vision of the future? Have they had the opportunity to agree upon such a vision? Do they possess the necessary skills? Is there adequate leadership? Are there conflicting relationships amongst partners?
- **Resources:** does the partnership have its own resources? Is there internal or external funding for the partnership available on a regular basis? Are partners contributing resources other than money (i.e. staff, equipment, premises, etc.)?
- **Organisation:** What are the structures of the partnership? Is there a clear distribution of func-

tions and responsibilities? Are there statutes that regulate the rules of interaction between members and bodies of the partnership? Do technical staff hold adequate competences in relation to the actions and objectives of the partnership? Is there good communication between manager and executive board?

- **Processes:** Does the partnership have a relevant role in the context of decision-making at local level? Does the partnership participate in or lead a strategic planning process? Is the partnership linked through networks with other organisations, both local and external? Is the partnership promoting networking? Is the partnership facilitating positive attitudinal change in relation to decision-making behaviour of local actors?

Despite the enormous potential of partnerships, their capacity to deliver key outcomes to local society and territory will depend on the direction of the action of the above-mentioned key elements. Only if these elements show good practice, will the partnership fulfil its potential: (i) the overall process of sustainable development is achieved by promoting more collaborative action by local institutions and organisations and a more synergic development, based upon a common understanding of the future; (ii) the action of the partnership is linked to a premeditated development strategy that guides decision-making and the actions of the local actors, facilitating benefits, such as better focused policy design and management, multiplication of synergies and minimisation of overlapping or contradictory actions; (iii) greater social inclusion, community involvement and capacity building coming from an inclusive decision-making and learning process, as-

sociated with participation and strategic development; and (iv) a stronger and more legitimate local

democracy is promoted, based upon participation and inclusion.

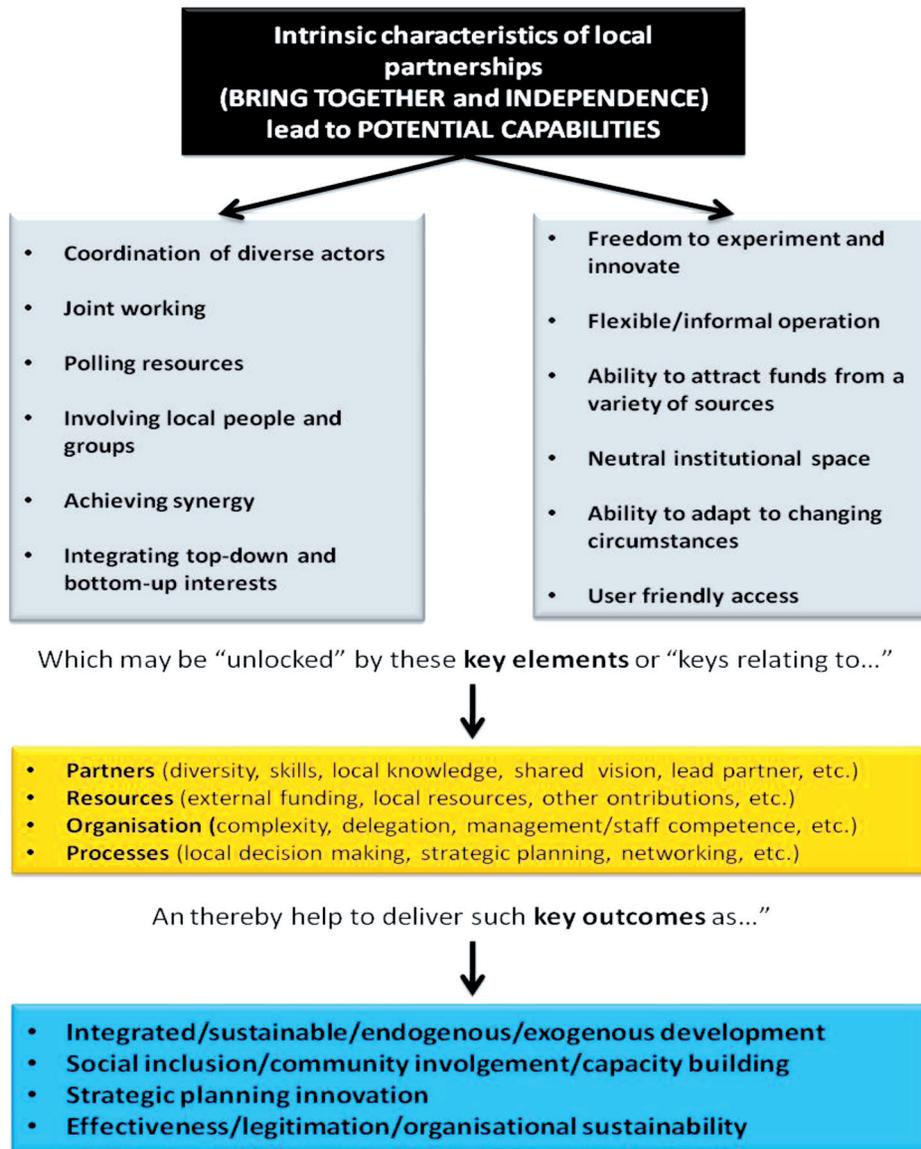


Fig. 1. How partnerships add value to development processes_

Source: Own elaboration from PRIDE Final Report (2001)

4. VET partnerships as integration tools for local governance: defining a vision

The general scenario of VET policies is characterised by increasing complexity (globalisation trends, sustainable development needs, etc.) that demands better governance of employment through anticipation (planning) and consensus (participation and involvement of different stakeholders). Due

to the complex scenario stemming from globalisation trends, a strategy should be designed to ensure the feasibility and relevance of partnership work, to increase its potential, improve its efficiency, and enhance the benefits. Local VET partnerships represent relevant integration tools to improve decision-making. However, to achieve this role effectively, it is necessary to improve the organisation of partnerships, through a scheme of evaluation such as the one proposed in Figure 2.

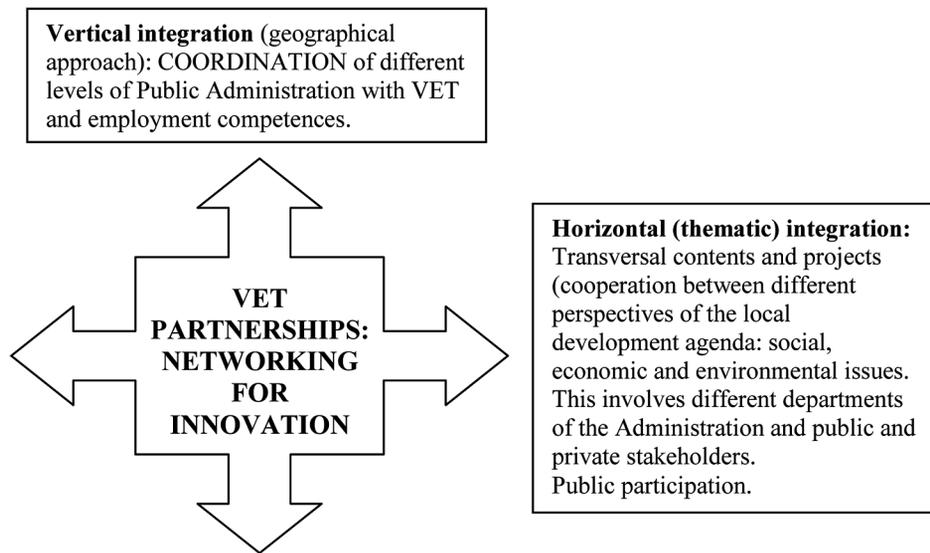


Fig. 2. VET partnership as an integration tool for local governance

Source: Own elaboration

This model is guided by a double objective: on the one hand, principles of governance, i.e. anticipation through strategic planning and social consensus through civil participation; on the other hand, a sustainability approach, i.e. multilevel coordination, territorial vision and transversal integration of social, economic and environmental policies.

Thus, the process of designing of (or the re-thinking) of the partnership must consider the operative integration of the different types of the relevant partner involved in the design and implementation of VET, and employment policies at local level. This question highlights the contribution of partnerships to local governance, in fostering local cooperation between actors and through strategic planning exercises:

- Increased cohesion clarifies objectives, which allows the identification of common interests.
- The process of designing the partnership provides an opportunity to re-define the role of social partners in relation to the objectives pursued.
- Re-negotiation of the policy framework with the government may be appropriate when social partners are responsible for a policy sector related to the VET.

- Through negotiations over the policy framework, social partners may also be asked to broaden their activities (Table 3).

Regarding the multilevel approach, interfaces facilitate the development of activities which meet the interests of various agencies. Under certain conditions, local programming exercises have been translated into bottom-up policies. Vertical co-ordination has thereby been improved. The involvement of community-based organisations has been translated into useful contributions to policy implementation. Partnership organisations have widened their scope of policy concerns and linked up externally with other agencies promoting local coordination.

It is useful to identify, involve and give priority to these partners within a long-term strategy. Experience indicates that these partnerships show a greater potential for policy co-ordination and adaptation to local conditions and have greater effectiveness. Separate policy frameworks, networks and service structures have co-existed, but limit the capacity to share methods and skills, to co-ordinate actions and to pursue objectives in partnership using common resources.

Despite the diversity of particular situations, common features can be identified as key aspects for a partnership (see Table 4).

Table 3. Checklist for an effective initiation of a VET partnership

ASPECT
1. Name
2. Tentative initial date
3. Territorial scope (E.g. Local /regional /national)
4. Type and diversity of members:
4.1. Territorial integration: Are national, regional and local administration represented?
4.2. Areas of integration: education, employment, social affairs, development, environment..?
4.3. Inter-sectoral integration: different productive sectors?
4.4. Is civil society involved? Social-based groups? Private initiative?
5. Legal form and statutes:
5.1. What is the legal form? (E.g. association)
5.2. Are there different levels of involvement (responsibilities and rights) for partners?
6. Objectives:
6.1. Description. What are the main objectives?
6.2. Are we linking social and economic development?
7. Function and services:
7.1. Description.
7.2. Are we developing the following questions about VET and Lifelong Learning?: (i) institutional sensitisation and training; (ii) research projects (innovation); (iii) knowledge management: diagnosis (questionnaires and database); (iv) fund rising actions; (v) evaluation of impacts (observatory); (vi) cooperative programs and projects
8. Resources and tools:
8.1. Description of: annual budget, human resources, office and infrastructure.
9. Administrative structure:
9.1. Description of structure: (i) how does the leadership work?; (ii) how relevant is the manager profile?; (iii) how does coordination between departments work?
10. Strategic planning:
10.1. Do we have a document with guidelines and objectives?
10.2. Do we have indicators to evaluate and monitor impact?
11. Participation of the social based groups in the partnership:
11.1. Is any social marketing action being developed?
11.2. What is the role of community-based groups and the target group?

Source: Own elaboration

Table 4. Key aspects in the design, constitution and implementation of a local partnership

ASPECT	COMMENTS
Leadership, bottom-up approach, local empowerment	VET partnerships are structures promoting the role of local actors in employment, according to the European Employment Strategy.
Territorial cooperation and multi-level coordination	The need to coordinate the different levels of Public Administration with employment competencies (i.e. national and regional level) means the development of different, compatible logistics and bureaucratic routines.
The VET partnership as a multi-service and multi-function structure	Training, research, coordination, innovation, planning, animation and sensitisation... are some key services for a VET partnership. The diversity of work contents includes, according to the European Employment Strategy, the improvement of employability, promotion of entrepreneurship, increase and stimulation of equal opportunities, identification of emergent sectors for local labour market, and identification of the particular needs of rural areas.
Promote participation of private sector and NGOs	Public participation is fundamental because of the need for broadening and deepening the range of social partners and the inclusion of the private sector. The representativeness of the stakeholders is another critical issue.
Consensus	The promotion of a wider consensus and the definition of a common vision for the future is essential to the planning process. The development of studies, diagnosis and research tools is important in this regard.
Strategic planning. Operative guidelines	It is necessary to structure an integrated strategy through concrete programs and actions that are consistent and accurate. Knowledge management for anticipation: to identify conflicts and long term tendencies, improving information about the local labour market and VET supply and demand. Transversal contents scheme (according to the different topics included in the European Employment Strategy)
Action plan. Resources and budget	Fund-raising and executive management roles are two essential aspects for an operative VET partnership, in order to guarantee its economic sustainability.
Monitoring	Indicators for measuring impacts and evaluation.

Source: Own elaboration

5. Lessons learned on the role of VET partnerships

The potential benefits of local VET partnerships are frequently offset by a number of factors and circumstances relating to the degree and extent of integration of local actors, the overall long-term aim of the cooperation process, the degree of success in the construction of a “neutral institutional space”, etc. The experience of VET partnerships highlights the relevance of certain topics: the weak co-ordination of objectives between different levels of Public Administration, a lack of interest in a partnership framework directed at specific policy objectives and a weak accountability framework, amongst others.

The evidence found in the literature and the empirical work of the author in two European projects during the first decade of the 21st century provide lessons relating to the role of VET partnerships in local development processes.

The “true” reasons for local cooperation. In most cases, local PPPs respond to a call or external opportunity and VET partnerships are not an exception. One of the key elements that constrains the process of formation and consolidation of VET partnerships is the availability of external funds. The long-term sustainability of cooperation is compromised when the reason for cooperating is mainly linked to a funding opportunity. However, in the context of little or no prior cooperation, such incentives can lay the grounds for long-term cooperation, as long as the benefits are clearly perceived and valued by partners (Fig. 3).

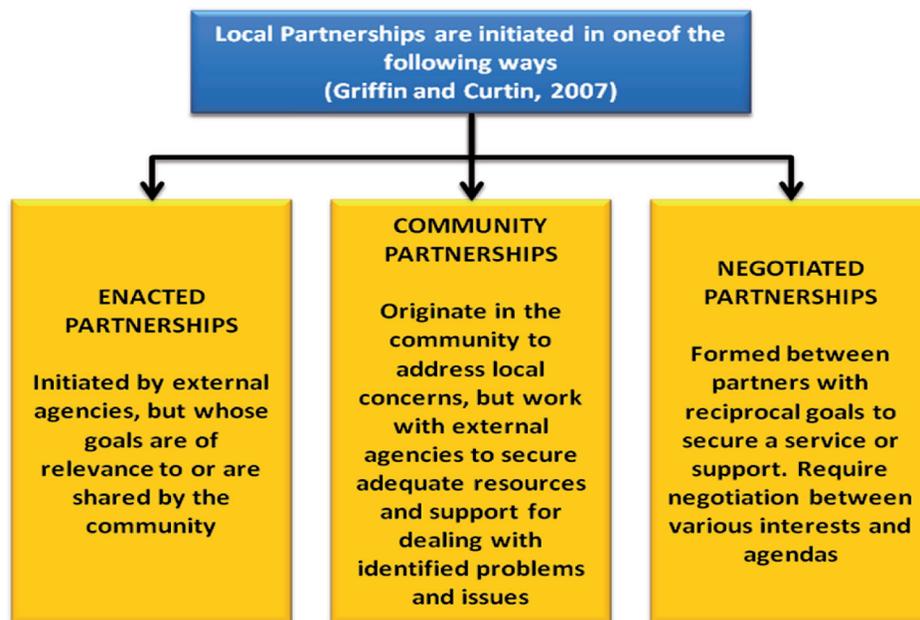


Fig. 3. Ways of initiation of local partnerships
 Source: Own elaboration, adapted from Griffin and Curtin (2007)

Local Leadership and bottom-up approach. VET partnerships are structures that initiate the role of local actors in the promotion of employment, according to the European Employment Strategy. A clear and strong public aim is fundamental in providing credibility to the project. Local authori-

ties, due to their essential responsibility in decision-making, have the greatest role and responsibility for bringing together the various components of local society. However, this role, whilst positive in the initial stages, tends to remain equally powerful later, sometimes reflecting excessive control over deci-

sion-making. For local authorities, there is a risk in being “always necessary” and convinced that they alone should always guide the process.

Networking and administrative cooperation. One of the main weaknesses of traditional governance is the low degree of coordination between the different levels of Public Administration with employment responsibilities (i.e. national and regional level). As a consequence, there is a strong chance of overlapping or even contradictory actions coming from different departments within the same administration or different levels of government. VET partnerships can help increase action coordination by bringing together decision makers from different departments and levels of government.

Project management and fund-raising. The VET partnership is a multi-service and multi-function structure. Training, research, coordination, innovation, planning, animation and involvement are some of its key services. Therefore, it is essential to develop a fund-raising strategy that ensures long-term sustainability. Depending on the legal status and the philosophy behind the cooperation process, the VET partnership may have access to the following types of funding source: contributions of partners, existing programmes that match the strategic objectives of the partnership, and development of products and services.

Strategic vision, dialogue and participation. Transparency in decision-making and public participation is essential to legitimate the partnership. The overall culture of democracy and the representativeness of the stakeholders are critical issues. The promotion of a wider consensus and the definition of a common vision of the future are fundamental to the long-term planning process. It is essential to structure an integrated strategy through concrete programmes and actions. This must be linked to a realistic budget. Fund-raising and executive management roles are essential aspects to guarantee economic sustainability.

Monitoring and social marketing. It is necessary to provide indicators to measure the partnership impact and to allow for a project evaluation. A communication strategy is also necessary to provide information about results, to sensitise the population and to make visible the impact of the strategy.

The lessons above are developed into recommendations and guidelines in the next section.

6. Recommendations and guidelines for the effective delivery of outcomes by local VET partnership

Whatever the configuration and operational mechanisms of a VET partnership, its ultimate aim is the improvement of VET mechanisms that should, in turn, contribute to a better adjustment between workers’ skills and qualification, and the needs of the labour market. The main reason for creating a VET partnership is to achieve beneficial effects for local society and territory. The enormous effort, in terms of human and material resources invested in the process of the creation and the daily operation of local partnerships, makes sense only when positive results are perceived and obtained.

This section discusses the main outcomes that local VET partnerships try to achieve. For each of these outcomes, main key factors are identified.

6.1. Adequate integration of the VET community in the partnership

VET works with various groups and institutions with differing scopes of reference that must be properly integrated into the partnership. This involves matching the appropriate representatives in each case, informing them of the partnership objectives, achieving mutual consensus about goals, objectives and implementation of procedures leading to the achievement of shared objectives.

The main factors determining adequate integration of the VET community in the partnership are: first, location of the appropriate representatives of each VET stakeholder (those having meaningful representation); second, establishment of the aims of stakeholders in relation to their participation in the partnership (determination of legitimate representatives, contributions to the objectives of the partnership in terms of human, financial and material resources, etc.); third, consensual definition of the goal, objectives and actions; and fourth, agreement on a procedure towards the achievement of shared objectives.

6.2. Legitimated governance model

One of the main advantages of partnerships when compared to other modes of organisation is their greater ability to legitimately represent the interests and concerns of stakeholders. Partnerships have the benefit of being able to integrate successfully a greater number of viewpoints than most other organisations. Unfortunately, a sizeable proportion of partnerships do not capitalise on this potential. The reasons are varied but one stands out. Many partnerships have tended to mirror an existing local balance of power and, sometimes, to follow the same logic of partisanship. In this way, they can soon become a “sounding board” for the existing balance of forces and political relationships in the area. Sometimes partnerships are controlled by the most influential or active groups. They do not always follow those capable of better quality leadership. In fact, leading personalities and groups are frequently excluded when they do not hold a formalised representative position. In many cases, members of decision-making bodies within a partnership “forget” that they are representing a group and end up not “accounting” for the decisions made and the positions taken. Mechanisms for participation often do not work or are not effective.

To overcome these problems, a number of factors can contribute to the achievement of a more legitimate governance model by VET partnerships: first, a high degree of heterogeneity and representation which allows more legitimated decisions and greater integration of existing views about VET into the development strategy; second, bottom-up initiation of partnerships showing shared concerns about sector problems and the need for common action; third, sufficient local decision-making capacity to exploit the advantages afforded by the knowledge of the sector and the joint action of local actors; and fourth, creation of an institutional, social, economic and political “neutral space”, avoiding a tendency to reproduce the balance of political forces and, sometimes, the same logic of partisan discussion.

6.3. Tailor-made VET strategy

This is one of the most important factors in relation to the cooperation process. It constitutes a “road-

map” for action and is the most appropriate tool to design a development strategy capable of responding effectively to needs, goals and actions.

Strategic thinking is still weak in most cases, although the need for cooperation is beginning to internalise in some areas, as a necessary element to obtaining benefits (funding, more effective action, projects above local level, coordination, etc.). Certainly, the need to build a development strategy began to arise as a result of local cooperation itself. However, it should be noted that often the design of a development strategy is closely tied to the specific requirements of a funding programme that feeds the local VET partnership. Therefore, only a small percentage of local partnerships undertake strategic thinking, grounded in local participation, to achieve their goals.

The key factors determining the achievement of strategic development by VET partnerships are: (i) there is a clear awareness amongst society and partners “that common action can bring benefits to the VET sector”; (ii) this leads to action within a society, especially amongst members of the VET partnership; (iii) partners are able to channel these desires for change, leading to a participatory process that integrates VET stakeholders; (iv) VET partnership is able to conduct the entire process, including the design of a VET strategy; and (v) VET partnership is capable of maintaining the involvement of local society and its key actors during the development and implementation of the VET strategy.

6.4. Adequate integration of VET actions in the local development strategy

Although VET partnerships promote the development of projects and actions in different economic and social sectors of the local system, their action is still far from integrated. This means wasting the benefits of synergies and “multiplier effects” resulting from possible working relationships between different development actions. Two requirements are fundamental to achieving integrated development: on the one hand, the integration of action that promotes a VET partnership within a development strategy; on the other hand, the integration of action that promotes the VET partnership with local policies and programmes.

The most important factors determining the achievement of integrated development by VET partnerships are: (i) representativeness in the composition of the local partnership, which allows greater integration of VET actions into the development strategy; (ii) bottom-up initiation of partnerships showing shared concern about local problems and the need for common action; (iii) understanding of and consensus about the basic problems for which action must be taken; and (iv) presence of leaders (individuals or organisations).

6.5. Permanent observation of the VET context

One of the most valuable tools in guiding the action of the VET partnership is the establishment of an observatory of the local VET reality. Its purpose is the continuous analysis of the situation of the labour market, the characteristics of vocational training offered in the area and the training profiles of the local workforce. These and other parameters will enable better guidance of VET policies. The observatory must have a team qualified in socio-economic analysis and must be functionally and/or legally dependent upon the institution that leads the cooperation process, i.e. usually a town hall. The main factors determining the achievement of permanent observation of the VET context are: (i) creation of a VET observatory; (ii) generation of a periodic reporting and dissemination strategy; (iii) discussion of the results of the partnership with stakeholders; and (iv) integration of results in the VET strategy.

6.6. Innovation

Innovation is often a key outcome from VET partnerships which benefit from fresh thinking, enthusiastic members and their relative independence from administrative controls. Innovation requires the existence or development of appropriate communication channels and networks, both within the partnership and between the partnership and the different local groups. The main factors determining the achievement of innovation by VET partnerships are: (i) creation of a clear structure with effective communication protocols between bodies,

staff and partners; (ii) creation of a communication and dissemination strategy aimed at the local society; (iii) interest in promoting R+D+I in relation to the practice of the VET partnership – creation of a formalised R&D structure; and (iv) integration of VET networks with other territories.

6.7. Capacity building

The establishment of a local VET partnership constitutes a good opportunity for the consolidation of development centres with specialised technical staff. Similarly, the establishment of local partnerships has led to the introduction of new administration, new ways of conducting relationships between local actors, and even changes in attitudes and mentalities, all of which have many beneficial effects. All these elements are the highlights of a new learning process and capacity building that has been developed as a direct result of partnerships. It would be no exaggeration to say that, beyond the financial investment achieved by partnership actions, the implementation of these other processes is the real benefit for long-term, sustainable development. The key factors determining the achievement of capacity building by VET partnerships are: (i) the development of cooperation networks between the partnership and local society; (ii) identification of local problems or coping with an appropriate strategy; (iii) members of partnerships hold leadership skills and exercise leadership within local society; (iv) high degree of heterogeneity and representation within the composition of the partnership allowing greater integration of existing views about VET into the development strategy; and (v) joint planning and strategic development process through mechanisms of negotiation and social dialogue.

6.8. Local development

VET partnerships promote local endogenous development in two ways: first, by providing the most appropriate institutional framework for local cooperation and the utilisation of local human resources; secondly, by closing the gaps between the skills available in the local context and the strategic needs of businesses and organisations. Endogenous de-

velopment is, therefore, one of the most important matters to be enhanced by VET partnerships. The key factors determining the achievement of local, endogenous development by VET partnerships are: (i) VET partnerships are initiated and established locally (bottom up), responding to widespread concern about common problems and the need to come together to address them or to take advantage of certain opportunities; (ii) partners must be able to adequately identify the object of cooperation, for which it is essential to have a thorough knowledge of the territory and local society; (iii) partners must have the ability to design an appropriate development strategy to address the problems and identified requirements; (iv) there must be a minimum background in local society, in terms of human and material resources that can form the basis for the development process (critical mass); and (v) local decision capacity must be sufficient to exploit the advantages afforded by the knowledge of the territory and the joint action of local actors.

7. A “nine-month roadmap” to an effective initiation or improvement of a local VET partnership

The final section of this paper presents a nine-month work plan and a schedule of activities for the design and implementation of a VET partnership. The work plan is structured into three consecutive periods or “quarters”, each identified by its main purpose and most important activities.

The first quarter: designing and starting the VET partnership. During the first quarter, the process focuses on the following activities: (i) definition of the aim, goal and main objectives of the partnership that must guide its action, taking into account the motivations that have initiated the need for cooperation; (ii) definition and resolution of the legal status of the partnership (i.e. non-profit organisation, consortium, association, etc.); (iii) decision on the composition and structures of the partnership; (iv) funding model; and (v) staff recruitment according to the needs foreseen in relation to the aim and objectives of the partnership and the availability of funding.

An initial technical proposal is required to initiate these actions. Its contents include the definition of the partnership mission, its specific objectives (priorities) and the proposal for developing services. The definition of the technical staff (one manager and two technicians as a proposed minimum) is essential to initiate this first step.

The expected outputs and results of this first quarter are: (i) a formal partnership structure; (ii) an operative manager and technical working group; (iii) an Initiation or Starting Plan, including a description and the organisation of the necessary immediate actions; (iv) a calendar showing the relevant timescale for proposals that match one or several of the general objectives of the partnership; (v) a work plan aimed at defining a diagnostic for the VET for the scope and territory of action (to be developed in the second quarter), which should include contents definition, information sources and priorities; and (vi) a Marketing and Communication Plan (to be implemented during the second and third quarters), which includes any action to disseminate and market the activities of the partnership. Usually this includes details of expected visits, interviews and the organisation of a local workshop.

The second quarter: strategic planning and action plan. During the second quarter, the process focuses on the following activities: (i) defining a vision of the main VET conflicts and opportunities within the territory to prepare a mid-term strategy; (ii) drafting a proposed Action Plan, including strategic guidelines, programmes and concrete projects; and (iii) establishing a methodology – compilation of previous documents, reports and background information, identifying information gaps and knowledge, conducting workshops and in-depth interviews and designing questionnaires.

The expected output and results of this second quarter are the preparation and submission of project proposals.

The third quarter: implementation of a local workshop around the VET strategy. During the third quarter, the process focuses on the organisation of a public conference about the partnership work plan and social debate. The expected output and result consist of feedback for the strategy: social consensus and animation, institutional communication and identification of priorities.

Although the EU initiative allowed to generalise local PPP figure for more than 20 years, the success of the implementation is different depending on the prior history of territorial and social context in which implantation occurred. This does not undermine a formula with notable advantages and guarantees of success if take care of components in a public policy management more complex and, in time, more powerful. It aims, rather, to the need to further analyse the performance of the local PPP and weaknesses observed in its operation in order to identify areas for improvement and to enhance the points already noted for their strength and good work.

8. Conclusion and discussion

The public-private partnership approach for the design and implementation of the strategy of Vocational Education and Training (VET) proposes a new joint management system within the context of the new territorial governance. In this paper, the main contributions of local PPPs to the design and implementation of public policies have been highlighted. These are, among other, the ability to procure more effective, efficient, relevant and legitimized policies and initiatives. The extent to which local PPP can operate according to its inspiring principles (consensus, strategic, real cooperation, integrated view of development, open participation, etc.) will determine the real impact of the advantages listed above.

However, neither local PPPs are chosen as a way to manage public policies, nor in all the territories in which local PPP is selected, it operates according to the good practice principles described. Many local societies maintain traditional forms of public policy management that are less open to participation. This is the evidence of immature contexts from the point of view of democracy, where common good and real cooperation are not among the first priorities of local actors who have the power to make decisions. This is the case of the countries of southern Europe and most of the New Member States, where clientelism and little democratic tradition combine to impose significant challenges to developing the potential of the local PPP.

Although the initiative of the European Union has allowed for the generalisation of local PPPs for

more than 20 years now, the success in implementation is different depending on the prior history and social context of the place in which it occurred. This does not undermine a formula that has notable advantages and guarantees of success if the key factors of a more complex but more powerful public policy management system are taken good care. It points to the need to further analyse the performance of the local PPP and the weaknesses observed in its operation in order to identify areas for improvement and to enhance the factors already noted for their strength and good work.

Note

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