

# Facilitative leadership and the challenge of renewing local democracy in Italy

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# **Facilitative Leadership and the Challenge of Renewing Local Democracy**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Participatory arrangements have become a popular way of addressing modern challenges of urban governance, but in practice face several constraints and can trigger deep tensions. Facilitative leadership can play a crucial role in enabling collaboration among local stakeholders despite plural and often conflictual interests. Surprisingly, this style of leadership has received limited attention within debates linking urban governance and participatory democracy. We summarize the main insights of the literature on facilitative leadership and empirically develop them in the context of participatory urban governance by comparing recent participatory processes in two Italian cities. Whereas in one city facilitative leadership gradually emerged and successfully transformed a deep conflict into consensual proposals, in the other city participatory planning further exacerbated pre-existing antagonism, and local democratic culture was only later slowly reinvigorated through bottom-up initiative. These diverging pathways explain how facilitative leadership is (1) important for making things happen; (2) best understood as situated practices; (3) an emergent property of the practices and interactions of a number of local actors; and (4) a democratic capacity for dealing with continuous challenges. Key to this style of leadership is understanding participatory urban governance as an ongoing democratic process.

The discourse on participatory democracy as an antidote to political disengagement and a tool to increase democratic legitimacy and administrative effectiveness has gained popularity throughout Europe. It is now conventional wisdom that traditional government institutions are no longer adequate on their own to confront the complexities of today's societies (Fung and Wright, 2003). Political parties are unable to formulate convincing responses to new challenges or channel popular participation, and public agencies often lack the ability to implement sustainable solutions. In response to the need to continuously legitimise local leadership and reconcile the plural interests of fragmented local societies, participatory venues are opened which involve social actors and public agencies in collective decision making to produce innovative policies (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). The great promise of genuine participation is not just better and fairer decisions, but also the development of a "collaborative mindset" that can overcome traditional political authority and adversarial civic activism, while renewing and deepening the practice of local democracy (Fung and Wright, 2003).

The connections between normative theories of participation and deliberation and the empirical conditions of urban governance have received much attention over the past years, as attested to by four recent symposia in this journal (Melo and Baiocchi, 2006; Beaumont and Nichols, 2008; Guarneros-Meza and Geddes, 2010; Silver et al., 2010). Despite differing emphases, all these debates approach participatory urban governance in terms of its inherent political conflicts and power struggles as well as the contingencies of the local socio-political context. Empirical studies show that participatory projects are entangled in contingent institutional constraints and practical dilemmas such as power inequality, pre-existing antagonism, exclusion, and cultural differences (Weeks, 2000; Delli Carpini, et al. 2004; Hoppe, 2011). Participatory urban governance proves fragile, because the commitment of local actors is constantly put to the test when, for instance, political support or budgets are withdrawn because of changes of government or people moving to different jobs.

Enhancing the potential of participatory arenas requires a new type of leadership. Traditional leaders, by exercising formal political authority *over* others, do not seem capable of responding to the value differences and conflicting interests of fragmented societies, while simultaneously guaranteeing stakeholders' mutual interdependence. By contrast, facilitative leadership emerges from the activity of working *with* others to achieve collective and consensual results (Susskind and Crushank, 2006; Svava, 2008 Denhardt and Denhardt, 2003). Critics of participatory democracy argue that this style of governing exists "without an

opposition” (Offe and Preuss, 2006: 181) and has the potential to create a democratic deficit, as responsibilities are diffuse and accountability is more difficult to guarantee. However, the legitimacy of participatory decisions arises from inviting to the table all those affected by a given issue, in order to reach fairer decisions that take account of all interests (Bobbio, 2004; Hoppe, 2011). Facilitative leadership can thus encourage identification with the participatory process and reconcile different interests around common objectives (Triglia, 2005:145).

While the notion of facilitative leadership has so far received limited attention in the debate on participatory urban governance [1], the literatures of public administration, public management, policy analysis, and public planning offer sophisticated theoretical frameworks and rich empirical material on conducive institutional conditions and everyday practices. We summarize the main insights of these literatures and empirically develop them in the context of participatory urban governance, in order to demonstrate how the perspective of facilitative leadership forms a valuable line of inquiry.

We compare the divergent pathways through which facilitative leadership emerged during participatory planning in two Italian cities: Bologna (Emilia Romagna) and Prato (Tuscany). Both case-studies displayed different and non-linear patterns of participation, from centralisation of decision-making (whereby citizen advice is effectively controlled by public officials), to open conflict between grassroots groups and institutions to gain control over decision-making, and co-decision and face-to-face negotiations between public officials and residents (see Susskind and Elliott, 1983). Comparative analysis of both participatory planning processes confirmed and developed four key insights on facilitative leadership: facilitative leadership proved to be (1) important for making things happen; (2) best understood as situated practices; (3) an emergent property of the practices and interactions of a number of local actors; and (4) a democratic capacity for dealing with the continuous challenges of participatory processes, beyond the outcomes of individual projects. Before turning to the cases, we discuss the literature on facilitative leadership, explain our comparative approach, and provide some background on the Italian context.

## **FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP AND THE CHALLENGE OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY**

Leadership is commonly thought of as “a formal leader who either influences or transforms members of a group or organization –the followers– in order to achieve specified goals”

(Huxham and Vangen, 2000: 1160). Traditionally, leaders are portrayed as individuals with a strong personality and authority, who establish a hierarchy, set the agenda, and ensure solutions. The underlying assumption is that the followers are not capable of resolving issues on their own (Susskind and Crushank, 2006). As noted above, dealing with value differences, conflicts, and mutual interdependence requires something other than traditional leaders with formal political authority which they exercise *over* others. Facilitative leadership, instead, emerges from the activity of working *with* others to achieve results everyone can agree to (Susskind and Crushank, 2006; Svara, 2008): it is about serving rather than steering (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2003).

In contexts “where incentives to participate are weak, power and resources are asymmetrically distributed, and prior antagonisms are high, leadership becomes all the more important” (Ansell and Gash, 2007: 555). Therefore, participatory and collaborative processes often rely upon key individuals who act as catalysts (Neaera Abers, 2003). Who these local leaders are, where they come from, and what they do can be pivotal for the process (Morse, 2008: 96). Facilitative leadership has thus become a common variable for explaining collaborative behaviour within public organisations, cross-sector partnerships, and network governance (Luke, 1998; Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002; Van Wart, 2005; Bryson et al., 2006; McGuire, 2006; Ansell and Gash, 2007; Linden, 2010).

Empirical research has identified several best practices by which facilitative leadership can engage people in constructive participatory processes (see Crosby and Bryson, 2005; Linden, 2010; and Williams, 2002 in table 1). By profiling successful facilitative leaders, a close connection has been established between their practices and personalities (see Morse, 2010 in table 1). Particular attention has also been given to the micro-politics and communicative acts through which planners, mediators, and facilitators resolve policy disputes (Susskind, 1999; Susskind and Crushank, 2006; Forester, 1999, 2009; Escobar, 2012). Rich narratives illuminate how these figures enable stakeholders to come together and agree to joint decisions (see Forester, 2009 in table 1). Hence, there is now a rich literature about the facilitative leadership of “collaborative public managers” (Kickert and Koppenjan, 1997), “consensus builders” (Susskind, 1999), “deliberative practitioners” (Forester, 1999), “boundary spanners” (Williams, 2002), “everyday fixers” (Hendriks and Tops, 2005), and “exemplary practitioners” (Van Hulst et al., 2011). Three elements about how facilitative leadership enables “making things happen” (Huxham and Vangen, 2000: 1160-1161) are worth emphasizing.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

First, there is a widespread consensus that typologies, theoretical frameworks, and best practices should not be taken as a recipe for success but rather as handles for reflective practice (see Huxham, 2003; Crosby and Bryson, 2005). Facilitative leadership should be understood as skilful, situated performance: i.e., it comprises fine-grained practices that can only flourish under certain conditions. For example, facilitative leaders can only become “champions” of a project if they have a “sponsor” who gives political backing to their often unconventional practices (Hendriks and Tops, 2005). How to obtain and keep such a sponsor is a matter of context-specific practices.

Second, facilitative leadership does not merely refer to the actions of one key individual. Within collaborative and participatory settings, every stakeholder can take a lead on specific issues. This implies that the focus is not on facilitative *leaders*, but, rather, on *leadership* as accruing from the activities of many. Facilitative leadership is a decentred practice, or emergent property, which transpires from structures, processes, and interactions (see Huxham and Vangen, 2000). In this respect, facilitative leadership is closely linked to the interdependence of stakeholders (Ansell and Gash, 2007). Participants who have strong stakes in the issue at hand and perceive the participatory venue to be a substantive decision-making arena (or do not have access to alternative and more effective channels) will be more willing to commit to the process and take a lead. In turn, facilitative leadership will further strengthen participants’ commitment and (awareness of their) interdependence by sustaining an inclusive political space and fostering common objectives.

Third, facilitative leadership is about more than resolving the immediate problem, task, or conflict at hand. The challenges facilitative leadership faces are manifestations of intricate and intractable problems bound up with socio-economic inequalities, multi-level governance arrangements, political power struggles, and deep-seated differences. This requires the ability to work through pre-held assumptions, strong emotions, and the engrained perceptions held by stakeholders, and to instil the latter with the capacity for constructive communication about future issues (Fung and Wright, 2003; Susskind and Crushank, 2006; Forester, 2009; Escobar, 2012). These challenges, and the need for the democratic capacity to jointly resolve them, are unlikely to stop when a project or partnership ends. Instead, facilitative leadership should enable an ongoing process of deepening local democracy.

A key challenge for facilitative leadership is how to encourage new forms of democratic mobilisation without ritualising them and constraining efforts to deepen local democracy (Susskind and Elliott, 1983). As local government becomes first and foremost a producer of goods and services (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), participatory experiences are often conceived in functionalistic terms to manage conflicts and build consensus on existing policies. Predetermined design of the new arrangements will inhibit the emergence of new actors, ideas, and resources that could challenge traditional power relations, trigger a process of innovation, and strengthen local democratic culture (Gelli 2005; Blaug, 2002). Therefore, it is paramount to understand whether and how facilitative leadership can offset the risk of developing into technocratic leadership serving a functionalistic rationale and, instead, fulfil the promise of genuine democratic innovation and a collaborative mindset. In this respect our case studies highlight the relationship, and at times the clash, between designated traditional and technical leaders and the facilitative leadership that organically emerged from participatory initiatives.

### **COMPARATIVE APPROACH**

The cases presented below are each part of two independently conducted comparative studies, both carried out in Italy in 2010. Even though specific research objectives differed, both studies took a qualitative approach to examine the practice of participatory urban governance. A qualitative analysis of each case was conducted through interviews with local actors and textual analysis of relevant documents to produce “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973/1993) of the tensions and conflicts characterizing participation in the complex, messy practice of urban governance. Document analysis helped to build an understanding of the background and rationale of the projects and how they related to local and regional governance arrangements. Qualitative interviews generated in-depth accounts of the personal experiences of a variety of stakeholders, selected to ensure a balanced mixture of interests and backgrounds. By triangulating all these data, we were able to identify the main patterns of participation in each case.

Irrespective of strong similarities in the local histories, policy goals, and institutional arrangements of the two cases, we observed notable differences in terms of dynamics and outcomes of the participatory process. Whereas in Bologna a participatory planning project gradually emerged and successfully transformed a deep conflict into consensual proposals

and unprecedented enthusiasm about collaboration, in Prato a similar project further exacerbated pre-existing antagonism, while later triggering a series of initiatives from within civil society that contributed to rejuvenating the local democratic culture. This puzzle instigated us to explore what mechanism could have determined such different results. Through an extensive process of going back-and-forth between the empirical data, theories of participatory urban governance, and our own assumptions (see Wagenaar, 2011), facilitative leadership emerged as a key explanatory variable for such diverging paths. Although several other contingent factors were found to be relevant (e.g., associational dynamics, other tiers of government, communicative patterns), the notion of facilitative leadership helps to capture much of the fine-grained micro-politics of organizing, facilitating, and following through, which, as the next sections will elucidate, made a significant difference to the dynamics and outcomes of the participatory process.

### **THE ITALIAN CONTEXT**

Italy offers a particularly interesting context to study how participatory urban governance materialises in practice. Recent decentralisation reforms have opened new windows of opportunity to address problems of urban governance, while several regional and national laws and financial incentives encourage local partnerships and citizen initiatives, fostering a rhetoric of participatory democracy at the local level. However, participatory initiatives are often hindered by weak multi-level governance structures, poor coordination among institutional tiers, and limited political awareness and administrative capacity to act upon collective decisions and deliver results. Therefore, local leadership plays a crucial role in developing these participatory projects in one direction or another.

The decentralisation reforms of the 1990s have encouraged a more prominent role for local leaders. Devolution of responsibilities to regional and municipal authorities has raised expectations of a more active role on the part of local leaders in addressing economic and development issues, particularly in the context of de-legitimated political parties. In the 1990s, the collapse of mass parties such as the Christian Democrat Party and the Communist Party, around which much social life was organized, disintegrated traditional channels of local political participation and left a vacuum that has been filled by the adversarial politics of neighbourhood organisations mushrooming around single issues. In this context, participatory urban governance is presented as a new opportunity structure for local leaders to

realise more effective administration and more legitimate politics (Carson and Lewanski, 2008; Bobbio, 2002; 2004; 2005).

In the traditionally hierarchical Italian system, local administration entailed the implementation of central policies and orders. Nevertheless, clear guidance was often absent, because, besides basic regulations under the national planning law, Italy does not have a national urban policy framework. A number of reforms set out to change this by increasing opportunities for local leadership. The 1993 Act introduced direct mayoral elections to free mayors and their executives from party pressures and local government officials from political influence (Caciagli, 2005). The 2001 constitutional reform decentralised many responsibilities to the regional and municipal level, increasing the status of local government as an autonomous policymaking body within an interdependent multi-level governance system (Capano and Gualmini, 2006; Vandelli, 2007; Ferrari, 2008).

Several urban renewal programmes, often encouraged by EU policies and structural funds, have introduced a discourse of participatory governance (Gualini, 2001; Bagnasco et al., 2002; Sclavi et al., 2002; Brunazzo, 2004). Local government has increasingly started to institutionalise partnerships and regulate inclusive decision-making processes, often in an enthusiastic and sometimes uncritical way. Local politicians tend to withdraw initial support for participation when they perceive the process or outcomes as a threat to their role as representatives (Steyvers et al., 2007). Mayors, emboldened by newfound powers and visibility, initially underestimated the need of coordinating local interests and often paid a political price for such a “decisional illusion” (Trigilia, 2005).

Participatory urban governance generally takes the form of project-based arrangements embedded in the local urban planning system (Sclavi et al., 2002). However, local governance capacity to implement urban plans, collaborate with private land-owners, and mobilise collective action continues to be low, while being vulnerable to business interests, violation of plans, corrupt practices, and political agendas (e.g., Cognetti and Cottino, 2003; Healey, 2007). Local government is still characterized by lengthy bureaucratic processes and a strong formalistic-legalistic culture that favours applying procedures over attaining results (Vicari, 2001; Capano, 2003; Capano and Gualmini, 2006; Vandelli, 2007). Participatory mechanisms are often understood by local government as consultative exercises where traditional political leadership delegates coordination of the process to one or more public service CEOs or experts, within a very hierarchical framework with little discretion.

The cases of Bologna and Prato reflect these tensions and complexities. Both cities are traditionally part of the so-called red-belt (*zona rossa*), long dominated by the Left and characterized by a relatively strong social fabric. Both implemented innovative participatory processes, encouraged by new regional laws regulating citizen participation in policy making. However, pre-existing antagonism, political dynamics, and technical complexity compromised process and outcomes. Facilitative leadership thus helps to understand the diverging pathways through which each case developed.

### **BOLOGNA: LEADERSHIP AS AN EMERGENT PROPERTY**

Between April and June 2010, 20 interviews were carried out in Bologna as part of a comparative project on community participation in three European cities. Interpretative analysis of the narratives of residents and public professionals revealed how facilitative leadership led them to setting up and maintaining goal-oriented and delineated participatory arrangements that enabled the participants to focus their efforts and attention on achieving concrete results. This process emerged and thrived because several key individuals (1) bargained for participatory arrangements to solve a protracted conflict, (2) created political, financial, and legal conditions within which effective deliberation could take place, and (3) prepared and managed participatory meetings based on deliberative techniques. Rather than having anticipated these practices and their unprecedented results, facilitative leadership emerged from the various ways in which key individuals interacted with each other and the local context.

Respondents were interviewed about their experiences with the participative workshops (*laboratori*) that were conducted in the neighbourhood Bolognina. This area of about 32,750 inhabitants, part of the *Quartiere Navile* (Navile District), was built during the 20<sup>th</sup> century to house manual labourers of the three heavy industry factories located in the neighbourhood. As a result of the collapse of the traditional political system, massive deindustrialization and immigration, Bolognina changed from a tightly-knit working class community with a strong identity into a deprived area with large portions of derelict land, immigrants, and safety problems. (Callari Galli, 2007; Procopio, 2008). After the closure of the factories in the 1980s, the strong social fabric started to crumble. The big disused areas of the old factories, as well as the neighbourhood's old military barracks and the now closed

fruit and vegetable market (*Mercato Ortofrutticolo*), became hotspots for drug dealing, illegal housing, violence and prostitution, causing great distress among the residents.

The first round of participatory workshops, *Laboratorio Mercato*, was launched in 2005 to address the conflicts that had arisen around the ongoing problems and regeneration project of the *Ex-Mercato* area. This participatory arrangement emerged from the practices of a group of active residents captured with the code *groundbreaking*. The story of this middle-aged resident who grew up next to the *Mercato* is illuminating:

...when in 2003 ... the Municipal administration under mayor Guazaloca presented us the project of requalification of the *Ex-Mercato* area ... I met together with others ... and an ... effort emerged ... leading up to contesting the approval of this project ... It has been a process ... which took more than a year, this one, which then has merged into the *Laboratorio* of the neighbourhood. Because in the meantime there was the change of the administration ... Guazaloca to the administration Cofferati ... [which] accepted a public meeting organized by [us], in which [we] brought forward [our] points of view ... on the *Ex-Mercato* area. And in that ... meeting the proposal for participative workshops was put forward ... [and the] alderman of Urban Affairs ... accepted the proposal. [The] associations had prepared a survey, had distributed it in a part of the neighbourhood gathering about 400 and working out the data of this survey and presenting it publicly... And then when the *Laboratorio* started, ... all the associations, groups, ... that had participated in the previous process merged together in the ... participative workshops...

The resident explains how they got organised to do *groundbreaking* work. The *Mercato* had always caused problems of heavy traffic, pollution, and noise day and night, and after its closure was left to deteriorate. When the regeneration project in 2004 proposed to create a “gated community” with public facilities and a park shielded off from the original residents by a wall and several high buildings, the residents felt anything but compensated for their years of suffering, and started to organise themselves. They got together, compiled a survey which they distributed and analysed, convened a meeting with the new political authorities and convinced them to organise participative workshops. By doing all this preparatory work of knowledge gathering and political bargaining, these residents managed to break with an antagonistic situation and create leeway for what would be a *groundbreaking* experience.

More than a hundred individual citizens, a dozen public officials, and representatives from fifteen civic associations participated in seven meetings, which included collective and small group deliberations. The *Laboratorio Mercato* led to the formulation of a new plan that “radically modified the previous plan” (Comune di Bologna, 2007: 46) and was adopted by the Council in July 2006. Furthermore, it generated so much enthusiasm about the

participatory format itself that the Municipality of Bologna in 2008 integrated participative workshops in the *Piano Strutturale Comunale* (Structural Municipal Plan). This new and comprehensive urban planning system, following the *Legge 20/2000* of the Region Emilia-Romagna, was instituted to create more effective and sustainable urban renewal throughout the city (see Provincia di Bologna 2003). This enabled the formation of eight other *laboratori* throughout the city, of which the *Laboratorio Bolognina Est* was the most ambitious. This *Laboratorio* was launched in 2008 to formulate plans for the regeneration of four abandoned areas in the east of the neighbourhood and involved a total of 400 participants in ten general meetings and thirty smaller meetings.

Both participative workshops did not just take place after the preparatory work of the residents and the institution of the *Piano Strutturale Comunale*. A lot more ground had to be cleared by several officials from the Neighbourhood Council and planners from the Municipality. Their practices of *creating conditions* are highlighted by the story of this middle-aged official who managed the Neighbourhood Council at the time:

We asked ... to meet with the landowner, because it was important to know if the landowner would create problems or not during the *Laboratorio*. Also because ... the landowner had an interest in a transformation of the land tax that would lead to an increase in value... We said to the landowner that ... the agreement on that tax in terms of the building indices of that area, that we didn't want to put that under discussion. However, a part of that value would have to be transformed in services for the citizens. Second issue, the project had to take the history of Bolognina into account, so it ... had to be intertwined with the historical part of the neighbourhood that was around this new area... The landowner agreed but asked for guaranteed timescales on the implementation of the process. We have guaranteed the timescales, but we asked the landowner for a robust collaboration in the costs of the ... Laboratorio... [We] needed to ... research ... what types of responses there were among the residents. How many schools, how many health clinics, ... how much greenery, how many, for example, gyms, etcetera, etcetera... The landowner accepted and the Municipality has formalized the process ... to arrive at the ... presentation of the proposed project.

This official stresses the importance of *creating conditions* by bargaining behind the scenes for political leeway and collaborative commitment. They negotiated with the private landowner of the *Mercato* area about the building indices and land value for cooperation, the connection of the project with the historical surroundings, the creation of public services, the timescales that would have to be followed, and how to share the costs of the project. Then, they needed to demarcate political mandate and support and explore the needs of the residents

as well as the technical, legal, and financial possibilities with regards to, for instance, the height and design of buildings, infrastructural routes, and standards for traffic nuisance. For *Laboratorio Bolognina-Est* the situation was far more complex, because there were three landowners and a more diverse population which had not been involved up to then. This meant that even more work was required on formulating the goals, structures, and procedures regulating who could decide about what, when, and how. So, by *creating conditions*, these public professionals facilitated deliberative space for making concrete and consensual decisions in a complicated political, financial, legal, and social environment.

Under these conditions, a handful of facilitators organized and managed the meetings in which residents and public professionals deliberated about the projects. The group of facilitators was diverse and had one catalyst (see below). The *Laboratorio Mercato* was managed by three facilitators with backgrounds in planning and architecture. In the *Laboratorio Bolognina-Est* the facilitators came from a local women's rights association which had won the public bid for managing the process. Together with the catalyst and several of the officials and architects who had been involved in the *Mercato* workshops, they used participatory methods for the formulation of regeneration plans for three abandoned areas in the East of Bolognina (Comune di Bologna, 2009).

In both participative workshops, the facilitators managed to build consensus by insulating the discussion from traditional political and adversarial forces and focus on the substance of the issues at hand. They used participatory methods such as Open Space Technology and Scenario Workshop to facilitate residents and experts in exchanging ideas, arguments, and experiences and formulating concrete proposals. The story of the catalyst, a young planner by training who turned into the main facilitator of the participative workshops, illuminates these practices of *canalizing*:

...something that we did was ... [an] urban walk. When you do that you decide with, before, with people the [route]... And then usually at the end you ask people to write ... what are the problems of the neighbourhood, what they would like to communicate to the other participants, using a map where people can put their post-it. Or you can ask them as a coordinator to write and then you put the post-it on the map... And at the end ... you try to say what are the main themes you see in this map, trying to match the different problems, the different critical places and so on. And when you do that you can explain to them what the problems are ... you can speak about and the problems that are outside the project... And it is also something difficult ... for people participating, because sometimes ... they would like to talk about something different or not only about the topic of the project. But I think it's better if you explain to them what are the powers they have: 'We are discussing about this project, you have the

power to discuss this project with the Municipality. If you go outside this you can discuss, but we are not sure about how to give you an answer’.

The catalyst gives an example of how the facilitators were constantly *canalizing* attention by making clear what topics were under discussion and which were not, what the different viewpoints of the participants were, and how their ideas and desires could be translated into concrete proposals. Before every meeting, the facilitators met with planners from the local authority to prepare the topic, information, and techniques to be used. They analyzed the neighbourhood and relevant rules and policies and prepared maps, photos, and models which residents could use to imagine how their proposals would look like. They started each meeting by explaining the goals, procedures, and contents and, during the deliberations, assisted residents in expressing their proposals in graphic representations such as maps and matrices. Afterwards they synthesised the outcomes into final proposals that were presented to the Municipality. While at first glance *canalizing* might seem a form of technocratic leadership, the facilitators actually engaged in all these backstage and front stage practices to empower residents in formulating feasible proposals that would be acceptable to those with the power to make final decisions, but without compromising residents’ needs and desires.

In sum, this case demonstrates that facilitative leadership can enable significant changes to engrained conflicts, the institutional lay-out of the planning system, and unproductive working relationships when it is understood as an emergent property that goes beyond the acts of individual leaders. Facilitative leadership emerged from a number of local actors facilitating the creation of participative workshops through their combined practices of *groundbreaking*, *creating conditions*, and *canalizing*. By the same token, we could question the long term impact of this facilitative leadership on the local democratic culture. Following the conclusion of participatory workshops, it remained unclear whether the plans would be implemented by the Municipality and the private landowners or whether they would support any participation in the future. Lack of follow through could have detrimental effects on local democratic capacity. Therefore, facilitative leadership in Bologna will need to enable the implementation of these proposals and institutionalisation of citizen participation, based on an understanding of participatory urban governance, in the words of one respondent, “not as a moment but as a process”.

## **PRATO: LEADERSHIP AS A DEMOCRATIC QUALITY**

The case of Prato is part of a comparative study on participatory planning including three other medium-sized Italian cities (Trento, Lecce, and Sassari). Findings presented here are based on official documents and 46 semi-structured interviews with institutional, private and social stakeholders involved in a series of collaborative initiatives held in Prato during the past administration (2004-2009). Prato's participatory process was characterized by two divergent leadership dynamics. First, traditional political and expert leadership was unable to structure the participatory process so as to capture people's imagination with a vision of future urban development. As the local civil society struggled to understand a top-down process that many perceived as elitist (i.e. excessively technical) and non-inclusive, pre-existing conflicts were exacerbated beyond the control of traditional leaders. In response, facilitative leadership spontaneously developed through a bottom-up process, as neighbourhood associations (1) adamantly opposed the top-down participatory process, (2) opened their own participatory arena by taking advantage of the change of local government, and (3) embedded this platform in the urban governance system and culture, by contributing to changing the local statute on citizen participation and institutionalising participatory democracy.

Prato, at the centre of a textile district often studied as a paradigmatic case of all Italian industrial districts (see Becattini, 2000; Bacci and Bellandi, 2007), developed around private factories with a *laissez-faire* attitude on the part of local politicians eager to encourage industrial development. Numerous active associations contribute to enriching Prato's cultural and social life, although the deterioration of the district, proverbially based on trust and social cohesion (Becattini 2000), has partly fragmented the community. The district has been deeply affected by the current recession and social conflicts, spurred by growing immigration flows (particularly from China). The inability of successive administrations to act in a decisive manner to address economic and immigration issues and the deep divisions within the then governing centre-left party (Democratic Party – PD) determined the victory of the centre-right coalition in June 2009, after 63 years of left-wing governments. As new political parties are unable to channel participation –while the former Communist Party (PCI) used to play a major role in the community– neighbourhood movements are filling the participatory vacuum.

The Region of Tuscany, with Law 1/2005, has transformed planning by introducing a new understanding of land use regulations. The so-called *Structural Municipal Plan (Piano Strutturale Municipale)*, replacing the old *Piano Regolatore Generale*, goes far beyond the

old land use plan, since it defines the characteristics of the territory, the resources of the community, as well as land use and environmental protection regulations. Under this new law, administrators and citizens are encouraged to work together to elaborate plans through a participatory process. The regional government has invested greatly in a participatory approach to planning and is one of the first regions in Italy to have passed a law on citizen participation. Under Law 69/2007, local administrations and/or residents can request participatory decision-making processes to be opened on any regional and local issue. The regional government funds participatory mechanisms on the condition that the process is completed within 6 months and that the final decisions are binding (Floridaia, 2007).

In 2008, the regional government strongly recommended that Prato employed the new participation law to elaborate its Structural Municipal Plan. A few urban planners from the University of Florence were asked to coordinate the participatory process in Prato. The process consisted of two phases: a first phase of “active listening” of the local community and interactive construction of the plan, which took place between April and December 2008; and a second “deliberative” phase to discuss the founding principles of the new plan, which was concluded with a deliberative Town Meeting on 28 March 2009. The first phase of the process was intended to collect the numerous points of view of very diverse stakeholders, particularly groups of the population that are traditionally marginalized and weakly organized. Several meetings and interviews were intended to identify proposals and needs. The second phase aimed to employ deliberation to solve conflicts and ensure shared solutions. The presence of one of the academics coordinating the process within Prato’s planning office served to strengthen the link between the participatory process and the technical elaboration of the plan, ensuring that participatory decisions would be incorporated into the final plan. Although the process was planned in great detail, in practice it failed to involve the community. A local architect complained about the structure of the meetings, which often turned into dry lectures about participation.

In three and half years these people working on the Structural Plan organized a series of embarrassing meetings at the local “urban centre” where they talked of participation, on participation, for participation, without showing us a single map, without talking about choices. These people mortified participation.

The planners from Florence, on their part, felt their efforts were ostracised by local experts and officials. The participatory law 69/2007 requires a “guarantor of communication” who

oversees the process, ensures fair and far-reaching communication on all the events and outcomes, and promotes participation. This role, as stressed by one of the experts, is key to guaranteeing an inclusive and successful process, and could have contributed to fostering the development of facilitative leadership. However, the urban planning office was dismissive and considered this new role to be a simple formality: emails were not regularly sent to stakeholders, events were not advertised properly and, as local media were not always supportive of the process, meetings often went unattended or merely attracted professionals, such as local architects and engineers, and landowners.

The process lacked a vital ingredient, as no one among public officials and experts was able to facilitate collaboration and spark the emergence of facilitative leadership. The mayor, isolated within his own party, did not enjoy enough legitimacy locally. Previous participatory initiatives that had involved several local associations to discuss, among other things, the regeneration of the largest square (*Piazza Mercatale*) had generated much disaffection, as the administration eventually tried to bypass collective decisions and push through its own project. On their part, the experts in charge of the participatory process failed to convey to the community the value of a participatory plan and to explain clearly how they intended to structure the process. As they were not from Prato, but from Florence, they were perceived as outsiders and many local experts and public officials resented their interference in their own territory. One neighbourhood association, *Comitato per Piazza Mercatale*, was particularly militant in what was coded as *critical campaigning*. One of the planners from the University of Florence explains:

We realised that there was deep resistance on the part of local associations to interact with us, not because we were bad and ugly, but because there was structured obstructionism against the administration. There was total lack of trust and an absolute de-legitimation of the mayor, which resulted in an actual boycott. When we organized our meetings, there were people protesting outside.

Thus, within an explosive context, facilitative leadership failed to emerge, constrained by lack of political support and by a process that was excessively structured and not very flexible and responsive to local demands. By the time the Town Meeting took place there was a hardening of positions, with the mayor refusing any contacts with the neighbourhood movements. This clash between top-down participatory (or *incumbent*) democracy and *critical* democracy (Blaug, 2002) became apparent during the Town Meeting: while 150 randomly selected citizens discussed general issues concerning the city and its Structural

Plan, the neighbourhood movements were protesting outside. Excessive trust in formalism and lack of facilitative leadership exacerbated issues of weak interdependence and coordination between stakeholders, further fuelling confusion among participants about the difference between communication, consultation, and participation. To date, the plan has not been approved yet, as the change of administration in 2009 has slowed down implementation, with right-wing parties rejecting much of the work carried out by the previous government.

While facilitative leadership clearly did not emerge from within traditional, formalistic institutions, it developed organically from the activities of the neighbourhood associations, which took advantage of the window of opportunity opened by the change of administration. In the months following the Town Meeting, several neighbourhood movements, whose leaders are traditionally left-wing voters, started meeting regularly to elaborate a series of proposals, which they later submitted to the new centre-right coalition. The leader of these associations turned out to be an “everyday maker” (Bang and Sørensen, 1999), with his own project identity and the determination to resolve his own problem –the redevelopment of *Piazza Mercatale*– “on the lowest possible level” (Bang and Sørensen, 1999: 336). Through his own network of contacts and capitalizing on his legitimacy within the community (he is the local GP) and interpersonal skills, he was able to develop a participatory project. Although several members had strong ideological positions and were initially very suspicious of a right-wing administration, eventually the collective project took off, also through his intermediation with the new government. During an interview, he explained how the associations’ practices developed from adversarial *critical campaigning* to pro-active *institutional networking*:

The idea of the project we are now elaborating with the support of this new administration was actually born during the Town Meeting. There [after months of adversarial politics and boycotting of participatory meetings] we started talking about the Structural Plan as citizens, putting forward our vision of what the city should look like... When we started putting forward our considerations [to the old left-wing administration] we only got one answer, “No”. They’d tell us, “You do your own participatory process then”... The new *assessore* [member of the executive] for Participation, when I proposed our projects, said, “I don’t know much about this, but if you help me understand, I’ll be happy to look into this.” And I thought this was a very good beginning. So we kept putting forward new projects and requests, such as a venue where to organise our meetings which would become the Citizen’s House, and which should have specific features so as to act as an interface between the city and the administration.

The new administration, which had never been in power before, had an interest in opening up to civil society to widen its support base and compensate for its lack of administrative experience. In fact, the *assessore* for Citizen Participation is actively supporting a new civic network, *Casa del Cittadino* (Citizen's House), created by the neighbourhood movements, but open to all local associations and citizens to discuss public policies, allegedly with municipal funds. Seventy associations and civic lists spontaneously organized into a constituent assembly that produced a series of proposals to amend the existing Regulations on Citizen Participation of the town's statute. These were partly revised and finally approved by the local council, albeit with several constraints. Participatory processes can now be opened on the initiative of the administration or of the citizens, although they will have a consultative role and important limitations in terms of time (the participatory process needs to be completed within 90 days) and structure. The administration, however, has committed itself not to take any final decisions on issues under discussion by the citizens, to consider citizen proposals and, were they not accepted, to justify such a decision. These practices of *formalizing* the new bottom-up participatory arena, by institutionalising the role of the Citizen's House within the local statute, are further explained by the leader of the neighbourhood associations:

The project that we put forward is the creation of this meeting place where to put together all the neighbourhood movements and citizen associations, the citizens, a sort of citizen council, but with a clear structure and rules, not just a random thing, as it happened before. And the last, and most important, request we put forward is to amend the statute. All this is meaningful if we can change regulations.

The leadership of the neighbourhood associations has opened a participatory space where citizens and associations can bring issues to the attention of the city and the politicians. The impact of this new collective entity on the local polity is illustrated by an initiative of the local newspaper *Il Tirreno*, which launched a fortnightly column to facilitate communication between the citizens and the local administration, called "You've got mail, *assessore*" (*C'è posta per l'assessore*). Furthermore, the associations organised into an umbrella association, *PratoPartecipa*, which has its own website and Facebook page and organises regular meetings to discuss issues and elaborate policy proposals; these will automatically be debated in the City Council. *PratoPartecipa*'s latest proposal, which has been welcomed by the current mayor, entails the establishment of a new civic figure called Civic Observers

(*Osservatori Civici*) and its institutionalization under the corpus of norms that regulate the Structural Plan. Their function would be to “regularly monitor the implementation of the Structural Plan, to propose and evaluate projects and to know in advance the administration’s choices and intentions with regard to urban planning” (*Il Tirreno*, 22-01-12). By opening up to all associations, whether structured or not, and citizens, and by including several professionals, architects, and engineers, *PratoPartecipa* can become an important counter public (Fraser 1990) empowering citizens and offering political training ground. It can also provide local politics (which often lacks technical competence) and public services with alternative resources and valid know-how.

In conclusion, facilitative leadership enabled the emergence of a participatory space through the bottom-up practices of *critical campaigning*, *institutional networking*, and *formalizing*. While politicians still seem to understand participatory arenas as consultative at best, a public debate involving citizens and experts from civil society in an open and transparent fashion, and sustained by the media attention that the new project is enjoying, could foster greater citizen empowerment and better local government. Thus, in Prato the emphasis shifted from the projects of the Structural Plan to participation as ongoing process, as the focus was on *formalising* citizen participation, by amending the local statute to institutionalise the new bottom-up participatory space. Whether the tension between formalism and procedures and the need for substantive outcomes is resolved will depend on whether and how this grassroots facilitative leadership continues to develop.

## **FACILITATIVE LEADERSHIP AS AN ONGOING PROCESS**

These two cases empirically illuminate and develop the four key insights we identified on facilitative leadership, which proved to be (1) an important factor for making things happen in participatory urban governance; (2) best understood as fine-grained situated practices; (3) an emergent property of the practices and interactions through which a number of local actors take a lead; and (4) a democratic capacity for dealing with continuous challenges, committed to an empowering participatory process rather than functionalistic participatory projects.

First of all, the cases demonstrate how participatory democracy initiatives, in a context of traditionally organised local authorities and ingrained procedures and policy patterns, are unlikely to produce revolutionary transformations (Healey et al., 2003). Nevertheless, facilitative leadership did help to pragmatically foster innovative interactions

and enabled a learning process for those involved (Forester, 2009). In both cases legal frameworks at the regional level allowed and encouraged local authorities to open new participatory venues to address profound social conflicts. The style and practices of leadership proved to be an important explanatory variable to understand whether participatory processes turned out to be more than window dressing.

Second, the facilitative leadership that transpired in both cases strengthened relationships among stakeholders and produced innovative decisions and reforms through contingent, situated practices. In Prato, traditional political leaders initiated the participatory arrangements assisted by the planners from Florence University, but struggled to remain in charge as they lacked legitimacy and showed limited commitment. Facilitative leadership emerged out of the neighbourhood associations' practices of (1) *critical campaigning* to find the space to organise pre-existing social pressure and antagonism against the old administration and top down participation that they perceived to be non inclusive; (2) taking advantage of the new window of opportunity opened by the change of government through *institutional networking*; and (3) structuring themselves into an umbrella association to interface with local institutions while *formalising* citizen participation by successfully pressing for changes to the local statute. In the case of Bologna, a number of political, administrative, and civic leaders managed to gradually create the formal conditions within which facilitators could build consensus for innovative plans. Here, facilitative leadership emerged through the practices of (1) a group of residents carrying out preparatory work of knowledge gathering and political bargaining in order to overcome an antagonistic situation and create leeway for *groundbreaking* participation; (2) a handful of public officials *creating conditions* for a deliberative space conducive to concrete, consensual decisions in a complicated political, financial, legal, and social environment; and (3) several facilitators *canalizing* discussions by preparing and managing the meetings to empower residents in formulating feasible proposals that reflected their needs and desires.

Third, facilitative leadership in both cases was not tied up to one individual, neither was it solely an institutional affair. Instead, facilitative leadership was an *emergent property* of the practices and interactions of various key individuals, who had not deliberately planned to act as facilitative leaders. We saw this emergent dynamic most clearly in the case of Bologna, where facilitative leadership emerged from the combined practices of residents organized in civic associations, public officials and planners, and facilitators. None of their individual practices would have been sufficient to make things happen; instead, facilitative

leadership transpired from their collective work, as each took the lead on specific issues. Without necessarily being aware of the significance of their role at the time, they turned out to be key individuals by playing their part in responding to the concrete problems and opportunities that they encountered.

Fourth, facilitative leadership offsets functionalistic tendencies by developing the democratic capacity to deal with continuous challenges and committing to an ongoing empowering participatory process. We saw this democratic quality most clearly in the case of Prato, where the designated facilitative leaders, the experts from Florence University, operated in a “universe of one” (Wagenaar, 2001: 233), showing excessive faith in the formal aspects of their participatory methods, and unable to recognize and resolve unexpected conflicts. These experts unwittingly interpreted the technical aspect of leadership, which perceives participatory arenas in functionalistic terms. By contrast, the countervailing power of the neighbourhood associations gradually enabled an inclusive and empowering dialogue with all local stakeholders to develop. This grassroots facilitative leadership transformed a functionalistic participatory *project* into a long-term *process*, which is facilitating citizens’ political training, as well as increasing the role of citizens in policy making and monitoring policy implementation.

The Italian context emphasises that successful facilitative leadership will inevitably be an ongoing process. Italian local governance is characterised by high expectations and low levels of political and administrative competence. Implementation of the outcomes of participatory processes is vulnerable to coordination among government tiers, as local government, albeit enjoying greater autonomy, is still financially dependent on central and, increasingly, regional transfers. Local politicians may also hinder facilitative leadership, as they seek visibility within a highly antagonistic political context and need quick results easy to communicate to the electorate in order to build their political stock. Therefore, facilitative leaders face the continuous challenge of ensuring stakeholders’ commitment despite being unable to offer any guarantees for immediate, tangible results.

In conclusion, participatory arrangements clearly do not lead to unambiguously positive results. The leadership practices that mediate challenging local contexts can help to explain variations in the quality of process and outcomes. Researching participatory urban governance from the viewpoint of facilitative leadership adds an important dimension to the debate and, as evidenced by the two case studies, forms a valuable line of inquiry for the future. In particular, the focus should be on exploring how facilitative leadership manages to

sustain “formal linkages of responsibility, resource distribution, and communication that connect these [empowered local] units to each other and to superordinate, centralized authorities” (Fung and Wright, 2003: 16). A key issue for participatory urban governance will be how facilitative leadership develops over time and whether its commitment to an inclusive and democratic process survives the pressures of institutionalisation or rather succumbs to ritualisation and bureaucratisation.

## ENDNOTE

[1] Up to now, the focus has mainly been on transitions in traditional political leadership under conditions of urban governance (Borraz and John, 2004; Guarneros-Meza and Geddes, 2010: 122-124).

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