

Article

Welfare-Partnership Dynamics and Sustainable Development

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Abstract: The welfare partnership is defined as the process through which local agents interact with each other in the dynamics of collectively defining strategic objectives and building place-based approaches that reinforce local citizenship. What can we learn from the experience of municipal social action partnerships that is likely to assist us in building sustainable development formulas? This article analyses the partnership practices in six Portuguese municipalities in the Northern Region, discussing forms of social support that are convergent with sustainable development and how they tend to be articulated in municipal social action partnerships. The present research followed phenomenological reasoning using qualitative methods and multiple case studies. There were debates with professionals, looking for explicit meanings in the abstract knowledge of the concept trajectory. The results suggest that convergence with sustainable development resides in the combination of three elements: (1) developing innovative eco-community social responses that are aligned with a comprehensive social sustainability ideal that is contextualized in the relationship between subjectivities and territory, as well as with the general principles of the providence system; (2) implementing a local strategic planning practice, monitored and aligned with local projects that act on the ecological effect, determining local vulnerabilities; and (3) adopting an efficient practice of governance and allocation of stakeholders and resources, emphasizing the multilevel articulation and durability of the implemented local processes.

Keywords: welfare partnership; development; community development; sustainable development; municipal social networks



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1. Introduction

Welfare-partnerships are structures of mutual collaboration, inspired by the theories of reflexive risk society and welfare state reform [1–5]. Although accompanied by a tendency to adjust institutional welfare systems to the characteristics of each country, the reform of the welfare state in European countries has specifically resulted in the creation of new systems of public functions, which, in turn, led to the creation of new social and contractual organizations in which local partnerships are included [6].

After the 1970s crisis, and the successive aftershocks that followed up to the present crisis, the organization of the welfare state was reconfigured; while in the 1970s the crisis triggered the demand for a stronger role on the part of the state, the current one, interspersed with multiple economic, epidemiological, war, environmental, social, and ideological crises, caused the state's role to retract. Partnerships and networks arise from changes in the state's role and configure a structure that enhances the interdependent relationships between different types of actors, both public and non-public. At the same time, global interdependencies were intensified through United Nations development declarations and social movements that committed each nation-state to indicators of development, quality of life, and human rights, among other agendas.

In the wake of the new guidelines for public policies and the new perspectives of endogenous development, due to their intersectoral, interdisciplinary, and multilevel composition, partnerships and networks offer possibilities for understanding the territorial

variable and for leveraging community systems of social protection in systems of local well-being [2,5,7].

Several authors define these structures as independent actors, reflexive organisation devices that are involved in complex and reciprocal interdependencies to share resources and develop projects [6]. Through agent and resource coordination, they aim to ensure local standards of social well-being by aligning solutions to actual social demands and envisioning new forms of community, public, and multilevel solidarity [8–10].

The present article focuses on how social partnerships implement welfare and social protection systems. The extensive development literature reveals gaps in the deepening of the relationship between the development of territories and the mechanisms of public social protection [10–13], as well as the models of sustainable development in social partnerships. This goal is all the more important when framed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which challenges the various United Nations member countries to intervene in the ecological, economic, and social dimensions of the territory. Objective 17 of this Agenda reaffirms the importance of studies that allow one to know the dynamics of partnerships and extract lessons that have been learned to strengthen the means of implementing and revitalizing partnerships for sustainable development [14].

The Municipal Social Network in Portugal is a partnership established by the Ministry of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security [15–18] to promote municipal social development. This partnership has been clarified throughout several legal texts, namely Decree-Law No. 115 of 2006, which recognises it as an institution dedicated to supporting local authorities and acknowledges its major role in establishing a strategy for local development. In recent years, the social network has become an instrument for activating both the state, local power and its partners, and has converged towards a multilevel operation. The Decree-Law No. 23/2022 clarifies the powers of its bodies in local authorities and inter-municipal entities, as well as the principles and rules for defining a set of strategic instruments for social planning.

In Portugal, however, the planning of these municipal social partnerships still focuses heavily on social vulnerabilities and favours community development approaches that do not always bring out the articulation of social action with the systemic and structural integrality of sustainable territorial development [4,5].

It is at this point that studies that allow one to extract lessons from previous cases and envision working formulas in social partnerships in line with the purposes of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development become important.

The present research departs from the conceptual clarification of social partnerships in an attempt to conceptually discuss the relationships and interactions with development processes and concepts. It also clarifies the trajectory of the development concept in the literature and in political-institutional justifications from the new endogenous development perspectives following the author's choice to analytically address the meaning of these transformations and their impact on how they are locally applied.

This article outlines the rising roles and the growing sensitivities of cooperation and the reinvention of social action practices while discussing what it means to turn local social action into sustainable development.

2. Conceptual Clarifications of Development

Development theories are framed in three theoretical frameworks: modernity theory, dependency theory, and post-development theory or endogenous development. The former was developed between the 1950s and 1960s, combining theoretical frameworks based on classical economic philosophy, Keynesianism, and the vision of economic progress and modernisation. In the post-war economic and social context, it offers an interpretation of development models by mimicking the development patterns of western industrial societies. Originating in Max Weber's prepositions, the theory is followed by various precursors of systems theory and structural functionalism. Myrdal's thought on the "cumulative circular causality" of social and economic affairs allows us to underline the simplistic character

of the theory by presuming that underdeveloped countries go through a traditional stage before experiencing the modern stage [19].

Dependency (or underdevelopment) theory was developed from the 1960s onwards, as opposed to the theory of modernity. It was greatly inspired by Marx's *The Capital* and involved thinkers of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean who looked into the internal social structures of the reproduction of underdevelopment. Gunder's theory [20], "the law of uneven and combined development for Latin American historical development," explains that in these countries the "backwardness" resulted from the historical context of "colonial capitalism," which was not completely overcome in the second half of the 20th century. Cardoso and Faletto's vision of overcoming underdevelopment through the articulation between internal social forces and external hegemonic centres, or Marini's deterministic vision in *Underdevelopment and Revolution* [21] of the subordination relationship between peripheral and central nations, configure a historical structuralism based on a set of analytical dimensions both of the centre-periphery relationship and structural heterogeneity, which influence development.

In the last 30 years, the search for new concepts of development has contributed to instilling a new epistemic foundation marked by the need for a paradigmatic transition to differentiated formulae into the theory of post development, converging with the possibility of building contextualised alternatives for social change [9,13,22]. The post-development current has been consolidated by the "Post-Washington Consensus" and the various United Nations Development Conferences that emphasize the territorial character, the endogenous perspective, the collective conception, the mobilisation of knowledge and local experiences, and the interpretation of territorial differences and subalternities in the face of universalist global systems.

Following World War II, both socialist (Marxist) and capitalist (Keynesian) countries with welfare state models rethought their ideas of European rebuilding and progress, bolstering alternative development approaches that were convergent with state interventionism in the economy and society [22].

Over the last 30 years, the development concept, drawn from various theories of change and disciplinary and ideological backgrounds, has become particularly elastic, integrating new dimensions and political-institutional agendas. Table 1 shows the densification of the development concept throughout its historical trajectory.

Table 1. Trajectory of the development concept.

| Concepts | Chronology | Influences | Key Ideas |
|-----------------------|--|---|--|
| Economic Growth | Late 19th century to mid 20th century (the 1950s) | Classic economic theories | Progress according to a western model: industrialism, mimicry, ethnocentrism, progress. |
| Community Development | Late 19th century to early 20th century (the 1960s). | Settlement movements, Hull House, Religious connection. | Community approach in more vulnerable social groups; Community formation; Addressing concepts of participation and integrality. |
| Basic Needs | 1970s | Religious connection. | Addressing the basic needs (BN) approach; Considerable emphasis on human development aspects. |
| Human Development | 1990s | United Nations | It presupposes access to goods to satisfy basic needs; Human life quality in each context; The Human Development Index (HDI) and the Human Poverty Index (HPI) are two indexes developed by the United Nations to measure wealth, poverty, literacy, education, average life expectancy, and birth rates, among other variables. |

Table 1. Cont.

| Concepts | Chronology | Influences | Key Ideas |
|---|------------|----------------|---|
| Village concept; Development on a local, rural, and urban scale | 1990s | United Nations | Emphasis on endogenous factors; Several United Nations declarations and action plans are decisive for the local centrality. |
| Alternative Development | 1990s | United Nations | Appreciation of the subject/actor and the recipient- empowerment; The recognition of the multifaceted nature of the development concept gave rise to the notion of collaborative production. |
| Social Development | 1990s | United Nations | Emphasis on guaranteeing basic social rights and integrality. Right to employment, eradication of poverty, promotion of social integration. The Copenhagen Summit (1995) and the Millennium Declaration (2000) were milestones in this assumption. |
| Eco-development Sustainable Development | 1990s | United Nations | It translates to a worldwide model of social and economic development, as well as human and cultural achievement, with an emphasis on the prudent use of the planet's resources; The United Nations Environment Organization Conference 1972; Brundtland Commission with the Brundtland Report in 1987; Montreal Protocol in 1989; the Stockholm Conference (1992); the Johannesburg Sustainable Development Summit 2000; the Lisbon Strategy of 2000; the New York Summit in 2015. |

Source: Adapted [4] p. 29.

In the 1990s, the theories of endogenous development became more relevant; in this post-development phase, such notions as local, human, participatory, social, and sustainable development asserted themselves, which triggered assumptions of collective action, multilevel territorial governance, and systemic integrality between public social protection and local development, along with the reform of political structures of proximity [10]. The search for eco-social innovation models, built on the analysis of cultural and territorial diversity, the appreciation of local knowledge, and the reasonable use of resources are some of the main challenges these local structures of social partnerships have to face [9].

The concept of sustainable development emerged in connection with renewable resources and became denser with the inclusion of integrated ecological perspectives. The evidence that the deterioration of livelihoods has a direct impact on the health and well-being of populations, which is particularly evident in the current context of climate change and wars, was pivotal in the definition of the sustainable development concept in the literature as multidimensional, related to people and communities' human rights and social and environmental justice, in addition to economic dimensions. In this line of thought, the ability to unleash innovative eco-socially transformative formulas in administrative and productive contexts becomes paramount [23–26].

The eco-social perspective began with the settlement social movements, namely Jane Addams' Hull House Settlement, following approaches to community development in Chicago's peripheral neighbourhoods which highlighted the environmental conditions of immigrants. By developing an immersion-research-action methodological approach, the Hull-House Settlement examined social, cultural, physical, and environmental factors, seeking to improve immigrants' lifestyles and social integration [27].

The Brundtland Report [28] defines sustainability as the process of meeting current demands without jeopardising future generations' ability to meet those needs. This formulation, in line with the policy of international agencies such as the Conference of the United

Nations Environment Organization in 1972, known as the Brundtland Commission, and the Montreal Protocol in 1989, puts together three central ideas: natural resources management integration, inter-generational solidarity, and production durability [22].

The purpose of this research is not to link the sustainability agenda to social work, namely because of the identity of the latter's professionals, but to look into the relationship between the two. From the point of view of social work, several contemporary authors discuss the implications of climate change and its high costs on families and communities, urging social work to make the transition to new challenges of well-being and new models of sustainability [23–25]. However, since this is not the central issue in this article, the author chose to deal with the theoretical and analytical discussion on the interaction of social partnerships with sustainability, despite acknowledging the social workers' robust polarisation of these local structures, which include multiple professionals.

From the 1970s onwards, the eco-social approach has sought to respond to the ecological crisis of contemporary society and requires a new ecological paradigm of preventive action [1,29] and structural critical action which addresses local communities' action proposals, reinforcing people's and territories' functionality and capacity to generate personal and community rights [26,30].

Sustainable development is an integrated concept that includes: the role of political structures; urban and regional planning; the efficient management of finite resources [31–33]; the construction of mechanisms of economic efficiency, social justice and ecological prudence [34–38]; the sustainable management of organisations and companies emphasising the durability of products [39–43]; and organisational and professional specialisation [44].

In political and institutional terms, at the New York Summit, the United Nations Member States approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which established 17 multidimensional objectives to strengthen the integrated, holistic, preventive, and structural sustainability perspective in fields such as poverty, life quality, industry, economic growth, labour, environmental climate action, sustainable communities, innovation demand, infrastructures, institutions, and effective partnerships.

Social partnerships and networks aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development are a critical component in achieving this goal. They pursue an epistemic foundation marked by the search for formulae for social change and local well-being. They work to enhance local functions in terms of access to goods and forms of social solidarity. In short, the sustainability idea is built on three basic assumptions in the context of welfare-partnerships:

1. Creating innovating eco-community social responses based on a comprehensive social sustainability ideology, encompassing environmental, economic, social, political, and spatial dimensions, in Sachs' sense [38], that are capable of mobilizing universal policies and resources, as well as complementary community systems, in several domains, including ageing, poverty, education, training and capacity building, and public health, among others, while preserving such challenges as systemic action, socio-territorial cohesion, economic efficiency, and ecological prudence;
2. Implementing a local and regional strategic planning practice that is monitored to aligned with local projects designed to act on the ecological effect, determining local vulnerabilities;
3. Adopting efficient practices of local and multilevel governance and allocating stakeholders and resources, emphasising the multilevel articulation and durability of the implemented local processes.

3. Method

This research mobilises data collected for an empirical doctoral study that was completed in 2019 that was based on grounded theory and qualitative methodology. At this stage, the object of study was social workers' practice in social partnerships in the context of providence paradigms' reform, seeking to explain professional reconfigurations and new models of community practice.

Following constructivist phenomenological reasoning, the research process in this article was supported by the interaction between the researcher and the object, and was organised around a multiple case study and the qualitative method. The extensive analysis of the doctoral research allowed the object to be steered, (re) situating it in the search for interactions between social partnerships and sustainable development. Therefore, it starts by providing the data collected in the partnership-providence of the municipal social network in Portugal, aiming at discussing the applicability, adjustment, and usefulness of adopting a model of sustainable development in partnerships-providence.

Hence, the following research questions arise:

1. What can we learn from the experience of municipal social action partnerships for the construction of sustainable development formulas?
2. What eco-social practices are taking place?
3. To what extent do the activities developed by this partnership allow one to envision a sustainability model in social partnerships?

In general, data from previous studies conducted on partnerships in six municipalities in Portugal were used, this time with different angles of analysis. The selection of cases in the first phase of the research allowed the current incidence since the selection criteria already established that only cases referring to innovative practices in municipal strategic planning and in local projects be considered.

The present research was based on qualitative methods and a multiple-case study according to a gradual sample obtained by theoretical saturation which allowed us to understand the depth of the case both as a whole and in its uniqueness [45].

The article placed the role of these partnerships in the territorialised policy of local social action and outlined convergences with sustainable development. Similar elements were extracted, growing sensitivities of cooperation between local agents were identified, and the formulas in progress in the development of territorial policies for social action were clarified to illustrate generalizations and extrapolations in similar cases, showing how resorting to a sustainable development model can prove to be useful in social partnerships. See the analysis model in Table 2.

Table 2. The Methodological Framework.

| Paradigm | Phenomenological and Interpretative Nature, in Line with Grounded Theory |
|---------------------|--|
| Methods | A multiple case study, the qualitative method. |
| Data collection | Interviews with coordinators or professionals in leadership roles in the municipality; |
| Techniques | Focus group for professionals belonging to the municipal social network partnership; |
| Analysis techniques | Document analysis of development plans and local projects; Categorical analysis (Nvivo); and, Analysis of the narrative (speech). |
| Cases | Six social network partnerships in municipalities in the Northern Region: Viana do Castelo (VDC), Guimarães (GUI), Santa Maria da Feira (SMF), O'Porto (OPO), Lousada (LSD), and Valpaços (VPA). |

The research process started from constructivist phenomenological reasoning, which was supported by interaction between the researcher and the object, and was structured around a multiple case study and the qualitative method. (In addition to the research carried out in these six partnerships, the researcher's experience as a facilitator and evaluator of the dynamics of social network partnerships and community development projects was decisive for the discussion). Six individual interviews (one for each municipality) were done, encoded from E1 to E6, as well as six focus groups (one for each municipality), encoded GF1 to GF6. The number of professional who participated in the focus groups ranged from five to thirteen professionals, for a total of fifty-two professionals Prior to

data collection, all participants were emailed with regard to the goals of the research and granted their verbal agreement.

The first stage of the research occurred between 2017 and 2018. In 2022, a documentary analysis of the web pages of the projects highlighted by the professionals in the course of the first stage was carried out, and telephone contacts with the six interviewees were established. Simultaneously, the development plans and transcripts collected in the first phase of the study were revisited. This data update confirmed the effective continuity of projects and strategic development axes, as well as the partnership approach, which focused more on emergency projects and the assistance to aging during the 2019 COVID phase, although it still kept the analysed projects working. The research valued visions of eco-social innovation, planning and governance processes, and forms of participation and sustainability.

4. Results

The Social Network in Portugal is a social partnership that is acknowledged as an institution whose partnership relationship model involves both central and local administration and the third sector in the local strategic planning of social action and in the leverage of community projects that mitigate situations of poverty and social exclusion in the municipalities. In recent years, these partnerships have sought to feed the multilevel operation between municipalities belonging to the same intermunicipal territory.

Thus, these structures have improved the integrated reading, the collective formulation of social development plans and the intervention in vulnerable communities, confronted with issues such as aging, poverty, the flow of migrants, addictive consumption, domestic violence, homelessness, among others. The practices of creating protection products are transversal and often anchored in narratives that allude to the worsening of the economic and social crises that affect the territories, the latter's insufficiency of resources and products, and the new development and systemic change concepts and practices.

"The logics of action operate in the sense of individuation, empowerment...there are other demands for mediation (...). In terms of social intervention, a systemic perspective is imposed." E1

"Sometimes there are emergency responses that are necessary in the face of a context (alluding to the economic context and failures in universal policies)! Our practice is in fact very integrated, at the expense of the intersectoral views the Network promotes." E5

"Today, the project methodology is required to structure the response and obtain financial support from the municipality." E2

The discourse of professionals was perused in search for core ideas regarding innovation and sustainability factors, and in parallel, local projects leveraged by the partnership in each municipality were examined. The innovation and sustainability ideas are not disconnected from the well-being models produced; the mediation according to standards of social, individual, and community rights; the communities' empowerment and the social support provided within the scope of local projects; or the coherence between the proposals and the social needs of their respective local contexts. Tables 3–8 present three local experiences per network.

Table 3. Oporto social network's innovative projects: eco-social practices.

| Categories | Projects | | |
|------------------------|---|--|--|
| | Porto Amigo (Friendly Porto) ¹ | Plano de Apoio aos Sem Abrigo (Assistance Plan to the Homeless) | Rede Local do Voluntariado (Local Volunteer Network) |
| Concept and objectives | Improving housing, health, and the right to aging-in-place protection; Increasing sociability, solidarity, and protective services. | Expanding the network's institutional support capacity for the homeless population in times of crisis through a contingency plan for the cold wave and the provision of social support. | Creating the Local Volunteer Network, a space between volunteers and the organisations in the municipalities that welcome volunteers. |
| Work processes | Definition of eligibility criteria; Diagnostic analysis of the poverty situation; Mobilisation of resources in the local community; Carrying out rehabilitation works. | Development of contingency strategies for "cold waves" through collaboration with partners in the sector; mobilisation of community resources for the distribution of various forms of social assistance; endogenous coordination of Porto's multiple street teams to develop a homeless signalling and monitoring gadget. | Creation of a computer platform for managing registrations and providing vacancies for volunteering; construction of instruments for selection and monitoring of volunteers. |
| Participation | Inter-institutional, public and business participation. | Inter-institutional, public, solidary and business participation. | Inter-institutional, solidary, and citizen participation through volunteering. |
| Sustainability factors | Durability of the process (since 2017); Convergence in partnership and governance; Mobilisation of the business sector; Practice of mobilising endogenous and business resources. | Durability and transformation of the process (since 2017); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of the social and business sector; the practice of mobilising endogenous, social, and business resources. | Durability and transformation of the process (since 2017); workplace culture in partnership and governance; citizen mobility; the practice of mobilising endogenous, social and citizen resources. |

¹ There is a pun between the name of the town, O'Porto, and the meaning of the word porto in Portuguese, meaning harbour. Source: adapted [5] p. 188.

Table 4. Valpaços social network's innovative projects: eco-social practices.

| Categories | Projects | | |
|------------------------|---|--|---|
| | Afetos (Affections) | Libelinha (Draffonfly) | Idoso Isolado-PII (Isolated Elderly Person) |
| Concept and objectives | Fostering the relational and affective sociability of the elderly who live at home; relocating sociocultural and affective activities to centres of proximity. | Developing parental skills, providing social assistance to single-parent families who are economically disadvantaged; providing direct assistance. | Breaking the feeling of abandonment of dependent elderly people so as to avoid institutionalisation; relocating the monitoring activity for dependent elderly people. |
| Work processes | Organisation and implementation of cultural, recreational, relational, and rehabilitation activities that have been relocated; publication of activity calendars; mobilisation of logistical resources. | Signalling and diagnostic analysis; dissemination of activities and calendars; encouragement of group activities to empower families; assistance response and professional qualifications. | Signalling, diagnostic analysis, and individualised intervention at home. Monitoring health services; articulating with the formal social action network. |

Table 4. Cont.

| Categories | Projects | | |
|------------------------|---|---|---|
| | Afetos (Affections) | Libelinha (Draffonfly) | Idoso Isolado-PII (Isolated Elderly Person) |
| Participation | Inter-institutional, citizen, and solidary participation | Inter-institutional, citizen participation. | Inter-institutional, citizen participation. |
| Sustainability factors | Durability of the process (since 1999); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of additional endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since 2000); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of additional endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since 2014); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of additional endogenous resources. |

Source: adapted [5] p. 190.

Table 5. Santa Maria da Feira social network's innovative projects: eco-social practices.

| Categories | Projects | | |
|------------------------|---|--|--|
| | Cuidar de Quem Cuida (Caring for Carers) | Direitos e Desafios (Rights and Challenges) | ALPE |
| Concept and objectives | Assisting informal carers of people with dementia; assisting carers of people with dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease; carrying out delocalized actions in two offices located in different parts of the municipality. | Ensuring people's rights through various responses - domestic violence victims, both perpetrators and families; developing delocalized initiatives in parish forums. | Enhancing employability through training initiatives that meet the requirements of the labour market; helping young unemployed people create their own jobs; Developing delocalized initiatives in parish forums. |
| Work processes | Provision of gerontological, legal, psychological, and social work assistance; mobilisation of social and health support responses; planning, scheduling, and development of occupational and psychological support forums. | Informational and psychosocial support for legal counselling and referral; planning and provision of informative, therapeutic, educational, and recreational activities. | Promotion of personal and professional development activities; participants' orientation toward formal training mechanisms and/or the creation of their own business and social innovation; planning, organisation and promotion of motivational and informative activities. |
| Participation | Inter-institutional and community participation. | Inter-institutional and community participation. | Inter-institutional and communal participation. |
| Sustainability factors | Durability of the process, since 2012; workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of additional endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since the 90's); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of additional endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since 2005); work culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of additional endogenous resources. |

Source: Adapted [5] p. 192.

Table 6. Lousada social network's innovative projects: eco-social practices.

| Categories | Projects | | |
|------------------------|--|--|--|
| | Movimento Sénior (The Senior Movement) | Dicas (Tips) | Festival Internacional das Camélias (International Camellia Festival) |
| Concept and Objectives | Promoting healthy and active aging processes; providing activities to the elderly, and relocating them to various centres in the municipality. | Promoting psycho-social support activities and reinforcing academic pathways from pre-school to university education. | Valuing the local resource (several camellia species) and promoting other economic activities like tourism and handicrafts through the Camellia Fair. |
| Work Processes | Design and implementation of training, recreational, cultural, sports, rehabilitation and information activities that promote an active lifestyle, the well-being of senior persons, and intergenerational coexistence; development of the appropriate delocalisation logistics. | Planning and implementation of activities to support educational success and prevent school abandonment; assistance to teachers and educators; provision of individualised psychological follow-up for students who have been flagged. | Planning and development of the annual Camellia Fair; inclusion of theatre, dance, painting and craft activities in the fair's program so as to involve social action audiences. |
| Participation | Inter-institutional and community participation. | Inter-institutional participation. | Inter-institutional participation. |
| Sustainability Factors | Durability of the process (since 2013); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since 2010); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since 2011); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of endogenous resources. |

Source: Adapted [5] p. 194.

Table 7. Guimarães social network's innovative projects: eco-social practices.

| Categories | Projects | | |
|------------------------|---|---|---|
| | Guimarães 65+ | Consigo (With You) | Guimarães Acolhe (Guimarães Welcomes . . .) |
| Concept and Objectives | Ensuring aging conditions at home through community solidarity mechanisms; promoting the articulation between the family network and the services in the field. | Providing a wide range of assistance to parishes in order to temporarily or permanently alleviate dependency. | Welcoming people in need of international protection and granting them rights of citizenship-integration of refugees. |
| Work Processes | Creation of a social managers' pool to accompany the elderly in articulation with the IPSS [†] ; creation of a mobile communication network between the elderly and their families and between the elderly and the health and social welfare services. | Provision of home care to the elderly people referred by the Guimarães 65+ program; creation and management of a technical aid bank; setting up of recycling and/or re-use procedures for equipment that has been acquired and/or donated to the project. | Putting together of a personalised reception and integration plan; mobilisation of public integration services (health, social security, universities, schools); engaging of local managers in informal support of the reception process. |
| Participation | Inter-institutional and community participation with volunteers. | Inter-institutional and community participation with volunteers. | Inter-institutional and communal participation with volunteers. |

Table 7. Cont.

| | | | |
|------------------------|--|--|--|
| Sustainability Factors | Durability of the process (since 2012); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since 2016); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since 2015); workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of endogenous resources. |
|------------------------|--|--|--|

¹ IPSS is the Portuguese acronym for the Private Institution for Social Solidarity. Source: Adapted [5] p. 196.

Table 8. Viana do Castelo social network's innovative projects: eco-social practices.

| Categories | Projects | | |
|------------------------|--|---|---|
| | Envelhecer Com Qualidade (Aging with Quality) | Banco do Voluntariado (Volunteer Work Bank) | Capacitar Para a Qualificação das Redes Sociais do Minho e Lima (Prepare to Qualify Minho and Lima Social Networks) |
| Concept and Objectives | Reinforcing active and healthy aging through activities designed to strengthen identity, self-esteem, and physical exercise at home. | Strengthening voluntary work by bringing together people who are interested in volunteer work and organizations that promote voluntary work. | Identifying and exploring the strengths and weaknesses of social networks, as well as enabling them to qualify in terms of social analysis and innovation in interventions. |
| Work Processes | Development of cultural, recreational, relational, informative, gymnastics, cinema, dance, and bonding activities, subject to registration; implementation of a registration system for activities; mobilization of the appropriate logistics. | Creation of a computer platform with information on volunteer vacancies and applications; volunteer training and support to IPSS; implementation of activities to collect and distribute food through a selection of people and families in situations of economic and social need. | Training, information and support to reflexivity in order to enable social networks to intervene socially; identification and dissemination of good practices. |
| Participation | Inter-institutional and community participation. | Inter-institutional participation through volunteer work. | Inter-institutional participation. |
| Sustainability Factors | Durability of the process (since 2010); Workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since 2014); Workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of endogenous resources. | Durability of the process (since 2012); Workplace culture in partnership and governance; mobilisation of endogenous resources. |

Source: Adapted [5] p. 198.

Local projects work in vulnerable areas, relying on innovations that are related to the goals of local processes. Those goals vary, from strengthening solidarity through networking to providing additional protective services and increasing the service's response capacity in a given domain. As regards the sustainability concept, discourses emphasize the long-term viability of the support systems that have been built, as well as the network dimensions, multilevel governance, and the mobilisation of agents and endogenous resources, including the involvement of the business sector.

For further analysis of projects see Table 4.

The partnerships formulated new local responses, focusing on social needs conditioned by the functionalities of the territory. Thus, sociability is deepened, new solidarities are created, and the structural response capacity in place is complemented with the organization of community support systems relocated to various places in the county. The projects work in the areas of ageing, economic and parental vulnerability, and promote

social integration and the strengthening of basic social rights. The sustainability perspective emphasised the long-term viability of the projects, the network culture, multilevel governance, and the practice of mobilising adequate endogenous resources.

The Santa Maria da Feira Social Network highlighted the projects listed in Table 5.

The projects operate in the areas of social rights, displaying an orientation towards sustainability principles, which deepens the strengthening of solidarities, the organisation of complementary community systems, and the relocation of services to various places in the municipality. In the interpretation of sustainability, the speeches allude to aspects like the durability of products, with projects having been in place for more than twenty years; networking dynamics; multilevel governance; and the mobilisation of endogenous resources.

“Today’s projects are different from what they represented in the 1980s. They do not have such a short time horizon, and there are many more concerns about sustainability in the practices they have generated. A project is reconfigured and expanded in time and space.” GF3

For further analysis of the projects, see Table 6.

As before, the projects focus on vulnerable local areas; ageing; children’s and young people’s schooling; and the valorisation of economic resources. Likewise, the sustainability vision highlights the durability of the community products offered, the partnership working process, multilevel governance, and the resource mobilisation, including the business sector.

“Today’s projects are different...There is a greater awareness of sustainability issues...Sometimes they change their name, but they continue to work with the same audiences (...).” GF4

A comprehensive concept of sustainability is visible in the annual Camellia Fair project, a project operating in the environmental, economic, and social dimensions with associated promotional, recreational, craft, and tourist activities.

For further analysis of the projects, see Table 7.

The different categories that have been analysed have produced similar results to those obtained in previous projects. Similar notions of innovation and sustainability stand out, emphasising the reinforcement of solidarities and the long-term viability of the service; the partnership working process; multilevel governance; and resource mobilisation.

“(...) We provide a network of social managers and mobile communication equipped with an SOS system, with direct access to family members or services working in the field.” E5

“In the 1980s, projects had short execution times and this created some gaps in the continuity of support. Now a project is reconfigured to provide answers.” GF5

For further analysis of the projects, see Table 8.

Models of locally operating social action include aging at home, activating forms of social support, articulating solidarity strategies, encouraging intergenerational and communal sociability, and improving local, patrimonial, personal, and economic resources.

“Although the dominant tone of these projects is volunteer work or the collection of food products, (...) they are structured as regular offers and mobilize a series of actors.” GF6

As welfare-partnerships at the municipal level, social networks are responsible for various community responses, almost always justified by the institutions’ deficient response resulting from the universalist support framework. Despite their predominantly social orientation, social networks have introduced new dimensions of support in the territories and organized new complementary products to those offered by the public network in place. The diversity of intervention proposals seems to indicate the search for social action formulae inscribed in a comprehensive sustainability concept that includes systemic,

preventive, and communal integrality perspectives deemed as befitting the eco-social perspective by the literature.

The Strategic Plans show an obvious emphasis on the so-called “ecological effect”, looking for the relationship between the social and physical environment in terms of the enumeration of social problems and clarifying both the actual capacity for social integration and the prospective thinking underlying the creation of new social products. Changes in the local systems of social action’s *modus operandi* can be seen in work process narratives which allude to collaborative dynamics of institutional and professional reflexivity, product development, strategic planning, citizen participation and multilevel governance.

“In addition to the social network structures [Plenary and Executive Centre], we have Parish Forums, which are proximity structures that meet regularly, involving technicians, board presidents, and other local agents. The network made it possible to increase professionalization and institutionalization but also local competitiveness and the quality of work. We are no longer voluntarily working on cooperation and context.” GF3

“We are currently much more familiar with social diagnosis and with local and supra-municipal strategic planning, as well as articulation for the construction of solutions and subsequent implementation.” GF5

Furthermore,

“We have an attached technical secretariat, namely for the submission of candidacies. There is a device for organising the response to the county’s problems, involving the community and partners, from the Parish Forums.” E3

Continuing with the analysis of projects in Table 9.

Table 9. From the Social Development Plan (PDS) analysis to the actors’ perception.

| Municipality | Strategic Axes | Conception Views |
|--------------|--|---|
| OPO | Network dynamisation, training and innovation; priority areas of intervention, children and young people, seniors; disability, mental health, addiction, homelessness, gender violence; ethnic minorities. | The interpretation of problems and resources led to the creation of intervention axes. GF1 There were not exactly moments of consultation with the population, let’s say that the technicians have a concrete idea of problems [from their work with the public]. GF1 Working groups that involve industry partners. E5GF1 The University of O’Porto was in charge of all the argumentation. GF1 |
| VPA | Population-ageing; qualification and school and socio-professional integration; intervention in specific groups. | The axes are established according to the problems and policies [reference to universalist responses].E3GF2 Public meetings are held by the municipality (...), as well as workshops and group meetings (...). We call in experts to listen to the partnerships. GF2 Working groups are created based on the areas of development that we are interested in. GF2 It is the municipality that draws up the plan. E2 |
| SMF | Employability, educational and professional qualification; inclusion of vulnerable groups; social responsibility and citizenship; environmental safety and transportation. | We organized parish forums and working groups [forums include community members, working groups, and sector partners] . . . we had extensive discussions about the issues and resources (...). GF3 The co-production discourse is applied. GF3 Forums had the effect of mobilising citizens. GF3 There is a technical structure of the municipality (...) that supports the construction of documents to support the organization of the community consultation work and assumes the systematisation and design of the strategic plan. GF3 |

Table 9. Cont.

| Municipality | Strategic Axes | Conception Views |
|--------------|---|---|
| LSD | Human capital; economic potential and employment; inclusive capital. | The working groups are the pillars of the approach. GF4 [In moments of consultation with the population] The proximity and the relationship with the families already give us an idea of how problems are felt. GF4 The Social and Economic Studies Institute led the reflection and the argumentation. GF4 The council's PDS is articulated with the supra-municipal plan, which establishes anchor projects. GF4 |
| GUI | Innovation capacity; territorial development. | Thematic working groups were set up in areas identified as priorities [concerning institutional participation]. GF5 Then we extended the discussion to the parish nucleus of the interparish social commissions [concerning citizen participation]. GF5 There is a municipal SDP that is linked to the inter-municipal one, and the council priority axes are linked to the inter-municipal platform's orientation. GF5 [The executive nucleus and the municipal social action team are in charge of the systematization]. |
| VDC | Local economy, employment promotion and entrepreneurship; health promotion and active aging; education, family and social cohesion. | From working groups (...) in each of the axes [referring to institutional participation]. GF6 We now have more room for locally decided actions. GF6 This discussion [referring to the argumentation] is animated by the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo. GF6 |

Source: Adapted [5] p. 183.

This approach promotes citizenship processes and associates the renewal of products with democratic design systems through participatory methodologies and the strategic redefinition of the territorial base, thus engaging both public and community actors in building multilevel territoriality.

The planning design is oriented toward place-based approach objectives; it is materialized in new development models, institutions, practices, and networks; it follows a governance dynamic that includes efficient resource allocation, articulation of local and inter-municipal objectives, community consultation, innovation, and strategic predictability of new products. There is now an increased capacity to articulate the functioning of the partnership with sustainable development, leveraging contextualised and lasting community solidarity initiatives.

The activities included in the social network approach were also examined so as to provide evidence as to which ones the professionals considered to be the most affected (see Table 10).

Planning, governance, communication with the public, and emergency action activities were identified as constitutive practices pursued by local agents by the six partnerships. Integrated intervention, multilevel articulation, and empowerment of social groups, as well as political mediation for socio-territorial cohesion, correspond to activities taken into consideration from an improvement and applicability reinforcement perspective. During the interviews, professionals from the Social Network Partnership discussed possible compromise solutions to exercise political mediation with a greater degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the local political power, emphasising the partnership's role, and inherently the professionals' role, in the knowledge and explanation of local specificities.

Table 10. The approach's representative activities.

| Approach | Analysis Units | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|---|
| | OPO | VPA | LOU | SMF | GUI | VDC | |
| Project development and territorialisation based on local issues | x | x | x | x | x | x | 6 |
| Governance, networking, partnership with local authority coordination | x | x | x | x | x | x | 6 |
| Communication processes with beneficiaries-ethnomethodology | x | x | x | x | x | x | 6 |
| Integrated intervention in priority social groups | x | | x | x | x | | 4 |
| Political mediation and construction of community solutions complementary to universal support | | | x | x | x | | 3 |
| Articulation of strategic axes with regional territorial units | x | | x | x | x | | 4 |
| Emergency action | x | x | x | x | x | x | 6 |
| Empowerment, collectivist and critical action | | x | x | x | x | | 4 |

Source: Adapted [5] p. 162.

5. Discussion

The present study departs from a comprehensive concept of sustainable development, which, although focusing on environmental problems, is not limited to the notion arising from the harmful and irrational use of natural resources. Poverty and vulnerability resulting from capitalism's accumulation mechanisms and unsustainable management and production practices were also covered [24,38].

What is at issue here is the governance (local, regional, and territorial) of social affairs, oriented towards promoting the necessary compensation of asymmetries, the development of community solidarity resources, and the innovation of formulas for socio-labour integration and enhancement of local resources.

That is, the present research was based on a broad understanding of the environment, which included the family, social circles, institutions, political and economic structures, the community, the natural world, buildings, inequalities, poverty, habitats, and culture [24].

Places are historical constructs; to explain them, one must assume their peculiarities, as well as the knowledge and means that shape the local experience [9]. Most vulnerabilities do not result from biological characteristics but from social determinants, inherent to the so-called "ecological effect" [27]. The development of territorialist perspectives in the economy stems from the assumption of how important the space variable is to knowledge and the objective of seeking greater socio-economic equity. It is essential to interpret the territorial variable's role in the formation of contemporary social structures and dynamics, territorially-based productive organizations, innovation-generating synergies, and the interactions of local actors in territorial management structures.

Therefore, the interpretation of poverty, aging, or any other social area implies analysing the different functionalities installed in the territories and the conditions of instrumental access to collective services [13]. Operating through horizontal relationships, collective, multilevel, collaborative governance triggers discussions, negotiations, and deliberations for the territory, thus becoming mandatory as well as challenging. Many of these partnerships are still being dared to discuss theoretical concepts of development, collective action, protection systems, and eco-social production. This professional reflexivity is fundamental to producing deeper, qualified configurations and models of eco-social practices. Municipalities play a major role as agents of sustainable development, but their responsibility in transforming ambitious global goals into integrative local practices is increasingly framed in these partnership structures [44], and their qualification is therefore essential, as established by the 17th goal of the 2030 Agenda.

The Welfare Partnerships approach at the municipal level, ensuing from Welfare State reform and the search for sustainability in social protection policies, translates to the creation of specific programs for certain selectivities. Innovation requires constant creativity, simultaneously contextualised in the subjectivities/territories relationship and compared with the welfare system's general principles. The search for complements to universalism as well as for inter-institutional, interdisciplinary, flexible and adequate formulae to analyse

complex and multidimensional problems, together with the new development agendas, justifies territorial selectivity in how public intervention is conducted.

Evidence points to the emergence of change formulae in social partnerships which seek to involve local agents in managing daily integrated activities that activate local resources already existing in the territory and attempt to complement the institutional solidarities installed, mobilise the strategic planning of local action and inter-institutional participation, and reinforce governance mechanisms that are progressively committed to eco-social creativity, with multilevel articulation and a rights mediation that takes into account the territorial variable effect on inequalities.

Welfare partnerships are implementing local, eco-social, and critical social action models in line with Peeters' critical eco-social approach perspective [26]. Several authors argue that social work has to move towards these new designs of individual and social well-being, adopting new models of sustainability and environmental protection [23,25].

The Social Network offers a contextual analysis proposal that focuses on the territory, the stakeholders' municipal and multilevel articulation, and the construction of sustainable forms of social and territorial cohesion [5]. Nevertheless, regardless of local projects' convergent potential with the new formulations of sustainable development, these partnerships are still faced with specific challenges, such as: understanding the territory and the creativity of change; ensuring social justice in the access to social rights and socio-territorial cohesion; promoting product innovation according to eco-community concerns; coordinating public as well as local resources and mechanisms; and encouraging citizens' participatory capacity and multilevel governance.

It is important to conceive the territory as a multidimensional space, influenced by different types of practices, relationships, and bonds; symbolic and cultural systems; and local productive relationships [9]. It is also worthwhile to examine how technicians, institutions, and audiences interpret and incorporate spatial concerns into planning [46]. It is a question of collectively recognising and discussing the problems and carrying out multidimensional analyses that are both subjective and illuminating of the views of those citizens for whom the action is intended.

It is vital to develop effective change proposals in order to find new solutions for eco-community, economic, socio-relational, cultural, and symbolic issues. It is critical to bring together the network's public and social actors with other actors from the economic and environmental sectors to explore and expand reality interpretations and intervention tactics from an eco-community development viewpoint. Understanding the relationships between identity, place, and power, as well as developing culturally specific conceptions of nature and ecosystem formation, are all components of acting on place [9].

The centralism that has been observed in some local power actors' actions suggests the need to develop resistance mechanisms to fight municipalisation of territorial policy management. Everyday management of sustainable development plans in municipalities with limited economic and human resources should entail the coordination of players and collaborative work processes that are appropriate for the territory. Theories of endogenous development show limitations arising from a disproportionately autarkic configuration, which explains why partnerships, horizontal organizations rather than centralized ones, collective rather than sectoral, and necessarily segmental strategies for phenomena analysis and understanding have gained space in the political arena.

The change may benefit from the introduction of new methodologies, immersion, predictability, and participation (not just institutional). In this sense, from a place-based approach, it is vital to involve the sector's strategic partners in innovating, creating, and monitoring local development initiatives; the search for alternative labour relations; the creation of aging-in-place community systems; or social services co-production. The implementation of alternate forms of local leadership, depending on the type of project or axis of intervention, can be effective. It is essential to articulate local strategic objectives with regional and national ones, favouring contextualised and inter-territorial interpreta-

tions, aware of the comparison of human rights and types of state social benefits between neighbouring territories.

The proposal for the design and implementation of territorial policies in municipal welfare partnerships enables concepts of comprehensive sustainable development. These policies are expected to pursue broad objectives, providing local responses based on community and socio-relational values such as the recovery of lifestyles, the quality of production and distribution of collective goods and services, safety, and the various networks' capacity to converge towards access to quality-of-life goods, some more strongly than others [47].

The respondents' view is revealing of a practice that is based on activities that represent the approach in need of clarification. And although this may be construed as a limitation to the social partnerships approach's applicability in Portugal when it comes to eco-social innovation, strategic planning, and governance, the findings in this paper allow for the identification of sustainable development patterns in municipal partnerships in developed countries, as well as crucial factors in the welfare partnership approach:

1. The innovative nature of the search for eco-community social products/answers, mobilizing universal policies and community systems, preserving the challenge of systemic action, socio-territorial cohesion, economic efficiency, and ecological prudence;
2. The improvement of local and regional strategic planning practices by monitoring and aligning them with local projects designed to correct the ecological effects that cause local vulnerabilities;
3. Multilevel governance improvement; stakeholder and resource allocation; multilevel articulation emphasis; political mediation; and the long-term viability of established local processes.

6. Conclusions

The concept of sustainability has motivated different formulations throughout its trajectory, culminating in a comprehensive concept that accommodates economic growth dynamics, social justice, and the preservation of environmental resources. Several authors have added other aspects to the concept, like the products' durability, planning, governance, and eco-community intervention [9,39–42,48].

The cases studied illustrate the usefulness of adopting a sustainable development model in welfare partnerships, guided by the objectives of a place-based approach and materialised in new paradigms of development, institutions, knowledge, practices, and networks; new visions of cohesion, integration, and correction of asymmetries that take into account efficient resource allocation, the articulation of local and inter-municipal objectives, innovation, and the capacity for strategic predictability of new products.

Within the scope of policy territorialization, the solutions to complex contemporary social problems must entail the integrated implementation of strategies and multilevel governance in a simultaneously holistic, systemic, eco-social, structural, and community innovation attitude.

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