

07

Partecipazione, inclusione e gestione dei conflitti nei processi di governo del territorio

A CURA DI CARLA TEDESCO E ELENA MARCHIGIANI



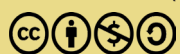
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9 CARLA TEDESCO, ELENA MARCHIGIANI

Partecipazione, inclusione e gestione dei conflitti nei processi di governo del territorio

Questioni, approcci, innovazioni

22 FRANCESCO BERNI, SERENA MAIOLI, MARTINA LODI

L'eredità delle sperimentazioni: la sostenibilità dei processi di rigenerazione collaborativa e delle pratiche di riuso urbano

28 FRANCESCO BERNI, GIAMPAOLO SANTANGELO, DAVIDE TESTA

Processi di innovazione aperta a Reggio Emilia: scienza, politica e cittadinanza attiva

35 FRANCESCO CAMPAGNARI

Esplorare le azioni civiche urbane oltre il locale. Prime riflessioni sugli effetti delle relazioni civiche sovralocali e translocali sulle politiche urbane e sui repertori di conoscenza

40 FRANCESCA CARION

Il cambiamento generativo dei processi di innovazione sociale nella rigenerazione urbana: verso nuovi strumenti di supporto alla creazione di strategie

45 ELISA CARUSO

Un approccio sperimentale per la pianificazione collaborativa

50 FRANCESCA COGNETTI, MARIA ELENA PONNO

Urban Living Labs e università. Riflessioni dal margine sul ruolo dell'esperto, tra posizionamento e neutralità

56 GIOVANNI LAINO, CLAUDIO CALVARESÌ

Dove sono gli artisti? Vedo solo populist

63 ELENA OSTANEL

Spazi intermedi di pianificazione: quali esiti, quali processi, quali innovazioni

71 DANIELA POLI, CHIARA BELINGARDI

Progettare città e territori con sguardo di genere

77 MADDALENA ROSSI

Ripensare il territorio della follia Volterra: la città e la cura

-
- 84 CAMILLA VENTURINI
Modelli alternativi nel sistema del cibo. Pratiche di comunità in Friuli-Venezia Giulia

Percorsi partecipativi, strumenti e processi di pianificazione

- 94 MARIALUCIA CAMARDELLI, ROBERTO MALVEZZI
Comunità partecipanti e processi multi-attore: il progetto Teen Maps Matera
- 102 SELENA CANDIA, FRANCESCA PIRLONE
La partecipazione come strumento per l'elaborazione di un Piano di sviluppo turistico condiviso e responsabile. Le Cinque Terre in Liguria
- 108 ROMINA D'ASCANIO, ANNA LAURA PALAZZO
Chi vive l'Aniene? Conflitti e cooperazioni tra fiume e città
- 115 IRINA DI RUOCCO
The waterfront of Salerno: from product of urban regeneration to diffuser of sustainable social equity
- 124 MICHELANGELO FUSI, MICHELA NOTA, MICHELA TIBONI
L'approccio partecipativo nella progettazione di spazi aperti interessati da interventi infrastrutturali per la modalità pubblica
- 129 RITA GABRIELI, GIOVANNA MANGIALARDI
Rigenerare dal basso. L'esperienza di Foggia
- 139 LUCA GULLÌ, GIUSEPPE SCANDURRA
La lunga parabola della partecipazione civica a Bologna
- 144 MARIA RAFFAELLA LAMACCHIA, ROCCO PASTORE, GIUSEPPE VOLPE
Pianificare il sistema dell'Istruzione tra assetti fisici e istituzionali: simmetrie a scale diverse
- 149 GAETANO GIOVANNI DANIELE MANUELE
Partecipatto: un processo "dal basso" di rigenerazione urbana
- 158 GIULIA MOTTA ZANIN, PASQUALE BALENA, ALESSANDRO BONIFAZI
Pratiche d'uso innovative del territorio e attivazione della sfera pubblica: verso la co-produzione di politiche per la gestione integrata delle zone costiere nella città metropolitana di Bari
-

164 SERENA OLCUIRE
Economie, inclusione e futuro. Appunti sulle esternalità positive delle pratiche di autorganizzazione – e su cosa farne

169 VENERA PAVONE, MEDEA FERRIGNO
Il peso di alcuni nei processi di tutti: riflessione a partire da due esperienze di pianificazione co-produttiva in Sicilia Orientale

175 IVAN PISTONE
Geo-spatial and psycho-social approaches to manage the city-sea interface in the context of maritime spatial planning

Transizione ecologica, partecipazione e attivazione dal basso

183 NICOLÒ CHIERICHETTI
Participation as a device for raising Awareness. The challenge of Urban Forestry

190 GABRIELLA ESPOSITO DE VITA, LUISA FATIGATI
Arte e attivazione femminile: pratiche di cura per la rigenerazione urbana in contesti marginali

197 CASSANDRA FONTANA, ELENA TARSI, IACOPO ZETTI, ANDREA TESTI
Ecosistemi collettivi. Uno strumento per mappare i servizi ecosistemici di supporto alla partecipazione nell'ambito dell'European Green Deal

201 ANTONIO RACITI
“Diversità profonde” nella pianificazione per la transizione ecologica: Riflessioni da Gloucester, Massachusetts, USA

206 STEFANO SIMONCINI, LUCA BRIGNONE
Reti socio-ecologiche per lo sviluppo auto-sostenibile. Evidenze qualitative e quantitative nel contesto romano

217 SILVIA SIVO
Fronti d'onda. Conflitto e inclusione tra azioni dal basso e processi istituzionali nella governance dei fronti portuali e costieri urbani

Abitare, co-abitare, includere

225 VALENTINA CIUFFREDA, ANGELICA NANNI, LUCIANA MASTROLONARDO
Riabitare i margini: da luoghi di transito a luoghi di inclusione

-
- 231 ENRICO DALLA PIETÀ
Inclusività e conflitto nello sviluppo di urbanità alternative
- 239 CRISTINA DANISI, DANIELE PAGANO, ANTONELLA SANTORO
Politiche condivise e progetti sperimentali nel processo “Puglia Regione
Universitaria. Studiare e vivere in città accoglienti e sostenibili”
- 250 LUISA FATIGATI, GABRIELLA ESPOSITO DE VITA
Il progetto InkCamp: processo eco-collaborativo per il disegno del piano
urbanistico di Camposano
- 257 ANNA MAROCCO
Abitare queer come ecologia della cura: nuovi orientamenti per le politiche
dell’abitare
- 262 MARILENA PRISCO
Collaborative Housing for young adults: infrastrutture per l’abitare dei giovani
durante e dopo la pandemia attraverso il caso studio delle student housing
cooperatives statunitensi
- 268 ANDREA RIGON
BEST PAPER Diversità, giustizia e partecipazione: un approccio intersezionale allo sviluppo
urbano in contesti fragili
-

**Transizione ecologica,
partecipazione e attivazione
dal basso**

Participation as a device for raising Awareness. The challenge of Urban Forestry

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Abstract

La discussione proposta affonda le radici nel tentativo di depolarizzare il dominio delle strategie bottom-up da un lato, e la forestazione urbana quale controparte - la cui consapevolezza nelle istituzioni è in crescita, soprattutto vista l'urgenza di adottare politiche efficaci a contrastare, in primis, la tendenza del cambiamento climatico. Questo, tuttavia, ancora non influisce direttamente sui cittadini. Il dibattito mira a comprendere il possibile ruolo della partecipazione nei processi decisionali, di governance e di intervento attivo per sensibilizzare la comunità verso un tema così delicato, legato al diffuso discorso sulle nature-based solutions, sui cambiamenti climatici, sulla resilienza urbana e sulle questioni ambientali. Globalmente, sono migliaia le città e le aree metropolitane che hanno aderito o stanno aderendo a un movimento di forestazione urbana – quali Toronto, Melbourne, Singapore, Londra come esempi virtuosi – e da qualche anno anche la Città Metropolitana di Milano con l'iniziativa di ForestaMi. Il paradigma da risolvere è la rilevante connessione tra la causa che la Forestazione Urbana intende perseguire, e la ricettività dei cittadini, utenti finali di queste strategie. Risulta fondamentale quindi il tentativo di comprendere se, in questo scenario di strategie green di rigenerazione urbana, una proposta partecipativa più intensa e “operativamente transcalare” possa costituire un dispositivo per sensibilizzare “dal basso”. Laddove l'approccio top-down non sembra fornire i risultati attesi, la soluzione potrebbe essere un approccio più radicato dal basso: può un ribaltamento di paradigma essere la soluzione efficace per rilanciare la Forestazione Urbana sul territorio europeo, riconnettendo le persone con la natura?

Parole chiave: participation, urban practices, urban forestry

1 | Towards a definition of Urban Forestry

Some researchers have debated a European definition of urban forestry as distinct from the definition that originated in North America (Konijnendijk, 2006: 15) and is widely accepted worldwide. This European definition focuses mainly on “town forests” of urban fringe woodlands commonly associated with urban settlements in some parts of Northern Europe. However, limiting the focus to just urban woodlands undermines one of the basic principles of urban forestry, the “integrated” approach (Konijnendijk, 2005: 7-12).

In M. Johnston's¹ opinion, this so-called European definition originates from a basic misunderstanding of the essential concept of urban forestry (Johnston, Rushton, 1998: 129-146). Johnston attempted to analyze this explanation by formulating what is known as an “operational definition” of the concept. Urban forestry, or the various activities contributing to sustainable urban forest management, can be described as a planned, systematic, and integrated approach.

Putting aside the difficulties in founding a common and shared definition of Urban Forestry, the founding problem may lie in the fact that there is a profound lack of coordination on local, municipal, national, and international levels. How can we expect citizens to participate and be part of our urban forest ecosystems, be involved, coordinated, and be aware of the topic - who should lead them or not? How can we transform these strategies into a participative one? Should it involve citizens and volunteers?

In the last decades, the so-called bottom-up approach has reached more and more visibility; this term has been adopted from the IT environment and later declined for systems and humanities theories. In the top-down model, a general view of the system is initially formulated, or its primary purpose is described without going into the details of its parts (Pissourios, 2014). Each part of the system is subsequently refined (decomposition, specialization, and specification or identification), adding more and more layers of information. In contrast to the top-down model is bottom-up design, in which individual parts of the system are specified in detail and then connected to form more significant components. Specifically in the humanities domain, we talk about bottom-up sometimes as a synonym for tactical urbanism actions, where the definition of goals and interventions is mainly thought and designed by the final user - in our case,

¹ Independent Scholar on Arboriculture, Landscape and Urban Forestry; Formerly scholar at University of Ulster, he played a leading role in the development of urban forestry in both Britain and Ireland.

citizens. If the regular planning strategy seems to have failed to give coordination and guidelines to the single citizen, maybe the solution could be the bottom-up approach. Can we start with people to revitalize our urban forests?

Agenda 21 is an example of a worldwide action plan led by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, which focuses at all scales on citizens' potential environmental impact to conceive a participated intervention in planning and management (Fors, Faehnie, 2015). Public participation could not only be successful in moving forward in the forestry process, but it may also improve it by giving a balanced integration of the different social demands and enhancing the social sensitization of the theme.

Regarding the necessity to integrate the role of active participation, we must consider the situation on two fronts: the first is due to the difficulties in finding a scientific and operative coordination that inevitably freezes the possibility of widely working on our urban forests, and the second is the fundamental objective of involving citizens as a part that designs the city and conceiving them not only as final users. We need to take distance from the idea that the city is something professionals design for us (Arnstein, 1969: 216-224), but it is incredibly relevant to integrate a dimension of continuous permeability from its daily users. Therefore, it can and should be a collaborative process: urban planners' desire lacks concept for the social dimension, especially people's participation leads to challenges, remaining limited in the technical discipline. An example is the one introduced for the Urban Forest project in Tehran, Iran (Zare, 2016: 224-237). In this design-driven research, the author tried to identify the main factors leading to people's participation to understand the background of the successful output of the project. The bottom-up process here was expected, succeeding in defining effective decision-making and collaborative learning - by analyzing the wishes and views of different citizens.

2 | Interpretative mediations of theory-in-practice. A citizen-science approach

Following the traces of the Tehran scenario and in the horizon of proposing a bottom-up investigation for a bottom-up proposal, a series of interviews in the form of a survey have been proposed to the residents of Milan within the contemporary operations of the Milanese initiative of ForestaMi². In the same way as the proposed approach, the questionnaire technique can be framed in the so-called citizen science domain. There are millions of individuals around the world, most not trained as scientists and academics, which, however, can be engaged in projects of categorizing, collecting, analyzing, and transcribing scientific data - forming what may be definitive a citizens' science.

In terms of content, the questionnaire was structured into sixteen sections, covering the main points of the proposed debate and adopting the branching technique to narrow the question to the respondents (n=502) across the proposed sections. With reference to the opening discourse about the proposed overview on the definition of Urban Forestry, it is interesting to understand the citizens' perception and to reveal and realize the level of comprehension about this innovative topic. In reference to this, Question 8, "How would you define Urban Forestry?" can give an interesting point of view.

The specific question was conceived as free text. 81,8% tried to give a personal definition (n=450), and, in some cases, they tried to explain their understanding and level of awareness even deeper; the answer was intentionally left open. Due to the diversity of answers and upon confronting all the different valid entries (n=432), the responses were sorted into six different columns to categorize and find common trends and patterns of behavior: the classification was based on different categories: Subject of the definition, Spatial location, Type of action, Benefits awareness, Actors involved, and Strategic Criteria. The following step has been to combine and elaborate such categories into a possible reclaimed manifesto for citizen participation and awareness.

3 | Conclusions. A Manifesto for an Aware Urban Forestry

The research assessed the self-reported perception of citizens on participation and the current role of Urban Forestry in the contemporary urban and social transformations arena. This statement is one of the critical elements that have been highlighted and emerged during the research discussion, which should be acknowledged from all the different levels and layers of implementation. When dealing with an Urban Forestry process, we are debating on a green urban transformation strategy and a considerable social metamorphosis of the city and its residents and users. The social and physical dimensions are inevitably interconnected. Considering the two discussion domains as a whole, as forestry framework and involvement dimension, we can highlight how both essential factors affect the positive outcome of a relevant urban and peri-urban transformation as Urban Forestry: the ultimate challenge that is important to acknowledge and

² ForestaMi is an Italian organization based in Milan which aims at increasing the tree canopy of the city with 3 million trees by 2030.

to make an attempt in exploring is the comprehensive investigation of how the top-down processes of forestry could deal with the power and effectiveness of bottom-up devices, such as citizen participation, involvement, and awareness. Thus, the current study provided a preliminary understanding of this conjunction of top-down forestry and bottom-up awareness and participation, which needs to be endorsed and deepened by future replication, for example, by increasing the sample size and understanding different trend patterns within the European continent across different countries.

In urban and peri-urban environments, trees and vegetation have a much more significant influence and wider benefits-provisioning than we are aware of, from reducing the heat loss effect to finding a shaded spot to sit or for our cars, but what was evident is a difficulty of associating intangible benefits in correspondence to much more public-domain benefits. In this sense, we can understand how citizens' awareness level is quite limited to the importance of forestry with its implications on the urban landscape. The proposed survey also reflected this vision in which there is still a restrained perspective and acknowledgment of Urban forestry, its implications, and the possibility of being involved and contributing to tackling contemporary environmental challenges that we must face and find a solution for.

Respondents of these preliminary interviews have proven that this field of intervention is still perceived at a too general level of understanding, dealing with realities that look only at the city landscape and at trees as the subject of the process, with a predominant and shared perception of it as a mere conceptual and reflective strategy. On the other hand, citizens feel extraneous to these processes, conceiving them as green strategies of public consensus in which the individual figure of inhabitants is not involved in the process, lacking the component of the social transformation which we refer to as "Awareness" during the discussion.

Tabella I | Summary table with UF Definition "Strategic Criteria" responses. Source: Extrapolated from the PowerBI Dataset of the Survey proposed by the author. *R1, R2, ... Rn refers to the "Respondent ID"

Strategy	Definition	Quotations from survey
Implementation (116)	It can be considered the most generic definition of Urban Forestry, conceiving the strategy as the simple act of increasing the number of trees, shrubs, and vegetation in a specific location.	« I think we mean a series of numerous interventions aimed at greening the urban context, strengthening the provision of public and private green areas and reconfiguring pre-existing spaces in order to insert plant species (mainly trees and shrubs) » - R442 « Planting different plants closely together in cities or other human settlement areas » - R76
Green vs gray balance (41)	Similar to "Implementation" but with a more specific declination in the dichotomy and contrast between green and gray infrastructure. Urban Forestry was usually defined as a balancing system between the built environment and the more natural landscape.	« The interaction between forestry and urbanized areas. For me, it is bringing these two completely different things and entwining them to coexist and improve the lives of people. » - R53 « Introduction of trees and greenery to form a green structure capable of forming a plant counterpart to the built environment » - R55
Mitigation (32)	From the perspective of Mitigation, UF assumes a predominant functional role in providing ecosystem benefits and services to the urban environment.	« Small indigenous trees group planted on vacant land in a metropolitan area to have some temp control and reduce greenhouse effects » - R258 « One of the most effective, ecologically, socially, and economically sustainable methods to make cities (from metropolises to small towns) more tailored, personally, healthier, more livable. In one sentence, it is the best solution to the climate crisis, together with the drastic reduction of CO2 emissions from our production systems and our hyper-consumerist lifestyles. » - R435
Re-introduction (18)	Parallel to "Green vs. Gray Balance", in this scenario, Urban Forestry is defined as a process that is seen as a sort of re-appropriation of the Urban landscape by the natural environment.	«It is a discipline that aims to repopulate the urban flora, planting new trees where the flora has been cut down following the construction of new buildings. » - R101 « Reintegrate within a district/city/agglomeration a point where it is possible to make the greenery flourish where it was previously present. » - R102

		« Give nature back its rightful place. » - R110
Forest-mimic (17)	Logic for which a development process exists to re-create the Forest landscape within human settlements.	« Creation of biotypes in/near medium/large urban centers in which trees are predominant. » - R415 « A process through which we try to attribute the forest dimension to an urban reality. » - R439
Community (16)	Perspective for which these processes are strictly related to the human dimension, both in terms of target as well as for main drivers of intervention.	« Urban forestry is a process of planning, planting and caring for trees in cities, which administrations, businesses, and citizens, individually or together, do for the health of citizens and to combat the impacts of climate change - R154 « A space of interaction between nature and citizens where these two elements must learn how to interact in a reasonable way. » - R390

Citizens want to be involved in these transformations, recognize the prodigious contribution that bottom-up contributions can bring to greater transformations, and are willing to contribute and be involved - but quite often, the strategies applied by governments and top-down institutions do not allow this interaction. In multiple cases, respondents were astonished to hear that there are Urban Forestry initiatives that rely on citizens' participation and accept and embrace their contribution; in these cases, the main issue and question was instead reflected on “How can I be part of the change, where can I start?”. Multiple submissions in one of the final proposed questions about an assessment of the proposed strategy showed great enthusiasm and improvement of their awareness, as proof that a necessary component to consider and implement is the involvement of people, providing them with all the necessary background information and goals: awareness needs to be grown the same way we do with trees in order to, one day, give back.

In the debate around the massive shadow of unified top-down management, also reflected in the scientific disclosure and in the attempts to raise awareness from the institutional organizations, the assessment of the survey and interview results want to be proposed in the form of “A manifesto for an Aware Urban Forestry”, which is designed reversing the current paradigm: it is no longer a discussion from a top-down perspective, but rather a guideline driven by citizens towards the top, a bottom-up definition and instruction program for governments and associations on how to involve and lead the powerful resources of inhabitants effectively.

The manifesto – based on the responses provided to the question “What Would make you join an Urban Forestry initiative right now?” and after a conspicuous process of elaboration – can be summarized into six main points for an effective involvement, a reverse attempt of re-appropriation of their own “right to the city” in an indirect method. If the aim is to have greater involvement and awareness from the bottom, the strategy of involving citizens cannot come from the top: the process of participation must be raised and defined from the bottom, as well as tackling fears and expectations, concerns, and potential suggestions.

A manifesto designed through six different concepts for an effective social and urban transformation - and as Urban Forestry should be: Designed for People, Designed by People.

3.1 | Proximity

« People are more likely to get involved if this is happening in their own neighborhood. » (R128)

One of the main issues highlighted during the research is a high non-participation rate due to proximity criteria. Citizens have proven to be much more interested and have a greater possibility to be engaged and actively involved in participatory strategies when the occasion is closer to their residence, work location, or to a space that they have a habit of visiting: the opportunity of being involved in an initiative located close to a recurrent space enhance the possibility to be engaged.

In this perspective, this criterion tells us about the necessity of constituting a capillary network when promoting a specific strategy, whether the initiative is the same or a composition of parallel networks collaborating. In the proposed survey, 54,8 % (n=258) of the respondents declared that they “Have never heard about Urban Forestry” or that they have never participated because they “Could not find initiatives in my city”; this piece of information tells us the importance of a process of network-building in which the initiative makes attempts over the more comprehensive possible range of municipalities and realities, in order also to involve the smallest cities.

3.2 | Ownership

« It is important to plan urban forestry from below because the citizens who have to experience those places must feel them as their own, to make them responsible for respect, care, and life. » (R42)

Participants feel more engaged when they can prove that they belong to a more significant and common objective and when they can correspond to a shared problem with their contribution.

Many of the most successful initiatives have been the ones that allowed a personal connection with the activity in which they were involved, for example, conceiving the activity as a family or through a conceptual appropriation and ownership of personal satisfaction. We refer to experiences where an entire network of people involved in the same initiative for the same objective can achieve more significant urban and social transformations in a perspective where unity is strength.

Participants are also more willing to contribute if they can provide and gain something personal; it is the case of the *Dona un Albero alla tua Città* campaign by ForestaMi on the territory of the Metropolitan City of Milan³. The campaign allowed people to donate "your tree" personally or on behalf of a loved one. Different companies, such as LAND⁴, also embraced it, which donated one tree for each employee, developing a sense of belonging and personal affection.

3.3 | Awareness

« Direct participation with green care companies and municipal bodies, sitting around a table to understand problems and suggest changes/solutions, making good communication, and keeping all the parts up to date and in consideration for decisions. » (R375)

One of the main points touched on during this discussion is the role of awareness on the type of process and strategic approach that wants to be applied, specifically in what are the objectives, opportunities and benefits, threats, and emergencies that the initiative is willing to tackle and contribute in counteract.

Citizens want to know about how they can contribute actively and make the change as part of a community, but also seek clarity in what a specific organization or initiative aims at achieving; in order to accomplish this, an effective and transparent communication campaign constitutes the most efficient device to share knowledge and raise awareness. In most of the analyzed case studies - reports, information, and instructions were not targeted to an audience of individual citizens but rather to a network of professionals and public administration. For instance, the operation that ForestaMi is trying to achieve is using an effective marketing campaign to reach all the possible citizens and provide them with information to raise awareness, even from the smallest unit living in the city.

We cannot expect people to be involved, be part and participate in making the change if they do not know what they are fighting and contributing to, as being sure that citizens are aware of the importance of each objective is probably even more important than being active on the field. What is important, highlighted by multiple respondents, is that awareness needs to be genuine and not come from political public consensus actions.

3.4 | Long-term

« The importance of a project with a long-term plan that does not end as a simple game. » (R108)

It is all about a Long-Term strategy and perspective. Participants do not look at tomorrow's impact, they do not seek an immediate change, but they can perceive that it is a medium-term effort. They are willing not to make the change today but rather to take action that will significantly impact future generations. Many of the responses mentioned the role of children and future generations, the effects not only on the contemporary cities but much more as a look at tomorrow.

This type of perception can be considered specific and typical in the field of urban forestry, as citizens tend to demand to see the effects of any kind of transformation immediately and to benefit in real time from the positive consequences of a given intervention. This is not the case for Urban Forestry, where an effective intrinsic awareness allows a medium/long-term perspective.

3.5 | One agenda

« Because political decisions are made according to the interests of citizens and only when citizens start to put pressure to participate, only then, will politics begin to consider urban forestation seriously. » (R411)

It is all about one shared agenda. In the perspective of one common agenda, respondents have proven to deeply understand the necessity of being "together for a mission", where all the different stakeholders

³ Forestami had actively promoted the research outcomes during the initial phase of the program. During and right after the pandemic season, an widespread marketing campaign in Milan aimed at sharing information and raising awareness on the initiative.

⁴ LAND is an international landscape architecture studio with offices in Italy, Switzerland and Germany

involved in the process are aligned on the same patterns, creating a dense and diversified mosaic, perceiving the common long-term objectives that bond all the fields.

Citizens showed a great understanding that Urban Forestry is not just about forestry and green branches of knowledge; it is instead a multidisciplinary approach that crosses multiple fields of expertise - even though the environmental one is the leading background - from communication to management, from urban planning to agronomy. Most of the respondents in the proposed survey came from multiple fields of expertise, all sharing an interest in contributing with their possibilities and providing their peculiar and individual endowment across the different disciplines. Participants are also aware of the necessity to be aligned on a common front, where support from institutional organizations and public administrations is vital, including support from mass media and the so-called influencers, because what we need to face, the benefits coming from it, and the necessity of doing it, is a shared duty. This vision also reflects the citizens' understanding that they can empower governments, talking about a popular echo towards top-down.

3.6 | Involvement

« Citizens can influence political decisions, both locally and nationally, which ultimately lead to a paradigm shift. Personally, as a citizen, I think I have to take care of the space I live in, and this would be a way to make the city space more livable (for me). » (R373)

The last point of the manifesto for citizens' effective involvement and participation in such strategies is the necessity and claim to be involved at all levels of intervention and action.

Too often, citizens are considered only survey samples or the smallest sector of a pyramidal structure of management and intervention. Instead, they should be involved in a trans-operational approach, allowing them to be able to contribute in all the possible phases of the strategy, from the active intervention to the communication campaign, from research and monitoring to the most valuable of all, the decision-making process, even though the survey highlighted how their support is mainly limited in mapping activities and only in some cases, to planting. We have seen how citizens can reorient public policies and interventions through their contribution, they can shape and promote urban and social transformations, and most important of all - they are aware of this and willing to contribute: we have all the necessary ingredients to act, what we only miss now is providing them with the possibility to contribute, for a common objective - at their own rules, which should also be, ours.

Both on scientific research and implementation layers, there is a limited spread of such interventions due to the difficulty of providing a definition at a general level, which is also reflected in the institutional and policy frameworks, as well as with a profound lack of comprehension on benefits and necessities - constituting a lack of awareness. For this reason, we need to be ready to learn from the most expert actors in our urban spaces, citizens themselves. It is crucial to implement policies and operative constructs that allow citizens to truly understand the meaning of the necessary contemporary urban transformations; it is not just a matter of intervention but the necessity of comprehension on a deeper level. It is easy to accept implementing green areas and trees with superficial reasoning, but what happens if the arboreal elements come instead of our precious parking spaces? Are we aware and ready to balance our options?

Through awareness, we can get active intervention and a greater sensibility towards urban forests from our citizens, and this may be the only way to enhance and tackle top-down actions, making the difference - from the bottom, the most effective driver for historical transformation.

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