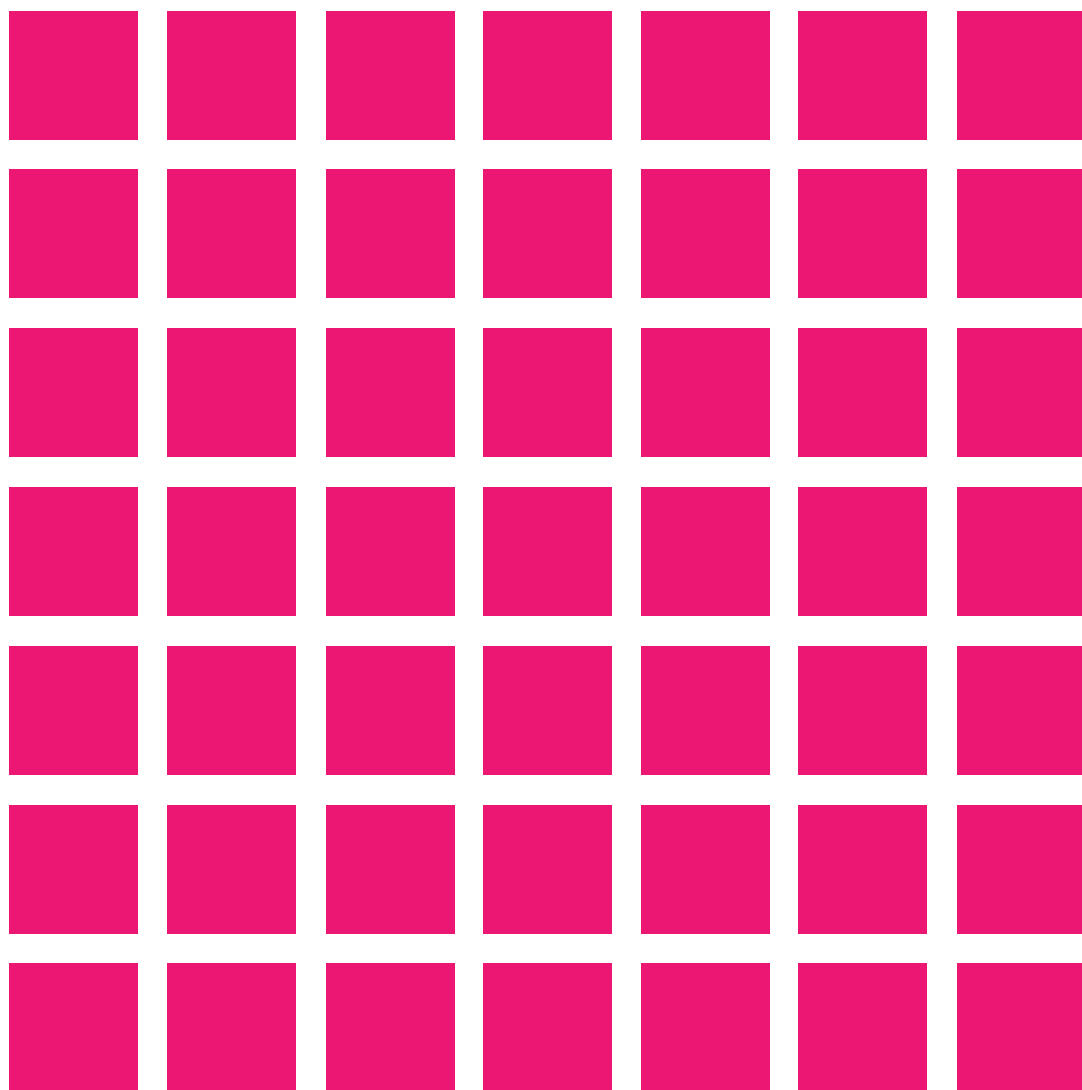


Active participation.



Words, key concepts and outlooks:
outcomes of a participatory process.



Fondazione
Compagnia
di SanPaolo

cheFare^{cc}

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Intro- duction

“What do
you mean by
active partic-
ipation?”

by
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“What do you mean by active participation?”, “Can you give us a definition?”

Two questions we have often been asked over the last three years.

Even before 2020, Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo was involved in promoting active participation in various operational areas, from cultural innovation to social policies: cultural participation and inclusion, direct experience in the design of the *Polo del '900*, *audience development* and engagement, popularisation of science, active citizenship, youth protagonism. As a result of an internal reorganisation, these were brought together into a dedicated mission which, in addition to defining a general *statement*¹, divides active participation into three possible categories (civic, cultural and democratic), with two cross-cutting focuses (young people and inland and mountain areas).

In the new four-year strategy for 2021 to 2024, the programme document on which the activities are based, a deliberately broad and non-restrictive interpretative framework was established, within which the Foundation operated in two ways: through interventions intended to encourage, welcome and support local interpretations and forms of active participation (guidelines for policies and collaborative practices or programmes such as Space on participation spaces); with strategic allies to establish new perspectives for work through joint observation and the re-elaboration of thoughts, practices and evidence.

This resulted in the **most** urgent themes being identified, **along with methods** and **contexts** with specific characteristics.

There has been an increasingly widespread demand for participation in recent years, due to growing **inequalities** and a reduction in the opportunities for trade brought about by Covid and the economic crisis. The research carried out by LaPolis-University of Urbino and Demos, on the relationship between “Italians and the State”, now in its 25th edition, shows us what has changed and is changing in our democracy and in the associated activities: participation, relationship with politics and associations. As Ilvo Diamanti says in his comment, “The lesser impact of fears has promoted a resumption in local participation and commitment. It has allowed us to ease the sense of loneliness and vulnerability fuelled by insecurity. As a result, our time appears less “suspended” today than it was a year ago. Because we can look forward. Together with others”.

We have also understood that the rhetoric about the **participatory method** being a democratic embellishment is risky: if the relationship with the people involved in the processes is not serious and based on mutual trust, it risks increasing the frustration of the ecosystems rather than being an added value. This argument also applies to the work we do, as a Foundation, with the people who agree with curiosity to work together, such as in this case, recognising that they have a fair if not equal co-responsibility.

¹ “We invite people **to take the initiative**: in fact, we strive to foster a **new spirit of sharing**, with which to rethink **cultural and public spaces** in a new light that makes them more **inclusive** and **engaging**. We see culture as a driver for building a **new active citizenship**”

Intro- duction

Finally we have begun to recognise some of the **characteristics of the territories** in which we work, which are peculiar to them and which make them particularly fertile today, each with its own strength: Turin has a high concentration of systems typical of its civic, cultural and social structure (examples include the unique experience of the *Case del Quartiere* (neighbourhood houses) network, the *Abbonamento Musei* (museum subscription) scheme, the *Polo del '900*, the *Portinerie di Comunità* (neighbourhood concierge offices), the various and widespread clubs, including bowling clubs, which are rooted in the tradition of social innovation started two centuries ago by many people including Giulia di Barolo); just as the city of Genoa is one of the Italian cities with the greatest number of active local agreements, experimenting with forms of “decentralised” management based on the central and active role of city councils; or the Olivetti tradition in the Ivrea area, the *Società di Mutuo Soccorso* (mutual aid societies) the first of which in Italy was founded in Pinerolo in 1848, and the Alpine experiences, which are among the most interesting in the country because of their ability to promote local development through active participation.

After three intense and often completely rescheduled years due to the pandemic, and particularly in view of the new strategic plan for 2025-2028, we decided to take stock of our work so far and put it to the test with a selection of our privileged stakeholders in these areas (the strategic allies mentioned above, municipalities, associations, universities, research and training centres, national institutional entities, other second-tier entities, foundations of banking origin) with which we worked for three days. We relied on *cheFare* to carry out this sharing and summarising exercise and this report is only the beginning of the analysis.

*“We are the custodians of an idea of Italy that we see expressed in our Constitution. Being heirs means knowing that the heritage left after the conquest of freedom is one of **commitment** and **participation**”.*

Sergio Mattarella on his visit to the Polo del '900 (2 August 2023)

Methodology

A set of worldviews and theoretical and operational definitions.

The **Word, concepts and outlooks** process adopted the **Emerging Collective Definition** method established by *cheFare* over the last 5 years. This approach was tested for the first time in Turin during the “**Nube di Parole**” (word cloud) project implemented at the *Polo del '900* (2018) and supported by Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo.

Emerging Collective Definition is an empirical method – derived from the *Grounded Theory*, developed by Glaser & Strauss (1965) – to explore the ways in which organisations develop practices and attribute meanings to them in new, emerging, contexts that are in the process of being defined. It is a strictly inductive and interpretative approach, designed to take complexity into account, avoiding simplifications and above all reductionism, based on the circularity between data and interpretations.

The **first stage of the process** involved the collection and analysis of the documentary material used by Compagnia di San Paolo to construct its **operational definition of Active Participation**, and a discussion with the relevant Mission staff.

The **second stage** began with a closed doors session involving 13 Strategic Allies of the **Encouraging Active Participation** Mission and the Mission staff. The meeting was an important opportunity to draw directly from the expert knowledge of people who have been developing participatory practices in the territories of Liguria, Piedmont and Valle D'Aosta for some time.

The analysis of the results allowed the theoretical and practical definitions adopted by the organisations to be established, along with the scenarios to which they refer, the critical issues they encounter in their work and some possible trajectories for change in the future.

The **third stage** began with two days of meetings with representatives of 55 organisations and public administration bodies chosen from among the Mission's principal stakeholders to promote active participation. These entities have not always been part of the multi-year process of discussion implemented by the Mission, but are distinguished by their knowledge of the participation contexts, linked to practices, research or the development of policies.

At this stage, the hypotheses developed in the second stage were explored, revised and questioned.

The **final summary** revealed **18 keywords** which define Active Participation activities across the territories covered by Compagnia di San Paolo: **accessibility, alliances, change, involvement, collaboration, collective, conflict, continuity, co-responsibility, impact, intelligence collective, intergenerationality, power, representation, risk, economic sustainability, tools, times.**

Some of these keywords were selected based on the strategic indications of the Encouraging Active Participation Mission and included in six headwords : discursive data sheets inspired by the structure of dictionaries, which include and articulate multiple concepts. You will find them on the following pages.

Method- ology

The first three headwords (“**community and representation**”, “**involvement and accessibility**” and “**change and continuity**”) are the result of the second stage and mainly refer to the discussions held on the Encouraging Active Participation Mission implemented in the **last three years**.

The last three headwords (“**conflict**”, “**intergenerationality**” and “**co-responsibility**”) are instead the result of the third stage, and relate to **outlooks for the future**.

The headwords do not claim to be **universal**. They simply represent the **worldviews** and **theoretical and operational** definitions of the people involved in Active Participation in Liguria, Piedmont and Valle D’Aosta.

Bertram M. Niessen
cheFare - agenzia per la trasformazione culturale

Key words and concepts

Community and representation

"it isn't true that people don't participate, but often their ways of doing so have changed completely"

Many studies argue that community life is contracting: the number of people who vote in elections is falling steadily; the main actors of political life and intermediate bodies are losing their centrality; since the pandemic, the statistics for volunteering work also indicate a sharp decline.

While not denying these critical issues, the participants indicated that we must learn to search in new and different places. Active Participation is therefore seen as an opportunity to **identify, integrate, relaunch and promote new forms of community practice** at local level, often characterised by little formalisation or by recourse to emerging categories of people, which are not therefore fully known and agreed.

The people who experiment with these forms of public action use different categories of **community** every time: **communities of place, practice or care; users of common assets; audiences participating in musical, artistic, theatrical or literary scenes..**

The groups who take action - or are involved in action by others - are very diverse: from **parents to pensioners**, as well as **early childhood; primary and middle school pupils and university students; groups of professionals and freelancers; civil rights associations and informal migrant groups.**

In each of these cases - in different forms, places and at different times - the many parties involved take part in Active Participation processes that seek **collective identities** capable of **building bonds, not barriers**, increasing the **circulation of social, cultural and symbolic capital** at local level.

The widespread demand is to **broaden the opportunities** for these actors, encouraging **under-represented or non-represented** collective identities to **speak out and exercise power**. This translates, on the one hand, into a demand for better positioning flowing from the "sense of community" of the inhabitants: a demand for **greater visibility of social ambitions**. And, on the other, into a demand for a strict institutional **representation**: the chance to **create tools with which to influence public agendas** so that minority views can be taken into account.

Involvement and accessibility

“we need to involve especially those who aren't there”

The process clearly showed that Active Participation is seen as an opportunity to systematise the **accessibility** experiences developed by communities and institutions over decades of work. Varied experiences which have over time taken the form of **practices, paths, methodologies, organisational and planning skills, administrative devices, forms of communication.**

Accessibility is understood to have two different and complementary meanings here.

First of all, **“physical accessibility”**: the opportunity for people with all types of motor, neurological and sensory abilities to use spaces and services fully **independently** and **safely**. This relates not only to the material dimension of overcoming physical barriers to access, but also to the opportunity for social and cultural sites to be accessed, inhabited and enriched by a **multiplicity of different bodies**, with as many potentials and limits.

Secondly, accessibility is also **“digital accessibility”**: the opportunity for all social groups to use digital content **easily** and **immediately**, without this being curtailed by inadequate skills or equipment. Again in this case, the widespread demand among participants is for digital spaces to increasingly become **democratic public arenas** characterised by the multiplicity and promotion of **diversity**.

In this respect, accessibility is closely linked to the **involvement** of new individuals and groups in Active Participation paths. Involvement is essential to escape the **self-referential** approach which inevitably develops over time among professionals and which can be counteracted through two main lines of action. **Activating dissemination mechanisms** that address **complexity** without trivialising it. And **working in geographical and social territories with no previous experience of participation.**

Change and continuity

“there is a need for things to change and there is a need for things to remain”

The process clearly showed that the parties involved in Active Participation are following **two kinds of trajectories**, which are only apparently contradictory.

The first is connected with a pressing demand for **openness to change**. A demand that originates with equal strength – albeit with different forms of language and connotations – both **from the institutions** and from the **external parties** who interact with them.

This is not an appeal to the highest systems: on the contrary, it is quite clear that the rhetoric of innovation at all costs now arouses widespread distrust. Instead it is a demand for specific **organisational procedures, administrative devices, guidelines** and **institutional strategies** built specifically to **operate in a world that is changing ever faster**. And which, because of this, has to be approached with specific **adaptive abilities**, so that it can re-organise itself **quickly**.

The second relates to a – parallel – **demand for continuity**: if everything is constantly changing, continuity of **meaning, relationships** and **procedures** is needed in the **long term**. The demand is to establish **common threads** within **institutions** and in the relationship **between institutions and stakeholders** across the territory.

This is because activating Active Participation processes above all involves **taking risks** and continuity is the indispensable prerequisite for these risks to be distributed fairly

Perhaps more than anything else, the two poles of change and continuity are linked to **implicit** and **explicit skills**. A **collective intelligence** spread across the territories that can mobilise resources while being surprisingly **volatile** and which, for this reason, needs to be constantly facilitated, supported and systematised.

Conflict

In the most diverse disciplines, it was highlighted how the generative dimension of **conflict** has gradually disappeared from public discourse. Of the many possible meanings of the term, there is an increasing tendency to use those connected to the destruction of contenders, oppression and war. Yet conflict does not necessarily have to imply an abuse of power. Conflict can be a way to **recognise inequalities** and trigger **positive social changes, encourage discussion, make territories dynamic**.

The process revealed the need to find **new cultural and organisational devices** to create space for emerging forms of conflict in the territories, recognising their potentially **generative** nature and opening the way to forms of **collaboration, mutualism** and **cooperation** that are established not only “for”, but also “against” something.

It is a widespread demand among very different subjects – both at “grass roots” and institutional level – who observe how the **removal** of these dynamics risks triggering **exasperation and disaffection, thus paradoxically becoming counter-productive** for territorial cohesion.

There is also a manifested need to be more explicit about the **power** differential that is created – even in participatory processes – between people, organisations and different types of institutions. Power is understood, in this case, as a **different opportunity** to access and mobilise forms of economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. And it is therefore closely connected with the **competition** for access to **public and private audiences, relationships and resources** which is inevitably also created between subjects who deal with forms of mutual participation.

In order to enable this demand for change, **new opportunities for dialogue, institutional tools and cultural frameworks** need to be created that will explain and manage this complexity.

Intergenerationality

The diversity and fragmentation of the policies, tools, cultural origins and institutional natures of the parties involved in participation have over time created a **great wealth of experiences and practices related to** social groups of different ages.

The parties involved in the process highlighted how Active Participation is a promising field for building wide-ranging **framework programmes** capable of building **unexpected synergies** between **different age groups**. The demand is to find forms of action that go **beyond the limits** imposed – necessarily – by the **conventional stratification of public policies**. For this purpose also adopting **“cascade” approaches** which allow processes to be devised, planned and managed that work with certain age groups while involving others at the same time.

There are Active Participation processes that work with **early childhood**, and therefore also with **parents** and other members of the **family**. There are also processes aimed primarily at the **elderly**, which can trigger generative mechanisms of interest also to **younger generations**. Or projects aimed mainly at **university students** which instead build relationships with **more mature individuals** holding **senior positions** in the worlds of work, research and culture.

This logic can be an effective way of identifying people in **marginal** conditions, for whom a **categorisation by “target”**, according to age, risks building **barriers** that reduce potential trajectories for change. It can also trigger **unprecedented experiments in social cohesion** and **unexpected alliances** between organisations and between them and institutions.

Perhaps more than any other category, **intergenerationality** sees **third places, social and cultural hubs, cultural institutions and public spaces** as **local enablers** of new forms of social capital.

Co-responsibility

Active Participation processes build **relationships of responsibility** in at least two main dimensions.

The first is the one that links the **organisations** that promote the processes with the **people** who inhabit them.

These are relationships built on an **agreement**, which must be explicitly stated **as clearly as possible**. The organisations undertake to mobilise **resources** in the territory, **both tangible and intangible**, while the people commit to playing an active role, using their **time, skills and knowledge**, and in some cases their **work and resources** – including financial.

The second is the one that connects **institutions** with **organisations** involved in Active Participation. This is a delicate relationship that can be endangered by institutions, due to excessive **bureaucracy** and **exploitation** for purely **political ends**, and by organisations, **due to an inability, impossibility or unwillingness** to translate “basic” demands according to institutional logics.

This **network of co-responsibility** triggered by participatory dynamics obviously extends much further, both **horizontally** and **vertically**. Between **institutions** and **inhabitants**, between **different institutions**, between different **organisations** involved in Active Participation, at **first and second level**.

When these dynamics develop in a co-responsible way – **i.e. when there is two-way responsibility** – positive mechanisms can be triggered to **build and consolidate social capital** in the territory. When one of the parties disregards them, there can be a widespread **loss of trust, effectiveness and social capital**.

Therefore, it seems essential to learn how to **build relationships of co-responsibility** as a **key premise** for active participation paths. Just as it is essential to establish **lines, strategies and tools** to ensure that pathways have **real economic sustainability**, last for **as long as required** and do not run out before having achieved at least a significant part of the **undertakings** given by the parties.

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