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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Civic Collaboration and Urban Commons. Citizen's Voices on a Public Engagement Experience in an Italian City

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**ABSTRACT:** The article focuses on "public engagement" and recent modifications in citizen participation through a case study regarding the "collaborative governance" of urban commons in the city of Bologna (Italy). Civic collaboration is an experimental partnership which is being implemented between public administrations and citizens in order to develop, treat and reuse commons with a view to improving the quality of life in cities. The goal of the project is to understand whether, and how, civic collaboration is also transforming citizen participation in local public policies. This article presents the results of research which was performed by interviewing citizens who are involved in the collaborative governance of urban commons. This contribution aims to connect the literature regarding "open government" and its impact on participation with the consolidated debate regarding the role of culture in the conception of citizenship and civic engagement and, as a consequence, in the effectiveness of collaborative governance. Particular attention was paid to citizen engagement, and to the role performed by both public and private platforms and digital media.

**KEYWORDS:** civic collaboration, civic engagement, collaborative governance, Italy, participation, public engagement, urban commons

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## 1. Introduction

The article focuses on “*public engagement*” (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009) and recent modifications in citizen participation through a case study regarding a policy of “*collaborative governance*” (“*amministrazione condivisa*”, Arena 1997) of urban commons (Ostrom 1990; Arena and Iaione 2012). Civic collaboration is an experimental partnership between public administrations and citizens which develops, treats, and reuses goods of public interest in order to improve the quality of life in cities. The goal of this study is to understand whether, and how civic collaboration is also modifying citizen participation in local public policies.

The focus here is on Italian public engagement initiatives as, since 2014, many Italian municipalities have approved a Regulation regarding the collaborative governance of urban commons. It was decided to base the case study on the Municipality of Bologna not just because it has accumulated the most experience, but also because it is recognized by many other City Councils as a benchmark in the field of public engagement in local policies.

This article presents the results of a study which was created by listening to citizens involved directly in the collaborative governance of urban commons. The narratives of their experience demonstrate what it means to be a citizen and highlight the significance of civic engagement, the satisfaction obtained, and the problems faced, not only in their dealings with the administration, but also with other citizens. These interviews provide a contribution to public engagement studies, which generally do not focus sufficiently on the experience of citizen participation (Couldry 2006). The goal is to connect the literature regarding “open government” (Donolo 2005; Mayntz 1998; Rondinelli 2006) and its impact on participation (Bovaird, Van Ryzin, Loeffler and Parrado 2015; Moini 2012; D’Albergo and Moini 2007), with the consolidated debate regarding the role of culture in the conception of citizenship and civic engagement and, as a consequence, in the effectiveness of collaborative governance. (Cartocci 2007; Coleman and Blumler 2007; Couldry 2006; Dahlgren 2009; Dalton 2008; Hermes and Dahlgren 2006; Papacharissi 2015; Putnam 1993).

Particular attention was also paid to citizen engagement, and to the role performed by the platforms and digital media, when it comes to urban policies (Bakardjieva 2019; Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016; Faccioli 2016; Firmstone and Coleman 2015). The role of digital media is a central theme in international literature regarding civic participation and open government, which in this case study is quite marginal in citizen participation practices.

## 2. Collaborative governance, citizen participation and civic cultures

Transparency, participation, and collaboration are the three main ideas at the core of Open Government. Three keywords which determine a significant change in how to govern. In particular, the debate focuses on the relationship between civic participation in public policies and the creation of *collaborative governance methods*, two specular aspects which intersect, assume meanings, and define different interpretations. After an extensive study of the academic literature and institutional documents, some authors highlight how the expression *collaborative governance* is used to refer to extremely antithetic realities concerning five important aspects: “participation (inside and/or outside government); agency (which drives these processes); inclusiveness (organizational and/or citizen participation); scope (time frame and stage of policy cycle); and normative assumptions (positive or neutral)” (Batory and Svensson 2019, 8). Others write more specifically

about *collective co-production* from the standpoint of involving citizens, as well as other stakeholders, in improving the processes related to the quality of public services (Bovaird *et. al.* 2015). Behind this complex scenario are European and international laws which centre on the development of relationships between institutions and citizens and focus, in particular, on local governance where said relationship is closest<sup>1</sup>. An important example of the sense attributed to these processes can be found in the definition of *governance* in an OECD document which states: “*Governance defines the process by which citizens collectively solve their problems and meet society’s needs, using government as an instrument*” (2001a, 11).

Conversely, the theme of civic participation in public policies and of experimenting with inclusive processes and how they impact on governance are at the centre of an international debate regarding at least three critical issues (Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016): the relationship between representative democracy and deliberative democracy and the possibility of citizens gaining empowerment through their involvement in policy-making (Bobbio 2013; Dalton 2008; Moini 2012; Rondinelli 2006); the role of communication and digital media in promoting new forms of participation (Bakardjieva 2011, 2019; Bartoletti and Faccioli 2013; Boccia Artieri 2012; Bowen, 2013; Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen 2012; Carpentier 2011; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Dahlgren 2009; Lovari and Valentini 2020; Papacharissi 2010; Warren, Sulaiman and Jaafar 2014); and the feeling of disaffection towards politics and a democratic deficit (Rosanvallon 2008, 2011). At the same time, there has been a proliferation of top-down and bottom-up citizen participation experiences. The former are defined as *public engagement* and are often aimed at experimenting new forms of governance and focusing on inclusive processes, while the latter are promoted by the citizens, sometimes in partnership with public institutions, and are defined as *civic engagement*.

By limiting this discussion to “*public engagement*”, it can be schematically stated that the debate focuses on three contrasting positions. Firstly, top-down citizen engagement is considered to be an expression of neoliberal politics, aimed solely at gaining consensus through listening procedures, reducing public expenditure, and broadening the privatization of public services (Cellamare 2019; Crouch 2004; Moini 2012). Secondly, public engagement experiences are considered to be an expression of “*open government*” based on the diffusion of citizens’ listening and involvement (OECD 2001b, 2009) and aimed at creating, and providing value to, consensus and fostering trust in Government. The third position considers public engagement to be an opportunity for both governments and citizens to construct new ways of governance based on accurate, effective citizen participation (Bovaird 2007; Bovaird *et. al.* 2015; Delli Carpini 2004; Carpentier 2011; Dahlgren 2014), as long as specific conditions are met (Coleman and Blumler 2009; Coleman and Firmstone 2014; Coleman and Götze 2001).

Related to this debate, it must be asked if this new form of governance and civic responsibility creates social capital, strengthening the sharing of values and a sense of civic belonging (Bobbio 2013; Bovaird *et. al.* 2015). The definition of social capital being referred to is that of Putnam: “social capital here refers to features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action [...] spontaneous cooperation is facilitated by social capital” (1993, 167). This is the central issue as it highlights the possible relationships between the process of *collaborative governance* and new forms of participation, and how they impact on the everyday lives of those who live in a city and utilize its public spaces. This theme is connected to that of citizens who feel a sense of belonging and, therefore, to *civicness*. Dahlgren (2009, 2013), in particular, underlines how these forms of commitment, which reinvent participation and assign a particular meaning to ways of living citizenship, which is the result of *civic agency*, in that it is

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<sup>1</sup> See in particular OECD 2001a, OECD 2001b and European Commission 2001. An analysis of citizenship practices in various European realities is contained in Garcia 2006. See also D’Ambrosi 2019.

constructed through the sharing of practices to resolve problems which regard the collective. *It is achieved citizenship* and not just *received citizenship* that feeds and, at the same time, enhances civic culture. Dahlgren defines this as “features of democracy’s dynamics and maintaining the political involvement of citizens. [...] Civic cultures are always context-specific and contingent on historical circumstances and power relations. They are, thus, multiple and always, to some degree, evolving” (Dahlgren 2018, 20-21). The awareness of a sense of civic duty, and the presence of a tradition in which civic culture is widespread, create a background of values and shared practices which can facilitate public engagement experiences taking root.

In this complex scenario, however, the general feeling of disaffection with politics must not be ignored. Moreover, a loss of public confidence in institutions, which are harshly criticized for having failed to respond to people’s needs, has led to them being no longer trusted as protectors of the common good (Dahlgren 2015), and those who govern are perceived as being incompetent and lacking any sense of ethics (Edelman 2020). In the same context, a plurality of voices and different forms of bottom-up participation which lie between civic and political engagement can be seen (Cellamare 2019; Demos & PI 2019; Donolo 2011; Moro 2013; Sclavi 2002). It is also worth noting how, according to the latest Demos & PI Report (2019), Italy is experiencing a steady decrease in the amount of trust people have in institutions, something which was recently felt at the voting booth (with 44% abstaining at the recent 2019 European elections<sup>2</sup>). However, there has also been a significant increase in different forms of social responsibility (participation in non-profit associations, voluntary work and protest marches). In this context, the authors (Demos & PI 2019) surmise that it is plausible that the *Friday for Future* and *Sardine* movements have contributed greatly to enhancing a sense of participation as an experience, focusing people’s attention on important issues like environmental sustainability and, more generally, on the importance of social commitments, both in the youth and, transversely, other age groups, regarding problems which are both global and local, and which affect the quality of everyday life and the cardinal principles of democracy. Although they are often niche experiences, and rarely covered by the mainstream media, they are signs of a social demand to be heard and more closely involved. The research presented herein describes one of these realities: the growth of public engagement in the care of commons in urban areas, which is the result of a process of participation promoted by the government of Bologna, a city which has always had a deep-rooted civicness.

### 3. Collaborative Governance for the Care of the Commons: The National and Local Scenario of the Bologna Case Study

This case study fits into the broader experience of the Italian municipalities’ experimentation with open government concerning the care and regeneration of urban commons (Arena and Iaione 2012). It deals with a series of local public engagement initiatives which were triggered by a change to art. 118 of the Italian constitution in 2001 which introduced the “subsidiarity principle”. Unfortunately, this change failed to find significant implementation for several years and progress was only made in 2014 when Bologna City Council approved a *Regulation on collaboration between citizens and the administration for the care and regeneration of urban commons*<sup>3</sup> (henceforth referred to as *the Regulation*), which was inspired by the principle of “collaborative governance” (“amministrazione condivisa”, Arena 1997).

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.termometropolitico.it/?s=astenuti+elezioni+europee+2019>

<sup>3</sup>See [http://partecipa.comune.bologna.it/sites/comunita/files/allegati\\_blog/odg\\_172\\_reg.beni\\_comuni\\_urbani\\_pgn\\_45010\\_2014.pdf](http://partecipa.comune.bologna.it/sites/comunita/files/allegati_blog/odg_172_reg.beni_comuni_urbani_pgn_45010_2014.pdf), accessed 07/02/2020.

The aim of the Regulation was to enable collaboration between both citizens and municipal authorities, “favouring autonomous initiatives of citizens, individually or in an association, for the performance of activities of general interest”. By “urban commons” the Bologna Regulation means “the goods, tangible, intangible and digital, that citizens and the Administration, also through participative and deliberative procedures, recognize to be functional to the individual and collective well-being, activating consequently towards them, under article 118, par. 4, of the Italian Constitution, to share the responsibility with the Administration of their care or regeneration to improve the collective enjoyment” (Art. 2.a).

After Bologna, another 212 Italian municipalities adopted regulations regarding collaborative governance<sup>4</sup>, even if the application of the regulations is very different on a national level. There are several reasons why Bologna was chosen. Not only is this the first case of the approval of an application rule regarding the principle of horizontal subsidiarity between an administration and its citizens when it comes to urban commons, but it is also evident how its practical application has evolved significantly. In order to promote the effective application of the Regulation, Bologna municipality promptly developed a specific administrative tool, the “Collaboration Agreement” (the so-called “patto di collaborazione”).

However, what is of particular relevance is the relative success of this policy when it comes to the public’s response. The first Collaboration Agreement was signed in Bologna in September 2014, and by April 2016 there were 220<sup>5</sup>. A recent survey on the state of the implementation of the Rules in Italian cities, following a national meeting promoted by Labsus<sup>6</sup>, highlighted how the approval of the Regulation was not enough to guarantee the effective implementation of the collaboration regarding the commons, and how, in some cases, the active participation of citizens did not correspond to the public engagement initiative of the Municipalities. In the case of Bologna, both conditions were observed – although not without some criticism –, rendering it a case study of general interest in evaluating initiatives of public engagement, especially when it comes to the urban context.

In order to allow the comparability of this study and to strengthen its relevance in a more general setting, it must be remembered that Bologna is characterized by its long-standing, wide-ranging civic associations. Moreover, it is located in the Italian Region of Emilia Romagna, which has traditionally always had a high level of civicness (Putnam 1993; Cartocci 2007), something which has survived over the years (Lewanski and Mosca 2003; Piazza, Mosca, Lewanski and Andretta 2006) notwithstanding the significant changes which have occurred not just in Italy, but in most advanced western democracies.

## 4. Research questions and method

The research presented herein began by listening to the voices of citizens who undersigned collaboration agreements with the municipal administration of Bologna, within the framework of the local policy of the collaborative governance of urban common goods. The following issues will be addressed:

1. How do civic collaboration policies re-conceive and shape citizen participation?
2. How does civic collaboration foster social capital, trust in public administration, and civic agency?
3. Does civic collaboration widen citizen participation, including new actors and issues, in local policies?

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.labsus.org/2020/01/regolamenti-amministrazione-condivisa-dei-beni-comuni/> accessed 07/06/2020.

<sup>5</sup> See [http://www.comune.bologna.it/media/files/sintesi\\_20122016\\_delle\\_attivit\\_di\\_cittadinanza\\_attiva\\_.pdf](http://www.comune.bologna.it/media/files/sintesi_20122016_delle_attivit_di_cittadinanza_attiva_.pdf), p. 6, accessed 07/02/2020.

<sup>6</sup> See “Agreement between the city for the civic imagination and the shared care of common goods. Final Report of Friday, December 6th 2019”, Draft 17th December 2019.

4. What is the role of communication – especially social media and digital platforms – in citizen listening and engagement practices?

In the previous stages of the research, six expert interviews were performed with officials from the city administration who had mainly been involved in the implementation of the Regulation on civic collaboration and the civic digital platform, which represents one of the communication tools of engagement for civic collaboration provided by Bologna City Council (Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016).

In order to design the next stage regarding the experience of these citizens, all 357 collaboration agreements signed by the Municipality of Bologna were analysed up to, and including, the 31st of October 2017, in order to understand, amongst other variables, who the main actors were and what the main aims of civic collaboration might be (Bartoletti and Faccioli 2020)<sup>7</sup>. What emerged was how the implementation of the Regulation had extended the participation of actors who were not traditionally involved in the process of public engagement, for example, non-institutional actors (individual citizens, informal groups, committees, etc.), schools, and economic actors, even if the role of associations is extremely prevalent, having been involved in 70% of the collaborations analysed<sup>8</sup>.

Regarding the objectives of the collaboration, four main macro-areas were identified: care of public spaces (54.1%); care of the vulnerable (25.8%); care of the community (23.5%); and care of culture and education (17.9%)<sup>9</sup>. In this context, the care of green areas, which characterizes a significant number of agreements (35.8%), emerges as an activity through which citizens strive to achieve all the different objectives of the civic collaboration identified in this analysis. It is believed that this is another sign of the progressive recognition of nature in urban environments as common goods to be nurtured by all (Bartoletti 2013; De Biase, Marelli and Zaza 2018) and which deserve special attention.

This paper presents the results of interviews with the promoters of all 33 civic collaboration agreements concerning the care of green spaces (public gardens, parks, flower beds, school gardens or allotments) in the city throughout 2019<sup>10</sup>. As is evident, single promoters prevailed (associations, informal groups of citizens, a single citizen or economic actors), while partnerships involving more promoters were more uncommon and had relatively simple set ups<sup>11</sup>. Table 1 shows the categories of promoters of collaboration agreements interviewed, with associations prevailing (57.1%). The green areas considered by the agreements were mainly public parks and gardens (57.1%).

From October 2019 to January 2020 a total of 28 in-depth interviews were conducted with 42 citizens (20 males and 22 females)<sup>12</sup>. These were mainly adults or the elderly, with the retired accounting for approximately

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<sup>7</sup> The analysis examined the descriptive form of the project and the documents published on the platform (agreements, project's reporting) and the sites of promoters. On the basis of these sources agreements have been analysed in relation to the promoter of the agreement with the administration, the partner, the most important objectives that the promoter intended to attain, the referents of the agreement inside the public administration (City Districts, sectors, etc.), the location of the actions to be carried out in the territory, the recipients of the action and the duration of the agreement, even as a result of eventual renewals.

<sup>8</sup> Amongst the other actors involved in civic collaborations we note individual citizens (5.9%), informal groups of citizens (6.2%), parent's groups (2.2%) and economic actors (5.6%).

<sup>9</sup> The total percentage is more than 100 because up to a maximum of two collaboration objectives were identified in order not to reduce the richness and complexity of the collaboration projects.

<sup>10</sup> The data on active and concluded agreements were taken from the platform of the Municipality of Bologna, <http://partecipa.comune.bologna.it/patti-di-collaborazione/elenco> on September 6th 2019.

<sup>11</sup> This result confirms that which had already emerged from our mapping of collaboration agreements and other studies (Iaione, Pais and De Nictolis 2020).

<sup>12</sup> The interviews carried out cover 85% of the 33 agreements selected; the missing interviews were the result of explicit refusals by the promoters due to a lack of time (1), unavailability (1), the interruption of the agreement (1) or due to the impossibility to

half of those interviewed. The social composition of the interviewees illustrates that they are primarily middle class, but from heterogeneous class fractions, characterized by different levels of economic and cultural capital, which are also the result of different trajectories in social space: some are endowed with elevated levels of cultural capital, but there are also members of the lower middle-class and others who might be considered closer to lower class, due to their family backgrounds<sup>13</sup>. Despite these relatively heterogeneous social positions, a trait which unites the interviewees is their background in social and civic engagement, while political engagement was more rare, with only two interviewees having had important roles in the local municipal administration. Finally, the agreements analysed concern different neighbourhoods of the city, not just the most popular parts of some suburban areas but also areas which are not very central and characterised as being more residential. These are places where taking care of commons is motivated not only by territorial degradation, but also by the need for social revitalisation. It must, however, be noted that a limited number of agreements (6/33) concern green areas located in the city centre.

**Table 1 - The promoters of the 33 agreements on green urban areas in 2019**

<i>Category of promoter</i>	<i>Number of agreements</i>	<i>(%)</i>	<i>Number of interviews</i>	<i>(%)</i>
Individual citizens	7	21.2	5	17.9
Informal groups of citizens (in two cases in partnership with a different actor)	5	15.1	4	14.3
Association/s (in two cases in partnership with a different actor)	17	51.5	16	57.1
Economic actors	4	12.1	3	10.7
	33			
Total		100	28	100

The interviews were designed to investigate the following macro-areas: the characteristics of the promoter; the motivations and circumstances for the activation of the collaboration agreement, including how the promoter discovered its existence; the objectives of the civic collaboration; the relationships with the public administration, including the forms of communication; the relationships with other citizens, including the modes of communication and engagement as well as any controversial issues; and an evaluation of the civic collaboration experience and the tools of the agreement.

The interviews, which lasted approximately an hour, were transcribed verbatim, and each citizen’s narrative was then analysed (Montesperelli 2014). When discussing the results, the focus fell on three main issues: the relationship between collaboration and civic agency, civiness and trust; the practices of communication and engagement; and the efficacy and limits of collaboration between public administrations and citizens.

perform the interview at a time which suited the investigation (2). The interviews involved just a single advocate, or different characters from the same association or informal group, or representatives of the various actors involved in the partnership.

<sup>13</sup> This refers Bourdieu’s (1979) analysis of social space; for their updated application in the case of the middle classes in the city of Bologna cfr. Sassatelli, Santoro and Semi (2015).

## 5. Collaboration Practices: civic agency, civiness and trust in the narratives of the protagonists

One of the main themes of the research regards the experiences of citizens involved in the promotion of collaboration agreements concerning green urban areas. Speaking about one's experience means taking some important aspects into consideration related to the context of collaborative governance and the different expressions and meanings of public engagement. Important questions include: Why do some citizens get involved? What is their aim? And what are the main results of their activity? The majority of those interviewed proposed one, or more, collaboration agreement in continuity with a tradition of civic engagement and volunteering in different social contexts. The experience gained by the agreements, nevertheless, almost always resulted in the acquisition of more awareness regarding the problems concerning the city, but also of their ability to have a constructive role in seeking out solutions to everyday problems. The representative of an informal group affirmed that:

The aim is to have a presentable city. There are entire parts of our district which are very run down. A cleaner city is more welcoming, so there is also always this double aspect of cleaning: urban decorum and hospitality. The citizen must take responsibility in these situations. I think that a person shouldn't just limit themselves to complaining, if I don't accept that my city is dirty, that our city is dirty, I have to personally make an effort to do something about it. As a citizen [I learned] more awareness and a lot more about both the city and also of my district.... I met a lot of people who I had never met before, all united by a feeling of civic belonging and who all gained heart in a divided world... And I realized that I'm not alone (...) that lots of other citizens think the same as me and make themselves available to work a few hours for free, that should give us hope (informal group *Civicamente Lame*).

These experiences refer to the care of urban commons, which, according to the Regulation, are “functional for the welfare of the community and its members, who exercise the fundamental rights of people in the interests of future generations”. As has been highlighted (Labsus, 2019) one of the strengths of the Regulation is that both citizens and administrations work together to recognize a good as common and define the forms of enhancement and protection. This recognition pre-establishes a direct relationship between the citizens, who take responsibility, and the good that they must guarantee the best individual and collective usage for. The representative of a citizens committee involved in the care of an allotment in a public garden highlights that the area they work in:

used to be very dark, with very few lights, and incredibly run down. A place with a lot of drug dealing (...) now it's a public allotment, there is even a small lake now. Now, it's very beautiful. Unfortunately, everyone in Bologna, up until not so long ago, believed that a common good was no good at all. So it was abandoned to itself, or at least not respected. So we tried to do something to change this... common goods must be regenerated and protected. So, we began in the dog-friendly area in Lennon Park. We got the fences changed, we got all the street furniture changed, and bins installed... then we started to hang up signs explaining the most important rules, we started to organize events about dog training, how to respect the commons and finally (...) I had to call the municipal police many times, and the carabinieri too, for some serious issues... So now we have a place that is loved by everyone and the citizens and locals who go here look after it. That's the idea. And it's a great idea because, you know, sometimes we have disagreements amongst ourselves, so it's important that we agree in the end (committee *Bulldog Brioché*).



It must be highlighted how the problem of public safety in areas abandoned for an extended period are managed without any scaremongering, in a context in which the word decorum means liveable places and not just the result of neoliberal urban policies. Moreover, this interviewee also introduces the possibility that these experiences can activate moments of aggregation and support, and that they can create forms of social capital.

The majority of the experiences considered have produced not only new relationships characterized by a division of labour in which every member does their best to help those in difficulty, but also moments of sociability with people who met thanks to this experience. A volunteer of an association which created and looks after a bookcrossing station and a flower bed in a public garden said:

We, as an association which expresses itself in different fields, were looking for an activity, in this case, civic and environmental, to make our contribution to the city of Bologna... and this was a very precise sector because it's a meeting place, it is a public park, there is vegetation, so we are in contact with nature. And here we can see the work, which you do yourself, but especially (this garden) allows our volunteers to operate. So, as you can see, it is a double-barrelled situation, internal and individual, because you need a little bit of training, you need to have some motivation. It's not just simply doing something and then stop! There is a root cause and it's this root cause that gets you going, it pushes you to do something, and to willingly do something that will benefit others. There, in the park you can meet the citizens... there is the dissemination of civic values, of volunteering, and it raises the awareness of common goods (Nuova Acropoli Bologna).

These activities often involve meetings and relations between different cultures, promoting inclusive paths through shared practices and potentially fostering civiness.

He opened a little mosque which became a point of reference not only for the Pakistani community, but also for, you know, the people who live nearby... so this presence began to grow, and we saw more and more people, especially on the street, at particular times of the day etc. so we said: we need to get to know them and to know each other a bit. (...) That was the beginning, then we started working together with the Islamic community, which has always helped us a lot, so we started to clean up the streets together because there was a lot of graffiti around at the time... and then, after work we go to eat together, you know, getting to know one and another better and then, at a certain point this... a place which had been closed for a while, which some of us had seen but, you know... it had been closed for fifteen years... so we started to ask ourselves: but why don't we try and ask the owners...at least until they decide to restore it, the owner is the "Asp Città di Bologna", so it's a public owner and... the garden, to make it useful again, we could try... (Citizens committee Torleone Insieme)

These are also places of socialization, where one can pass the time gardening or just chatting with those who stop to admire the beauty of the flower beds.

[the agreement] it's a good thing... you know, I do it for civiness, because I love flowers and greenery, and I have to say one thing here, it helps me a lot too, it's also a way to meet others, the neighbours, the locals, because if I'm there someone will pass by and say "ah Madam", then we will talk about something else, it's also a way to socialize (a lady who takes care of a public flower bed).

These experiences produce resources which are both immaterial (like listening, dialogue and inclusion) and material (like the produce of the gardens, the green areas and playtime) and are more generally considered to be pleasant places to be used and lived. They help discover sociability, which can be produced by a conversation in which interaction and reciprocity are more important than the content of the communication (Simmel 1997). One aspect present in many of the narratives is the emotional attachment they feel in relation

to the good they have been entrusted with. In the practices they implement, the expression of a civic sense is intertwined with an almost affectionate attachment to the products being taken care of. This is an example of what some authors have defined as “affective citizenship” (Cfr. among others, Papacharissi 2015, Dahlgren 2009, Coleman & Blumler 2007).

For me this is an amazing space, it surprises all social categories. Take, for example, the students... they come here to study... to eat a sandwich... Then there are grandparents, who bring the children with them, and then families... for me it's a special place for everyone, we have refused to allow things like beer and shops. Otherwise, it would just become a beautiful bar or a beach, we wanted to be different. (Association “il Giardino del Guasto”).

It could be said, paraphrasing Cellamare (2019), that collaboration agreements experiment forms of the “*production of urbanity*” through the regeneration of abandoned or degraded areas, in which the municipality entrusts individual citizens, groups or associations with the task of recuperating or enhancing them. These spaces become places after a process of re-signification and care<sup>14</sup>.

In a scenario in which experiences have been prevalently positive, sometimes even enthusiastic, there are still uncertainties and difficulties which can still have repercussions on trust, both amongst the citizens themselves and towards the institutions. The former concerns the division between active citizens and those lacking any civic sense: those who take care of flower beds often find plants and flowers which have been uprooted or stolen; citizens who mentioned good manners often find rubbish, cigarette butts, or dog droppings and are sometimes insulted. These are opposing points of view which are difficult to reconcile. On the other hand, many interviewees highlight that even inside their organizations there is often an unequal distribution of work which falls prevalently on the few, which is something which creates tension and uncertainty.

However, the most relevant aspect concerns the relationship with the municipality which, although it has been defined as positive by the majority of those interviewed, is, at the same time, perceived by others as an intermittent spokesperson which first proposes a relationship of exchange but then sometimes disappears and does not guarantee the necessary support. This problem is particularly felt, for example, when it comes to the consumption of the water necessary for gardens and flower beds. Unfortunately, it is not always available and its cost can sometimes fall on the promoters of the agreements. The same is also true of insurance policies to cover the risks which volunteers run. Moreover, there are also uncertainties and fears concerning the future of this collaborative experience. Some ask if the visibility that is being given to this experience is connected with an upcoming election campaign, while others fear that cleaning up and redesigning spaces with socially useful activities will make them more attractive for commercial use, fostering a process of *gentrification*.

These uncertainties reflect on the sense of trust in the administration, which oscillates wildly between credibility and, while not quite distrust, a feeling of disenchantment with an administration which is partially “*blocked*”, notwithstanding the incredible effort it has made with the experience of the collaboration agreements.

The administration is present, it gives answers, it discusses, for good or bad. We have also fought too... but there is feedback, whether it's positive or negative (representative of the committee Bulldog Brioche).

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<sup>14</sup> It must be stated that the cases studied by Cellamare have no connection with experiences of civic collaboration, but of sometimes illegal «urban self-organisation», in the city of Rome in an urban and social context which is significantly different from that of Bologna. The municipality of Rome, moreover, did not adhere to the Regulation for collaborative governance of urban commons. This article does not consider the experience of «urban self-organisation» in Bologna as it does not fall under the parameters of this case study.

In conclusion, the citizens' narratives paint an incredibly rich picture of positive results and potential, which requires, and tries to create, a "*right to the city*" (Lefebvre, 2009), to design and experience places which can enhance the expression of civicness and civic agency (Dahlgren 2009). However, this is only possible with administrations which tackle the challenge of relating to its citizens to recuperate credibility, therefore offering opportunities for an achieved citizenship, in a context of reciprocal responsibility (Donolo 2005).

## 6. Communication and engagement practices: the ancillary role of digital media

One of the aspects which was of particular interest was that of communication and engagement practices. This refers to both public sector communication and the relationship the promoters of agreements activated with other actors in civil society, in the organization of the activities which had been planned for in the agreement, and in the involvement of the recipients of the agreement and the wider public. In this context, it was asked what the role of digital media was in both private and public platforms. Concurrent to the launch of the collaboration agreements was the renewal of the municipal council's public network, "Iperbole", which has been active since 1995<sup>15</sup>. Since December 2014, besides the institutional website, which has had a mainly informative function, and a second section dedicated to the delivery of municipal services online, "Iperbole" has hosted a digital civic platform, which is currently called "Participate" ("Partecipa"), which is aimed at fostering citizen participation within and beyond the framework of the Regulation on urban commons<sup>16</sup>. In the "Community" subsection of "Participate" every citizen, organization, or association can create a profile where it can show the initiatives it has promoted in the field of participation, including collaboration agreements, which have either concluded or are ongoing.

"Participate" can be considered to be a "collaborative platform" – if Bakardjieva's classification (2019) is being referred to – for the type of relations it intends to enable between the public administration and the citizenry. Although its function is to render collaboration agreements public, it also aspires to offer interactive civic space, not just between the public administration and citizens but also between different actors in civil society, enabling forms of civic "connective action" (Bennet and Segerberg 2012) which should be relatively innovative when compared to the traditional participation methods of associations.

This platform, which is designed and run by the city council, has a limited amount of resources at its disposal for its development and community management. As a result, its features to support horizontal interaction amongst its users have not developed as much as they should have. This has resulted in citizens, or organizations, experiencing difficulty when attempting to match resources needed with offers, and stifles similar projects coming into contact with each other (developments which were indicated as being desirable in Bartoletti and Faccioli 2016)<sup>17</sup>. This can be seen in an interview with the president of an association:

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<sup>15</sup> Iperbole is the Italian acronym for "Internet for Bologna and Emilia Romagna". Bologna was the first Italian city to create a civic network, the second in Europe after Amsterdam's "Digital City."

<sup>16</sup> The Participate collaborative platform currently hosts, as well as collaboration agreements, the various tools of public engagement which have redesigned the ecology of participation in Bologna over the past five years. These include city district Laboratories (Paltrinieri and Allegrini 2018), participatory budgeting, open data, and online consultation.

<sup>17</sup> In the qualitative comparative analysis of open government platforms by De Blasio and Selva (2019) this aspect is observed through the indicator "Communication for network coordination", co-evaluating the degree of participation and collaboration fostered by institutional platforms.

Their site is extremely complicated (...) and a site must be very instinctive. For example, let's take a look at "Associations". So, we go to associations, click and enter, and then there's a kind of drop down menu which opens up, (...) before we get to "Libere Forme Associative" (Free Form Associations) you have to go through hoops to get there. I would just give up if I were someone interested in finding something. And even if I wanted to volunteer, you know, where do I go to find an association which I want to help? To "Free Form Associations"? I don't even know what that means (Guardian Angels Bologna Association)

Although the platform does not seem very effective in promoting engagement and civic interaction, it is, instead, structured and used adequately when compared to the goal of institutional communication and transparency when it comes to relations between Public administrations and the citizenry (Ducci 2015). Collaboration proposals are published on the platform by the municipal administration after an initial evaluation of their admissibility and are visible online for at least 15 days to permit any eventual partnership proposals or criticism from other actors (individual citizens, associations, etc.) before passing onto the co-design stage and the eventual signing of the agreement. Thus, the action spaces of a "monitorial citizen" (Schudson 1998) are enabled as are those of civic interaction. However, from interviews with the public, it emerges that none of these features are well known, nor are they significantly applied in day-to-day collaboration. Why is this so?

First of all, it is extremely revealing how promoters were able to discover the existence of the collaboration agreements tool at all, and how the first collaboration occurred. Collaboration agreements are often the result of a network of relationships which are deeply rooted in the daily life of city quarters. It is not uncommon to discover that agreements originated as a result of direct and personal contact between citizens and exponents of the municipal administration (a president of the City District, City offices dedicated to civic collaboration, etc.). When the promoter is an association, the collaboration agreement is often preceded by a partnership with the municipal administration based on administrative tools which existed prior to the approval of the Regulation (typically public-private agreements or "convenzioni"). Therefore, it is unsurprising that the collaborative platform rarely appears spontaneously in the accounts of citizens. Only twice did interviewees mention interaction with other citizens which was mediated by the City council platform at the moment when the proposal was first published, before the agreement had been signed, or during the performance of the activity itself. The municipal platform aims, therefore, to be collaborative, however, due to its low levels of audibility and participation, when it comes to the field of collaboration agreements, it is, in reality, closer to an "administrative platform" (Bakardjieva 2019).

If we consider grass-roots communication practices, how promoters communicate with other citizens, and how they involve them in their activities of collaboration, it can be noticed that collaboration is based mainly on personal relationships and face-to-face encounters. These are generally all rooted in the city, the quarter and the City District, which "*become a little bit like a small town*". In this context, agreement promoters use the potential of connection and involvement offered by digital platforms – with Facebook and WhatsApp the most cited – in a quite ancillary way and not particularly strategically, also because their public is often geographically close at hand. As two women who signed an agreement to take care of the park their children play in explained:

Chiara: Well, I think these web things don't work so well when it comes to real-life in the local neighbourhood. You know, old fashioned word of mouth is much better. (...) Like, it's not a cultural thing, like an exhibition or a concert. It's just old-style word of mouth. So I think it wouldn't have a very strong impact. Because, you know,

we are all there, people talk outside the school, “Guys, there’s a party in the park, let’s go”, full stop. That’s what’s so good about it, you know.

Anna: We send invitations through the class chatroom, you know (...) We hung it up here because this ice cream parlour is very popular with everyone who goes to the school, so we hung it here...

Chiara: Yeah, it’s our point of reference. (il Parchetto Committee)

Meanwhile, a volunteer to an association who created and takes care of a flowerbed in a public garden tells us how they try and get citizens involved:

Well, there is always the staff, who are a team of kids who do public relations, so they promote the activity, they use flyers. You know, telling people what’s happening. (Nuova Acropoli Bologna).

It is not uncommon for citizens to underline how civic engagement does not leave much time for communications to promote the activity, which some admit may lead to it not being as curated as it should be, both for a lack of time and competency. Despite this, promoters of agreements rarely complain about the difficulties they encounter in involving other citizens, who can be reached through networks of personal relationships, word of mouth amongst parents, volunteers, neighbours, regular visitors to parks and gardens, and a mix of more traditional forms of communication (flyers and posters hung up in the street, left in shops, or handed out to passers-by) and digital (events and posts on Facebook, especially by associations and informal groups, WhatsApp chat groups of parents or volunteers). For instance, an association which has been active for many years and boasts various digital channels – a blog, a newsletter, a Facebook page and around a thousand contacts on WhatsApp – complained about the difficulty in managing everything, but also recognized that the ability to engage families and the general public usually originates elsewhere:

So who manages the Facebook page?

Milena: Well, we’ve got Carlo, who does the design part.

And does he also do the blog, or...?

Milena: Yeah, he does that too.

Antonella: But usually at night and it’s all a little bit last minute.

Milena: Because he also works.

Antonella: So the notifications for tomorrow arrive today.

Milena: But, you know, it’s all based on the relationship with Antonella and on trust.

(President and co-founder of the Association “il Giardino del Guasto”)

The importance of engaging other active citizens is notoriously problematic: different interviewees voiced concern regarding the difficulties involved in attracting new volunteers and the critical issue of passing the torch from one generation to another in associations or citizen informal groups, something which puts both the continuity of the work, and the capitalization of the experience itself, at risk.

In conclusion, whether the relationship between the promoters of the agreements and the municipal administration is being observed, or their relationships with citizens and other actors in civil society, it must be noted how civic collaborations regarding urban commons originates and feeds on a network of relationships of cooperation, solidarity and trust, which are embedded in the city, in the local quarters, and the neighbourhoods. Digital tools accompany and eventually strengthen these networks – an unsurprising result of this study when compared to findings from international research on how the Internet affects two forms of

social capital, “network capital” and “participatory capital” (Wellman, Haase, Witte, and Hampton, 2001) and technologically enabled civic participation (Firmstone and Coleman 2015).

## 7. Conclusions: efficacy and limits of public engagement

Overall, the verdict that citizens provide regarding their experience with collaboration on public goods is overwhelmingly positive. The main benefits obtained are connected to the recognition of the value of the volunteer work, ratified by an institutional document which is the agreement; satisfaction for the appreciation obtained on behalf of other citizens who, even if they do not want to engage directly themselves, confirm the value of the work done by the most active; and the visibility that this tool confers to civic activism – to the promoters and to the activities that they perform.

It is equally evident that had the municipality of Bologna not made the collaboration agreement tool available, these citizens would probably have found alternative ways to protect not only these urban commons and green areas, but also the relationships which converge in these public spaces. This is true of all the associations, which find only the most recent tools in the agreement to allow collaboration with local institutions. Moreover, this also applies to individual citizens or informal groups, for whom the tool was originally designed. The policy of civic collaboration, more than activating new participation, appears to have shaped participation which, without the agreements, would more than likely have found other ways to emerge, either institutionally or informally. Surely then the agreements have promoted a growth in the institutionalization of grassroots engagement which would have remained invisible and, in some cases, even illegal and unrecognised: for example, the flowers spontaneously planted by citizens which were removed by local police or gardening companies because no agreement had been signed.

Overall, the research highlights how the experience of collaborative governance provides space for self-organized citizens’ practices and enhances forms of participation based on shared practices and creativity, instead of forms of participation based on discussion such as deliberative arena. Paraphrasing Rosanvallon (2008), who writes about the mutations in democratic activity, it could be said that the experience of collaboration agreements promoted by the municipality of Bologna delineates the scenarios which the author defines as the «democracy of involvement» and the «democracy of intervention», which are characterised by the involvement of a plurality of people to create a common world and obtain shared goals. In this context, the phase of the announcement and protest, which Rosanvallon calls the «democracy of expression», seems to belong to the past.

Finally, it must also be noted that if the collaboration agreements allow growth in the individualisation of participation, organised civil society still plays a leading role in the case of Bologna with traditional associations or less structured groups. There is no sign of the risk of “civic privatism” appearing, which some authors feared (see for example Bifulco 2005 for Italy, De Biase *et al.* 2018 in a study of the city of Paris). Even in cases where this danger could be more significant – for example, when the promoters of agreements are individual citizens who take care of the public flower beds near their homes – the narratives seem to suggest that the risks of individualisation are marginal:

Then you need to ask for permission, because, you know, you need to ask for permission, because you can’t just do things (laughing). And accept what you are asked in the end, because, you know, the street is public property

and you can't just say "ah, you know, I won't do anything now!". So it doesn't make sense. If it's public, you have to do something which the public will like and won't disturb anyone – as much as you can (individual citizen).

While the outcome of the collaborative experience is generally perceived as positive, some negative aspects, however, emerge throughout the analysis. First of all, numerous promoters complain about excessive bureaucracy, which might appear paradoxical seeing as the agreement is a tool which was developed to simplify collaboration between citizens and administrations, and should take inspiration from the principle of informality, namely flexibility and simplicity (as stated in art. 3.h. of the Regulation). From the narratives of some promoters, it can be deduced that it is necessary to continue to promote an administrative culture, which should be widespread in the different sectors of public administration involved in civic collaboration, to favour a more decisive passage from a logic of authorization to one of collaboration. The public sector should acknowledge a citizen's capability for innovation and ability to provide answers to emerging needs and include their opinions in the design of public policies. The risk, of course, is that the potential innovation contained in the agreements is limited by a strong tendency to regulate and control on behalf of the public administration, resulting in the relative standardization of the forms of collaboration.

However, the most critical issue might concern the central aspect of collaboration, which is the division of responsibility amongst the citizens and the administration in dealing with problems of general interest (Arena 1997). In some narratives, there is the underlying sensation that collaboration could be seen as a substitute for a lack of intervention by the administration. This is the risk highlighted by some authors who see "shaky ground" in the Italian Regulations regarding urban commons as they could transform into a type of "delegated administration" (Cellamare 2019), which is consistent with a critical approach to public engagement as a strategy of neoliberal urban politics (Crouch 2004; Jessop 2002; Moini 2012).

While this paper shares some of the basic assumptions of this critical approach, it does not believe that this interpretation fully recognizes the complexity and richness of the civic experience which has been analysed, and of the ability of citizens to re-appropriate the policies of public engagement promoted by the Municipality (de Certeau 1990). These are the "*spaces of the possible*" (Donolo 2011) which have been co-produced by the initiatives of active citizens and sometimes, like in this case study, together with the public administration, which is often niche but rooted in the city. A partnership between public institutions and civil society which aims to enhance common goods is "more of a cultural convergence than political; this has nothing to do with alliances for power, but for doing: what is important is the local practices which must become standard" (Donolo 2011, 137).

To conclude, the relative success of the policy of collaborative governance on urban commons in the Municipality of Bologna must be seen in the context of a favourable civic culture characterized by a consolidated tradition of associations, both conventional and innovative, and a relatively high level of civicness, where a growing sense of distrust in institutions – which has already been detected in other contexts (Edelman 2020; Rosanvallon 2011) – has not impeded the commitment towards issues of collective interest regarding the quality of urban life. This case study highlights how open government can be effective if certain conditions are present. In particular, a mature administrative culture which is open to innovation and a deep-rooted civic culture. These narratives also shed light on how important the credibility of the public institutions promoting them is in these processes of civic activation and also on the importance of transparent institutional communication, one which is based on both listening to citizens and on standing out from the rhetoric of political communication (Canel and Sanders 2012; Canel and Luoma-aho 2018).

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