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Towards empowerment through-out citizen participation. Triggers in tangible and intangible resources for a sense of belonging.

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The management of the territory is generally governed by a **dualistic logic**: on the one hand the agreements between strong powers that try to govern the regulatory constraints and social consensus and on the other the juridical-normative approach that takes care of the compliance of the procedures. In this dualism there is an unsolved problem: it is above all the administrations and stakeholders who must be convinced of the "reasons for participation" as well as the citizens, who often confuse participation with protest.

The complexity of the urban scenarios offered by the contemporary city and the numerous cases of failure of traditional planning impose the need to search for new governance tools in territorial planning. It needs to be made clear that participation is much more than just "consulting citizens".

Participation concerns the set of possibilities, granted to the citizen as a single individual, to influence the processes of urban and social transformation. The widening of the discussion arena on the objectives and modalities of intervention with respect to the restricted public / private relationship presupposes that all those who have an interest in the project and in the territory - are called to offer their resources to improve effectiveness and efficiency of the transformation project. In most cases, the problems of difficult definition of projects and their implementation are attributed to factors such as the rigidity of administrative procedures. The exchange and access to information constitutes the first level in the participation of citizens in public management, as it provides the process with the resource that allows the creation of a sharing of knowledge and therefore build a common level of dialogue. The importance of citizens also falls in the choice of guaranteeing a right to transparency, including

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decision-making. In addition to transparency, information and involvement can be functional to promote behaviors and forms of **co-planning**.

The participation process sets its goals through different steps, all equally necessary and important. In first place, the analysis of user interest towards a specific project allows to optimize the project's and users' time, which eventually can lead to the understanding of people's actual needs. After an initial draft of the intervention, citizens' contribution is crucial to provide feedbacks and complete the proposal in a **co-creation action**, while also trying to mediate eventual conflicts. Citizen participation is an important strategy which relies on different principles as drivers for potential benefits. People are able to produce deep modifications in the spatial and social structure of the urban environment and the recent experiences[1] have proven that those actions taken by social groups have much more probabilities to become permanent and long-lasting transformations, compared to those super-imposed by external entities. In addition, communities can develop capacities to tackle their own internal issues without necessarily having to rely on external influences; other than that, local actors are the best stakeholder when the problem acquires a great level of complexity.

The italian scenario in the European panorama.

The *Maastricht Treaty* (1992) introduces the "principle of subsidiarity",[2] on the basis of which it is hoped that individual citizens and groups can actively participate in decisions affecting their lives. At the international level, the participation of the community and social groups is one of the priority objectives of the United Nations Agenda 21[3] and **Healthy Cities**[4]programs.

In Italy several initiatives have been launched in the recent 5 years and have started to be recognized as pilot case studies from the United Nations; on the first Line Forestami - the Milanese Re-forestation project led by the Architect Stefano Boeri, project which has just entered in its community engagement phase, and which makes communication to the public one of its main goals. The experiences of participatory planning have spread and consolidated following, above all, some national regulations (*L. 285/97* and *L. 328/00*) that address different social subjects (municipal services, ASL, schools, private social, etc) forging collaborations to address specific problems present in the territories to which they belong. Some Regions have also equipped themselves with specific tools to increase the participation of citizens in public life (in Tuscany *LR 69/2007*, in Emilia-Romagna *DL 115/2010*). These regulatory guidelines call for the overcoming of the traditional design concept that starts from the top which, as it is too specialized and sectoral, has proved insufficient to deal with the recent changes in social reality: reduction of public resources, growing demand of citizens to control the work and

work of governors, complexity of the problems to be faced. Even if many institutional projects actually have a dedicated full-time and paid staff, sometimes the amount of administrative and on-the-field work requires an additional support. Having volunteers to implement their efforts on the active operations is an important approach to have the staff focused on specific aspects. Volunteers are an effective way to have a more efficient use of limited funds and increase at the same time the productivity and quality level of the project. Participatory planning is a flexible and useful method for understanding and implementing a given process, effective in directing decision-making, the development of intervention plans and the solution of critical issues and needs in the urban environment.

Participation triggers a process whereby, through the empowerment of citizens, a sense of appropriation of the interventions is generated and a consequent **empowerment**.[5] A further result obtained in the bottom-up processes is the provision of both tangible and intangible resources and the creation of new human relationships and networks with the consequent increase of social capital within the community. In this case, social capital is a product both vertical, in the relationship between citizens and administration - and horizontal in the relationships between individuals and collectives, such as associations and non-governmental organizations. This increase is closely linked to the enhancement of self-management, the cardinal principle of bottom-up processes, and therefore to the strengthening of cooperation, a sense of ownership and a positive climate and belonging in building a sense of **community**.[6]

Even more relevant is the orientation of participatory processes to stimulate interactions that are able to stimulate, albeit partially, the choices of technicians and public administrations. In this lies the main difference between participatory processes activated by administrators and those of citizens' initiative, where those empowerment processes are activated that make it possible to identify and autonomously manage the challenges of the city.

References

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2. It is the principle whereby the European Union does not take action (except in the areas which fall within its exclusive competence) unless it is more effective than action taken at national, regional or local level.

3. United Nation program AGENDA 21.

4. A healthy city is one that is continually creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources which enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and developing to their maximum potential.

5. Empowerment is a process of social action through which people, organizations and communities acquire competence over their own lives, in order to change their social and political environment to improve equity and quality of life (WHO, 2006).

6. Bobbio L. (2007), *Amministrare con i cittadini. Viaggio tra le pratiche di partecipazione in Italia*, Regione Toscana, 2007

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