The paper aims to explore the concepts of social partnerships, social co-production and governance, in order to promote a comparison between current thought and on-going research. The term “partnership” refers to a structural configuration characterized by the co-presence of different social subjects - state, market and third sector - and by reciprocal and collaborative social action that seeks to achieve project goals and is based on the implementation of mostly medium- to long-term relations (Osborne 2000; Powell, Geoghegan 2004; Glendinning, et al., 2002; Newman 2001; Rummery 2002; McQuaid 2000; Boccacin 2005, 2008).

The term “co-production” entered into the field of sociological reflection only recently, in particular with regard to the third sector. As with many other sociological concepts, this term presents a polysemy that, on the one hand, enables its application to many and diverse situations, while, on the other makes it difficult to establish an analytical definition that could promote a comprehensive review of the conceptual debate (Verschuere, Brandsen, Pestoff 2012).

The concept of co-production has two discernible semantic roots: the first concerns the participation of individual (citizen) initiatives among the general public, the goal of which is to benefit the city itself. The second highlights the contribution of the subject to the production process of services, through participation in voluntary organizations and networks of relationships established with public and private entities. The intertwining of both semantics is often the basis of the processes of successful co-production.

The function of governance is essential in both of these two processes (social partnerships and co-production) and often affects the role that third sector organizations can play in policy planning, as well as the contribution they can offer to the improvement of well-being and quality of life within the community. In particular, some authors emphasize the participatory dynamics inherent in the definition of the term "governance" by referring to "hybrid governance" and "co-governance" (Bertin and Fazzi 2010).

These hybrid forms of governance are based on regulatory mechanisms between the public and private sectors: within these forms of governance they find a balance that is, however, contingent upon such intangible resources as authority, trust and social capital (Bertin and Fazzi 2010).

These forms of co-governance are created in an attempt to govern growing differentiation through implementation of democratic initiatives and citizen participation. They involve the presence of representatives of various levels of action (national, regional, local) to whom is given the opportunity to vote in the choices that affect the development of a particular sector and its future. Thus, the structures of co-governance depend upon the constitutional differences and legal frameworks in force in the various welfare systems in which
they are used (Pestoff 2012). Specifically, co-governance concerns input, while partnership and co-production involve output, or implementation of services. Co-governance involves third sector actors and other public and private entities in the implementation of public policies related to a particular field or area of intervention (White, Acheson, Scaramuzzino, de Tagtachian 2010). Similarly, forms of governance such as "collaborative governance" (Huxman 2000), and "flexible network governance" (Hardiman 2006), which is made up of a complex, yet flexible, network of relationships facilitate bipartite and tripartite negotiations among institutions, representatives of voluntary organizations, and citizens’ groups. The ultimate goal of said negotiations is to reach a joint decision. Thus, cooperation and exchange between actors of different sectors become the core of an innovative relational process (Glendinning, Powell, Rummery 2002).

The consideration of each of these three concepts, individually and in combination, has recently begun to be explored in surveys and qualitative studies conducted in Italy, and looks to be useful in promoting understanding of emerging configurations of the third sector in the field of human services (Boccacin 2009; Boccacin, Rossi, Bramanti 2011; Rossi Boccacin 2012). The paper proposes a comparison of different theoretical approaches towards the definition of the above-mentioned concepts, as well as some interesting experiences through which we can observe these phenomena and their social impact.