

Competences and Social Participation in Local Social Policies: the Italian Area Social Plans

Abstract

Drawing on the results of research on twenty Area Social Plans (*Piani Sociali di Zona*), the article analyses competences for participation and the role that they perform as a link between models/theories and practices of participation. Through these results we investigate in particular the conceptual models and representations of officials and politicians with regard to the competences deemed important for promoting social participation. Besides giving voice to those who actually design and implement the Plans, often working in the front line, these representations shed light on the strengths and weaknesses of social participation.

The underlying trend that emerges from the research is the centrality of a relational framework of participation. This entails some problems. There is the risk of an over-simplified vision giving overwhelming weight to personal skills of a communicative type. This would fail to recognize the value of both institutional contexts (in terms of resources and facilitating factors or, conversely, disincentives) and the purely intersubjective dimension at the basis of communicative skills. The risk, in short, is the trivialization of relational skills. The most important point is that conceiving of skills as equivalent to personal abilities leads to evading questions of how to elicit, transmit, and reorganize knowledge for participation.

Keywords: Competences; Social Participation; Area Social Plans; Local welfare; Italy

1. Introduction

In many European countries, citizen participation is a central concern of local policies dealing with social inclusion, urban renewal, development, the environment, health and the social services (Garcia, 2006; Beaumont and Nicholls 2008; Silver, Scott and Kazepov, 2010). According to Lascoumes and Le Galès (2004), participation procedures belong to a growing typology of policy instruments that omit reference to authority and privilege citizen activation. Behind them lies a challenge to the traditional structure of government based on the public functions of command and control, and the affirmation of governance based on instruments intended to involve individuals as key actors in policy practices.

In this article we concentrate on Area Social Plans (*Piani Sociali di Zona*), which are instruments of participatory governance for the planning and management of local social policies in Italy. Introduced fifteen years ago by the law reforming the social services (Law 328/2000), the Plans do not seem to have exhausted their innovative thrust towards the changes envisaged by the reform: the adoption of participative forms of planning; the 'steering' role of local government; the integration of social and health care; coordination between public and non-public actors; reference to the territory as a reservoir of resources as well as the origin of specific problems.

We shall stress the implications of this complex system that has induced local authorities to open up arenas for participatory governance. Despite the problems that have accompanied their implementation, the Plans have marked the start of a new phase of social participation in Italy in connection with ongoing dynamics in other sectors – local development and urban renewal in particular. Our analysis focuses on competences for participation and the role that they perform as a link between models/theories and practices of participation. Drawing on the results of research on twenty Area Social Plans, we investigate in particular the conceptual models and representations of officials and politicians with regard to the competences deemed important for promoting social participation¹. The cultural patterns and values of these actors, the images that they have of their own role and that of others with whom they interact are, in fact, crucial features in the concrete institutional and organizational profile of policies and services.

We shall proceed as follows. First, we shall outline the main aspects of the policy context in which social participation and Area Social Plans are embedded. We shall then describe our analytical approach and provide an overview of the implementation of the Plans investigated. On this basis, we shall analyse the representations of **competences for participation** expressed by officials and politicians. Besides giving voice to those who actually design and implement the Plans, often working in the front line, these representations furnish important insights into more general dynamics and enable discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of social participation.

2. The policy context

Although there is a fair degree of consensus that participation can be defined as citizen involvement in public decision-making, the interest that the subject arouses both in scholarly debate and the general public is on a par with its vagueness as a concept and the variety of practices associated with it (Papadopoulos and Warin 2007). In any case, themes like involvement of the local community and the development of participative and deliberative decision-making have become prominent on the governance agenda in many European countries. The English case can be considered paradigmatic because of the policy practices it has inspired, with an increase in programmes based on community regeneration through the adoption of participative methodologies. The same move towards participation is to be found in France, Germany and Italy. Participatory governance, therefore, should in theory involve not only a transformation of power but also its transfer to individuals and communities through experimentation with new forms of citizenship, especially in local and urban contexts (Blakeley, 2010).

It should be said that, although the theme of social participation now enjoys particular currency, it is not a new one. As pointed out by Moini (2012), during the 1970s and 1980s, in connection with a series of broad social mobilizations, participation practices marked by conflict, a low level of structuring, and reference to egalitarian ideologies and collective identities spread throughout Europe. In Italy, those were the years in which mobilizations for work, health, and housing generated new forms of social and political subjectivity expressing an unprecedented demand for change. Thereafter, during the 1990s, a second wave began with ‘top-down’ forms of participation whereby local authorities acted as the promoters of **opportunities for participation** and tended to concentrate on issues of more limited scope (ibid.).

It was therefore the 1990s that saw the beginning of social participation not only in social policy matters. Many factors contributed to encouraging this trend. Governments in many

European countries felt the need to find new sources of consensus and legitimacy able to counter the electorate's growing disaffection or to prevent conflict on issues of high environmental and social impact. At the same time, the localization of the welfare systems was accompanied by the spread of schemes designed to enhance local resources for action and coordination (Kazepov, 2008). The result was that greater use was made of devices whose inclusiveness had a twofold significance: in fact, they were measures for the social inclusion of disadvantaged individuals and groups and, simultaneously, instruments to involve those actors and citizens more generally in decisions and public life. Besides, participation attracted bipartisan support in the European Union as a whole in conjunction with key issues such as social cohesion and innovation. In this sense, it was a phase particularly favourable to participatory politics and policies, in which the supranational, national and local levels worked as vectors and domains of application for new tools and approaches in public action.

In this context there has been growing appreciation of the potential benefits of participation. **These theoretically should include (includerebbero in teoria)**: better understanding of the problems addressed and therefore more effective solutions; the strengthening of cooperative capacities and social capital; revitalization of the democratic process. Moreover, policy-makers have become increasingly convinced that many issues cannot by their very nature be resolved without the involvement of the people who are affected by or co-interested in them. **However there are also several problems (vengono evidenziati anche diversi problemi)**, especially with regard to the effective inclusion of weak interests and disadvantaged groups. An issue much discussed is whether the importance assumed by participation has come at the expense of measures and goals regarding social justice (Feinstein, 2010; Tissot, 2007). Moreover, levels of participation tend to be low almost everywhere.

In Italy, social participation has been especially favoured by the rescaling process, which simultaneously involves politics, state structure, and policies. The role played by politics concerns above all the 'new mayors', whose powers have increased decidedly since the changes made to the electoral system and the mechanisms of local representation in the 1990s. As regards state architecture, the de-centralization process has been of great importance and led to a constitutional reform in 2001 undertaken in the name of devolution. This reform changed the forms of sub-national government and empowered Regions to legislate on certain matters, including social services.

Also to be included in this picture are the Area Plans and the reform of social services enacted in 2000. This reform has been a prominent topic in national debate for quite some time, and has been regarded as a sort of turning point. In general terms, its guiding principle is that of integration. The fragmentation of the Italian social service system is in fact a long-standing and serious problem that concerns diverse aspects: the feeble coordination among the different levels of institutional responsibility; the big differences between the Centre-North and the South; and the vagueness and inequality of rights (Paci 1989; Ferrera 1996; Mingione 2000). The reform law decisively affects all areas of integration. Firstly, it aims to guarantee essential and uniform levels of social services across the entire national territory. A second field of integration regards the construction of an institutional structure based on the vertical subsidiarity model which attempts to balance the responsibilities of the various political-administrative levels (national, regional and municipal) and to create a mix of centralized regulation and local self-government. Moreover, in order to manage social policies, Italian municipalities must join together in new inter-municipal groupings called Area Plans. The law also provides

for the involvement of local third-sector organizations and citizens in the design and production of social services. This includes superseding the model of ‘mutual accommodation’ typical of the Italian welfare system and characterized by a low degree of public regulation, weak coordination between the public and private sectors and the high economic dependence of the third sector on public finance (Paci 1989, Pavolini 2003). Overall, the form of integration envisaged by Law 328 is closely linked to a model of local governance based on negotiation and participation. In this regard, the law identifies the Area Plan as the instrument for the joint planning of services and social interventions.

It should be specified that, although large-scale changes have taken place, the overall situation is still far from homogeneous, especially as regards institutional responsibilities, which are not sufficiently coordinated. The reform consists of a non-legally-binding, regulatory framework. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, the federalist reform begun in 2001 has considerably strengthened the powers of the Regions. As a consequence, the balance between the national and local levels proves to be particularly difficult and fragile. Moreover, due to the financial and economic crisis, further constraints and problems have added to those that already existed. The need to control and reduce government spending has induced re-centralization. The capacity for innovation demonstrated by local governments for several electoral cycles is in trouble everywhere, and, when viewed in the light of the full-blown crisis of politics, seems marginal and lacking in incisiveness. The aggravation of social problems that are extremely difficult to address with the means available – problems such as poverty and unemployment – exert particular pressure at local levels, in a situation of continuing uncertainty about the national regulatory framework and central-level responsibilities. This increases the territorial disparities between macro-areas. Furthermore, this scenario comprises the well-known difficulties of the European project caught between increasingly stringent budget constraints, on the one hand, and the advance of populism on the other.

But the time has come to describe the research and its results.

3. Participation, competences and Area Social Plans: the analytical perspective

It is not easy to say what social participation has achieved to date. What is lacking, in fact, is an overview that brings together the results of the numerous studies carried out on specific cases and in specific territorial contexts. In any event, participation concerns different levels of public action: not only the macro and meso– regulatory and structural constraints, the different scales of decision-making, the political cycle – but also the micro level of organizational and professional practices, the everyday operational interfaces between services, associations and citizens. The aim of our analysis is accordingly to determine the dynamics that occur at this level, by examining the competences involved in participation. This analysis is important for several reasons:

- because it concerns the everyday institutional and organizational domain, where policy change as designed on paper either fails or succeeds;
- because it investigates the capacity to learn: that is, to acquire and stabilize new skills on which the public authorities can rely, in particular to support and consolidate participation;
- because it sheds light on the processes by which the approaches and concepts concerning competencies are mobilized and re-elaborated in contexts where change is required.

Taken together, these reasons have to do mainly with social policies, which, more than other sectors of public intervention, find it difficult to include recipients in the design and implementation of participatory measures. In fact, they usually involve people and contexts suffering hardship and situations in which neither the resources nor the interest necessary for participation can be taken for granted (Borghini, 2006). The effective involvement of citizens and its results depend on the joint development of processes of institutional learning and social learning. From this standpoint, focusing on skills for participation means identifying the dynamics which foster – or hamper – institutional intelligence about the problems and solutions involved in participation processes. But it also means investigating the conditions for and constraints on social learning and the ability of social actors to construct and refine cognitive frames, categorizations, and knowledge: that is, a latent cognitive capital which can be brought into play in the aggregate and collective forms of agency typical of participation.

Our analytical framework draws on various approaches that analyse public action in terms of situated contexts and interactions. The first is the street-level bureaucracy approach (Lipsky, 1980), which investigates the microdecisions that determine the delivery of services. It highlights the fact that there is normally a marked discrepancy between the design of policies and their implementation, especially when resources are limited and goals are ambiguous. The second approach is that of the organizational studies focusing on practices and the interpenetration between the processes and contexts of knowledge production (Nicolini, Gherardi, Yanow, eds, 2003). Adopting the notion of learning as a social process, this perspective tends to emphasise the situated and inter-subjective nature of knowing and learning. The study of work practices, therefore, focuses on the interactions that develop among the people, technologies and spaces that mediate the work activity (Parolin, 2011). There are, in addition, important lines of inquiry that concentrate on the relationship between policies and knowledge and the so-called ‘informational bases’ of policies (Salais, 2008; de Leonardi, 2009). This bears out the choice of using the perspective of skills to investigate the knowledge, both formalized and tacit, which fuels agency in participation.

It should also be borne in mind that the theme of skills acquires a specific profile and importance in the context of the European Lifelong Learning Programme. This programme has extended and articulated the meaning of the notion of skill to encompass the integrated set of personal, social and/or methodological knowledges whose use concerns both professional and personal development. At the same time, in recent years the scientific literature has also shown how skills relate to learning and change, giving salience to overlapping aspects such as problem-solving and problem-setting, and capacities for mediation and coordination (Agten 2007).

Competences are normally sub-divided into four broad areas: strategic, technical, professional, transversal and basic (Moore et al., 2002; Pellerey, 2004; Delamare, Le Diest and Winterton, 2005). However, for the purposes of our research, we have referred to the neo-Vygotskian sociocultural perspective integrated with the “Activity Theory” (Cole, Engeström, 1997). Unlike classical theories centring on individual characteristics (Spencer and Spencer, 1993), this perspective highlights the ways in which competences are brought into play in relation to the context (Goodwin, 1997). Above all, we were interested in grasping the relational aspect of competences, linked to the position held by those who believe that in order to really be enacted, they require some type of acknowledgement, in other words evaluation by others (Le Boterf, 1994).

Within this conceptual framework professional competences distinguish themselves as a “group of activities carried out by several subjects acting together in specific contexts, according to mutually agreed modes and in order to achieve a certain aim. They are thus understood as ‘strategies in action’” (Cole, Engeström, Vasquez, 1993, pag.).

In order to analyse the data in accordance with this perspective, the competences were divided into the following four broad areas (Ajello, 2002; Riva, 2013):

1. technical, requiring the application of specific professional competences (normative, theoretical, methodological) with particular reference to the theme of participation;
2. organizational, which involves the knowledge of organizations and their procedures and the ability to manage them in order to facilitate participation;
3. relational, implying mastery of competences (the ability to listen, communication, empathy, etc.) able to facilitate and promote relations between actors;
4. strategic, including competences specifically aimed at reaching an objective, in this case the development of participatory processes.

With specific reference to the Area Social Plans, participation practices centre on skills situated at the intersection between actors and context. On the one hand, individual knowledge and abilities are important, not only of a technical nature, but also related to the capacity to define problems and identify solutions, manage and mediate relations, and the ability to learn from the concrete activity performed. On the other hand, what is also important is the way in which these skills interact with the institutional and social contexts in which practices take place: with the organizational structures of services, decision-making processes, and the cultures and social resources of locally established participation.

On the basis of these considerations, it was therefore decided that within a more wide-ranging research study on active citizenship and, in particular, on the role of the promotion of social participation by the Area Plans, priority would be given to the theme of the competences of subjects that played a crucial role in the processes of participation, in the conviction that these competences constitute a link between models/theories and real practice (Meghnagi, 2005). More specifically, an attempt has been made to identify in the interviewees’ replies how much importance is given to the four areas previously outlined in the individuation of the competences of importance for promoting social participation.

As to participation, in the first place the relative vagueness of the concept should be stressed once again. Indeed, participation should always be distinguished from connected issues and phenomena, on which it is often superimposed. It should, for example, be distinguished from deliberation, which in its true sense is identified by the dialogical-rational model, based on dynamics of communication and argumentation. Unlike participation, which does not exclude conflict, this model assumes that dialogue allows the actors to transform their positions reciprocally and have them converge in a common perspective. Be that as it may, the research has attempted to deal with this vagueness by constructing certain maps for finding the way in the investigation of practices. Arnstein’s (1969) classic categorization paved the way for analyses centring on different typologies of participation. His famous ladder is broken down into eight steps which, from the bottom up, are: manipulation and therapy, equivalent to non-participation; consultation and placation, which correspond to tokenism; partnership, delegated power and citizen control, all three associated with citizen control. As Bishop and Davis (2002) observe, the

analytical scheme proposed by Arnstein and the classifications that have been formulated in its wake tend to consider participation as a continuum, but participation is a discontinuous form of interaction.

Keeping to this perspective, we have stuck to a fairly loose concept of participation, broadly emphasizing the involvement of citizens in public decisions, in order to leave room for the variations by which real practices are marked. At the same time we took into account the variety of organizational forms of social participation that exist in the third sector, taking into consideration both the organizations for social cooperation, normally of a professional nature, and family forms of association, centring mainly on self-help and mutual aid.

The methodological structure of the research involved the identification of 20 Area Plans, selected in order to be on the one hand significant in terms of all the country's large macro-areas, and, on the other, of situations marked both by different normative and political balances and by the different economic resources available. For each Plan the available materials were analyzed (first and foremost the planning documents and reports from the past three years) and five subjects were interviewed: a politician (generally the **Head dopo diventa Councillor, qual è giusto?** of Social Policy at the main municipality in the territory affected by the Area Plan); the **official Head of Office for the Plan**; **a social worker** with responsibility in the decision-making process; a representative of the third sector and a representative of a users' association. At the same time, since the main objective was to understand the dynamics underlying the decision-making and organizational processes, it was decided to opt for long, in-depth interviews, able to successfully highlight the interviewees' cultural models, their evaluation of the latter and their own representations. Clearly, the subjects interviewed were not necessarily representative of the whole universe of those taking part in the Area Plans in Italy; nonetheless they can be considered significant both in terms of the different problem areas that institutional representatives, professional figures and social subjects find themselves up against in their daily work and in their attempts to create networks and social participation, and in terms of the main models and interpretative schemes they refer to.

4. Implementation: an overview

The twenty plans analysed by our research were distributed across eleven regions: four in the North of Italy (Friuli, Emilia Romagna, Lombardy and Trentino Alto Adige), three in Central Italy (Lazio, Tuscany and Umbria); two in the South (Calabria and Puglia); and two in the islands (Sardinia and Sicily).

The results as a whole confirmed that the differences between formulas of participation only partly reflect the territorial cleavages that have distinguished the Italian welfare system and the country's historical dualism, whereby the South is decidedly poorer in resources than the Centre-North. While the gap with regard to the amount and types of supply persists, with respect to innovative dynamics the demarcation lines are much more blurred or variable. The differences between macro territorial areas are therefore mitigated, while a significant diversity in regional contexts is apparent: for example, comparison between the plans developed in Lombardy (in the North) and those in Puglia (in the South) shows that the former are static, while the latter are more innovative. These differences are influenced by variables that operate in sub-national contexts and in the relationships between levels of government. What are decisive in this regard are the

legislative and planning choices taken in recent years by regional decision-makers in accordance with the principles of vertical subsidiarity enshrined in the devolution law of 2001 (Carabelli, Facchini, eds, 2011, Ciarini, 2013).

Two particular features should be highlighted in this scenario. First, the negotiating logic of planning coexists with traditional methods and approaches. In more than one case, needs analysis was performed on quantitative data from secondary sources rather than on data collected specifically for the purpose. Second, the involvement of the third sector is a widespread but rarely systematic strategy. Participation is mostly fragmentary and restricted to specific issues and delimited areas. However, there are exceptions. The Bergamo and Cividale del Friuli Area Plans, for example, are based on a systematic approach to participation that gives a central role to the individual citizen. At the opposite extreme is Palermo, where a public selection system requires the submission of an application to participate.

The South, however, has several surprises in store. **The design and the implementation of Plan of Bari have been characterized** by the creation of a variety of arenas for discussion and participation. Citizen involvement has been encouraged in particular by multi-purpose open centres (*Centri Aperti Polivalenti*) and has led to the drafting of a *Manifesto of the Rules*. Educators, social workers, officials, and representatives of the third sector and community service have participated in all the planning phases. More to be expected but equally significant is the large participation infrastructure created in Friuli, in north-eastern Italy, which has certainly benefited from a regional tradition in which a substantial endowment of public resources for welfare combines with an extensive and solid network of associations.

The Area Plans of Trento and Bolzano also use an extensive range of instruments to support participation. In Trento, the ‘social poles’ distributed around the city operate simultaneously as service centres and crucial nodes for citizen participation. In Bolzano, focus groups have been organized with the specific purpose of promoting participation. In Milan, after some years marked by scant social participation, the Plan for 2009-2011 introduced a new architecture of territorial governance comprising a community participation body (*Organo di Partecipazione della Comunità*: third sector), technical-thematic panels (*Tavoli Tecnico-Tematici*: officials and experts from associations for specific areas of intervention) and a steering committee (*Consiglio di Indirizzo*: institutions). The result is a composite architecture but one which seems to suffer from excessive formality.

In the Area Plan of Garbagnate, in the province of Milan, the extent of participation is limited. In fact, there is a third-sector local consultation panel (*Tavolo Locale di Consultazione del Terzo Settore*) which, as its official name implies, can only make non-binding proposals.

The Area Plan of the Alta Val di Cecina, Tuscany, has instead invested in the involvement of both the third sector and the public, and has drawn up a charter for social citizenship (*Carta per la Cittadinanza Sociale*) which has been conceived to promote a pact between the local community and institutions.

The city of Bologna has a robust social participation and planning infrastructure. Moreover, since 2009 it has had systematic assessment procedures in place.

As for Rome, the municipality investigated lacked a real participatory approach, but this lack should be read in light of the differences that normally exist between the various municipalities into which the capital is administratively divided.

Broadly speaking, allowing for some leeway, four main models and strategies can be identified in participation, whose main promoters are politicians: a strategy that can be termed ‘inclusive through communication’; one marked by ‘participation through procedures’; one centring on ‘targeted consultation’; and one based on ‘community participation’. An example of the first model is provided by the municipality of Bari, whose Area Plan aims to broaden the range of actors involved by relying mainly on communication, much less on formal spaces. The second model gives more weight to procedures, and associates participation with the construction of a highly articulated set of relations between different spaces and subjects. In Bologna, for example, this architecture regulates the relationship between neighbourhoods and the central level of the city’s governance. Again in Bologna, the characteristics of the participation infrastructure – both formal and rooted in neighbourhoods – seem to have favoured the involvement of individuals, who elsewhere have recorded low levels of attendance. In reality, what certainly works in favour of citizen participation is an agenda that systematically covers other sectors and areas of city life, as well, given that the Area Plan is one of the most complicated of instruments. By contrast, the case of the municipality of Roma II shows a more circumscribed investment. It is an example of a quite widespread system centring mainly on consultation with the third sector, in particular associations, and therefore reflects the third model outlined above. Finally, the case of Trento exemplifies an approach which emphasises the community dimension of civiness relegating the decision-making and policy-planning area to the background.

5. Competences for participation

Before starting out on an analysis of technical and political representations with regard to skills for participation, some preliminary observations are necessary. In general, these representations convey an open and at times confused view. In some cases, participation is understood simply as informed access to services or as consultation. In others, emphasis is instead placed on the need for real inclusion in planning that affects decisions and therefore implies some form of power.

As to practices, these representations give rise to a wide array of problems. The issue of resources is obviously crucial, but it regards the participation framework in an ambivalent manner. On the one hand, in fact, active citizenship tends to be considered a necessity in times of severe spending cuts, as a strategy to cope with the shortage of resources; on the other, active citizenship itself needs to be supported by an appropriate amount of resources.

The core problem concerns the dynamics of participation. Almost everywhere, participation is sporadic and not particularly effective. The situations that can be considered successful from this point of view testify to the importance of practices generating trust and reciprocal recognition between institutions and third-sector organizations. There is then the problem of the Area Plan’s visibility and recognition as a tool to enhance local welfare. From this derives the importance attached to the development of contacts, especially direct ones, between administrations and citizens.

The officials

Against this background, the representations of the officials tend to be arranged around three main concepts: relationships, information, and organization.

The frame of relationships, communication and listening is the one most frequently mentioned and the most recognizable.

If we're talking about the ability to involve citizens, we're talking about communication skills (Head of the Plan Office, Trieste).

Those respondents who focus on listening emphasize its interactive dimension. The development of listening skills by administrations, in fact, is conceived of as a process complementary to the development of the ability to give voice to the recipients of a service.

The capacity to listen, to value the other, and to give precise information are essential; it's also important to maintain contacts with people even when there are no meetings scheduled, to communicate important matters, because this will keep the connection open (Head of the Plan Office, Cividale del Friuli).

Corollaries of listening are the abilities of negotiation and mediation.

The skills that should definitely be enhanced in staff are the abilities to negotiate and establish solutions with the public (Official at the Central Office of Social Policies, Milan).

Representations of a more strategic kind centre on knowledge and information. They emphasise in particular the acquisition and production of knowledge about the territorial area, the context, and the community. Consequently, the promotion of participation centres on the ability to understand the specific contexts in which action is to be taken and the resources available.

If we have to develop participation within an area, we need to know the characteristics of that community so that we can understand how best to approach people to ensure that they participate and become a resource (Head of the Plan Office, Cagliari).

Also emphasised is the need to promote the production of knowledge by individuals and groups. Participation requires citizens and communities to be informed about the opportunities available to them. A long-standing problem of the social services is that the most vulnerable people, i.e. their main targets, tend to know little or nothing about them. Finally, knowledge is seen as furnishing information of strategic value in support of planning. This concerns the more formalized kinds of participation skills, which enhance codified assessment procedures.

Skills relating to assessment are certainly necessary - knowing how to subject local requirements to strategic assessment. (...). We must not undertake a task just because someone asks for it every three years, so as not to lose funding. We have to work with the continuous planning method (Official at the Policies for Employment Office, Bari)

The third core notion, as already mentioned, concerned aspects with a more direct bearing on the organizational dimension, both within services and externally in relations with the public. With regard to the former, the interviewees consider integration and multidisciplinary to be two conditions necessary for dealing appropriately with the complexity of contexts and enhancing the potential for action. Put simply, it is the ability to work together.

Teamwork is important in order to interpret together the needs of those come into contact with the services ..(it's) a competence tied not only to theoretical concepts but also to practical aspects linked to know-how, not just to knowledge (Head of the Social Sector, Bastia Umbra).

Overall, the three frames reflect the intersection between two trajectories of change. The first is the affirmation in the public sector of competence models typical of the knowledge society. According to these models – which are prevalent in firms and technology-

intensive production processes – the essential features of competence are both the production of knowledge and the development of relational skills such as the ability to coordinate and cooperate with others. The second trajectory of change concerns the spread of network-based organizational methods inspired by a model of ‘shared’ administration based on the involvement of multiple actors attentive to communication, willing to listen, and able to mediate (Kathi and Cooper, 2005).

In the interpretative frames used there is no lack of reference to technical skills, but these are marked by characteristics of ‘polyvalence’, ‘interconnection’ and ‘multidisciplinarity’ which greatly scales down specialized aspects and instead brings to the fore the need to “*work together on the whole person*”. In any case, there prevails a perspective that gives salience to the ‘situated’ nature of skills, i.e. to the interdependence between knowledge and the context in which it develops.

Consistently with this approach, in the majority of cases skills and knowledge for participation are not considered to be the prerogatives of specific professionals; rather, they are conceived as shared – or sharable – resources, which bring into play the way in which diverse figures and professionalisms work and interact with each other.

The politicians

As already mentioned, the Plans are influenced by the different approaches that have been outlined above, from which politicians gain their inspiration regarding citizenship and participation. Nonetheless, these differences do not substantially call into question the priority, common to all of them, of a relational register, which is in any case considered essential in defining the competences needed for participation, both regarding one's own role and that of the other players, institutional or social, that are or may be involved.

It is in this perspective that the interviewees give central importance to three aspects. First, they emphasise the multidimensionality of skills. Second, in line with the attention paid to the role of the third sector, they stress the tacit, non-formalized, skills available to local communities. Finally, and obviously, they think that the capacity of multiple actors to collaborate is decisive.

There need to be multifaceted skills, an ability to listen, and the capacity to translate needs into opportunities, also depending on the means available. Because we need to be able to grasp the needs of the community and know how to analyse them and then turn them into opportunities on the basis of what the resources offer... It is not so easy to translate need. Then we need human skills, the ability to listen and mediate, as the committees often degenerate because there's someone who wants to impose their own will (Councillor, qui e dopo è giusto? Assessore? Cividale del Friuli).

A spirit of cooperation is essential for all those involved in participatory planning, disinterested collaboration, because otherwise everything becomes just a matter of money (Councillor, S. Marco Argentano).

In their arguments, the politicians refer to specific notions of the relationship between institutions and society.

If I think that the community is organized for different levels of responsibility and recognize these different levels of responsibility, then I put my own responsibility on the line, too. The competence of a person acting in a community is knowing what his share of the responsibility is, believing in a certain idea of society and community, having a high regard for the person that he's dealing with (...), saying firmly to this person “you're

important as a player” (...) and avoiding the desire to dominate, control and organize from above (Councillor, Trieste).

Skills for participation may also be associated with an ideal dimension: that of politics as a vision or, as one interviewee put it, as a “dream”.

I like to think that a little imagination helps, besides legal and regulatory instruments. Imagination, a desire to overcome obstacles, a vision that contemplates the dream dimension (...) a dream that, if pursued with strong determination and perseverance, can come true. I think that giving hope, a little light to the people who need us, is the main goal. Otherwise it becomes the mere delivery of services, which, I think, leads nowhere (Councillor, Trieste).

Whilst sharing a relational stance, the politicians are more convinced than the officials about the extent of political participation. This was to be expected. Those who understand participation as the exertion of real influence on the dynamics of decision-making and management – that is, as a redistribution of powers – emphasise the need to support and expand citizens’ knowledge about social phenomena so that their role can be more incisive. The equivalence between participation and involvement in decisions is especially apparent in areas where institutional sensitivity to participation is more consolidated. This was the case of Bolzano.

Participation is a fine thing, it’s right. If it is informed and conscious participation, it brings results. But if participation is only saying ‘tell me a couple of things and then I’ll handle it myself anyway’, it’s the best way to alienate people (Councillor, Bolzano).

In other contexts, historically marked by greater difficulties in the relationship between state and citizens, the public value of skills for participation is also understood as the capacity to represent the state, thereby implicitly responding to the need to restore faith in the institutions. This is the case of Bari.

First of all what’s necessary is a good institutional capacity for self-criticism, because we have to restore credibility to the institutions. The citizen no longer sees the state as a credible figure. So we must establish criteria of credibility by having front-office staff with a culture of work and who can represent the state in the places where citizens come into contact with it (Councillor, Bari).

Apparent in almost all cases, however, is the fundamental role attributed to the capacity to compose a sort of “mosaic” of participation.

In our current programming we’ve also used the media to show all citizens that the municipality is willing and able to promote this path ... there have always been officials from the municipality, the local health board, or other bodies who have coordinated the work and collected input from the participants. In my ignorance I didn’t think it would be possible to work by having everyone participate ... instead a mosaic of truly remarkable people took shape right in front of my very eyes (Councillor, Trieste).

6. Conclusions: competencies and opportunities for participation

The underlying trend that emerges most markedly from our research is the centrality of a relational register of participation. This finding runs through all the roles and contexts analysed. The representations of skills, in fact, were quite similar in all the various macro-areas and municipalities considered. What should be noted, however, is that the positions expressed with greatest clarity were those of actors operating in contexts where participation was more extensive and incisive. It is likely that the wealth of

representations of competences is on the one hand a factor that facilitates participation; but on the other hand, and to some extent, its outcome. This may mean that, in cases where there is a highly inclusive and well-tested model of social participation, this has, at least in part, given rise to a change in the image that technicians and politicians have of the competences – their own and of others – necessary for participatory decision-making processes.

What should be stressed in any case is the capacity – though unevenly distributed – to include communicative and relational skills within a more complex framework comprising not only organizational capacities in the strict sense but also those able to identify the community's social priorities and the resources to be devoted to the processes of active citizenship.

This framework entails some problems. There is the risk of an oversimplified vision which gives overwhelming weight to personal skills of a discursive and communicative type. This would mean underestimating both institutional contexts (in terms of resources and facilitating factors or, conversely, disincentives) and the purely intersubjective dimension at the basis of communicative skills, the ability to listen, etc. The risk, in short, is the trivialization of relational skills. The most important point is that conceiving skills as equivalent to personal abilities leads to avoiding the issues of how to elicit, transmit, and reorganize knowledge for participation.

These risks do not mean that participation is impossible. In order to gain more general insights from our limited research, in fact, further considerations can be sketched out on the prosaic, sometimes decidedly modest, model of participation. This model reflects the changes – some covert, others more explicit – which in recent years have affected different levels in the infrastructure of participation, primarily with regard to the drastic cuts in social spending. Moreover, participation has for some time been overloaded with expectations. These have fuelled both the optimism of participation's most convinced advocates and, as the problems have grown increasingly obvious, the pessimism of its critics. But the optimism no longer has any significant basis to rest on; the pessimism results in wasted opportunities that are now more valuable than ever. And there is the risk that, in these circumstances, participation will be reduced to a mere saving strategy or be abandoned because it is considered an unaffordable luxury.

Yet opportunities are not lacking, and they are most evident at the micro level. As we have seen, something has changed in the institutional, professional and social cultures involved in local policies. To be sure, there is no shared interpretation of participation, and rhetorical use of the notion is frequently made. However there are cases in which these cultures support the construction of open and inclusive participation infrastructures which recognize and encourage the voice of citizens.

One conclusion is therefore as follows: in order to demonstrate the real possibilities of participation, over-demanding and prohibitive, or over-simplified concepts must be dispensed with and, instead, the focus should shift to the practices and the actors, and their social and institutional skills.

Notes

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