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## **Youth policies and youth participation: from beneficiaries to actors** *Rita Bertozzi\**

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## **Youth policies and youth participation: from beneficiaries to actors**

*Rita Bertozzi\**

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*Abstract:* Recent research shows that young people tend to be scarcely involved in political matters, thus remaining invisible. There are indeed forms of youth activism, but they tend to involve different ways of participation. Participation has gradually become a more central issue at the political level, but the question remains of its relevance from the point of view of young people. Youth work is a privileged setting for the analysis of youth involvement. The paper first reviews the Italian debate on youth participation and youth policies. Secondly, it focusses on two contexts of informal aggregation in the Emilia Romagna region, to assess their value in terms of participatory experience, non-formal education and youth work. The analysis highlights how youth work experiences enable young people to participate more actively in social life, as they promote critical awareness and empowerment. Collective motivation also plays an important role, since acting together allows more vulnerable individuals and groups to gain more strength and power.

*Keywords:* youth participation, youth agency, immigrant young people, mafia

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### **Youth agency in youth policies**

In recent years, the issue of participation has become a cornerstone of national and international youth policies. As noted by Walther and others (2002, p. 9) "All European States try to relate policies addressing youth to the principles of participation and active citizenship". Participation is seen as innovating and reinforcing active citizenship. Thus, the concepts of participation and active citizenship have been analyzed in a complementary relationship (Walther et al., 2002; Cuconato & Walther, 2009).

This issue is not just about young people, because the establishment of a model of active welfare in the broader area of social policies (Lodigiani, 2008) has placed increasing emphasis on subjects' agency and on the relationship between activation and empowerment. Activation is considered one of the levers for creating individual paths to emancipation, and becomes "synonymous with participation in the production of welfare and with the exercise of civil, political as well as social rights" (Lodigiani, 2008, p.82). Empowerment increases personal resources and the ability to bring about personal and social change, which should therefore stimulate active participation. This perspective fundamentally sees citizens as social actors and leading players in defining their needs and finding answers to them.

At the same time, several studies point to the need to combine subjects' agency with social and cultural structures (Besozzi, 2012; Walther, 2012; Walther et al., 2002). In line with M. Archer's (1997) morphogenetic approach, individual decision-making is seen as a two-way relationship with structural constraints in the larger context.

These reflections are also relevant for the debate on youth policies in Europe and in Italy. The concepts of agency and empowerment, in fact, have gradually informed policies aimed at young people as well. In Italy there has been a shift from prevention policies to promotion policies, up to the most recent participatory policies. The latter aim at involving the youth not only in making decisions about national and local policies towards them, but also in implementing and evaluating them (Mesa, 2010; Govoni & Marinuzzi, 2011; Scardigno & Manuti, 2011; Bertozzi, 2012).

The evolution of Italian policies on youth is clearly summarized by Mesa (2010). He identifies four stages: the pioneering season of the seventies; the emergency measures of the eighties and early nineties

focused on prevention, although various regions of Central-Northern Italy were already beginning to adopt laws promoting participation; the nineties with a decrease of national attention towards young people<sup>1</sup> and a scarcity of participatory processes; until the final phase involving a more comprehensive approach to youth policies (since 2006), in which participation is mainly seen as a support in the transition to adulthood (housing and working independence, commitment to education, political participation).

However, as of today a systematic overall policy is still lacking, there are few associations representing the interests of young people and few places where these people can actually participate (Mesa, 2010). More attention to issues of participation has been paid in regional and local policies, albeit with significant local differences.

This change of policy has been driven by a paradigmatic change in how young people are perceived - from a potential problem (vulnerable, at risk of social exclusion) to a resource (Walther et al., 2002; IARD, 2001). In fact, in Italy these two views coexist, but awareness of youth's potential has grown - a trend shared by all European countries that in recent years have implemented policies for young people (Mesa, 2010; IARD, 2001).

Walther and others (2002) however believe that the 'resource' metaphor may not be fully appropriate on a political level, as it evokes a conformity to norms, values and standards set by the (adult) society without involving young people themselves. Walther (2012) thus suggests adopting a biographical perspective, which looks at young people as subjects, co-citizens and co-actors of social integration, in order to appreciate the many activities, decision-making processes and negotiations they carry out in their everyday life and which may be underestimated.

These critical remarks brings to the fore the central issue of intergenerational relations and of an Italian society in which young people are still struggling to get out of a social limbo where they remain for a long time before their specific contribution is acknowledged in order to gain full citizenship. Simply reporting this growing attention paid by political institutions towards young people's participation in decision-making is therefore insufficient. Young people' agency must be analyzed in relation

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<sup>1</sup> Important laws on the promotion of children and adolescents were approved in the 90s, such as L. 285/97.

to social structures, to the opportunities and constraints of specific life conditions, to local contexts and to the relationships with adults (Besozzi, 2009; Baraldi, 2008; Belotti, 2010; De Luigi, 2012). “How and why the actor makes choices has to do with both sociocultural influences and subjective perceptions (...) The child is a social actor with relevant and localized agency” (Stoecklin, 2013, pp. 454-446). Local contexts and policies, the family’s cultural and social capital and generational order (Belotti, 2000), all shape in many ways everyday experiences and power relations between generations. Attention must thus be paid both to the social context and to individual reflexivity (Stoecklin, 2013).

Analysis of youth policies brings to the fore another distinction, that between participation as a goal and participation as a policy-inspiring principle (Walther et al., 2002). In the first case, young people are considered to be passive and thus beneficiaries of compensatory and coercive policies which seek participation as an end, but that hardly reach it. In the second case, the focus is on situated needs and on the heterogeneity of experiences, on processes of exchange and dialogue with others, so that active involvement becomes a way of establishing relationships among generations across a variety of life contexts (Scardigno & Manuti, 2011).

“On a *policy level* a broad understanding of participation implies to refer to young people as co-citizens rather than postponing citizenship rights to uncertain future and to include all choices and decisions regarding the individual biography in the framework of public institutions” (Cuconato & Walther, 2009, p. 9).

Another issue in current research has to do with the concepts of actor and agency, which can finally be interpreted both as individual rights of the person and as applying to young people as a social group (Zermatten, 2009). The ‘Council of Europe Recommendation on the Participation of Children and Young People under the Age of 18 (2012)’ states that: “Participation is about individuals and groups of individuals having the right, the means, the space, the opportunity and, where necessary, the support to freely express their views, to be heard and to contribute to decision making on matters affecting them, their views being given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity”.

Young people’s citizenship implies full recognition of their individual rights but also of their role in social context. Recent research shows that

young people are agents of social change “regardless of how other societal actors address them” (Walther, 2012, p. 36). Even without being mobilized, young people act, “but in most cases not where institutional actors are looking because there are no societal spaces where young people can negotiate their agency” (Walther, 2012, p. 36).

In sum, participation has gradually become a more central issue at the political level, but the question remains of its relevance from the point of view of young people. How are participatory actions exercised? Do young people feel recognized as social actors, taking decisions and responsibility?

### **Youth participation in Italy: ways and challenges**

Many studies report changes in youth conditions over the past decades (IARD, 2001; Merico, 2004; Buzzi et al., 2007, 2002; Rauty, 2008). In De Luigi’s synthesis (2012, p.42), youth studies have used the navigation metaphor to represent the conditions under which young people today must constantly choose and build their own biographies, often without well-established references. Changes in the demographic and geopolitical setting, too, have influenced the political socialization of new generations and have created new arenas of participation.

The studies that have explored these themes have long focused on the political dimension of participation and have found a growing invisibility of the youth, alienation and disaffection with the political system, and a widespread disengagement (Buzzi et al., 2007, 2002; Cesareo, 2005; Cartocci, 2002; De Luigi, 2007; De Luigi et al., 2004). The White Paper on Youth published by the European Union in 2001 has highlighted the lack of interest among young people towards traditional forms of participation in public life. In fact, political concern with issues of participation has grown precisely with the aim to counteract this decline in youth participation in the public sphere (Colombo, 2008). However, alongside these more pessimistic outlooks, alternative interpretations have been advanced that highlight new ways of engagement and the need to rethink participatory processes. Actually, if on the one hand there is a widespread decline of traditional political participation, on the other hand different forms of civic and social participation, even among young people, are emerging (Zani et

al., 2011; Lavanco & Varvieri, 2007; Diamanti, 1999; Scardigno & Manuti, 2011).

We thus need to start by looking at how the notion of participation can be articulated in various interpretive categories. The typology proposed by Ekman and Amna (2009) for analyzing different forms of social engagement in politics and society is particularly useful, as it seeks to capture “all types of political behaviour that we would consider to be of relevance when analysing civic engagement and political participation” (Ekman & Amna, 2009, p.294). The typology distinguishes among:

- *Manifest political participation*. It includes formal political participation (traditional forms of political participation) and activism (legal or illegal extra-parliamentary political participation, or forms of protest).
- *Civil participation* (latent political participation). It includes social involvement (attention to social and political themes, which is a precondition for political interest) and civic engagement (actions taken to influence some situations in society).
- *Non-participation* (disengagement). It includes anti-political or apolitical forms.

These behaviors can be observed both on an individual and a collective level. This typology is useful because it allows to identify a variety of behaviors, not necessarily apolitical, and to distinguish formal involvement from pre-political or non-conventional involvement. It has already been used by Zani, Cicognani and Albanesi (2011) to investigate the participation of young people in Italy.

Other scholars distinguish forms of participation according to the benefits and potential empowerment of recipients in the decision-making processes taking place in institutions, policies, programs (Arnstein, 1969; Cucca, 2008; Mortari, 2008; Sebastiani, 2007). In such cases, different “ladders of participation” (Hart, 1992; Lansdown, 2009; Fletcher, 2011; Thomas, 2002; Stoecklin, 2013) have been proposed and applied to the participation of children and young people. In these interpretive frameworks, a distinction is made between situations of non-participation, such as manipulation, decoration, tokenism, and a range of participation forms, like consultative participation, collaborative participation, youth-led and youth-adult participation equity. In Italy, these participation scales have

spurred reflection on what participation is and what it is not, leading to the observation that consultative participation is more widespread than other (higher) levels (Baraldi, 2008; Bertozzi, 2012; Bianchi & Campioni, 2010).

In these scales, the adult-child relationship is central. Some, however, see power as a zero-sum game, where more power by the youth corresponds to less power for adults (Franklin, 1997, as cited in Wyness, 2013); others opt for a more relational approach, where adult-child interdependence brings maximum benefits to both parties when their respective roles and positions are acknowledged (Wyness, 2013). This latter viewpoint calls for "bringing adults back into the analysis" (Wyness, 2013), because adults play a fundamental role in defining young people's possibilities for active participation. As several studies show, young people often feel that they are not listened to by adults and therefore have little decision-making power (Bequet, 2009; Cuconato & Walther, 2009; Wyness, 2013; Stoecklin, 2013). Research on how participation is perceived by young people and adults shows that there are different points of view. For the youth, active citizenship means "conditional participation", accompanied by feelings of resignation, issue-oriented commitment, fluid membership, with a prevalence of individual forms of involvement, glocal and everyday participation, aimed at achieving small changes in everyday interactions. Adults mostly prize classic forms of involvement, which leads them to define youths as disengaged or engaged in 'unsuitable' ways (Pitti, 2013). There are thus many reasons why intergenerational relationships are crucial in analyzing young people's civic engagement.

These classifications are useful tools for interpreting the Italian situation, for they show how various forms of political and civic participation may coexist and how young people may be involved in decision-making at various levels (Eurobarometer, 2007, 2011; ICCS, 2009; Zani et al., 2011; Buzzi et al., 2007; Diamanti, 1999; Beck, 2000; Colombo, 2008; ANCI, 2009). As pointed out by Marini (2013), mobilization occurs nowadays mostly on individual instances, more limited in time and with fewer ideological implications, through concrete initiatives whose effects can be tangibly assessed. It is a pragmatic form of participation, involving relational aspects, contact with other people and targeted intervention. Cultural and sports events are the areas of greatest participation, followed by initiatives related to one's territory and to volunteer organizations, or other actions increasing social capital. Political

activities are less frequent, and even among young people there is a growth of plural, occasional and non-continuous forms of participation, rather than exclusive militancy or absenteeism.

Research on youth carried out in Italy also stresses the importance of structural constraints in defining forms of participation, such as the opportunities offered by local policies and agencies, social and cultural capital, gender, age and ethnicity (Besozzi, 2009; De Luigi, 2007, 2012; Cesareo, 2005; Abruzzese, 2005; Scardigno & Manuti 2011; Zani et al., 2011). Participatory processes are thus accessible at different levels and in different ways, which implies a risk that the most marginalized subjects become even more excluded (Tidsall, et al., 2008).

Ethnicity is for example one of the factors that can negatively affect participation, and it is in turn intertwined with gender, levels of participation in the community, religious affiliation, socio-economic and cultural levels, generational status. Some research (Zani et al., 2011) shows that young migrants do not have the same opportunities to participate: the main obstacles are issues of citizenship, the risk of stigmatization in case of protest actions, generational clashes, as well as scarcity of financial resources in comparison with Italians peers. Civic and community-level forms of participation are more common for this group, such as intercultural festivals, artistic and cultural activities or associations based on ethnic and cultural diversity. There is however a considerable difference between the first and second generation, with the latter often being more active on a civic and political level, probably as an effect of their perception of discrimination in the host society.

A second important set of factors analyzed by several scholars concerns the motivations and effects of participatory processes. Studies show a positive and bi-directional association between participation and sense of community, understood as “the perception of a sense of belonging to the community and of the existence of significant emotional ties, opportunities to satisfy one’s own needs and to have an influence” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, as cited in Zani et al., 2011, p. 92). Research with adolescents and youths (Cicognani & Zani, 2009; Zani & Cicognani, 2007; Chiessi, Cicognani & Sonn, 2010) shows that being able to have an impact on the local community strengthens one’s sense of community and promotes more effective participation; furthermore, membership in organized groups such as associations strengthens the bond between young people and the

community, thereby affecting their inclination towards civic participation. Civic participation and sense of community, in turn, have a positive impact on social well-being – young people who are most involved at a political-cultural level perceive a greater appreciation of their contribution to the community. Involvement in civic/ voluntary organizations is also positively related to sense of community in young immigrants (Zani et al., 2011; Cicognani & Zani, 2007).

Three types of motivations to participate in a collective action are widely analyzed in the literature (Cicognani & Zani, 2011): perceived injustice, identification with a group and perceived effectiveness in solving a group's problems. Participation depends in any case on three criteria: the ability to participate (which is related to age, competencies, sense of responsibility, social and interpersonal skills etc.); formal and non formal opportunities to participate afforded by the context; individuals' and groups' interest/motivation/ commitment (Zani & Cicognani, 2007).

Simmons and Birchall, still analyzing motivations, develop the Mutual Incentives Yheory (MIT), considering both collective as well as individual factors involved in participation (Prout et al., 2006). Their research shows that collective incentives play the most important role in motivations to participate, and that “with continuing participation, people's collectivistic motivations are reinforced and their commitment to the group develops” (Prout et al., 2006, p. 82). Individual and collective motivations are not the sole reasons why people participate, but the analysis should also include other aspects of the participation context. The Authors use the “participation chain” metaphor to include resources (time, money, skills, confidence), modes of mobilization and participation dynamics. Few studies look at these full range of factors to understand children's motives for participation. Thus MIT and the participation chain may be helpful to interpret children's participation, that is, the trade-off between individual and collective benefits, whether the latter lead to different types of participation, how participatory experiences change over time and to what extent they are influenced by different resources, skills, ways of involvement, opportunities for participation and possibilities to achieve change.

### **Youth work, non-formal education and youth participation**

The term ‘participation’ takes a number of meanings in different social and political arenas.

Social and civic participation are promoted in sectors including youth associations or public youth work (Walther et al., 2002). “Youth work provides (albeit limited) spaces which young people can actively shape – and thus feel empowered” (Walther et al., 2002, p. 44).

Youth work is a privileged setting for the analysis of youth participation and non-formal education, as in it young people come together and share a project, associational life, self-government, recreational and educational activities (Verschelden et al., 2009; Davies, 2005; Smith, 2013).

Over the last decade, the European Union and the Council of Europe have progressively recognized youth work as a way of providing specialized non-formal education for the youth. The educational methods of youth work place particular emphasis on the centrality of the learner and the voluntary nature of participation (Salto-Youth, 2012), on informal learning that may occur spontaneously during leisure time and on social and emotional learning experiences (Morciano & Scardigno, 2014).

A main feature of youth work is therefore the union between leisure experiences and learning opportunities: recreational activities are combined with activities on identity, values, ethical issues and with actions with political impact. Morciano and Scardigno (2014) also argue that youth work can be a tool to achieve a more equitable distribution of opportunities among young people and to reduce social inequalities. However, for this to happen one must make sure that youth work services do not involve only those youths who are the most capable, motivated and supported by the family. In Coussée’s words “the risk is that youth work that works is not accessible, and accessible youth work does not work” and “it is not youth work that produces active, healthy, well achieving citizens, but active citizens that create youth work” (Coussée, 2008, cited by Morciano & Scardigno, 2014, pp. 30-31). For this reason, it is essential to maintain a dual focus on individual agency and abilities and on structural opportunities. These authors apply reflexivity theory to educational processes and stress the individuals’ ability to influence their own life trajectory, while at the same time modifying existing social structures (Morciano & Scardigno, 2014). In this sense, youth work must create

"spaces and opportunities in which young people can acquire a critical understanding of the relationship between different living conditions (present and future) and the functioning of the existing social and economic system in order that they are able to express any disagreement in a constructive manner" (Morciano & Scardigno, 2014, p. 39).

Viewing young people as active agents in society leads one to consider youth civic engagement. The concept of civic engagement is closely related to that of active citizenship and has been defined as "individual or collective actions in which people participate to improve the well-being of community or society in general, and which provide opportunities for reflection" (Innovations in Civic Participation, 2010, p. VI). Civic education has been seen as an important type of non-formal education, because it provides a "mechanism for honing knowledge, skills, relationships, and commitments that contribute to young people's effectiveness as individuals and as contributing citizens" (Shaw et al., 2012, p. 36).

The 2012 Policy Forum *Engaging Youth in Planning Education for Social Transformation* highlighted the benefits that youth civic engagement brings about through non-formal education. Civic engagement is seen as crucial for social support, resilience, social interaction and positive youth development (Shaw et al., 2012). Its positive consequences include affiliation and commitment to the youth community, feelings of self-efficacy, a sense of identity and good behaviors in youth. For example, as regards social support, research shows that in civic engagement activities young people are not only actively involved in civic society, but also contribute to it by supporting others, and these hidden supports are the most significant for young people (Shaw et al., 2012).

### **Two case studies in the Emilia Romagna region: TogethER and Cortocircuito**

Youth associations display the civic engagement and are one of the main objects of regional policies. The Emilia-Romagna Region has been investing in this area for many years, encouraging youth aggregation by funding activities and services and through the development of youth centers. In 2007, the Region signed a Framework Agreement for youth

policies with the Italian Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of Economic Development, called GECO (Giovani Evoluti e Consapevoli)<sup>2</sup>, which envisaged a large-scale action labeled 'Youth centers in Emilia-Romagna: from knowledge to network'. This action firstly involved a survey on *Youth Aggregation Spaces* (Spazi di Aggregazione Giovanile, herein after *SAG*), i.e. "those physical locations where young people aged 15/30 meet and entertain themselves in order to develop skills in creative, cultural, recreational, sports, information and training activities, with the aim of promoting well-being and preventing deviance. These places empower young people by strengthening their skills through bottom-up programming, participatory planning and peer education" (Regione Emilia Romagna, 2010, p. 15). The survey analyzed 1.478 *SAG*<sup>3</sup> including *Youth Aggregation Centers* (Centri di Aggregazione Giovanile, herein after *CAG*), thematic centers, sports clubs, associations with cultural and / or social advancement goals, parishes and oratories, youth information centers, informal aggregation experiences supported by public funding.

Participation is one of the aspects that have been considered in the survey. All the centers involved in the survey tend to promote an active role by participants. In two *SAGs* out of three young people are involved in the definition of activities, although along a continuum going from autonomous decision, to co-decision, to systematic role-shifting between youths and professionals as regards decision-making and organization. In the *CAGs* shared planning between young people and social workers reaches the highest value (59% versus an average of 44.6% of all types of spaces). The percentage of activities defined by youths alone is rather negligible (4.1% for all categories, 3.5% in *CAGs*, 3.9% in cultural associations, with a peak of 11.9% in informal aggregations), while role-shifting between youths and professionals reaches 16%. These findings are obviously influenced by the fact that some types of spaces, for example *CAGs*, include a social worker whose role is to promote youths' direct involvement.

In this survey, activities planned solely by the youth are thus a minority and are to be found mostly in informal aggregations. This is the reason why this article reports on two contexts of informal aggregation, to assess their value in terms of participatory experience. The first case is the network

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<sup>2</sup> English translation: *Developed and Aware Youth*.

<sup>3</sup> 1.478 questionnaires have been collected by trained young researchers from *SAG* leaders and social workers from January to April 2009 (Regione Emilia Romagna, 2010).

TogethER, a network of youth associations in the Emilia-Romagna (ER) region addressing intercultural issues. It is composed of second-generation and Italian youths and aims at fighting discrimination and racism and promoting the participation of new immigrant generations to regional youth policies.

The second case is Cortocircuito (*Short-circuit*), an independent web-tv based in Reggio Emilia. It is a self-organized group of students, whose aim is to counter the *mafia* with educational and informational activities.

Data on these case studies were collected in 2014, through twelve interviews with key participants to the two projects (nine from TogethER<sup>4</sup> and three from Cortocircuito). The interviews aim at investigating forms of participation, the youth work's effects on individual agency and non-formal learning, and the contribution towards policy-making. Data analysis was integrated with the associations' dissemination materials, both in print and online.

These two contexts both combine youth work, non-formal education and youth participation.

Both these experiences feature voluntary attendance, participation and associational life, self-government experiences, educational work focused on individuals and groups and the blending of recreational activities with learning opportunities.

The first case is also noteworthy because, as we have seen, immigrant youths generally have fewer opportunities to participate, because of social inequalities or institutional discriminations. Non-formal education can play an important role in the social integration of young immigrants, such as in youth centers or oratories (Bonizzoni & Pozzi, 2012). In the case at hand, the association's network is supported by an institutional project and by the Intercultural Center *Mondinsieme*, although it is run entirely by young people.

The second case is of a different, more informal, nature. It was in fact established by a group of students as a students' magazine and independent web-TV, and it retains a much simpler structure. It is however remarkable how these young people are able to critically interpret the context they live in and to join forces to denounce situations of mafia infiltration and to

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<sup>4</sup> Interviewees of the TogethER network belonged to the associations Associna (Bologna), Wor(l)d (Sassuolo), Rainbow (Rimini), Intercultural Youth (Forlì), Generations on the move (Ravenna).

express disagreement in a constructive manner, for example through civic education projects.

These two experiences meet the spirit of the 2003 *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life* (Council of Europe, 2003), which states that young people's active participation in decisions and activities by local and regional authorities is essential for building more democratic, united and prosperous societies. The *Charter* does not restrict participation to voting, but sees it as an opportunity to step in and influence decisions by engaging in direct activities.

Another important normative framework for these two cases is the Emilia-Romagna Law 14/2008, *Norms concerning policies for younger generations*. The law's guiding principles include the participation of younger generations to civil and social life, the promotion of active citizenship and intercultural and intergenerational dialogue. The main purpose is to "recognize young people as subjects with autonomous rights and as a vital and fundamental resource for the regional community" (Regione Emilia-Romagna, 2010, p. 8). By means of this law the Region supports a range of forms of youth aggregation, including both associations offering opportunities for the youth and informal youth groups promoting activities, providing services or giving a voice to the youth world. Both the experiences reported here were supported through this law.

### **The TogethER network**

TogethER is a regional intercultural network of youth associations that identify themselves with Article 3, paragraph 1, of the Italian Constitution, stating that all citizens have equal rights "regardless of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions".

The Network was created within the GECO Agreement between the *Mondinsieme* Intercultural Center in Reggio Emilia and the Emilia-Romagna region. The network is managed and coordinated by young people aged 18-30, both Italian-born and with migrant origins, who decide on its goals and carry out its activities. The Network has established itself over the years and now involves 8 associations in 7 municipalities: *Wor(l)d* in Sassuolo, *Mondinsieme Reporters* in Reggio Emilia, *Intercultural Youth*

in Forlì, *Generations on the move* in Ravenna, *Associna* in Bologna and Ferrara, *Arci World* in Bologna, *Next Generation Italy* in Bologna, *Rainbow* in Rimini. They all promote dialogue, intercultural exchange and youth participation. In some organizations there is a collaboration between youths and adults, others are entirely formed by young people. The TogethER network in turn has as main adult interlocutors the staff of the *Mondinsieme* Intercultural Center, which offers collaboration and support.

The aim of the Network is to bring together the youth of Emilia Romagna to enhance their experiences, promote joint projects and cooperation with regional institutions. More specific objectives include:

- promoting active participation by young people of foreign origin and assigning them a leading role in regional programs about youth policies;
- promoting good practices of inclusion and intercultural dialogue;
- promoting cultural and relational *métissage* among Italian and foreign young people;
- implement intercultural skills in youth groups belonging to the Network.

Three main types of action are pursued: actions promoting active contribution by youths of foreign origin, informative actions to raise awareness against discrimination (through TV commercials, web, video and DVDs), public initiatives aimed at schools and citizenship. The Action Week against Racism is one of the network's key projects, with events throughout the region. Network members are also offered courses on communication and intercultural skills, graphics and video production, which have led to the production of numerous videos and documentaries, some of which won international awards<sup>5</sup>.

The strong ties with the regional territory are an asset which allows to exploit local peculiarities and to disseminate the practices that have been trialed.

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<sup>5</sup> To cite only the main productions of the last two years: *Prejudice is a double edge sword*, realized with a high school and winner of the Copeam Plural+ 2012 award; the documentary *Daddy's country is Burkina Faso*, winner of the award VOLA ALTO 2012 best documentary; the video *Babylon by bus* presenting the youth associations belonging to TogethER; the multilingual sport announcement *Do not get carried away by the discrimination wave* for the World Week against Racism 2013.

Interviewees consider TogethER a major initiative for young people working in different settings for the same cause, namely the construction of an intercultural society. The clear message is that these associations are much stronger when united in a more effective large group.

It's important for small associations like ours to network and discuss with other organizations that have goals and issues like ours. It's important because it gives us the feeling of not being alone, of being able to rely on other groups (F\_24, World 1).

Joining forces will get better and bigger results. By sharing experiences and knowledge, one can aspire to larger social goals. Also to get more visibility on traditional and new media, on the web (M\_25, Associna).

Belonging to the Network encourages us to continue our operations, allowing us to rediscover enthusiasm and proactivity, and to restore the goals and core values that brought us together, because sometimes, during periods of fatigue or loss of energy and resources, they can fade out and disappear. Each association belonging to the network is enriched by the experiences of others, acquiring new awareness (...) Furthermore, through these synergies, large-scale events can be organized by sharing the skills, expertise and passion of each member. So people acquire a sense of belonging not only to their own association, but also to the network, expanding horizons and perspectives and ensuring that you do not confine yourself to the local reality. Unity is strength! (F\_31, Intercultural Youth 2).

The fact that we cannot participate with a frequency of 100% prevents us to reap all the benefits. The most important thing until now is that we have enriched our work with experiences we have found in other groups participating in the network (F\_22, Generation on the move).

Young people themselves define this network an instance of social and youth activism based on practical experience, which can be a boost at a regional and national level. This commitment is based on promoting equal rights and fighting discrimination and misinformation, and on the perception of doing something socially useful.

On issues of citizenship and interculturalism, we organize ourselves as a network exactly because we want to show that we are already born as an intercultural group, that young people can set a good example to grown-ups,

without hypocrisy, but with much realism. That this is our everyday normal living in Emilia Romagna (M\_25, Associna).

This awareness seems to be confirmed by institutional recognition. The region, which has financially supported the network through the Framework Agreement GECO, now promotes its consolidation and relies on its collaboration for specific projects.

The Region gives much credit to the network. It knows us and knows that we are serious and competent in what we do (F\_24 World 1).

We are one of the most important spokespeople for the Emilia-Romagna region. We are important because with a shoe string budget and low-cost activities we manage to bring social issues to local high schools. We are young and we have ourselves a fresh language (...) traditional authorities, no matter how well grounded in the local territory they are, have an average age closer to parents than to the young. That is why we are innovative and effective (M\_25, Associna).

The consequences for member associations are perceived to be the expansion of ideas and resources, in collaboration with different subjects, and the opportunity to participate in competitions and events (including training courses) otherwise not accessible.

Training activities in schools, public meetings, and other outreach projects by the network boost intercultural, interpersonal and communication skills. The group provides support and helps individuals to share their experiences and to find the strength to commit themselves.

I have strengthened my organizational skills and the ability to cooperate with others (F\_24, Intercultural Youth 1).

I learned how to better relate with people, to listen, to speak on a stage in front of a crowd, talking in front of the cameras, to take better pictures, to create websites and to communicate on the web via social networks (...). I learned that the problems I experience are also shared by other young people, no matter whether they are very Italian or of immigrant background (M\_25, Associna).

I learned how to manage contacts with institutions and to attend to paperwork, I have improved my organizational and educational skills, I have put into practice what I learned at the university (...). I experienced that the ways in which we relate to people, communities, institutions are key and come before any other competence and / or knowledge (F\_31, Intercultural Youth\_2).

Participation in the network is associated with increased agency, first of all in promoting social change. Young people perceive their ability to affect their own lives, even if not everybody feels that they receive the same level of social support from their own social networks.

I am much more experienced than before. I try to avoid the traps of clichés and instead try to tell my experience, because no one can call me a liar on the things I live myself. In addition, I'm very active in the reform of the citizenship law to give more rights to children and young people growing up and studying in Italy and who feel Italian, but that the law does not recognize because they were not born in Italy but came when they were very young (M\_25, Associna).

I learned how to put experience directly before words when I discuss with others what is close to my heart (F\_24, World 2).

I feel much more involved in the political and social reality that surrounds me (F\_24, Intercultural Youth1).

One feels valued, although at times it is a bit frustrating to see how cold the environment around you is (F\_24, World 1).

Young people have spaces for political participation and behave as social actors when they have to do with regional contacts and with stakeholders in the territories (institutions, associations, schools). They are also more credible and effective in sensitizing their peers and the community, because they are young and experience for themselves the generational, cultural and identity debate. These are the assumptions behind a number of projects in high schools for intercultural education and against

racism<sup>6</sup>. The campaign for the amendment of the law on citizenship, too, is an example of an action that has led to increased awareness and to fighting stereotypes, starting from personal experiences, but also to reflect more widely on citizenship rights and the responsibilities of individuals. Previous research has in fact shown that citizenship can be an important issue for the participation of new generations (Colombo, Romaneschi & Marchetti, 2009).

Participation is clearly related to the sense of community and it reinforces a sense of belonging; in turn, feeling part of a community motivates participation.

Since I have been an active member, my perception on living a city, a situation, a certain theme has changed, I am more aware, more informed, more responsible and I also have more responsibilities (F\_24, World 1).

I definitely look at problems with a different perspective. I always think about the ways in which a society with changing demographic composition can make the most of the advantages and reduce side effects to a minimum. My vision in any case remains critical, I never see things in black or white but I try to capture all the nuances, because the society I know is full of facets and there is no single solution for every social issue. I believe that social commitment and working on the field is worth a thousand words and election slogans (M\_25, Associna).

I feel much more involved and active in the life of my municipality (F\_24, Intercultural Youth1).

I took up social responsibilities and became active in the community (F\_24, World 2).

Before, I just used to dwell in Forlì; now, thanks to the participation in the group activities, I've begun to live it (F\_31, Intercultural Youth2).

I got to know better the problems of my area, the existing resources, I got to know the institutional network and how it works (F\_22, Generations on the move ).

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<sup>6</sup> Of particular importance to the initiative “Spring without racism” in 2014 has put online all the territories in simultaneous actions. For further information please refer to [www.retetogether.it](http://www.retetogether.it)

In general, all respondents recognize that membership in the network has increased their civic and political participation. However, a more in-depth inquiry about different forms of involvement points out some peculiarities.

The form of participation most increasing after joining the network is that of civic engagement. Belonging to one's association and to the Network makes everyone reach a high level of civic engagement, for example through discussions of social and political issues with friends and / or on the internet, the organization of intercultural meetings with other young people, the expression of one's point of view on issues concerning migration, local policies, and youth. Social involvement, too, grows thanks to youth work, while the least relevant aspect is that of political participation, except for the fact that all these youths acknowledge the importance of voting. Interest in political parties remains low, even if the network provides opportunities for discussing with politicians or civil officers. Increased participation is instead to be found in forms of extra-parliamentary participation, such as public events or campaigns. These young people directly contribute to regional policies when they discuss with representatives of political parties or suggest policies themselves; they contribute indirectly through their actions in the territories, which are useful for the widespread dissemination of regional objectives.

Participation promoted through this network thus takes different forms. In some respects it is a form of consultative participation, especially on policy issues (such as citizenship), for which, however, some room for collaborative participation has also been gained. In other respects, it implies youth-led processes, as members have their own proactive autonomy and act in local contexts and / or in social networks to reach their educational and recreational goals with their peers.

In this sense, the experience of the network TogethER is unique because it brings together young people of Italian and immigrant origin from various areas, emphasizing generational experience and promoting intercultural skills. This allows second-generation youths to actively lead active citizenship initiatives, overcoming formal obstacles and potential discriminations. It also allows them to exercise their agency together with their Italian peers, through shared intercultural practices.

### **Cortocircuito (*Short-circuit*)**

The Cortocircuito association was founded in Reggio Emilia in 2009 as a student print magazine, with the goal of producing alternative information and prompt young people to express their opinion. Students from twelve schools in the city were soon involved, and an online version and a web-blog have been added. Since 2010, the student magazine has also become a web-TV producing short films, surveys, interviews and video messages, and promoting meetings with judges, journalists and experts. The first action, accomplished together with other informal youth groups, was sponsored by the regional fund for youth policies (Lr. 14/08). Over the years the association has spread the range of its actions, most of which are entirely self-financing: high school journalism laboratories about the mafia, public meetings and festivals with anti-mafia personalities, short films and local inquiries, connections with events and groups on a national level, and in 2013 and 2014 the award for the best denunciation web-tv in Italy (awarded by the University of Bologna), the prize "Iustitia" - web-tv section (awarded by the University of Calabria), the Rocco Cirino award from the Molise Legality Observatory. The last video investigative report, "*Nothing happened.*" *Forty fires in Reggio Emilia* (2013), has even been shown in a parliamentary hearing, drawing attention at a local and national level on the often underestimated phenomenon of the mafia in the North.

Currently, the editorial staff is composed of fifteen university students, all volunteers. In the period September 2013-April 2014 they have organized 48 anti-mafia meetings, 20 with the general public and 28 with high school and university students.

"We're trying to do our duty as citizens, by trying to inform and raise awareness about names, surnames, data, numbers and facts of organized crime in Reggio Emilia" testifies one of the Cortocircuito youth (Gallo & Di Girolamo, 2014, p.40).

This civic volunteer experience, "which aims to increase citizens' level of awareness in various contexts of life and to create the conditions for social and political participation" (Scardigno & Manuti, 2011, p.34), highlights the links between youth work, participation and non-formal education.

A first remark concerns the type of participation enacted by these youths through Cortocircuito. Referring to the interpretive categories analyzed

above, it can be primarily defined as a strong experience of civic participation (or latent political participation). At an individual level, these youths show both an interest in the mafia issue (supported by constant study and information collecting) and an awareness of the role that each person in society can play to fight it. This social involvement is a pre-condition for political interest, which is manifested through concrete actions both at the individual and at the group level. Surveys, public meetings, public awareness, training activities in schools, information searches, press articles, the web-blog and the creation of a media platform linking all the local anti-mafia initiatives are all concrete ways of achieving the goal of impacting on public opinion. All this becomes manifest political participation in actions involving direct interrogation of and confrontation with political and institutional representatives.

Cortocircuito is a youth-led participation process, as all activities are decided and carried out by young people. However, there are also situations of collaborative participation and youth-adult equity, such as participation in local forums with the same roles as adults<sup>7</sup> or public meetings where young people often act as moderators. Traditional forms of participation thus blend with new ones, through social networks, blogs and protest and denunciation actions.

This associative experience is motivated by acknowledging the existence of a serious social problem which cannot be ignored.

I think that Mafia's deep roots in my region are a particularly serious issue and I believe that it has been too often ignored, silenced and underestimated for too many years (M, 22).

These young people are thus committed to raise adults' and peers' civic sense, and to give a personal contribution towards change. Their activation thus aims to have both a political impact and to promote paths of active and responsible citizenship.

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<sup>7</sup> Particularly significant is the role played in the creation of the media platform *Reggiocontrolmafie.it*, supported by the City council and the Region through funds from the Regional Law 3/11. Another example is the participation in the *Reggio Emilia Alliance for a society without mafia*, coordinating public institutions, economic and social groups, trade unions, professional bodies, and associations of citizens engaged in fighting mafia infiltration.

I hope I can influence a part of public opinion by sensitizing students, citizens and also public administrators (M, 22).

Civic education actions with young people have the advantage of practically implementing this commitment against mafias: five concrete actions to counter indifference are proposed, that every person can do to contribute to the cause (inquire in a critical way, consume critically, participate in the vote, reject short cuts, denounce – participate), with an impact on individuals and society<sup>8</sup>. Participation in this non-formal education context stimulates the growth of personal agency (individual proactivity).

It made me think a lot about how certain mindsets and social dynamics work. I also had to revise some of the prejudices and clichés. I had to deal with a city other than that my parents used to tell me about, I have known a world where legality, democracy and human rights must be reaffirmed every day. I discovered so many new facets of the phenomenon that this led me to try to organize, together with other people of the association, more and more awareness-rising and information activities. It also made me understand that, little by little, things can indeed change. By joining forces it is really possible to accomplish goals that I find very interesting (M, 22).

Being part of a group supports individual activation, develops new skills and adds a recreational dimension to the educational one.

Surely this experience has helped me to strengthen the ability to share objectives and strategies within a group. From the organizational point of view, I also manage time and priorities better (F, 21).

I learned how to work in groups to deepen my understanding of difficult issues. I also discovered the pleasure of doing interesting group activities (M, 22).

National awards have contributed to the social recognition of the potential of this group of young people, by both institutions and citizens. The commitment and active involvement on an issue often trivialized but

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<sup>8</sup> A more detailed presentation of the actions is available at the site [www.cortocircuito.re.it](http://www.cortocircuito.re.it)

really alarming and disconcerting for the territories of Emilia, testifies to the exemplary role that new generations can have within the community.

“Let them say as well that we’re just kids who want to play at being heroes, but the truth is that they believe that a group of students won’t waste their time asking for municipal resolutions, or interviewing people and gathering information throughout Reggio Emilia and its Province”. Riccardo pointed out to me: At the risk of being killed by some furious worker running after you with a bat in his hands because he wants to smash your camera. Federico replied: We’re trying to do our duty as citizens” (Gallo & Di Girolamo, 2014, p. 40).

These youth have gone a long way from being recipients of civic education classes to becoming civil leaders in new educational experiences raising adults’ and young people’s awareness and urging them towards a sense of mutual responsibility. From this point of view, these youths’ participatory experience is related to their sense of community, to feeling compelled to defend their territory from criminal mindsets, playing a role of active citizens who have the right to express themselves, become interested, denounce and not remain indifferent.

## **Conclusion**

Research on young people’s participation shows the positive impact of youth civic engagement on adult civic and political participation (Zani et al., 2011). Involvement in associations, voluntary organizations and youth formal groups is related to a greater interest towards politics and to an increased perception of the government’s responsiveness towards the young.

We have seen that participation fosters a sense of belonging to the community, and social and personal skills for political action. Nevertheless, opportunities offered by associations to their members to develop these abilities are different, which also impacts on different kinds of non-formal learning processes.

In the two cases analyzed, interviewees display processes of empowerment with clear benefits, although further longitudinal analyses would be needed to assess their long-term impact. Both experiences are an example of activism by young people with repercussions on local policies,

albeit not expressed through traditional forms of participation. The two experiences display different relationships between policies and participation: youth civic engagement was supported by policies in the case of the network TogethER, while in Cortocircuito it served to prompt policies to address the mafia problem.

Participatory stances affirmed in policies thus developed in a context where young people had already implemented agency processes and had started their own projects. Laws n.14/08 and n. 3/11 have acknowledged this state of affairs, by confirming the role of associations, non-formal education and responsible citizenship<sup>9</sup>.

On the one hand, therefore, the two cases testify a paradigm shift from young people as beneficiaries to young people as leading agents in projects and policies. On the other hand it is important to keep in mind the role of young people in relation to adults and within intergenerational relationships, for these have an impact on the level of participation achieved. In TogethER and Cortocircuito activities decided exclusively by young people prevail. Adults can act as a support, in targeted collaborative activities, but their presence is less structured than in other aggregation spaces. This may offer a greater managerial autonomy and avoid power imbalance, with high levels of participation by young people. However, it can have a negative impact on how this commitment gets public recognition and may weaken the potential for change. In the words of one of the interviewees, there is the risk of being considered just kids, so that the relevance of one's propositions is not taken into full consideration.

At the same time, being able to bring about change affects one's sense of self-efficacy, which in turn impacts on active participation (Scardigno & Manuti, 2011). For this reason, reflection on these two cases ought to continue with an analysis of the changes produced by these experiences, in both peers and adults, not just in terms of individual agency, but also with respect to structural constraints. One may wonder how and to what extent requests and suggestions by young people can influence local policies and how young people are able to affect other peers, including those from the most marginal groups.

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<sup>9</sup> Lr 14/08 Norme in materia di politiche per le giovani generazioni, article 37, paragraph 3; article 44. Lr 3/11 Misure per l'attuazione coordinata delle politiche regionali a favore della prevenzione del crimine organizzato e mafioso, nonché per la promozione della cultura della legalità e della cittadinanza responsabile, articles 4 and 7, paragraph c.

To conclude, youth work experiences arguably enable young people to participate more actively in social life, as they promote critical awareness and empowerment. Our analysis highlights how participatory processes are related to power and how this in turn depends on a range of factors, including local opportunities and constraints, social structures and adult-child interdependence. In the TogethER network, immigrant youths are able to influence collective representations and to act against discrimination and widespread stereotypes; in Cortocircuito, students gain critical awareness and expose the limits of adult society, defending legality and the common good, in contrast to widespread stereotypes about young people being indifferent, apathetic and amoral. Collective motivation plays an important part for youths involved as co-actors of social change: the group can support these experiences and allows the most vulnerable individuals to gain more strength and more power (i.e. young immigrant, students). In fact, the youths of TogethER and Cortocircuito seem to have realized that one needs to respond to certain social issues (such as discrimination or the mafia) by reactivating a strong sense of responsibility in citizens and bottom-up participatory processes, because change can only come by 'joining forces'. And this is not just for the benefit of young people, to address issues directly affecting them, but for a better future of society as a whole.

Of course the two experiences are placed in a local and regional context that has created over time favorable conditions for participation, with enlightened integration policies and a long-standing tradition of associations and civic engagement. In addition to these structural factors, one should also consider the virtuous circle of individual sensitivity and reflexivity gradually growing through sharing experiences in the context of youth work.

Non-formal learning within these experiences can thus be linked to the educational goals of many active citizenship projects: the construction of a common civic culture, inclusion by strengthening social bonds, the acquisition of skills aimed at participation, or multiple memberships (Santerini, 2001). Learning citizenship in these cases, takes place in interactions among different subjects, originating from concrete problems and through practicing exchange and democratic discussion/confrontation among individuals and groups.

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