How communities can react to crisis: social capital as a source of empowerment and well-being

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Abstract

Within the post-modern scenario, largely characterized by a sense of diffused social uncertainty and dominated by the ghost of a wide spreading economical and social crisis, social capital, solidarity and social responsibility might represent concrete and efficacious tools to cope with the implications of such cultural drift. The present paper aims at arguing such position by accounting for a repertoire of "good practices" experienced in the south of Italy, which have been read with theoretical and methodological lenses borrowed from social community psychology as well as sociology. The discussion will take into account two case studies (*Diffused Guest House* and *Urban Laboratories*) which are both representative in terms of social participation as well as in terms of social capital enhancement. Indeed, all the accounted experiences have shown how the construction of solid and open communities could concretely contribute to enhance social capital as well as to contrast with the diffusion of narrow and conflicting ghetto-communities based on marginality and social uncertainty, which are source for self-segregation, social fragmentation and increasing powerlessness.

1. Introduction

Our societies seem to be at a historic turning point requiring new visions and new skills. In particular, a different view of well-being, membership and interpersonal relationships seems to be required. In this paper we aim at emphasizing the role of social capital as a fundamental resource for coping with some crucial problems of our present days and to deal with the contemporary social challenges successfully. We will shortly recall, then, some examples: some cases where non-material goods (such as cohesion, sharing and participation) are mobilized, thus yielding positive social-economical effects too.

Sense of community and social capital are, in fact, essential resources in order to imagine new forms of human and social-economical development. Social cohesion is a fundamental "protective factor" in our present collective transition. In this view, even the recent economic and monetary crisis could be reconsidered. A massive deficiency of cohesion, mutual trust, responsibility and solidarity can be pointed out in the recent difficulties of so many post-industrial societies. These resources, which can be developed only within (and by) forceful and inclusive social communities, are not always strengthened enough.

The crucial importance of such non-material assets is often perceived too late, and only when they are going to get lost. Thus, we need to find out and sustain all the efforts which are carried out in this direction, and which aim at developing (or even "inventing") more satisfactory forms of human relationships, a new idea of individual and collective well-being. Across the time, well-being research was more and more developed within social sciences and, in particular, within community psychology (Noll,2002; Helliwell, 2003). In a bio-psycho-social view, well-being is a complex, multifaceted concept, that includes people's life skills, physical and mental health, as well as social connectedness and participation in the collective life.

As we will further discuss beyond, well-being depends, also, on the communities' characteristics (Farrell et al 2004), which can strongly affect satisfaction and people's global judgment about their own life. In other words, the general context and the quality of social relationships are essential determinants of subjective well-being, can affect people's experience, and their long term evaluations to a relevant extent. From the community viewpoint, such variables as income levels, sense of security, social inclusion and diversity management are all expected to affect individuals' well-being (Hooghe & Vanhoutte 2001). Indeed, Social Capital too is a crucial component of well-being. Research on the relationships between social capital and subjective well-being is not very extensive (Winkelmann, 2009) , nonetheless, there is a general agreement about this connection.

The concept of "Social Capital" is an elusive and multifaceted one, to be situated at the intersection of Economics, Sociology and Community Psychology (Cox, 1997; Baum, 1999; Norton, 1998; Perkins, Hughey, Speer, 2002). It describes some important resources of everyday life, namely good will, fellowship, empathy, and social unity (Winter, 2000). As Pooley et Al. (2005) suggested, Social Capital is the essential "glue" that holds individuals together, and allows people to be connected. It can be conceptualized as all the interactions between individuals in a community: in this view, the relationships between people and systems are central to any contemporary definition of social capital. According to the authors, then, sense of community can inform social capital. From the Social Psychologists' point of view, in fact, Social Capital calls into play the sense of community; the ways individuals interact and relate to each other in their communities.

In many contemporary societies, an increasing "need" for membership and sense of community seems to take place. According to some authors (e.g.Bauman 2001), loss of social cohesiveness, extreme individualism and a strong sense of insecurity can account for this renewed "feeling for community" in the post-industrial, global world. This is a relevant aspect of social life, which should be taken into account when considering the potential, as well as the risks, of the present time in many Countries such as Italy.

Not always, in fact, is a close-knit community also a healthy and productive one. To this aim some processes are required, such as enhancing social inclusion, avoiding discrimination, developing trustful relationships, perspective taking and empathy (Serino & Marzano, 2007; Serino, 2009). Social capital and sense of community are extraordinary resources for social life when they are intended to create larger social networks, to feed a basic set of shared meanings, values and feelings. New, original answers to the problems of our present transition are required: these answers call into play solidarity, social networks, innovation, caring of common goods, individual and collective empowerment. Indeed, funds and policy decision making are needed to achieve effective solutions. Not always however is there a direct relationship between money amount and project effectiveness. Personal involvement, intrinsic motivation and shared values are even more important. These resources deal with social capital as well.

According to Pooley et Al. (2005), Social Capital has been defined differently in different contexts, and, for this reason too, it is somewhat confusing and difficult to measure. As Putnam (1993, 2000) put it, social capital deals with the impact of networks on individuals and communities. In operational terms, then, social capital can be defined by referring to the levels of participation in formal or informal networks. Yet, it can also be assessed by referring to trust, that is by considering the degree to which the members of a given community believe people are trustworthy in general in everyday life. Perkins (e.g., Perkins et Al., 2002) pointed out different measures of both individual and community-focused social capital, including such measures as trust in the community, neighbour support, community satisfaction, community place attachment, sense of community, and life satisfaction (see also Prezza et Al., 2001). Social capital can generate economic resources, by promoting collective action in the public sphere and for the common good (Bourdieu, 1986). There is, then, a complex interplay between social capital and participation (Krishna, 2002).

Traditionally, social community psychology interprets participation as a construct that may promote empowerment of individuals, authentically considered as citizens through their participation in significant life experiences. In this vein, participation is a very relevant element for the circular interconnection between individual, social and communitarian dimensions of social life. Nonetheless, this interconnection is bounded to the enhancement of competencies rather than of deficiencies: in other words participation could be best promoted by starting with the acknowledgement of the resources people own rather than of the resources people lack.

The term *empowerment* exemplifies this process, which concretely allows people to increase their possibilities to actively control one's own existence, by developing abilities useful to critically read social reality as well as to adopt the strategies which best suit personal and social aims. To this purpose, Piccardo (1995) underlines how the concept of *empowerment* could be applied to many different domains: from the political one, to the medical one, to the organizational one, to the strictly psychological one. More simply, e*mpowerment* is the acknowledgement and the development of one's own resources in relation to the knowledge people have of their own social context that is always addressed to personal and socio-political objectives. In this frame, the individual is not the single addressee of any *empowerment* intervention rather he/she is the main character of change. As a consequence, participation is a chance to experience inclusion thus developing some stimuli which could be useful to start a personal changing process.

Therefore, the concept of *empowerment* embraces both the individual, with his/her heritage of personal resources, motivations, beliefs,

competencies, and his/her participation to the communitarian context, meant as a space characterized by bounds and opportunities which at times could facilitate and at times could hinder participation. Finally, *empowerment* is an ecological concept oriented to the contextual and relational comprehension of participation (Rappaport, 1987; 2000).

With special reference to social interventions addressed to youth, e*mpowerment* is adopted as an action of prevention and promotion of their active participation and of the consolidation of competences, abilities, and actions aimed at their personal growth and emancipation. Within the last years, many action-research experiences and *empowerment* programs have attempted at increasing youth's self-efficacy and personal power, as well as their ability in "reading" the social systems and understanding the bonds and opportunities they concretely supplied. These experiences of involvement and active participation have showed many positive results in terms of self-esteem, self-trust and sense of perceived competence. *Empowered* young people have also contributed to increase the competences of the groups and of the networks they belong to, which in turn have supplied them many chances to grow up and to participate, thus creating a positive loop. In this sense, personal wellbeing could concretely transform into collective wellbeing not simply through social action but through the development of the whole community.

In the perspective of social action, a community is meant as a context where inequalities and disparities in the distribution of power and resources are observed, where majorities and minorities compete with each other to gain leadership, where participation is aimed at purely instrumental objectives, such as the reversal of the power dynamics that are active. Conversely, in the perspective of community development, participation is permanent since it is both the starting point and the tool for the maintenance and for the management of the change that allows development. The development of the community is thus meant as a basic process, aimed at creating the conditions for social development, thus acting on the participation of the whole community through local initiatives (Mannarini, 2004; Noto & Lavanco, 2000). To this purpose, very relevant is the role played by policy and decision makers whose main task is to foster the problem solving process by encouraging self-organization. Then, the development of the community represents a form of guided participation where individuals do have the power to think their own needs and to make them visible on the political and social scene, thus allowing to the institutional forces to formally engage themselves in listening and projecting

solutions with the formal and informal resources which are even potentially available.

As a consequence, the *empowered* community is a competent community: it owes all the human, material, cognitive elements which could allow its members to acknowledge and to satisfy their own needs. The *empowered* community has the power to generate alternatives and opportunities, it knows how and where to go to gain different kinds of resources, it manifests a cohesive and shared identity and finally it has good levels of self-esteem meant as optimism and motivation which concretely guide action. Actually, empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths and competencies and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change. Empowerment theory, research and intervention link individual well-being with larger social and political environment. Theoretically, the construct connects mental health to mutual help and the struggle to create a responsive community. It compels us to think in terms of competence versus deficits, and strengths versus weaknesses. Similarly empowerment research focuses on identifying capabilities instead of cataloguing risk factors and exploring environmental influences of social problems instead of blaming victims. Empowerment-oriented interventions enhance well-being while they also aim to ameliorate problems, provide opportunities for participants to develop knowledge and skills (Perkins & Zimmermann, 1995; Perkins, Brown & Taylor, 1996).

In view of the above, the concept of community is also strictly linked to that of citizenship. Within social sciences, active citizenship could be meant as "the ability citizens have to organize themselves in multifarious modalities, to mobilize human, technical, financial resources, to act with different strategies to guard rights, to practice powers and responsibilities aimed at the protection and at the development of common goods" (Moro, 1998: 48). Such effort is concretely translated into social action that is shaped by the exercise of responsibility and *empowerment*, meant as ability and engagement to weigh heavily on social reality, as taking charge of the community *governance*.

In this perspective, social participation is meant as a modality through which active citizenship manifests evident connections with the construct of wellbeing, declined in its individual and subjective meaning as well as in its social and communitarian sense (Keyes, 1998). As we already reminded above, there is a largely shared view (see also Cicognani, 2005) according to which social wellbeing refers to the individuals' perception about the quality of the relationships they have with the social context: different indicators, such as social integration, social contribution, social

acceptance, self-actualization, and coherence (which in turn become concrete through specific courses of action) describe this concept. According to this model, social wellbeing includes perceptions of one's own relationship with the community, as well as more general opinions on human nature and on society in general (such as for instance, the sense of trust) which originates choices and options of sharing and participation. Consequently, the main aim of social policies should be to promote the citizens social wellbeing through the warrant of the right/duty to participation and the strengthening of the sense of community.

Actually, participation is nothing but the engagement and the responsibility of the individual within a project which is aimed at fulfilling a collectively determined objective (Wandermans & Florin, 2000), an intentionally determined action that through collective mobilization is aimed at the improvement of the quality of local life (Foster-Fishman et al., 2001). Participation is the essence of democracy but it is also the process, through which the community realizes itself, negotiates its identity and eventually transforms itself (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000). It is an indicator of the social capital, a dimension of the civic sense and of the civic competence of individuals (Youniss et al., 2002; da Silva et al., 2004).

According to the literature, three are the main features of participation (Zani & Cicognani, 2007): the ability to participate (i.e. in relation to gender, age, competence, etc.), the participation's chances supplied by the context (i.e. degree of legitimating to participation, presence of formal and informal channels of participation, etc.) and the interest, motivation and engagement of individuals and groups (i.e. unfulfilled needs, perception of social differences, etc.), which is the actual pushing element of the whole process. Indeed, a relevant issue connected with the dynamics of participation is how to motivate people to participate. Some authors suggest to consider participation as a cyclic non linear and non sporadic process, which is rather oriented to stimulate a constant engagement through the creation of continuous chances of intervention (Springett, 2001). Others underline the importance to involve all individuals in each single phase of participative action and not only in the final evaluative phase as often happens (Naylor et al., 2002).

Such effort leads to the creation and to the consolidation of a sense of community (Sarason, 1974) meant as the perceived similarity and interdependence with the others, which allows people to relate each other by fulfilling the others' demands as one's own. In this vein, the sense of community is not simply the sense of belonging but also one's own ability to act on the context by supplying a personal contribution which starts from the satisfaction of one's own needs and leads to the emotive sharing of experiences and relationships which are at the basis of a common history binding the members of a community.

2. "Treasure Hunt": in search of good practices

In general, when focusing on empowering and social inclusion strategies in a given area, a wide range of ideas and actions in a number of different contexts can (fortunately) be observed. Thus, even by a merely exploratory investigation like ours, a number of meaningful insights can be captured.

In this paper, therefore, we will focus on some examples from a Southern Italian Region, Apulia, which is carrying out considerable efforts in terms of participation and inclusion policies, with a particular attention to the young people and immigrants' conditions. Two ongoing experiences will be shortly reminded here in some details. The former was set up in a small country-side town, and was promoted, in the first place, by a voluntary association. The latter was promoted by the Apulia Government and aimed to enhance young people participation and employment. We think that, even by means of limited expenditure, some positive and pro-active solutions can be provided for a number of social-economical problems. In several interventions, this was made possible by connecting and supporting different subjects, who co-operate in synergy with each other.

According to Nation and Coll. (2003), an effective prevention program should be characterized by some essential conditions, such as: 1) Multilevel, comprehensive forms of intervention; 2) Different methods and interactive strategies; 3) Sufficient "dosage", timing and continuity of the intervention; 4) Research-based/theory driven; 5) Positive relationships: 6) Ecological and cultural validity; 7) Well trained and supported staff; 8) Outcome evaluation. We think such criteria can be usefully employed in the analysis of a wide range of interventions and kinds of social action. Some of the cases considered here seem to fit several of these criteria. They are also characterized by creativity, original ideas, participants' active role, broad networks, relevant efforts towards wealth creation, job opportunities, and sustainability.

We took into account some projects in which a less individualistic idea of well-being is put forward. By social inclusion and common goods protection, positive social-economical effects are yielded, such as waste reduction, increasing sense of security and satisfaction, wealth production, costs reduction, getting a job. Thus, the links among well-being enhancement, empowerment and positive

consequences on the social-economical system can be displayed.

Table 1 shows how information was organized at a first step of our overview. We will then focus, shortly, on the two cases mentioned above.

Table 1 - Four cases in Apulia: a schematic overview

Title	Goals	Goods and Services	Network Characteristics	Social-Economical Consequences
Albergo Diffuso Borgo Tressanti	Immigrants assistance. Favoring legality in agricultural employment Improving intercultural communication	Medical and psychological care. Job Training. Cultural activities. Legal advice. Aid to young people	Several cultural, religious and voluntary Associations, Trade Unions, "Food-Bank". Red Cross, local Administrations, etc.	Improving legality, intercultural communication, sense of security. Favoring sharp encounters between farms and workers. Fighting against waste (Through Food Bank)
"D.A.L.I.L.A."	Access facilitation of women and underprivileged subjects in the labor market	Data Collection. "Time Bank" and creation of "complementary money". Job Training. Small business start-up. Mutual and Self Aid promotion	Self-developing networks, trade unions, legal assistance	Favoring women employment. Supporting cooperation. Sustainability. Start up of self-business projects
"Ortocircuito"	Setting up a vegetable garden, cultivated by those living in the district. Re-qualifying peripheral city areas. Favoring bio-diversity and natural food consumption	Developing social relations among inhabitants. Empowering participation for old people, kids and families. Favoring healthy behaviors. Free and low costs distribution of natural food. Improving the quality of city life	Local Public Administration, Citizens Associations, Farmers Associations	Connecting producers and population. Enhancing healthy food consumption and reducing the costs. Increasing the value of typical local products.
Urban Laboratories of Bollenti Spiriti	Empowering youth as active citizens for setting up youth-led youth centres	New youth centres aimed at providing integrated services for leisure (i.e. practicing and finding a hobby, meeting friends, surfing on the web etc.) and career support (i.e. vocational training, career guidance, enterprise creation etc.) in a same place.	Local Public Administration, Youth associations, Informal group, nonprofit associations	Growth of the youth centres as self-sustained enterprises operating in the youth work services, as well as in diverse creative sectors

3. Holding Immigrants and intercultural relations: Albergo Diffuso Borgo Tressanti

In December 2007, originating from an already existing "St. Joseph" Centre for Immigrants and Persons in need ("Borgo Tressanti": Cerignola - Foggia, Italy), the project of a "Diffused Guest House" for the immigrants and their families was launched, in collaboration with the local township and the Regional Government[1]. The purpose was to offer a decent accommodation to so many seasonal

[1] Comune di Cerignola (FG), Regione Puglia, D.R. n. 1233, 8/4th, 2006). We thank Dr. Stefania Scelsi who collaborated to the case description

workers employed in the area, mostly in agricultural activities. A particular attention was paid to social integration and diversity management, by respecting the different cultures and religions and by encouraging the creation of intercultural sets. Mutual understanding and warm relationships are observed between inhabitants and guests. These continue when the immigrants went back home: caretakers, for instance, are often invited (for wedding and other events in immigrants' life).

The Guest House consists of 14 residential unities, for the immigrants and their families. In this way, they can live in a safe, healthy context. They are

saved from illegal hiring and from the hands of the opportunists taking advantages from their need condition. Workers protection is ensured as well, in a context wherein compliance with rules is often disregarded. Importantly, immigrants contribute to the costs, although to a very little extent: this is a way to encourage their involvement and support their self-esteem.

The peak of attendance was observed in summertime, when the seasonal work is most required: during the three months of summertime, about 1400 to 1800 people (men, women and children) are settled at the Centre, coming from several different Countries. Interestingly, the employers themselves are used to put in touch the regular immigrants who work in their company with the Albergo Diffuso staff, helping out immigrants in finding their accommodation.

The Guest House is one of latest achievements of the Center. From the beginning, this one was intended to provide housing and support to abandoned children, coming from both EU and non-EU Countries. The Centre consists of apartments, a lodging house for foreign young women, and a two-storey building where several services are located (offices, auditorium, psychological and social services, classroom, computer hall, gym hall, infirmary, dining hall, kitchen, and Television room). In the period 1998-2008 more than 400 immigrant children were settled at the Center, coming from 31 different Countries (the more represented ethnic groups are shown in Table 2).

Table 2 - Children received at the Centre: the most represented national groups

Country	Number of children
Albania	110
Afganistan	45
Kosovo	29
Palestine	20
Bangladesh	15
Eritrea	13
Morocco	12

Children were coming from other Countries too (Romania, Turkey, Ethiopia, Senegal, Pakistan, Iraq, Ghana, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Kurdistan, Macedonia, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Iran, Serbia, Somalia, Poland, India, Bulgaria, Mali, New Guinea, etc.). Different religious groups were present: Muslims, Catholics, Greek Orthodoxies, Hindu, Buddhists. In no way did the different religions yield problems or conflicts,

whilst some truly miracles of integration and reciprocal acceptance were observed.

A great attention is paid to education, health and careers counseling. Legal and psychological counseling for young immigrants and their parents is ensured as well. In cooperation with the Juvenile Court, 117 teenagers were accompanied towards family fostering or job training. After job training, a certain number of young immigrants were hired with a regular contract in local farms and artisan companies. Indeed, the social network around the Centre got a great importance in order to achieve these results. Who are in fact the subjects involved?

The Centre was created by a Voluntary Association at the end of Nineties, during the social-political crisis in Albania and other Eastern Adriatic Countries. Caring at different levels for kids and teen-agers was assured by the Centre from the beginning. Caretakers and personnel are represented by one General manager, one coordinator, three caretakers, one secretary, one social worker and one lawyer. They work 3 shifts, and at each time they complete a report on their activity. Monthly, a meeting is held in order to plan the activities or discuss problems and solutions. Although duties and job descriptions are clearly defined, the group is still a rather informal one, with strong internal cohesion, social sharing of emotions and values.

An important network of different subjects allows the Centre to pursue its goals: local authorities, hiring hall, enterprises, "Banco Alimentare" (Food Bank), Red Cross, Trade Unions, Cultural Associations and so on. Thanks to these connections, several activities are carried out, such as: job training, legal protection, psychological aid, food dispensation to persons in need, medical assistance, shuttle service to and from the work place, courses, and summer holydays for children.

We focused on this project by an exploratory study, mainly based on observations and semi-structured interviews to staff members. Indeed, a better understanding of this experience and its consequences at a later time will be provided by further investigation. By referring to a little, peripheral community, to this village of the Apulia countryside, however, our example points out the crucial role of creative networks in finding out possible solutions and changing problems into social and economical opportunities.

This aspect was emphasized in our interviews. According to one person in charge, the "Albergo Diffuso" project was originated by an "inspired insight", a "divergent vision" on intercultural relations and care-giving. The awareness of being involved in an innovative project was important to all participants, in terms of collective identity, motivation, internal cohesion, shared goals.

4. Empowered communities and youth active citizenship: Urban Laboratories of Bollenti Spiriti

Launched in 2006 by the Apulia Region in the South of Italy, the regional youth policy "Bollenti Spiriti" funded the refurbishment of 132 abandoned buildings and the start-up of Urban Laboratories (ULs) based on the integration between services for leisure, training, job and educational orientation, enterprise creation. Overall, the Apulia Region provided 22 M/euro for the refurbishment and the start up of the ULs. In this multi-site programme, the Local Authorities (Town halls) could refurbish a public building on the basis of a program designed together with the local youth community (peer group, cultural or civic associations, recreational organizations, informal network, artists, creative practitioners and professionals). Moreover, Town halls were obliged to give the management of the Laboratories to non-profit organizations for at least five years. The ULs were located in each of the five Provinces of the Region and in more than half of the municipalities (Local Authorities). The approved projects were mainly those with an artistic focus (photography, multimedia, handicraft, theatre). However, there was a diffused trend to integrate artistic activities with vocational training services. Thus, artistic activities had not simply a recreational nature but also professional training outlooks. The main aim of the Laboratories was in fact to promote the transition from leisure to professional activity enhancing entrepreneurship.

Within the overall program, a special role was assigned to youth participation. This concept has recently become a key issue both for national youth policies as well as for the European Commission (see for instance, Walthers, 2006). However, different are the views of youth participation at the base of the several patterns of public intervention adopted by national and international governments. According to some public policies youth participation is framed within the issue of social inclusion, while according to others, it is assimilated to the concept of social empowerment. The first kind of public policies aim at answering to specific young people's needs in education, in training and/or in job placement. These policies often provide top down interventions that are not really able to involve the targeted addressees (MacDonald, 1998). Conversely, some other public policies enhance youth participation as a basilar milestone of their actions, though often facing the following dilemma: Can youth actually profit from a public program even if they do not take part to its design? (Wildemeersch & Weil, 2009).

This was also the dilemma that the Urban Laboratory program of the Apulia Region wanted to take into account. For the first time, a program for local development pointed on the endogenous resources brought about by young people within the Apulia Region. In other words, through such investment public decision makers were promoting young people as a resource rather than considering them a social problem (IARD, 2001). For this reason, the success of the program was strongly dependent from the exploitation of young people's capabilities in each specific local context. In October 2009 the Apulia Region formally asked to the University of Bari (Department of Psychology, Section of Sociology) to evaluate the outcomes of this programme. Then, the evaluation aimed at helping the regional coordination of the program, taking into account the variability of the local projects, the stakeholders and the relational patterns between local and regional levels.

More specifically, the regional policy maker was interested in knowing the possible actions that could improve youth participation in the implementation of the ULs as to plan further specific project. In fact, in all the cases there was a history of youth participation in planning the ULs and in building the youth partnership willing to manage them. Therefore, evaluation focused on the youth participation processes already implemented. Instead, it was not possible to evaluate the impact of ULs' services because only 7 laboratories were actually started up.

A theory-based evaluation approach (Weiss, 1997) was adopted aiming at helping the implementation process in the site where an UL was setting up. The main steps of the evaluation program were: the elicitation of the program's theory at a regional level with its planned casual links; the identification of the casual links at a local level and the planning of some strategic actions at a regional level useful to improve those positive causal links.

To develop the regional program theory, the official documents published by the policy makers were analysed. Through this step of the analysis, some key-issues for the exploratory research were identified, mainly in the form of critical points and possible unwanted effects. After this action, 5 laboratories out of the 7 who had started activities were selected. This option was motivated by the consideration of the progress experienced by these laboratories within the implementation process. In each laboratory, focused interviews (Merton et al. 1956) were conduced involving 5 representatives of Management Bodies, 4 representatives of Local Authorities and 1 urban planner, who was actually a social animator. The actors who can best contribute to the activation of the participation process were clearly identified in the regional program theory. As shown in table 3, youth participation was meant both as the involvement of young people in the decision-making process, but

also the sharing of the responsibility for the success of the project. In fact, the management of the Laboratory was committed to youth organizations that also took the risk for any possible loss. Each of the actors had a specific role, even if participation was stimulated by the multiple interactions between them. In the sample of laboratories analysed these

different levels of participation interacted with each other producing a mutual increase of the motivation to participate. For instance, this was what happened when local youth associations stimulated the Town hall to take part to the program or when the Local Youth Network attracted other youth organizations willing to be acknowledged by Town hall.

Table 3 - Actors of the participation processes

Phase	Actors	Role
Planning of the UL	Local Administration (municipality) *(Public participation)*	Decision to refurbish a building and to apply a proposal of UL
	Urban planner, social planner, construction engineer, architect *(Expert participation)*	Consulting for the local planning and the implementation of the UL
	Informal group, no profit associations, professionals, enterprises *(No formal youth participation)*	Proposal of activities to do in the UL
Planning and implementation of the UL	Local Youth Network, joined by no profit youth associations *(Formal youth participation)*	Advisory function
Implementation and management of the UL	Management Body *(Youth participation in management)*	No profit partnership that won the public tender for the management of the UL
	Youth partner of the Management Body *(Youth participation in management)*	Youth organizations that implement specific projects together with the Management Body
	Young users (group or individuals) *(Youth participation in using the Laboratory)*	Using the Laboratory by themselves (i.e. internet café, library, self-management of spaces and equipment) or helped by experts (i.e. training, project working, job orientation)

The analysis of the documents allowed identifying some causal links related to youth participation which could be resumed along with the three main steps of the implementation process: participation to the planning of the UL; participation to the implementation of the local plan; participation after the regional program. Participation to the planning phase resulted in the identification of two intermediate events between the inputs of the program and youth participation (see chart 1). Actually, even before the launch of the ULs' program, the regional staff had already undertaken some specific research actions to survey youth capabilities and to promote a young people's web community[2] and it also started a public communication campaign.

Chart 1 - The program theory: causal chain about "Youth participation to the planning phase"
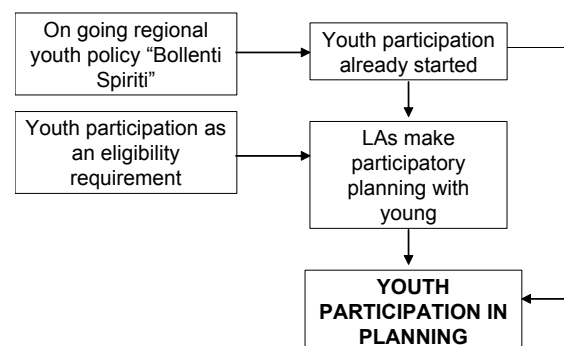
Together with these events, which are halfway between formal and informal, in the program theory there was also a rather normative event that played a very relevant role on participation. It was the imposition of participatory planning as an eligibility requirement in the regional call of proposals. However, confronting the results

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[2] http://bollentispiriti.regione.puglia.it

brought about by the field research, this event was less decisive considering the risk to allow a formal participation with a weak effect on the local policy decision.

> "These questionnaires and these focus group discussions were useful especially because they were requested by the call. I would have preferred to animate a bottom up process. In this way, even youth associations which are more resistant to participate would have done it (…) The local administration didn't want to rock the boat and wanted to get involved in a traditional way so that young people could be just informed about what they were doing".

During the phase of youth participation to the implementation, the role of Town halls was more decisive for almost all the intermediate events of the causal chain (see chart 2). In fact, Town halls had to promote and to legitimate the Local Youth Network, to involve youth in the executive planning, to complete the refurbishment of building, to select the Management Body.

Chart 2 - The program theory: causal chain about "Youth participation in the implementation of the local plan"
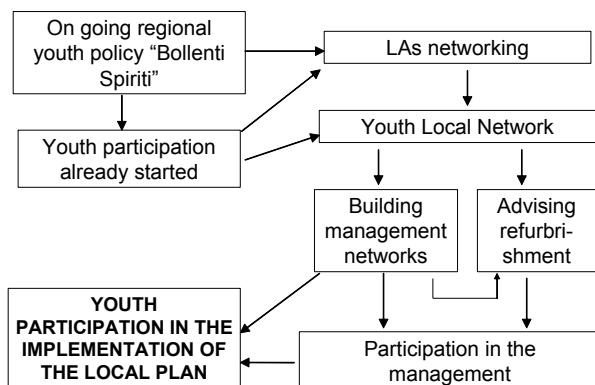
Finally, some favourable conditions for the continuity of youth participation are mentioned in the program theory. According to the theory, the Management Body of the Laboratory was expected to be able to combine resources coming from different sources (public and private, profit and no profit, voluntary and paid work). More specifically, the Management Body had the responsibility to transform young people into professionals and entrepreneurs willing to invest for the development of the Laboratory. In turn, the Laboratories could supply paid service, could work together with other Laboratories for fundraising and could involve local youth organizations for specific projects.

Chart 3 - The program theory: causal chain about "Youth participation after the regional program"
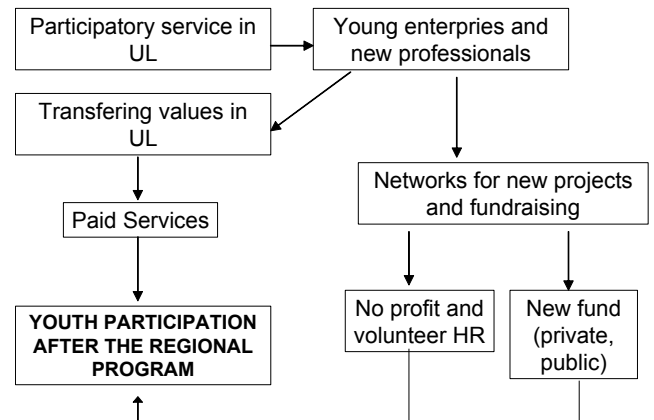
Basing on the results shown by the exploratory research run on the 5 Laboratories some good causal chains were discovered, highlighting a rather evident autonomy of youth participation from Town halls. Some specific events could have contributed to shape this equal-terms relationship between youth, Town halls and regional staff. Nonetheless, Town halls owe the decision-making power because of their property of the buildings where the Laboratories were created, their political property of the project, their responsibility in refurbishment and in buying all the necessary equipment, their power to close the Urban Laboratories after five years.

Within the causal chain hypothesized by the evaluation, the Local Youth Network (LYN) became a very important component of the local program. It was a formal body with advisory functions and was open to any kind of youth organizations. Starting from the top of chart 4, there were three key events about LYN from which virtuous causal links have been generated.

Chart 4 - Causal chains towards a less dependency of youth participation from Town halls
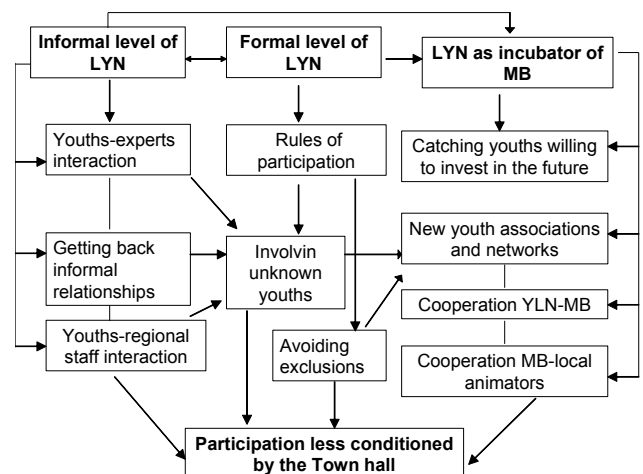
A positive interconnection between the formal and the informal actions undertaken by the LYN had a positive effect on the third key event, which was the incubation of the Management Body during youth participation in the LYN. In other words, the definition of equal-terms relationships between young people and Town halls was more likely where the action of the LYN was neither too formal, neither too informal. This means that LYN showed a good capacity to create norms and at the same time became a place for informal meeting and dialogue. This condition seemed to affect in a positive way the probability to generate a Management Body based on a strong participation of youth organizations. In fact, there was the risk that Town halls would have selected a Management Body composed by outsiders with weaker relationships with local groups and associations of youths.

Each of the three key events started a specific causal chain. At a formal level LYN was a place where to agree norms of participation in the management of the UL. For example, in the LYN it was possible to identify the more effective method to involve the associations that are less popular and/or more isolated. Furthermore, in the LYN it was possible to agree how to avoid the exclusion of some youth groups, especially of those where number and variety of participants were consistent.

> "The meetings in the local network were very serious and complicated (…). We tried most to reduce any abuse of power, thus we tried to agree the norms to enable every associations in the decision-making process"

At an informal level, where LYN wasn't perceived (or imposed) like the exclusive body of the participation, other participation processes came out. In other words, the LYN was a first chance to meet. Afterwards other informal relations came up. For example, the meeting in LYN was a chance to getting back friendship or professional relationship.

> "The meetings for planning the Laboratory was a chance to catch up with many friends that were working in the North or abroad…artists, architects"

Other kind of informal relations between young people and technicians helped to counterbalance the tendency of Town hall to privilege the role of technicians during the refurbishment and the executive planning phases. In some cases, technicians received explicit suggestions from the parties interested in the management of the Laboratory. Moreover, young people needed a place where to meet and to design their project and proposals without the public actors.

A certain degree of autonomy from the Town halls was perceived also by the Management Body of the Laboratory. For example, interviews revealed the need young people felt to have a direct relation with the regional staff, without the mediation of the Town hall. In this case, the Management Body perceived the regional staff as a "third guarantee" to avoid the risk for a decreasing acknowledgment from the Town hall, especially when there was a large acknowledgment from the youth community. In this respect, in some cases the regional staff was able to promote the Laboratory even where the Town hall was without a political government.

Finally, where the LYN was becoming a place able to virtuously interconnect formal and informal participation, the Management Body of the Laboratory was more likely to be linked to the local youth community. Where this happened, some interesting effects followed: new youth associations set up with the aim to enjoy the LYN, also as a combination between pre-existent associations; the absence of immediate benefit caught those young more willing to build the Laboratory as an enterprise with self-financing capacities; youth organizations faced about their specific skills for the management of the Laboratory.

5. Concluding remarks

A case study can provide a holistic understanding of the topic under consideration. Of course, different research methods are to be integrated, in order to achieve a fine-grained comprehension of some particular variables. Yet, when there is little control over the events and the real life context is on the foreground, a case study can provide a sensitive and insightful picture of a given phenomenon. Case Study, thus, can offer a training method, which may contribute to personal and professional development, as well as to problem-based learning in a number of organizational and social contexts. In this view, our examples may suggest how individuals or groups get involved and display their ability to create and produce new projects based on common good caring and empowerment.

At different levels, the two cases considered here are both intended to put forward some innovative perspective, where new solutions can be found out and the importance of non-material resources is emphasized. Indeed, the two cases are quite different, and, also, they were observed and described in different times and in different ways. Both of them, however, can highlight how, in a particular Southern Italian region, Some complex problems can be faced with by encouraging communities' creative involvement and participation, How and why these experiences were carried out? We tried to provide a first, provisional answer to these questions.

Our examples can offer a general outline about an empowering approach to some of the most crucial issues of our society. As a matter of fact, in the two cases discussed above, young people and immigrants are considered as being a great opportunity and a source of wealth, rather then a problem. Attention is given to their potential and they are involved in the planning of new solutions, in providing new visions and new results.

In particular, the first case (Albergo Diffuso) highlights the importance of social participation not only in creating concrete positive life opportunities for the more disadvantaged groups, but also in changing the cultural framework and in strengthening the connectedness of different actors and organizations in the wider social context. The enhancement of positive intercultural relations improves sense of security. Work protection and lawfulness in such a difficult context as the farming one may yield an important contribution to the economy of the area. The purposes of this experience can be analyzed in terms of "contact hypothesis" (Allport, 1954); "Self categorization" (Turner, 1987) and "multiple identities" (Wellman, 1997; Serino, 2011; Serino & Mc Britton 2011). In particular, David Wellman, drawing on both historical and contemporary American examples, pointed out the importance of "borderlands" and suggested these may encourage the flowering of inclusive, multidimensional identities. Borgo Tressanti with its "Albergo Diffuso" could become one of these "borderland" sites, wherein people may come to see one another as resources, and emerging rules for intergroup relations can be designed. By focusing on the Albergo Diffuso experience, we just wanted to show how, in a little Southern Italian village, the presence of immigrants can be transformed into an opportunity. Ethnic and religion differences are treated as reconcilable and mutually enhancing, and participants are encouraged to invent inclusive common identities, to become "competent actors in more than one cultural world" (Wellman, 1997,p. 16).

This project needs, of course, to be monitored more systematically across the time. It displays, however, an effective commitment in protecting people in need, in favoring lawfulness and in managing cultural diversity, while aiming at teaching peace and politeness at the same time. economic and social interventions as well as the relationships in a given community can be ameliorated. In this way, the Albergo Diffuso experience might be in condition to yield several positive effects concerning transformative changes at individual and group level, as well as in the community at large.

On the other hand, results coming from the second case study reveal the role played by public programs: they have been oriented to the enhancement of social participation of youth and to the multiplication of social capital, thus fostering self-entrepreneurship and self career management. In fact, the case of the Urban Laboratories in the Apulia Region brings our attention to an important mechanism associated with the youth participation in the implementation of services and activities for the youths. This mechanism is the combination of the start-up of a youth social movement and the building process of youth entrepreneurial skills. On the one hand, the public actor can activate youth participation basing on a 'resource-based' view of the young people. This also includes the ability to adopt a communication strategy that is in tune with the youth cultures. On the other hand, youth participation will be maintained if the program is able to find and improve youth skills for the management of the youth-work centre as a self-sustaining enterprise.

The present contribution is still a merely descriptive one. Our examples are just intended to point out some forms of social creativity by which individuals and communities can activate a virtuous circle in a bottom-up way. The cases discussed above suggest that different networks should be created and supported in order to influence the raising and distribution of resources. They also suggest how policy can stimulate and develop communities' action not only by means of financial support, but also by enhancing social-psychological resources, in order to set up innovative strategies, and to cope with scarcity in effective ways. Indeed the most challenging changes are to be verified in the long term: further longitudinal and follow-up analyses are needed, in fact, in order to put forward the structure of these cases and their specific implications for practice. Yet, they suggest we can cope with present-day relevant problems by connecting people, by enhancing participation and networking: that's what we can learn from the above examples.

The bigger question is, of course, whether and how these experiences can be generalized and to what extent they can get persistence across the time. Paying them attention and enhancing the actors' self- awareness is one of the possible answers, however. Inclusive, supportive communities are extraordinary places where new solutions to the crucial dilemmas of our present time can be found out, and people involvement in social life can be encouraged. We aimed at pointing out, in this line, some examples from Apulia, a Southern Italian Region that has been considered as a social and political "laboratory", even on the national scene.

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