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Community in the urban debate

*new research trends to support
future planning agendas*

> 1. Introduction: why community matters?

The community concept has maintained a constant and growing interest in urban studies and many related fields. The analysis of the policy boundaries and related issues on community action practices are nowadays important to understand various political interests concerning these territorial phenomena. The aim of this contribution is to propose a new interpretation able to clarify how a better definition of this concept can play a role in shaping future planning agendas.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the debate on the role of communities in urban studies. Furthermore, the literature developed during these years reveals some particular aspects of this topic in relevant debates such as the definition of community development in planning (Philips and Pittman, 2014), the various views of local governance and localism (Davoudi and Madanipour 2015) and the different interpretations of the planning practices within the community action (Gallent and Ciaffi 2014).

The constant presence of the community concept in the public debate is also evident when placed side-by-side with many traditional concepts in local and national politics. This steady growth of references citing the role of the community within the political arena can for instance be observed looking at global data on Google trends in Google news search category

during the time period from 2008-16.

<http://bit.ly/2awHetc>

The origin of this continuing interest seems to derive from the importance of the concept of community within large and diverse forms of political language. Therefore, this interest seem to grow together with the crisis of participation in democratic systems, as the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU, 2014) “Democracy and its discontents” report suggests for the whole of western society (the EU in particular) during the past five years.

The diverse and new meaningful roles given by politicians to local communities also seems to derive from the critiques of central government and bureaucratic systems for their inability to respond to environmental challenges and social inequalities. This inability stems from a lack of freedom, which enables public policy to promote self-reliant initiatives (Sen 1990) based on the ambitious assumption that the needs of communities can be readily and broadly categorised and serviced remotely (Habermas 1984). We can briefly define these evident difficulties in public policies and planning models as the inability to reach a precise “object and subject” (Fainstein 2000).

This political phase is thoroughly described by the geographer Erik Swyngedouw (2011, p.372) as the “disappearance of the political”, and also “the de-territorialisation and de-nationalisation of bio-political relations, primarily as the result of growing nomadism and the explosion of multi-

place networked identities”. According to this definition, the community concept seems quite effective as a catalyst to re-establish legitimacy to the depleted public territorial action, as a “post-democratic” (ibid, p.371) response of socio-spatial configuration.

In this way, the community concept progresses as a similar construct as the complex forms of community action, namely the drive of groups of individuals “to control and have responsibility for their own lives” (Gallent and Ciaffi 2014, p.5).

Different scholars and related research fields have analysed these controversial aspects of community organisations and action in urban studies. In social policies, the community concept has been abundantly debated in recent years (Burrows et al 2000). In particular, social policy scholars underline the emphasis of the community concept in the self-help and inclusion policy design and practices, related to public health provision, social housing and local welfare innovation.

In terms of economic geography analysis, the community concept has often been identified as a node of new complex polycentric governance scenarios (Ostrom, 2010). From this perspective, the different community units are leading to the disaggregation and decentralisation of central state power, transferring responsibilities towards what some scholars identify as civil society (Cox 1999) while others refer to the phenomenon as voluntary aggregation of individuals creating a “spontaneous order” of territorial organisation (Bladel 2005, p.11).

Due to this ambiguity in definition, communities have also come to be appointed as part of the “shift in neoliberal public governance” (Moore & McKee 2014, p.521) and the retreat of the state from “the direct provision of public goods, welfare and services, and its devolution of autonomy and responsibility for these needs to active and empowered citizens and communities” (ibid.).

The concept also comes to play a role in local assets in contrast with the globalisation process against what Sassen (2001) defines as the perverse dynamics of global cities with communities acting as a tool of empowerment for local markets and endogenous growth factors (Schaffer et. al 2004). Furthermore, they have been considered for their potential role in “bracing” social capital (Holman and Rydin 2004), a valuable process leading to the sustainability of local initiatives and trusted companion of local economic development policies (Dale and Newman 2010).

> 2. Framing community practices and issues in three policy clusters

The analysis of these issues can also be related to particular practices and policies. Before doing this, it must be acknowledged that the possibility of realising a general analytical framework can represent a misleading argument, unable to build replicable models, evaluations and indicators or predict consequential outcomes. This is impossible because:

- On one hand it is necessary to assume and emphasise that each initiative belongs to a particular place, where individuals have specific peculiarities. These are unpredictable, not replicable and do not belong to groups that can be exactly categorised.
- On the other hand, the objective is to explore the “community action” topic with no pretence of producing exemplary methodological tools, an aspect that in the same vein Popper (1944) underlined as a general social sciences bias: the impossibility to “determine trends” because the analysis could be affected by relativism and therefore unable to induce “social change” and create indisputable tools of planning.

According to this premise, we can though discuss around three policy clusters that a future planning agenda should take into account, in order to enable practices and leave local communities a certain extent of freedom of action, trying to assure them a fair distribution of opportunities.

2.1 Local communities as shared social values and relations: Civic initiatives arise from urban conflicts (Gualini 2015) regarding the land-use and spatial planning choices of public administrations. With the same objectives, other initiatives like social movements aim to influence general urban policy objectives and planning tools to address urban transformations (Cremaschi 2008) and claims for service provision.

It is a concept strictly linked to the practices that consider the relational dimension and the moral imperative of community existence. It overshadows both the individual dimension and the community as an instrumental tool of territorial action. The construction of shared values is seen as the primary driver of community action. The path of intangible asset construction is the basic requirement for any form of action, starting from community values. The instrumental action follows only as a second step as an outcome of the main

process of identification and affirmation of a community's intrinsic values.

The limit of shared community values as a fundamental and irreplaceable ingredient of a "just social action" is related to ignoring the complex sphere of individuals and families, as well as the importance of preferences, wishes, resources and dynamic expectations. This is true when observing some radical communitarian practices like eco-villages and radical social movements at a local scale, but also with some environmental associations or communitarian-based coalitions.

The limit within this policy cluster is the underestimation of the debate on democratic "social choices" and the importance of pledging equal capabilities within communities and individuals (Sen 1990). The simplification through the imposition of communal values within community members underrates the compatibility and conflict issues of wicked global or regional problems (such as land use, climate change, planning metropolitan areas). These issues raise widely discussed, yet complex questions within the debate of public and collective choices in planning.

2.2 Community of (social innovation) practices (Moulaert et al. 2010): This has recently gained more space in the literature and policy-making debate, especially in European cities. They are comprised of engagement policies in urban planning and collaborative formulas of urban governance (Dente et al. 2005) or as the target of experimental urban policies (Burdett et al. 2014).

The action in this case aims to produce consequential outcomes, such as the implementation of policies or introduction of new forms of urban governance. The community action is moved to target individuals' common interests and preferences. The main resource for these practices is the social capital, considered as an enabling tool of collective action (Rydin and Pennington 2000). As defined by Ostrom (2000:176), social capital "is the shared knowledge, understandings, norms, rules and expectations about patterns of interactions that groups of individuals bring to a recurrent activity". With these operations, communities can valorise the organisation of human and physical capital, helping individuals to "coordinate activity and credibility commitment (...) to a sequence of future actions" (ibid.).

This is the case of Sardex, an interesting example of a regional Local Exchange Trading and Credit Scheme between small enterprises and the local financial institutions of the Italian

Region of Sardinia. The motivation came from the idea of "enabling proximity-based and trust-based relations; fostering economic empowerment of a defined local territory; creating a resilient and vibrant community; and defining a more equitable environment for trading" (Littera et Al. 2014:5). This goal of economic and political empowerment enables a certain virtual scale of community through a credit unit that is not convertible into any other currency. It can only be spent and acquired through the members who voluntarily accepted the rules of the scheme in a "digital" field of knowledge. This field also issues mutual credit without interest along with many tools and services provided to the network by the network service provider (e.g. brokering, business networking events, community management, online services, helpdesk) (ibid.). These types of community action overcome the traditional framework of public and large private financial institutions allowing a virtual community of entrepreneurs to self-organise financial transactions and promote investments in a defined geographical area.

In this cluster the importance of neutral communication on precise objectives of political and economic empowerment must be underlined thereby putting more emphasis on the knowledge based community agreements. This approach is true for the instrumental use of community relations, in order to enforce the action through the explicit statement of why and how communities move and for which specific advantages. This basic principle for effective 'social choices' in territorial action leads to an improvement of the knowledge sharing for a more democratic selection of more or less important actions or strategies. In this sense, a future planning agenda should consider effective management of political empowerment within community organisations.

2.3 Community as asset-based community organisations that develop within institutional contexts favourable to the development of self-organisation. These organisations, also defined as community enterprises (Bailey 2012; Aiken et al. 2011), promote new forms of community ownership in order to produce local service provision (e.g. in the field of welfare, energy, food, education) employing (and managing) local tangible and intangible assets and responding with tailor-made sustainable solutions.

Following Somerville and McElwee's definition (2011, p.319) of the term "enterprise", it refers to "an activity that produces or aims to produce value that can be expressed in monetary terms and any individual that is responsible for

producing such value is commonly called an “entrepreneur”. These enterprises are linked towards “community” through trading systems with a strong social purpose in relation to a defined population or sub-group living in a geographically defined area (Bailey 2012, p.4).

Community Energy initiatives can represent an interesting and growing practice in this cluster (Moroni and Tricarico, 2015), raised by the introduction of technological systems such as smart grids and micro grids. It contrasts with the standard type of power grid with its single source and passive distribution, and instead involves users interactively with the grid (they would be both consumers and producers, i.e. prosumers) connected to a network fed by multiple energy sources. As such, the smart network would be able to respond promptly to surges and dips in demand from the various end-users, thereby ensuring the optimal and immediate management of energy supply and demand (Energy and Strategy Group, 2014). Whilst in the traditional centralised energy system, demand and supply occupied separate spheres, here they are in direct connection. As some UK context scholars have shown (Walker et al 2011) community energy projects are becoming a network of multipurpose initiatives, keeping the local energy production and distribution as main tasks but producing relevant outcomes in terms of local trust, environmental education and re-investment of revenues in different community initiatives.

The exchange of knowledge can represent a limit of asset-based communities based on private individuals’ territorial organisation. The action promoted by these agreements can on the one hand seem particularly legitimate, while on the other seem to underestimate the different functioning of a plurality of groups (i.e. informative and economic territorial disadvantages). The aims of “insulated” voluntary communities avoid the issues associated with a deep knowledge of external communities’ aims and needs. This lack of information can represent a potential conflict within a self-organised polycentric territorial distribution of communities. If the priority of community action relies solely on negative freedom within a group of individuals, it can result in a failure to promote social interactions between different groups. As Ostrom (2010, p.659) underlined, “the assumption that individuals have complete information about all actions available to them, the likely strategies that others will adopt, and the probabilities of specific consequences that will result from their own choices, must be rejected in any but the very simplest of repeated settings.”

> 3. Towards “institutional liberalism” and “co-production”: future research trends to discuss

Although the relevance and call for an innovative community-led agenda seems clear, we need to identify how and where research trends must work to support policy makers to catch opportunities and avoid intrinsic political threats embedded in these clusters.

Analysing the literature available, two arguments appear as a hot topic coming out from both national contexts and specific practices analysis.

First: Investigating the new landscape of opportunities that are related to experimental community-led agendas. The analysis of the UK localism agenda for instance highlights a new approach in policy making towards what some scholars define as “institutional liberalism” (Wills 2016). The need for clarifying this field of exploration should be conducted through local evidence-based analysis, in order to tackle the “anti-politics” arguments based on the assumption of central government’s purpose in reducing its responsibilities for questions of spatial inequalities and leaving decisions to local people. In this vein the new contribution should focus on both the advantages of enabling self-reliant tools, showing the outcomes of the local community working for their interests and the needs, such as having the institutional inheritance and civic capacity to respond on the ground.

In the future urban agenda, the role of planning policy must take into account the importance of supporting a strong civic infrastructure, boosting the network and interactions between local communities and key local institutions. The few contributions evidencing the relevance of this argument (coming from the UK context) are highlighting the importance of strong networks between local institutions and civic infrastructure within the “localism” agenda (NALC 2015) and as a general regional economic performance condition (Farole et al 2010).

Second: The contribution on how co-production can be considered as a formula for shaping institutions. “The importance of effective institutions for development is well established. There is however, a continuing debate on how to stimulate institutional reform within highly complex political and cultural contexts” (Shand 2015:3). There is a need to explore how the process of mobilisation influences the organisational forms provided by

institutions and the business sector and thereby influences the structural aspects of the broad political context in favour of community action.

Then there are a series of further questions to consider:

What symbolic and intangible assets arise from institutional interaction with local communities? What are the key aspects in terms of investment and financial innovation? What reasons push towards investment in community businesses including an analysis of which activities promote business models based on local share ownership schemes?

Which are the best formulas in the creation of local value: reinvestment funds (revolving funds) in communities, environmental values, spill overs and endogenous factors which favour investment and formulas of co-production with local governments?

As mentioned above, the current argument on the role of local “community” depends on a sensitive context. This is affected and threatened nowadays from various quarters including the unprecedented European Union political crisis. Research advances to support future urban agendas must focus on how to return and enhance the social meanings of community action. There are several aspects of community to consider here. Firstly, there is community as new social “infrastructure” to heal the rift between regions, cities and institutions. Secondly, there is community empowerment as the promoter simultaneously of individuals and civil society organisations, based on social and environmental sustainability. Thirdly, there is community as a tool for reshaping policy making processes and the reform of economic development priorities, thereby promoting local networks, skills and responsibilities in a perspective of cooperation between territories.

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