Collaborative services in the Italian city of Reggio Emilia. The case study of "Il Quartiere Bene Comune - The Neighbourhood as Commons"

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Abstract

"The Neighbourhood as Commons" is a public policy that involves every Reggio Emilia's neighbourhood in a massive co-design process with citizens, associations and various stakeholders to develop innovative services aiming at improving the quality of community life and urban environment. The main objective of the municipality is to guide a transition from a public participation - in the traditional sense - to a responsible civic protagonism, both in associative and individual form. Through the "Citizenship laboratories", participants are called to co-design a concrete activity that is formalised into a "Citizenship Agreement" and becomes an actual public-interest service. The key role is played by the Neighbourhood Architect: a representative of the municipality who is entitled to guide the whole process. Currently, 25 Citizenship Agreements have been signed by 695 actors (profit/no profit association and citizens) involved in 152 projects related to a variety of areas, such as urban agriculture, sustainable mobility, community welfare and digital innovation.

Introduction

Quartiere Bene Comune - "*Neighbourhood as Commons*" - is an experimental public policy developed by Reggio Emilia City Council to find new ways of delivering services and interfacing with local community after neighbourhood councils suppression in 2011 by the Central government[1]. For small to medium-sized Italian cities such as Reggio Emilia which has 171.400 inhabitants, the suppression of these local councils became an opportunity to keep alive the process of decentralization by re-thinking the relationship centre - suburbs and to improve the collaboration between local authority and citizen on co-design social innovation projects (EC, 2011; Ave, 2005). With its strong sense of identity, every neighbourhood becomes the community hub by which to rebuild the relationship between

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1 The National Law 42/2010 was spelled the end of the 'circoscrizioni' - neighborhood *council* for all municipalities with a population under 250,000.

citizen, community and Administration in order to improve the quality of city life (Arena, 2006; Arena and Iaione, 2011).

In this framework, Reggio Emilia had been reconsidered its own role within their neighbourhoods following the suppression of the '*circoscrizioni*' and to identify new approach for interfacing with the local community differently from the traditional dynamics of civil participation and deliberative democracy (Manzini, 2018). To achieve this goal, the Municipality has built a public policy calls '*Quartiere Bene Comune*' based on these three pillars:

- a governance model based on civic engagement which include every stakeholder to developed efficient solutions with the public authority;
- a strategic planning approach where citizens are a part of every project's steps such as co-design, implementation, evaluation and monitoring phase;
- a professional public servant with specific skills calls 'Neighbourhood architect' to support the community engagement process, empower the relationship inside and outside of the community, foster social innovation and come up with creative solutions developed with a place based approach.

Methodology, process and results

The Municipality identifies 18 neighbourhoods connoted by a sense of identity strongly perceived by the community where takes place a specific work process which has been outlined in a specific document approved by the City Council in December 2015.
It comprises several different phases:

a. Territorial interpretation and community listening
The interpretation of the urban context in collaboration with all of the Administration's internal services, in order to identify the main policy programs. The listening phase, instead, takes place through direct community participation tools such as on-site surveying, round tables, debates, interviews and targeted focus groups.

b. Co-design
The co-design process takes place through a public workshop calls "Citizenship laboratories" where citizen and stakeholders in collaboration with the Neighbourhood architect could develop collaborative projects. Based on the examination of technical and financial sustainability by the Administration's internal services, the neighbourhood architect will then prepare a Citizenship Agreement proposal which are re-submitted to the citizens and stakeholders through participative and deliberative discussion processes, in order to reach the broadest possible consensus. This phase concludes with the stipulation of the Citizenship Agreement, the document outlining all the projects to be carried out in the neighbourhood with their respective goals and actions, the financial and material resources, and the "division of labour" between the Municipality and all the private entities involved.

c. Agreement
The Citizen Agreement becomes formally effective once it is approved by the City Council, while it becomes factually effective once its projects are included in the service plans and schedules of the respective municipal offices.

d. Implementation, management and monitoring of the Agreement
The implementation, management and monitoring of the projects outlined in the Agreement, are under the supervision of the Neighbourhood architect, who works to keep everyone active and involved.

e. Assessment and reporting of the results achieved and the impacts produced

The assessment phase is based on a system of numerical indicators for each project established with every participant in the Citizen Agreement. Also, the policy 'Quartiere Bene Comune' has set up a dashboard of indicators to measure its own overall performance in terms of participation levels, efficiency, effectiveness and social impact. According to this point, the following results for 2017 are recorded with regard to the effectiveness of the policy:

-Project carried out successfully 77,65%
-Positive collaboration with Neighbourhood Architect 98,21%
-Positive collaboration with Municipality of Reggio Emilia 59,64%
-Positive impact of economic resources available 52,86%

In 17 neighbourhoods, 896 participants were involved in the preliminary phases leading to the stipulations of Agreements, including associations, stakeholders and private citizens. The 25 Citizenship Agreements were signed by 695 stakeholders, and specifically 375 no-profit Associations, 300 individual volunteers and 20 private companies. Under the 25 Agreements, a total of 154 projects have been initiated, of which almost are related to strengthening services for the individual and the community.

Case studies of collaborative design services

Following are described four projects as a case studies of collaborative design services.

Foreigners: empowerment and social integration - Topic: Welfare

The project is focused on teaching the Italian language to foreigners living in Reggio Emilia as a first step for an incremental process of social integration and local empowerment specifically dedicated to women. The project is linked to the resolution of two main critical issues:
- reduction of the mobility problems of the participants through the opening of Italian courses re-located in the suburbs;
- activation of a babysitting service for the participants that could leave their children and following the activities planned in the course. After the first step, the participants have been asked to extend the Italian course with other collateral activities based on their skills and interests.

All this led the Municipality to re-launch the project in 2018 with more activities based on the knowledge of the foreigners as a process of improving their Italian language and professional skills. In addition, the project has involved many actors of the local community such as volunteers for the babysitting service or spaces giver for carrying out the activities. The experience is a model of innovation that will be extended to the whole Emilian road, which has similar social characteristics.

Coviolo Wireless - Topic: Digital divide

The project helped to overcome the digital divide in the neighbourhood of Coviolo through a broadband wireless infrastructure. It allows people in a suburban area, that was lacking offers from the market, access to Internet guaranteeing an affordable service cost to the whole community. The funding of the infrastructure is from public sources (Local and Regional authority) while management costs are borne by the local community members. This bottom-up project has been implemented by a group of citizens affiliated to the Neighbourhood Social Centre of Coviolo, in collaboration with the Municipality of Reggio Emilia and Lepida Spa. Users have now access to high speed internet at an affordable

cost. "Coviolo Wireless" is one of the five winners of the European Broadband Awards 2017[2] and the experience will be extended to other five neighbourhoods of Reggio Emilia.

Rural Greenway of Bagno, Corticella and Marmirolo - Topic: Sustainable mobility

The project is focused on creating a new greenway as a complementary path linked to the existing urban cycle network and local services (school, parish, local square) of three suburban neighbourhoods of the city: Bagno, Corticella and Marmirolo. The project is based on the needs of citizens who highlighted critical issues related to the lack of safety for pedestrians and cyclists which represent a physical obstacle but also a social barrier for the creation of a solid and active local network. The Greenway has been co-designed with the citizens and many part of the project has been implemented from availability and concession of their private land. The found solution is different from the traditional design method by reusing sections of disused paths or river embankments. The experience is a model of innovation which has been extended to other neighbourhoods of Reggio Emilia such as Rivalta, Pratofontana, Roncocesi, San Bartolomeo and Gavasseto.

Social Agriculture in Nilde Iotti Park - Topic: Urban agriculture

Reggio Emilia has implemented a strategic plan to give value and promote urban and suburban agriculture. This tool affects both public and private green areas and it is intended to qualify areas and to promote new forms of social integration and cohesion by taking care of the urban green and encouraging farming activities. The experience of urban agriculture in Reggio Emilia is focused on the enhancement of vacant land through two main different approach:

- Agriculture as a strengthening of the sense of community and belonging with the experiences of the Edible park of Canali and the Fruit Tree Park of Castellazzo in which the orchard becomes a common good of the whole community who is recognized with it;
- Agriculture as a place for socialization and cultural integration. This is the case of the Orologio's garden which will be enhance through a new pilot experience placed in Parco Nilde Iotti where to rethink a model of social agriculture as a tool for welfare and the fight against poverty. In fact, this project insists in neighbourhoods with high immigration rates and welfare problems. The innovative side of the Nilde Iotti project lays in a model that focuses on the social dimension and is closely related to the issues concerning the Park and its surroundings. By May 2018 two scholarships have been offered to young researchers to support the experimentation by finding a sustainable management model which might keep together social and business

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