

LABORATORIES FOR SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IN THE DISTRICT OF CASALECCHIO DI RENO (BOLOGNA, ITALY)

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Introduction

When the project *Laboratories for Social Solidarity* started on the 14th of December 2012, the Health and social District of Casalecchio di Reno included nine municipalities of the Province of Bologna with a total population of 110,895 residents. Of all the municipalities of the Province, the District had the second largest population over 75 years of age, and third largest population over 65. Data recorded by the provincial observatory indicated that in 2012 the most expressed needs of citizens were to be cared for and listened to, following immediately after the need for sufficient economic resources.

In January 2014, five Municipalities of the District of Casalecchio di Reno were amalgamated, so today the District comprises five Municipalities (Casalecchio di Reno, Monte San Pietro, Sasso Marconi, Valsamoggia, Zola Predosa) and the total population is 110,725 residents. The age distribution of the population is: 16,4% under 17 years of age; 59,7% between 18 and 64; 12,9% between 65 and 75 and 11,0% over 75 years.

The social fabric of the District is characterized by the presence of a strong and proactive third sector: voluntary organizations, associations, cooperatives and trade unions. They are highly competent interlocutors and willing to engage in constructive dialogue with the institutional actors. This situation makes it possible not only to exploit resources and opportunities beyond the government's direct intervention, but also to develop innovative proposals that can help to detect vulnerabilities within the welfare system, bringing them to the attention of territorial public services before they become actual unmet needs. It also fosters a widespread sense of responsibility for the collective care of the common good.

Description of the experience

Objectives:

With the project *Laboratories of Social Solidarity* (and previously, with the project *How to build together the future of welfare in the District in Casalecchio di Reno*), the territory of the District set itself the goal of starting a path of innovation and regeneration of participatory local planning through the practice of participatory democracy.

* *Ufficio di Piano del Distretto di Casalecchio di Reno* is the technical structure of the District of Casalecchio di Reno, for the development, planning and coordination of the local system of social services. <http://www.comune.casalecchio.bo.it/servizi/Menu/dinamica.aspx?idArea=60799&idCat=60799&ID=60799>

Specifically, the experiment wanted to:

- stimulate a planning process based on collaboration among a variety of local actors, institutional and non, to awaken a culture of solidarity and community;
- test a new method of planning that transversely addresses priority issues instead of focusing on specific target groups (disabled people, the elderly, etc.), and through a vision of community welfare;
- reshape the functions and responsibilities of the public sector in relation to the growing needs of citizens, developing capacities to respond to new social needs and innovating the system of intervention.

Actors involved:

The participatory process was open to institutions, third sector associations, for-profit actors and individual citizens of the District. The full list of organizations has reached six hundred, including the District's municipalities, the local health system, associations, forums and volunteer councils, the Italian Red Cross, parishes, documentation centers, community centers, cultural and recreational centers, senior and youth centers, employment centers, councils of immigrants, cooperatives and social economy actors, residential and semi-residential services for elderly and disabled people, businesses, foundations, school teachers, university faculty, trade unions, interested citizens and politicians.

Activities:

The experience of participatory co-planning of the District of Casalecchio di Reno started in April 2011 with the project *How to build together the future of welfare in the District of Casalecchio di Reno*. It was realized with the support and coordination of the Planning Office for Health and Social Welfare of the District, using a participatory approach, which we called *Laboratories of the future*. The project has led municipalities, local health services, cooperatives, associations and active citizens to test out innovative solutions for the organization of social interventions and services. At the end of this first participatory process (May 2012), the participants expressed their willingness to continue to use the method of deliberative democracy to construct new models of welfare. This was made possible thanks to the project developed by the above Planning Office called *Laboratories of Social Solidarity*. It was co-funded through a call for proposals launched by the Legislative Assembly of the Region of Emilia Romagna thanks to a specific law *Rules for participation in the development of regional and local policies*.

In the early stages of the project, the various participants involved were invited to submit their specific requests, which were then incorporated into the co-planning process.

Eight such applications were received:

1. a solidarity condominium in Zola Predosa, submitted by *Casaperta Insieme*;

2. a network for the integration of services related to the social inclusion of people with disabilities and for the support of their families, presented by *Passo Passo*;
3. a territorial resource center for the employment of vulnerable groups, presented by the cooperative *CSAPSA*;
4. a social co-housing experiment, presented by *Asc InSieme*;
5. a plan for the use of the District's cultural spaces, specifically the public library of Casalecchio di Reno called "Casa della Conoscenza", presented by the Cultural Institution of the Casalecchio di Reno Municipality;
6. a community garden, presented by the municipality of Monte San Pietro;
7. interventions for adolescents in the District, presented by the City of Casalecchio di Reno;
8. a solidarity condominium in Sasso Marconi, submitted by the association *Passo Passo*

After receiving the requests, the main actions of the project were three:

1. a training divided into four workshops to explain and further develop the methodologies and practices for the construction of a participatory community project. It started from the eight proposals received and was addressed both to the staff of social services and those working in third sector associations;
2. an educational process about some issues that were considered to have a high community value, such as redesigning of the future of welfare and living in solidarity. A series of three events was organized in the District: a meeting called "A future for us all" held in Casalecchio di Reno and dedicated to the discussion of ideas and projects for people with disabilities; a meeting in Zola Predosa called "Let us take care of the future of our elderly" to analyze the need and the opportunities for community welfare and to discuss social policy, with a special focus on the elderly and on solidarity between generations; a neighborhood party organized in Casalecchio di Reno called "Vicinicini" to promote closeness and solidarity among neighbors;
3. the creation of working groups for the development of micro-experimental projects to be implemented in well-defined contexts with the direct involvement of citizens, through the use of innovative ways of participation such as social theater, theater of oppressed, narrative laboratories, creative writing workshops and a living library. The latter is the coming together of individual from all walks of life to communicate their personal reality: volunteers – the "living books"- meet interested "readers" for a private encounter. This form of participation is intended to break down stereotypes and challenge attitudes about difference by fostering understanding among diverse members of a community. The original project proposals were shared, detailed, revised or merged, and generated seven working groups.

This first phase of the project lasted seven months and was concluded with a Participatory Proposal Document that was approved by the Committee of Mayors of the District in July 2013. It was prepared by the Legislative Assembly of Emilia-Romagna Region and the Table of Negotiation, one or more moderated meetings where there are organizations, associations, committees and stakeholders with respect to the specific topic of discussion, which seek to mediate the interests and reach common positions or to agree on the instruments (direct, deliberative or participatory democracy) to be used to reach them.

The results obtained by the seven working groups were included in the Annual Implementation Programme 2013-2014 of the institutional social and health plan referred to as the “Area Plan for health and social welfare”.

After that, the working groups continued their activity to concretely implement the proposals that emerged through the co-planning process. This phase continues today with a much less pronounced institutional direction. This is a positive sign because it means that the actors involved are empowered with respect to the goal of expanding public responsibilities to the needs of citizenry.

Most important results achieved and challenges faced

Results:

This project allowed the testing of a new method of planning social services that addresses priority issues transversally as opposed to addressing traditional target groups (elderly, adults, children, the disabled) from the perspective of community and generative welfare.

The parties involved submitted project ideas around issues they considered priorities and started working groups with both public and private actors to define and develop projects in a participatory way. The findings and proposals of the seven working groups were approved by the Mayors of the Municipality of the District and incorporated in the institutional “Area Plan for health and social welfare”.

Subsequently, the working groups took forward concrete projects in the territory, with the direct involvement of citizens: solidarity condominiums, a network of volunteers to support families with disabled children, a resource centre for the employment of people with disabilities, social co-housing, a community garden, the renovation of cultural facilities, activities involving “invisible” adolescents and younger.

This experiment generated new alliances and forms of collaboration between players in the territory; it also consolidated the community welfare where there is a widespread responsibility toward social needs of citizens. It also gave an extensive contribution to the development of innovative institutional responses. For example, in a condominium located in the municipality of Zola Predosa there was an apartment inhabited by a family of disabled people who were not considered by the rest of the owners. Thanks to the path taken by the Laboratory of Social Solidarity, not only have the two sides begun to relate in a positive way, but also a volunteer family assistant was identified inside the building to help the family when they need it.

Challenges faced:

The biggest challenge was to make a more flexible process for public planning of social interventions, as well as open a direct involvement of citizens, starting from the process of selecting the issues to be addressed. For example, to facilitate and enhance participation by non-state actors, meetings and events were organized outside of office hours, and often in suburban and less formal environments so as to reconcile people's work and life schedules. And to facilitate a deeper involvement of participants, innovative techniques of participation were used (social theater, theater of the oppressed, workshop of narrative and creative writing, living library, civic entertainment). For this purpose, non-institutional actors and experts in practices of people's participation were contracted.

Another challenge was to agree on a "common language" in reference to the goal of participatory co-planning. To do this, a training course was organized at the beginning of the project. It was addressed both to directors, managers, operators of public services and participants from the private sector.

Critical self-reflection

Considering the participatory process that was included in the project presented for the Regional call, a report was made at the end of March 2013, three months after its beginning, and an evaluation took place in mid-July 2013, at the end of the planning part of the project. After about two months, a questionnaire was administered to the participants, to evaluate their satisfaction. There will be an overall evaluation at the end of the project, expected by the end of 2014.

The experience of participatory co-planning represented a new way to define priority issues in the District. The results of the process confirmed that the activation of a participatory welfare can help redesign public functions and responsibilities in relation to the growing needs of citizens. A first significant result obtained through this route was the close collaboration between the staff of the municipalities and private entities, leading to the activation of services to support disabled people. Participatory welfare can also develop a capacity to respond to new social needs and to innovate the system of interventions. This was, for example, the case of the public library in Casalecchio di Reno, a project for which the institutions have established a direct confrontation with the users in order to know their needs and to integrate services with their demands.

The social cohesion and the sense of belonging that characterize the District, the relationships of mutual trust among actors of the territory and the intense work of coordination and support, led to the creation of a new and improved planning capacity, in which everyone demonstrated willingness to contribute to the achievement of shared goals and the courage to question the present way they work.

The high and constant attendance at the organized meetings (159 people participated in at least one of the meetings) and the large number of proposals that emerged, confirm the availability

of the actors of the District to continue to experiment a different organization of the welfare state and new operating instruments for territorial planning. Also, the interactions started within the project enhanced existing collaborations between different actors of the territory and led to new ones being created. It also helped to identify more clearly the “grey areas” on which it was necessary to focus in order to achieve new results.

Regarding capacity development, the working groups showed a high performance capacity: in a short time they were set up for each proposed project and produced not only planning documents, but also some first steps towards the implementation of the actions set out in the projects themselves. Importantly, we also saw the evolution of specific skills by various institutional actors that were part of the territorial structure responsible for health and social territorial planning. For example, the head of the Planning Office and the head of the social and health services (Azienda Unità Sanitaria Locale- AUSL) of the District were trained to become tutors during the participatory processes. Other two members of the Planning Office contributed to the project as facilitators.

There is a strong awareness that this is a process that requires an adequate and constant maintenance of relationships to stimulate the growth of solidarity and pro-social impulses in the territory. For the future, the aspect to develop further is certainly the incentive for a greater involvement of citizens - not only in public events - an increased presence of the corporate world and a greater participation of immigrant communities.

Challenges:

The main challenges we faced were two. First, it was difficult to coordinate professional staff of public institutions while they related with the community outside their traditional sites for dialogue with users. Secondly, the high number of participants and the need to convene meetings outside working hours put a strain on the technical structures of the local authorities. The institutional staff did not have experience in using participatory methods of conducting groups or of critical exchanges with external parties beyond the usual technical procedures. We managed to overcome this obstacle by carrying out a joint training exercise between public employees and private citizens, together with an expert in participatory methodologies.

The experiments provide a good testing ground for participatory methodologies and processes that should be made by implementing new similar forms, to share priorities and general strategies for the social and health territorial planning.

Continued Monitoring

From the questionnaire administered to participants to rate their overall satisfaction, 62 % rated it as “high”, commenting that “it was a very good approach to generate social cohesion”. Other comments of the participants affirm this:

“Nice format for working”; “I hope it is repeatable as a good practice”; “Assess the impact on the area to make improvement/corrections”; “Very democratic way of working that allows extensive interaction between participant”; “The group has been able to set itself easy goals to

achieve and to qualify the resources of the territory”; “Interesting process of working, capable to obtain good results”.

The project *Laboratories of Social Solidarity* was also analyzed as an interesting case study within the project called *Community Lab* and by the Agency for Health and Social Services of the Emilia-Romagna Region. In addition, the process was studied during the international training seminar for Participatory Governance and Territorial Development which is a collaboration between the Legislative Assembly of the Emilia-Romagna Region and the *Universitas Programme* of the International School KIP (Knowledge, Innovations, Policies and Territorial Practices for the UN Millennium Platform). On the 16th September 2014 the Casalecchio di Reno municipality hosted a delegation from Senegal to learn more about co-participatory planning and community welfare.

Innovative elements

Innovative aspects of the experience include:

The use of new methods to encourage participation. The living library helps to promote intercultural dialogue, to break down stereotypes and prejudices, to bring different realities for the improvement of the use of public spaces.

Theater for social interaction helps to inform and raise awareness on the issues related to social inclusion of people with disabilities, family support and the importance of volunteering, through the employment of artistic mediums, such as:

- creative writing helps to reflect on the issues of accessibility in public and private shared spaces;
- social animation, theatrical techniques and street communication help to relate directly with the target groups, with a communicative and dramaturgical approach that allows animators to fit into the social fabric by participating in festivals, markets, but also through a “door-to-door” action to involve citizens;
- the theater of the oppressed helps to represent the oppression of everyday life, with the intent to find strategies for conflict resolution, by enabling the viewer and by placing him at the center of the play, in order to include different representations of reality and explore possible changes in a creative and socialized format.

The activation of micro-planning experiments in normal “places of life” to realize actions that encourage participation in specific contexts (condominiums, schools, youth centers...) where change is needed, thus abandoning the institutional spaces that usually host formal meetings.

The modalities for reaching, inviting and encouraging social realities (with a strong focus on differences related to gender, skills, culture, age and political affiliation), as well as the channels used to share information: the project was open to institutions, third sector, for-profit world, citizens of the District, associations, forums, councils, volunteers, parishes,

documentation centers, job centers, community centers, cultural centers, senior centers, youth centers, immigrant councils, social cooperatives, companies, foundations, school and university teachers, trade unions, administrators, representative of the Province and the Region. All activities were publicized both through direct invitation (via mail and phone), and through public channels such as the website of the Planning Office (and links made to the site by other institutions), the facebook page *Laboratori Solidarietà Sociale del Distretto di Casalecchio di Reno* created for this purpose, articles published in the local newspaper of the Municipality; distribution of posters, flyers and brochures; the website of the Region on the page dedicated to the welfare; communication during theatrical performances.

The reports of each meeting were sent to the entire mailing list of invitees and it was published on the website of the Planning Office, enabling informed participation, even by those who could not attend in person.

Training through workshops using a bottom-up methodology, which started from the eight original project proposals. They were used as case studies from which to propose practical suggestions and larger theoretical inferences useful to the whole class group.

Participatory monitoring:

To monitor the entire project's process, an inter-institutional steering committee was used. It was a group specifically formed for directing, organizing and monitoring the project. The negotiating table, a place open to the main organized groups who attended the meeting, played a monitoring role related to the dynamics of content development, rather than overall performance evaluation. The actors at the table prepared a summary of the different positions on the respective issues and defined the proposal document as a synthesis of the outcomes of the participatory process, to be approved by the authorities with decision-making responsibilities.

Lessons learned and lessons that others can learn:

What we have learned from this process can be summed up as the following:

1. Train and use facilitation figures on participatory dynamics, including within public institutions;
2. Have strong support from and a direct involvement of politicians for the credibility of the project and to facilitate its practical implementation;
3. Use social media channels for advertising, promoting and communicating the project, in order to obtain greater participation;
4. Maintain leadership by the public entity to take care of the coordination, maintenance and facilitation of networking among the various parties;

5. Alternate visionary moments (formulation of proposals and futuristic ideas) with moments of actual implementation of the visions to not lose credibility and to not disappoint the expectations of the participants. This is because real, concrete results, even gradual results, feed the interest and availability of participants to continue and/or to get involved in the process.

References to link of website and with photographs attached

All materials are available on the website of the Planning Office www.comune.casalecchio.bo.it/udp in the section “Percorsi Partecipati”. The facebook page *Laboratori Solidarietà Sociale del Distretto di Casalecchio di Reno* and the facebook profile *Udp Distretto di Casalecchio* are active.

From time to time, articles were published on local newspapers and posters and leaflets and brochures were distributed. They were given information about the project during local theatrical performances. The journalistic agency *AGENDA* made articles, video and photo galleries and they were disseminate via the website of the Region in the session for welfare and communication.