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**Citizen participation in urban governance:  
the case of institutional participatory projects  
in Reggio Emilia (Italy)**

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Student's signature

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'M. S.', written above a horizontal line.

## **List of acronyms**

ARCI - Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana

CSO – Civil Society Organisation

EU – European Union

HERE – Neighbourhood as a common good

Labsus – LABoratorio per la SUSsidiarietà

NRRP – National Recovery and Resilience Plan

PB – Participatory Budget

PP – Participatory Projects

PSSI – Patto per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile e l’Innovazione

PUG – Piano Urbanistico Generale

QUA – Quartiere bene comune

REPFE – Reggio Emilia people, for example

TAC – Territorial Advisory Councils

UN – United Nations

## Abstract

Since the UN Habitat II conference in Istanbul in 1996, participation and collaboration have been proposed to define the relationship between authorities and social groups living and acting in cities. However, despite the consistent efforts poured by local authorities to implement forms of participatory and collaborative governance, they are often perceived as far from citizens' needs and aspirations. Moreover, their attempts to institutionalise participatory processes are often criticised by active civil society as a “trick” to bend citizens' energies and resources to their interests. Therefore, a few questions arise as: why have thousands of local administrations been supporting participation and collaborative governance for the last two decades? What are the meanings given by the different actors to the term ‘participation’? This single-case study analyses the participatory projects promoted by the municipality of Reggio Emilia in the last 15 years to verify the capability of a set of theories and tools to explain the reasons and objectives underpinning these projects, the type of participation at play, as well as the changes occurred in the relationships between institutions and participating citizens in Reggio Emilia. The main theoretical frameworks employed are Cabannes and Lipietz's ‘Three competing logics’, Arena and Iaione's co-governance theory and the ‘Gradient of subsidiarity’, Arnstein's ‘Ladder of citizen participation’ and Wates's ‘Participation matrix’. Different sources of information have been triangulated, namely official documents as municipal regulations and reports, semi-structured interviews with institutional and citizens' representatives who participated in the analysed projects and the observation of some sessions of the ongoing participatory project. From these sources, in-depth answers to the research questions were elaborated and final observations on the effectiveness of the employed theories to provide these answers were made.

**Keywords:** Participation – collaborative governance – urban governance – institutional participation – Reggio Emilia

## Sommario

A partire dalla conferenza UN Habitat II a Istanbul del 1996, la partecipazione e la collaborazione sono state proposte per definire il rapporto tra autorità e gruppi sociali che vivono e agiscono nelle città. Tuttavia, nonostante gli sforzi costanti profusi dagli enti locali per attuare forme di governance partecipativa e collaborativa, essi sono spesso percepiti come lontani dai bisogni e dalle aspirazioni dei cittadini. Inoltre, i loro tentativi di istituzionalizzare i processi partecipativi sono spesso criticati dalla società civile attiva come un “trucco” per piegare le energie e le risorse dei cittadini ai loro interessi. Sorgono quindi alcune domande: perché migliaia di amministrazioni locali hanno sostenuto la partecipazione e la governance collaborativa negli ultimi due decenni? Quali sono i significati attribuiti dai diversi attori al termine “partecipazione”? Questo caso di studio analizza i progetti partecipativi promossi dal Comune di Reggio Emilia negli ultimi 15 anni per verificare la capacità di un insieme di teorie e strumenti di spiegare le ragioni e gli obiettivi alla base di questi progetti, il tipo di partecipazione in gioco, come così come i cambiamenti intervenuti nei rapporti tra istituzioni e cittadini partecipanti a Reggio Emilia. I principali quadri teorici utilizzati sono le “Tre logiche concorrenti” di Cabannes e Lipietz, la teoria della co-governance e il “Gradiente di sussidiarietà” di Arena e Iaione, la “Scala della partecipazione dei cittadini” di Arnstein e la “Matrice di partecipazione” di Wates. Sono state triangolate diverse fonti di informazione, ovvero documenti ufficiali come regolamenti e relazioni comunali, interviste semi strutturate con rappresentanti istituzionali e della cittadinanza che hanno partecipato ai progetti analizzati e l'osservazione di alcune sessioni del progetto partecipativo in corso. Partendo da queste fonti, sono state elaborate risposte approfondite alle domande di ricerca e sono state fatte osservazioni finali sull'efficacia delle teorie utilizzate per fornire queste risposte.

**Parole chiave:** Partecipazione – governance collaborativa – governance urbana – partecipazione istituzionale – Reggio Emilia

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## INTRODUCTION

This case-study research emerges from a personal, political and academic interest in developing an in-depth understanding of citizen participation in urban governance, differentiating between organic and induced participation (Mansuri and Rao, 2013), and among the objectives of different actors in engaging in it. Having no previous direct experience in institutional participatory projects, intensive literature review and immersion in the debate on this topic represented an essential precondition for the elaboration of research questions and design. This research process represented an opportunity for personal enrichment and orientation in the local social and political arena, in addition to an important academic achievement.

Participation of organised civil society organisations (CSOs) and of common, less organised citizens is a central topic of territorial governance, especially at the lowest territorial levels. It represents a fundamental factor to implement what is called ‘horizontal coordination’ that, together with a good ‘vertical coordination’, are at the core of multi-channel and multi-level governance. Citizen participation is therefore bound to the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, i.e. bringing decision-making as close as possible to the citizen, not only in a vertical sense (from the national to the urban), but also in a horizontal sense, defining regulative criteria for the relationships between the State, the civil society and citizens. Achieving the widest possible participation of different interests at the very local level is recognised as an added value for territorial governance, even if finding the right level of coordination and representation among a variety of stakeholders requires high organisational and systemic capacities.

The case study I chose to explore these topics is represented by the institutional participatory projects promoted by the municipality of Reggio Emilia on the whole municipal territory between 2008 and 2023. In particular, three projects were analysed as they represented the main channels for the participation of common citizens in the governance of the city’s neighbourhoods: “*I Reggiani per esempio*” (“Reggio Emilia people, for example”) (2008-2013); “*QUA - Quartiere bene comune*” (“HERE - Neighbourhood as a common good”) (2014-2019 and 2020-2024); and *Consulte Territoriali* (Territorial Advisory Councils) (2023 – 2027). Based on the living experience of these three local projects, I tried to generalise some theories about citizen participation that I found particularly interesting. I also tested the relevance of a political approach to participation (Arnstein, 1969; Carpentier, 2016) in the chosen case study, as compared to a more generic sociological approach.



The theoretical and methodological equipment provided by the literature review, together with the reading of articles, statements, reports and regulations of actual participatory projects, led me to the formulation of the following research questions :

- Why did the municipality of Reggio Emilia decide to formalise and support processes of citizen participation in decision-making over the past 15 years?
- How has participation been understood and implemented by the municipality of Reggio Emilia in the past 15 years, and how did this evolve through the different projects?
- Has the long-lasting existence of institutional participatory projects changed participating citizens' power and relationship with the Municipality over the past 15 years, and how?

To answer these questions, I first of all selected some established theoretical and analytical models that could help analysing participation in municipality-led participatory projects. I tried to account for the different levels on which these projects are structured, ranging from policy planning to the implementation of neighbourhood initiatives. This provided insights on the multiplicity of factors at play when talking about citizen participation in urban governance.

In parallel, I explored the chosen case study and its three embedded sub-cases (the three participatory projects) to properly understand their genesis, their practical performance, the actors they involved, the topics they dealt with, as well as the nature of their expected outputs. This was done by triangulating different sources of information, which allowed for a deep understanding of the three projects and a capacity to problematize the emergence of partial incongruences between their official presentation and the lived experience of their participants.

The theoretical and empirical research, as well as the analysis of official documents and of the living evidence provided by the voice of municipal and civil society representatives, alimented each other throughout the whole process. The research questions were essential to recompose this complex mosaic and make sense of the convergences and divergences identified between theories and practices.

The first chapter introduces the overall methodological framework of the research, i.e. case-study research, and exposes the main theoretical frameworks and models employed to analyse the case study. They encompass Cabannes and Lipietz's 'Three competing logics' (2015, 2018), Arena and Iaione's co-governance theory (2015) and the 'Gradient of subsidiarity'(Iaione, 2015), Arnstein's 'Ladder of citizen participation' (1969) and Wates's 'Participation matrix' (2000). The methodology of the research closes the chapter.

The second chapter presents the case study at the centre of this research. Starting from an overview of the territorial context in which it takes place (the municipality of Reggio Emilia), it then passes to the description of the three projects analysed in this work. They represent the evolution of the forms of horizontal subsidiarity targeting wide participation from organised and non-organised citizens promoted by the local administration. The chapter is closed by a quick glance at the new Regulation for democracy and urban and climatic justice in Reggio Emilia (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022b), collecting all the participatory tools available in the city, from the more traditional to the more innovative ones.

The third chapter applies the theoretical frameworks and model presented in the first chapter to the case study. This gives insights that help answering the research questions. The answer to the third research question, concerning the change in participating citizens' power and relationship with the Municipality over the past 15 years, is elaborated in a more narrative way through the organisation of the opinions collected from institutional and civil society interviewees.

A final chapter resuming the main findings of the research and answering the three research questions concludes the dissertation. It also describes some additional findings concerning representation in local participation, and proposes a few ideas for further research on the topic.

**Disclaimer:** the sources in Italian language mentioned in the text have been freely translated by the author of the thesis.



## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Chapter 1 is devoted to the presentation of the theoretical frameworks and research methodology that led me from the formulation of the research questions to the collection and analysis of a variety of data to answer them.

The chapter starts with an introduction on the general research approach, i.e. Case study research (Yin, 2018) (a). The unfolding of the six steps characterising this kind of approach is described, starting with the identification of the situations in which case study research is appropriate, passing to the sound design of the research methodology, then to preparation and execution of data collection, to the possible analytical techniques to interpret collected data and finally to the composition of the case study report and its distribution.

Once the methodological approach of the research has been set, the theoretical frameworks underpinning it are presented, underlining the research question that they will help to answer. Starting from the ‘why’ question (b), two main theories will be presented : Cabannes and Lipietz’s ‘three competing logics’ (2015, 2018) provide an analytical structure to determine the logics underpinning institutional participatory projects based on the analysis of international Participatory Budget experiences. Arena and Iaione’s ‘co-governance’ (2015), on the other hand, provides the theoretical basis underpinning most of municipality-driven participatory (collaborative) processes in Italy, as well as an analytical tool to determine the level of subsidiarity of specific collaborative experiences. The ‘how’ questions, and therefore the analysis of the possible different kinds (or levels) of participation (c), are theoretically studied through the political approach of participation as power applied in Arnstein’s ‘Ladder of citizen participation’ (1969) and in the following critiques addressed to it. An operational tool developed by Wates, the ‘Participation matrix’ (2000), is finally proposed as an applied analytical technique to assess the level of community engagement in community planning driven by local authorities.

The chapter is concluded by d), describing the research methodology adopted, applying the steps suggested by Yin (2018) to the case study at the centre of this dissertation and borrowing from the frameworks introduced above the main theoretical propositions on which the analysis is based.

### a) The methodological approach: Case study research

The research was conducted applying the case-study research methodology as proposed by Robert Yin in *Case study research and applications, Design and Methods* (2018). The author gives a twofold and practical definition of case study, where the first part is aimed at pointing out its *scope*:

“A case study is an empirical method that

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident.” (Yin, 2018, p. 45)

This underlines as basic conditions for conducting a case study both the aim to understand a real-world case and the assumption that this understanding cannot be gained aside from important contextual conditions. Moreover, as the phenomenon being studied and its context are not always easily distinguishable, some methodological characteristics can be defined to describe the *features* of a case study:

“A case study

- copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
- benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide design, data collection, and analysis, and as another result
- relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion.” (Ivi, p. 46)

The twofold definition of case-study research highlights its underpinning logics and scientific methodology encompassing design, data collection and analysis. Stating the scientific character of case study research is crucial to support its validity and reliability in front of an audience that is not always prone to consider it as a rigorous method. The suspicion towards this qualitative research method is caused by the confusion between research and non-research case studies. These two types of case studies, on the contrary, must be clearly differentiated, as the former is indeed a scientific research method, while the latter, more diffused in everyday life’s experience, is a tool to convey other concepts. It is the case of teaching or training case studies (used to provide a framework for class discussion around a specific topic), popular case studies (used in popular literature or media to present a fact or a concept to the audience) or case records (used by professionals for instrumental and administrative practices) (Ivi).

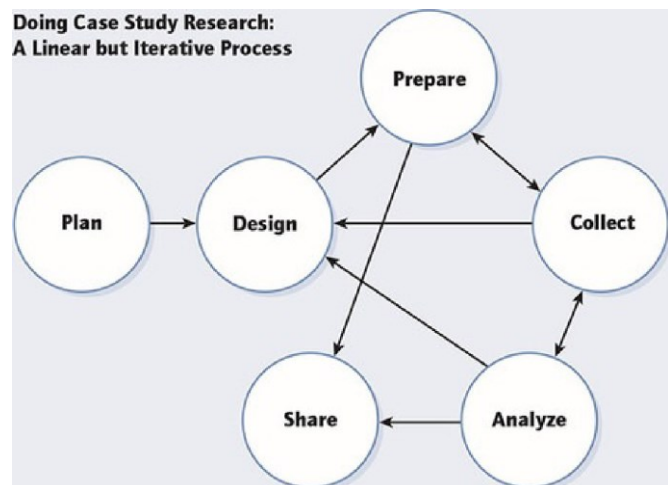
Another critique that is often moved to undermine the scientific validity of case studies results is the impossibility of a single-case study to provide generalizable insights. However, taking a case study as a sample and generalising its results to populations to calculate probabilities is not the purpose of

a case study, whose aim is rather to expand and generalise to theoretical propositions – i.e. doing analytical generalisations, and not statistical ones. The researcher should be able to identify what elements of the case study generalise the theories on which the research is based, and distinguish them from what is instead a peculiarity of the case studied. In a second moment, further theoretical propositions should be brought to try and explain what, at a first sight, might look as a peculiarity undermining the validity of the underpinning theory (*Ivi*).

Case study research can rely on different epistemological orientations: 1) “Realist perspective, which assumes the existence of a single reality that is independent of any observer; 2) Relativist perspective [...], acknowledging multiple realities and having multiple meanings, with findings that are observer dependent” (*Ivi*, p.47). The relativist perspective can be implemented using a constructivist approach, i.e. “attempting to capture the perspectives of different participants and focusing on how their different meanings illuminate your topic of study” (*Ibidem*).

Case study research is conducted over 6 phases that are essential to distinguish research from non-research case studies (Figure 1):

Figure 1: The six phases of case study research (Source : Yin, 2018, p. 30)



1. Plan: evaluation of the research questions, of our control on the behaviour of the studied subjects and of the contemporaneity of the topic to assess the appropriateness to conduct a case study (instead of - or beside - other research methods) (Yin, 2018, ch. 1);

2. Design: defining a well-crafted research design is a crucial step to ensure a logical connection between research questions, evidence and findings, as well as to set solid basis for the implementation of the following research phases. The main components of a case study’s design are: (I) case study’s questions, which can be inspired by literature review, by other case studies, and/or by some exploratory fieldwork; (II) case study’s theoretical propositions, orientating the research to specific aspects of its scope and helping to keep it within feasible limits; (III) the study’s case(s), which should be a real-world phenomenon having some concrete manifestation (as an individual, a group, an event or an entity), and should be defined limiting its temporal, spatial, and group boundaries; (IV) the logic linking data to propositions, i.e. the analytic techniques that allow to combine or assemble case study evidence as a direct reflection of study propositions (see

phase n.5 “Analyse”); (V) the criteria for interpreting the findings, i.e. identifying the main rival explanations that could be used to undermine the study’s findings, and plan how to reject them to strengthen the validity of the study.

The development (or embracement) of a theory (II) is therefore crucial in the design of a research case study. “Theory” in this case can either refer to an accredited theory coming from research literature or simply to “a [hypothetical] story about why acts, events, structure, and thoughts occur” (Sutton and Staw, 1995, in Yin, 2018, p. 70). The purpose of the case study will be to make analytic generalisations based on “either (a) corroborating, modifying, rejecting, or otherwise advancing theoretical concepts that [were] referenced in designing [the] case study or (b) new concepts that arose upon the completion of your case study” (Yin, 2018, p. 73).

Some tests can help to assess the quality and reliability of a case study design. The more common ones are : (I) construct validity, assessing the quality of the operational measures used to collect and analyse data and to share the research; (II) internal validity, assessing the rigour of the causal relationships established within the case; (III) external validity, assessing the generalisability of the case study’s findings based on research questions and theoretical propositions; (IV) reliability, assessing the possibility to repeat the same study and obtain the same results.

The two main types of case study design are single-case and multi-case designs. The single-case design is suitable when the researcher is dealing with a critical, extreme/unusual, common, revelatory or longitudinal case. The multi-case design, on the contrary, contains more than one single-case and is generally preferable when enough time and resources are available as it provides more compelling evidence. Multi-case designs use a “replication” design on each of the cases composing it, trying to demonstrate either literal replications (predicting similar results) or theoretical replications (predicting contrasting results for anticipatable reasons). Both single-case designs and multi-case designs can be holistic, meaning that each single-case is considered as a global unit, or embedded, when each single-case is considered as composed by subunits who receive “second level attention” in addition to the “first level attention” given to the global case. (Yin, 2018, ch. 2).

3. Prepare: data collection in case study research – as in all research methods – needs specific preparation in order to collect complete and unbiased data for later analysis. This preparation includes: (I) the development of (qualitative) research skills and values by the researcher(s); (II) a training on the specific theories and data collection techniques used in the case study

(especially important whenever the research is conducted by a team of researchers); (III) the development of a protocol (containing an overview of the study, data collection procedures, protocol questions and a tentative outline for the report); (IV) the screening of the candidate cases to choose the more appropriate one(s); and (V) conducting a pilot case study to refine data collection plans (before the final approval of the protocol).

In the preparation phase, the screening of the candidate cases (IV) is a crucial and extremely delicate step. Selecting an appropriate case from the beginning prevents the risk to realise that the case is not good enough after starting data collection and having to start again from the beginning with a new case study. If the candidate cases are not more than a dozen, the screening can be done on a one-phased approach that consists in a rough collection of data about each of the cases and a subsequent evaluation of the best ones based on a set of pre-defined criteria. All other things being equal, the availability of data sources should be prioritised for single-case studies, while the applicability of the replication design is the main priority for multi-case studies. When more than a dozen cases are potential candidates for the study, the one-phased approach can also be applied, but only after the reduction of cases to a dozen through the collection of relevant quantitative data and their evaluation using relevant, previously defined criteria (Yin, 2018, ch. 3).

4. Collect: based on the case study protocol, data must be collected by the researcher(s) using one or more among six main sources of evidence : documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and/or physical artefacts. The six sources are not always available for any case study, but given their complementarity “a good case study will [...] want to rely on as many sources as possible” (Ivi, p. 156) to allow for data triangulation providing an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon and its context. This is the first of four principles that are at the basis of data collection. The other three are : creating a case study database where all the raw materials on which research analysis was conducted are organised in an accessible way; maintaining a chain of evidence, i.e. reporting all the steps conducting from initial research question to findings by explicating the logics conducting from one to the other; and being careful in collecting data from the social media (both for the overwhelming quantity of data available and for the further need to cross-check information as they are not always sourced nor verified) (Yin, 2018, ch. 4).
5. Analyse: it is essential to have a pretty clear analytical strategy in mind since the first phases of the case study research, and not just relying on analytic tools to ‘improvise’ an analysis at the end of the process. In this way, the researcher can be sure that the data needed for the following analysis will be collected, and that case-study findings will be reliable and well-



founded. Many strategies can be combined to analyse data, and non-codified strategies can be tailored to suit a specific case study.

Four of the mostly used analytical strategies are: (I) relying on the theoretical propositions on which the research design was founded; (II) working data from the “ground up”, i.e. starting from insights emerging from the observation of the collected data to identify possible patterns and concepts that need a more extensive analysis; (III) developing a case description, that might serve both a descriptive case study and the identification of a pattern that can contribute to an explanatory case study; (IV) examining plausible rival explanations to those identified through the previous three strategies (which requires the collection of additional data to analyse these further explanations).

Moreover, data can be analysed using the following analytical techniques: (a) Pattern matching, i.e. comparing the patterns emerging from the empirical data with the patterns predicted by a pre-existing theory, looking for congruences; (b) Explanation building, i.e. developing a narrative explanation of the causal sequences justifying the patterns followed by the case study, better if reflecting some theoretically significant proposition; (c) Time-series analysis, i.e. tracing changes of one or more empirical measures over time and matching it with either a theoretical or rival trend that were identified before data collection to explain the relationship of events in the long run; (d) Logic models, i.e. elaborating a logical causal chain of occurrences to describe and/or explain how and why some sequential outcomes have been generated and then comparing it with the empirical evidence, focusing not only on the events but also on the transitions between them and on the contextual and rival conditions that might have produced them; (e) Cross-case synthesis, i.e. crossing evidence from different case studies (multi-case study) using a case-based approach (as opposed to a statistical variable-based one) to first identify any within-case patterns (possibly based on theoretical propositions), and then to synthesise possible replicative relationships across the case studies in an argumentative style (Yin, 2018, ch. 5).

6. Share: properly sharing the results of a case study is an essential task to make research accessible to an audience, and it requires particular attention and planning since the definition of the research protocol (see phase n.3 “Prepare”). Because of the multiple designs that a case study can assume, its presentation requires more effort than in other research methods as there is not a standard way to compose it.

Six main structures can be used to present the substance of the case study, and this choice mainly depends on the purpose of the study and on some characteristics of the cases

themselves. These structures are: (I) linear-analytic - the most classical one, presenting the issue under study, a literature review, the research methodology, the data collected, the analysis performed and finally the research findings and conclusions; (II) comparative - “repeat[ing] the same case study material two or more times, comparing alternative descriptions or explanations of the same case” (Yin, 2018, p. 286); (III) chronological – dedicating every section to a progressive temporal phase of the case to highlight the causal sequence of events; (IV) theory-building – dedicating every section to a part of the theoretical argument being formulated and connecting them in a logical way; (V) suspense – opening the report with the main outcomes of the study and using the rest of the report to explain how they were achieved; (VI) unsequenced – the chapters or sections are individual units with internal coherence but without any essential logical connection with one another (not requiring any specific order). (Yin, 2018, ch. 6).

Case-study research can be used for different purposes. *Explanatory* case studies try to explain the presumed causal links in real-world interventions that are too complex for survey or experimental methods; *descriptive* case studies aim at describing an intervention and the real-world context in which it occurred; *exploratory* case studies enlighten situations that the researcher is not able to grasp yet to provide a better understanding of the case before planning further research on it (whether using an explanatory case study or another research method) (*Ivi*).

#### **b) Theoretical frameworks : Why promoting citizen participation in decision-making?**

Participation and collaboration are among the multiplicity of concepts that, since the UN Habitat II conference in 1996, have been studied by scholars working on urban public space and on the social dynamics that take form in them, primarily in the field of public policies, to study the relationship between institutions governing the city and the social groups living and acting in the territory. Starting from that 1996, UN Habitat adopted “participation and civic engagement” as “a key principle of good urban governance” that “should be encouraged and supported through practical measures” as “the participatory formulation of City Development Strategies”, “participation of the urban poor in decision-making, formulation of policies, and implementation of local action plans”, a creative “tension between participatory and representative democracy”, as well as “public-private partnerships [...] [as] contributing factors to successful urban renewal” (Habitat, 2001). However, despite all the efforts, there still is a widespread perception of institutions that are far from citizens’ needs and aspirations, and the attempts to institutionalise participatory processes are often criticised by active civil society as a “trick” used by administrations to show a more inclusive and collaborative face,

while in fact bending spontaneous civic initiatives as well as active citizens' energies and resources to their interests and needs (see Ciaffi, 2015; DAC, 2021; Carlone, 2022). Therefore, some questions arise: why have hundreds of local administrations been supporting and proposing participation and collaborative governance as a public policy for the last two decades? What are the reasons behind this political address and the choice of this kind of relationship with their citizens?

I will first introduce an explanation based on the study of the success of participatory budgeting (one of the most promising and widespread participatory processes) all over the world by Cabannes & Lipietz (2018). I will then introduce an analysis of the reasons and founding theories behind the rise of collaborative governance in the Italian context, focusing mainly on the works of Labsus – Laboratory for subsidiarity<sup>1</sup> and of professors Arena and Iaione (2015). These works are particularly relevant in the context of this research, given that they are the framework that shaped the institutional participatory projects in Reggio Emilia, as it will be explained in Chapter 2.

### ***Three competing logics underpinning participation***

Participation is an umbrella term describing decision-making processes where an extended group of people (not only the ones officially appointed to decide or the experts in a topic) come together to collectively make decisions on a subject, usually having repercussions on a larger community. However, many different social and institutional practices fall within the scope of this term, very far from each other concerning not only the ways in which they occur, but also the reasons why they are put in place and the deep logics underpinning them.

Cabannes and Lipietz studied Participatory Budgeting (PB), “a form of decision-making that actively involves the citizenry in prioritising spending of public resources” (Cabannes and Lipietz, 2015, p. 3, 2018, p. 1). However, even within this particular type of institutional participatory process, “experiments span a broad spectrum: from symbolic participatory gestures with little transformatory impact to vectors of structural change in cities' governance systems that have reconfigured relationships and responsibilities across actors and institutions in the public domain - and have led to measurable improvements in the quality of life of their citizens.” (*Ibidem; Ibidem*). The differences among these experiments concern characteristics of the local entities in which they occur, spanning from villages to mega-cities, and from supra-municipal administrations (i.e. provinces or regions) to sub-municipal administrations (i.e. districts and neighbourhoods), and in some cases also inter-municipal entities. PB experiences differ even in their organisational form, as they can be territorially-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.labsus.org/>

based (i.e. concerning interventions in a specific territory), thematic (i.e. dealing with specific fields of priority issues) or ‘actor-based’ (i.e. addressing the needs of determined – usually vulnerable and marginalised – groups). However, the main aspects of PB experiences on which Cabannes and Lipietz focalise are the underpinning logics explaining its use by local authorities around the world for more than 30 years<sup>2</sup>, regardless of its time-consuming nature.

The three underpinning logics described by the authors were identified through the analysis of 20 Participatory Budget experiences, but can easily be applied to other forms of institutional participation, as they do not concern the specific modalities of management of the processes but the reasons why local public authorities resort to them to fulfil their political and/or administrative tasks.

The three possible underpinning logics identified by the authors are (Cabannes and Lipietz, 2015, pp. 10–11, 2018, pp. 3–4):

- **Political:** participation as an “instrument to radically democratise democracy” and give “power to people”, facilitating a bottom-up approach to policy and decision making and deepening participatory democracy as a political system (instead of representative democracy, that is perceived as failed);
- **Good governance:** participation as a way to construct new relationships between citizens and governments, deepening social ties and improving both vertical and horizontal governance. The processes are in general government-led and the variation in citizens’ decision-making power can be of different entity, or not be at all;
- **Technocratic and managerial:** participation as a tool “to improve efficiency and optimisation of [...] public resources and service delivery”, i.e. as a technocratic response to managerial problems.

It is important to notice that, in a given context, a continuity of participation processes can hide a discontinuity in the logics underpinning them over time. Moreover, different logics can in some way coexist in the same context at the same time. This leads to their representation as a triangle having the three logics as vertices - in which participatory (in this case, PB) experiences can be positioned in any point within its surface (Figure 2).

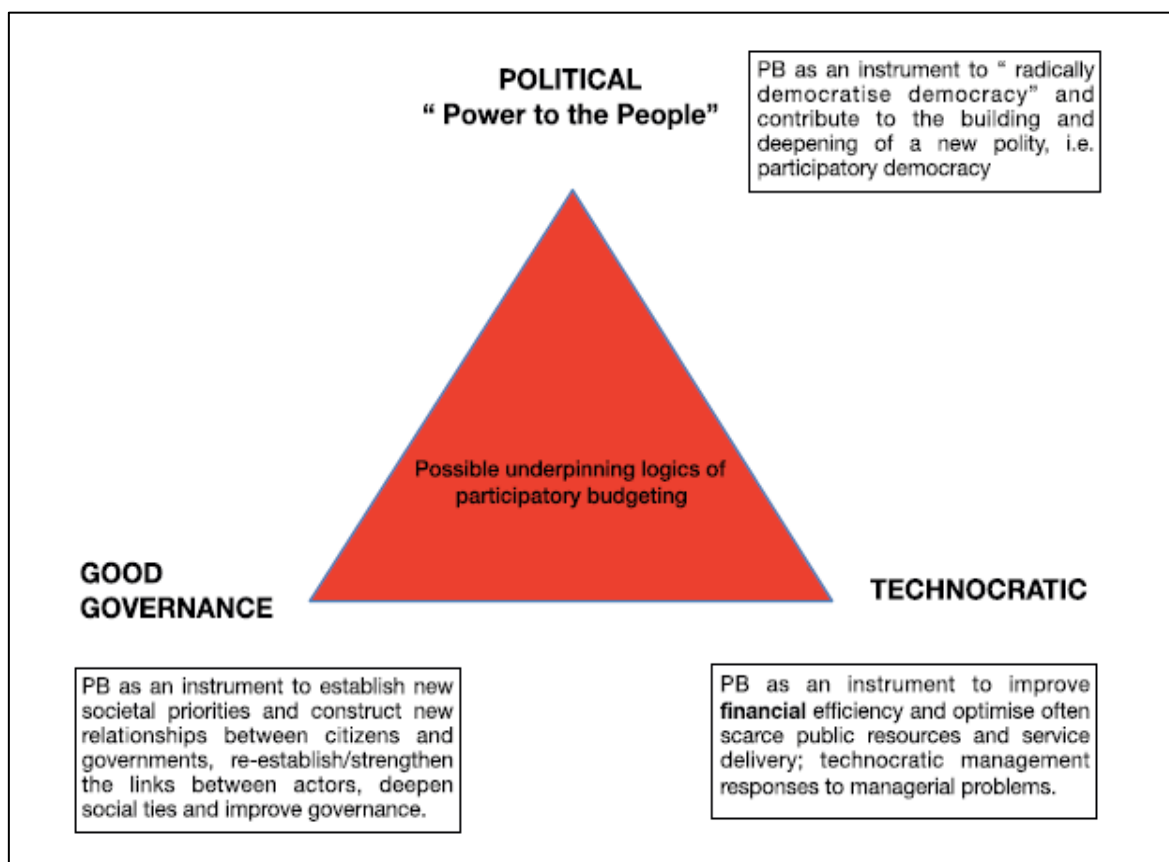
Based on years of observations and analysis of more than 100 cities’ PB experiences around the globe, Cabannes (2004; updated in : Cabannes and Lipietz, 2015) developed an analytical grid (Table 1) built on 4 analytical dimensions and 18 variables and aimed at both building a city’s PB profile and devising locally-specific PBs. Most parts of this grid can be very useful to analyse and get insights

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<sup>2</sup> The first experience of Participatory Budget was launched in 1989 in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

about the underpinning logics of any institutional participatory process involving decisions about public spending.

Figure 2: PBs' competing logics (Source : Cabannes and Lipietz, 2018, p. 4)



The analytical dimensions studied by the grid are: the participatory dimension (split into citizens' and local government's participation); the financial and fiscal dimension; the normative/legal dimension; and the physical/territorial dimension. Each of them is analysed by assessing the situation of 3 variables (6 for citizen's participation) at a given time; the whole list of 18 variables can be consulted in Table 1. The assessment is based on the comparison of the participatory processes under analysis with an empirical description (based on a review of existing PB experiences) of 'minimal', 'intermediate' or 'maximum' levels of participatory arrangements. In general, 'maximum arrangements' correspond to a more radical (political) approach to participation, while 'minimal' and 'intermediate arrangements' denote a more functional approach with lower levels of power redistribution (good governance / technocratic). However, any participatory experience inevitably presents different levels of arrangements for different variables, requiring a sensitive interpretation to identify the logics underpinning the whole process.

Some characteristic elements that can help identifying the presence of the three logics in a real-life process are:

- *Institutional anchoring within the local government*: looking at the municipal department(s) that are in charge of and accountable for the management of participatory processes can tell much about the deep reasons behind them. In general, processes motivated by technocratic logics are linked to finance or planning departments, whereas when the underpinning logics is good governance they tend to be anchored to specific departments dealing with participation. When the logics is political they are usually directly under the control of the mayor's office (Cabannes, 2003, p.57 in Cabannes and Lipietz, 2015, p. 11);
- *Contributions to reversing priorities in cities*: PB, and participatory processes in general, have the potential to “shift [...] the order of priorities” both from a political and from a territorial point of view, giving marginalised groups decision-making power that they had never had and bringing investments in poor and marginalised areas traditionally out of the public attention (Cabannes and Lipietz, 2015, p. 19, 2018, pp. 12–13). However, to what extent a participatory process actually transforms this potential into reality is directly related to the logics underpinning it : while for a political logic this opening-up of decision making to citizens is the core objective, for good governance and technocratic logics it is at most a side effect, if not a consequence to avoid;
- *Deliberative quality and degree of participation of active citizens*: if ‘democracy is about voice as much as vote’, the deliberative quality of a participatory process depends not only on the number of participating citizens, but on how active participating citizens are. The more local authorities support citizen participation based on political beliefs, the more they will encourage participants' turnover and more active participation during deliberative assemblies (Ivi, p. 23; Ivi, pp. 13–14 ). Conversely, the more managerial and governance needs lie behind the opening of participatory arenas in policy making, the more quantitative indicators will be preferred over qualitative ones in assessing the success of the process;
- *Investment in educating citizens and public officers to participation in decision-making*: one way to improve deliberative quality of participation is to educate both citizens and public officers to it. The diffusion of a participatory culture is essential to ensure that citizens know the functioning and potential of the system they are approaching and how to express themselves on the same level as city officials. It also equips the latter for dealing with horizontal relationships with citizens and active listening skills. Again, political logics of democratic deepening tend to hold education as a critical dimension for real participation. Whenever education projects are not considered as the starting points to build the whole participatory system, though, the governance and technocratic logics tend to supersede the potential for a

deepening of democracy, increasing the risks of political co-optation and populism (*Ivi*, p. 24; *Ivi*, pp. 14–15);

- *Institutionalisation of the process and of the participants' power*: 'who defines the rules of the game' is a critical issue to understand both the logic guiding a participatory process and its potential of democratisation. The two extremes of the institutionalisation spectrum are represented by a process that is entirely institutionalised through legal instruments, and one where the rules are completely self-determined by the community (an extremely rare option, even in advanced participatory experiences). In between lies the optimum, represented by situations where some aspects of the regulatory framework is set by local authorities but consultations are held regularly to let the people adjust the rules to their needs. Generally speaking, wherever citizens are able to define the rules of the game, on an annual and transparent basis, a political logic underpins the process, whereas in cities where the rules are defined by the authority in place alone the prevailing logics are managerial (technocratic or good governance) (*Ivi*, p. 25–26; *Ivi*, pp. 15–16).

Table 1: Dimensions and variables for differentiating self-denominated Participatory Budget experiences (Source : Cabannes, 2004, pp. 20–21)

| <b>DIMENSIONS</b>                           | <b>VARIABLES</b>  | <b>MINIMAL ARRANGEMENT</b>               | <b>INTERMEDIATE ARRANGEMENT</b>  | <b>MAXIMUM ARRANGEMENT</b>  |
|---|---|--|--|---|
| <b>Ia. PARTICIPATORY (citizens)</b>         | 1. Instance of final budget approval                            | Community-based representative democracy | Community-based representative democracy open to different types of associations | Direct democracy, universal participation   |
|   | 2. Forms of participation                                       | Executive (partial consultation)         | Council (consultative)   | The population (deliberation and legislative approval)                            |
|   | 3. Which body makes budgetary priority decisions?               | None                                     | Existing social or political structure<br><br>Government and citizens (mixed)    | Specific commissions with elected council members and a citizen majority          |
|   | 4. Community participation or citizen participation             | Neighbourhood level                      | City-wide level, through thematic contributions                                  | Neighbourhood, regional, and city-wide level                                      |
|   | 5. Degree of participation of the excluded                      | Thematic and neighbourhood plenaries     | Neighbourhoods, themes (including civic issues)                                  | Neighbourhood + Thematic + actor-based, preference for excluded groups (congress) |
|   | 6. Oversight and control of execution                           | Executive                                | Non-specific commissions (PB Councils, associations)                             | Specific commissions (Cofis, Comforça, etc.)                                      |
| <b>Ib. PARTICIPATORY (local government)</b> | 7. Degree of information sharing and dissemination              | Secret, unpublished                      | Limited dissemination, web, official bulletin, informing delegates               | Wide dissemination, including house-to-house distribution                         |
|   | 8. Degree of completion of approved projects (within two years) | Less than 20%                            | 20% to 80%   | Over 80%  |
|   | 9. Role of legislative branch                                   | Opposition                               | Passive, non-participation   | Active involvement  |



|                                   |   |   |   |  |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| <b>II. FINANCIAL AND FISCAL</b>   | 10. Amount of debated resources                       | Less than 2% of capital budget          | From 2% to 100% of capital budget                             | 100% of capital and operating budgets  |
|                                   | 11. Municipal budget allocation for functioning of PB | Municipal department/ team covers costs | Personnel and their activities (i.e. travel)                  | Personnel, activities, dissemination, training   |
|                                   | 12. Discussion of taxation policies                   | None                                    | Deliberation on tax policies                                  | Deliberation on loans and subsidies  |
| <b>III. NORMATIVE / LEGAL</b>     | 13. Degree of institutionalisation                    | Informal process                        | Only institutionalised or only self-regulated annually        | Formalised (some parts regulated) with annual self-regulation (evolutionary)               |
|                                   | 14. Instrumental or participatory logic               | Improvement in financial management     | Ties with participatory practices (councils, roundtables)     | Part of the culture of participation, participation as right (i.e. San Salvador)           |
|                                   | 15. Relationship with planning instruments            | Only PB (no long- term plan exists)     | Coexistence of PB and City Plans, without direct relationship | Clear relationship and interaction between PB and Planning in one system (e.g. a congress) |
| <b>IV. PHYSICAL / TERRITORIAL</b> | 16. Degree of intra-municipal decentralisation        | Follows administrative regions          | Goes beyond administrative regions                            | Decentralisation to all communities and neighbourhoods                                     |
|                                   | 17. Degree of inclusion of rural areas                | PB in either urban area or rural area   | The entire municipal territory                                | Entire municipality with specific measures for rural areas (preferences)                   |
|                                   | 18. Degree of investment                              | Reinforces the formal city              | Recognises both formal and informal city, without preferences | Priority investment in most needy areas (peripheral, central, rural)                       |

### ***Collaborative governance and the quintuple helix-model***

Collaboration is at the basis of collaborative governance, one of the concepts emerged since the early 2000s to describe the relationship between local authorities and citizens, especially concerning the management of material or immaterial goods such as public space, natural resources, and local social and cultural capital. The idea of collaborative governance is therefore tightly connected to the concept of commons.

The Nobel Prize-winner Elinor Ostrom defined commons as neither public nor private resources, but “common pool resources”, meaning “a natural or man-made resource system that is sufficiently large as to make it costly (but not impossible) to exclude potential beneficiaries from obtaining benefits from its use” (Ostrom, 1990, p. 30 in Euler, 2018, p. 11) and that have a high “degree of subtractability of one person's use from that available to be used by others” (Ostrom et al., 1994, p. 6 in Euler, 2018, p. 11). Ostrom identified in good governance and appropriate collective management the means to avoid what Hardin (1968 in Euler, 2018) called the ‘tragedy of commons’.

As opposed to this “goods-based” definition of commons, other scholars propose a definition based on the social practice of commoning – i.e. “[a] collective, participatory process of accessing, managing, and developing a resource” (Dellenbaugh-Losse, Zimmermann, and de Vries, 2020, p. 7) – as the institutional arrangement that identifies a tangible or intangible good as a commons (Euler, 2018).

In the Italian context, a definition of commons is given by the sociologist Carlo Donolo:

“common goods are a set of necessarily shared goods. They are goods insofar as they allow the unfolding of social life, the solution of collective problems, the existence of man in his relationship with the ecosystems of which he is a part. They are shared because [...] they are better off and provide their best qualities when they are treated and therefore also governed and regulated as assets “in common”, accessible to all at least in principle. They are also shared in a stronger sense, in that only their sharing guarantees their extended reproduction over time [...]” (Donolo, 2010).

Donolo (2010) identifies common goods as a possible shared binder that can prevent the contemporary society from “fall[ing] apart rapidly in an entropic way” given its “[...] violent tendency to transform everything that is public, common, shared, into appropriated, privatised goods”.

A juridical definition of commons can be found in the judgement n. 3811 of 2011 by the Italian Supreme Court of Cassation, who declared that “all goods that for their intrinsic nature or

purpose are functional to the pursuit and satisfaction of collective interests, whether they are public or private, must be considered as common goods” (Iaione, 2015, p. 40).

Finally, the definition of commons given by the *Regulation on collaboration between citizens and administrations for the care, regeneration and shared management of the urban common goods* developed by Labsus stems from the constitutional judgement mentioned above and is procedural and based on participatory and deliberative democracy tools, giving each community the right to collectively choose the urban commons to take care of, manage and regenerate :

“tangible and intangible goods, which citizens and the administration recognize as functional to the well-being of the community and of its members, to the exercise of fundamental human rights and to the interest of future generations, consequently taking action towards them pursuant to Article 118(4) of the Constitution, to guarantee and improve their individual and collective use, sharing with the administration the responsibility for their care, shared management or regeneration” (Labsus, 2022, p. 3).

As it can be noticed, the collective management of commons is a central element in all the afore-mentioned definitions. However, the definition proposed by Labsus to identify the object of its *Regulation* differs from the others in that it puts the public actor (i.e. local administrations), together with citizens, at the core of the care, management and regeneration of commons. This might look as a contradiction of the idea of commons as different from both public and private goods, and of commoning as a social practice of managing commons among peers. Nevertheless, it can be explained by the fact that the *Regulation* was developed with the purpose to give local authorities a tool to put into practice the constitutional principle of subsidiarity, given the lack of administrative procedures to allow for the actual implementation of this principle introduced in the Italian Constitution in 2001 (Arena, 2015). Moreover, the theoretical elaboration around co-governance aims at defining a new, equal relationship between administrations and their citizens, based on collaboration and pooling resources and competences (*Ibidem*): in this sense, public administrations and citizens are supposed to become ‘peers’ in the management of common goods. This definition of common goods, and the reference to the principle of subsidiarity, is particularly relevant in the Italian context, as local Regulations based on Labsus’s work have already been developed and approved by almost 300 Italian cities and local authorities (Labsus, 2023).

The principle of subsidiarity is introduced by Article 118(4) of the Italian Constitution, which prescribes that “the State, regions, provinces, metropolitan cities and municipalities foster the autonomous initiative of individual or associate citizens to carry out activities of general

interest, according to the principle of subsidiarity”. This recognizes the role of citizens not as users of public commodities or as administrated subjects, but as responsible subjects collaborating with administrations to pursue a general interest (Arena, 2015). Reading this “general interest” as “common goods”, as a higher “common purpose” towards which public, private and collective interests converge, transforms the principle of subsidiarity into a new social, economic and institutional model. In this new model, all the actors of the so-called ‘quintuple helix’ (Iaione and De Nictolis, 2016) autonomously decide to collaborate together to share the responsibility of taking care of commons (Iaione, 2015).

The quintuple helix model is an evolution of the triple helix model theorised by Etzkowitz e Leydesdorff (1998, in Iaione and De Nictolis, 2016, p. 76) and of the quadruple helix model theorised by Carayannis e Campbell (2009, in Iaione and De Nictolis, 2016, p. 78). The triple helix model transforms the binary governance relationship industry-public institutions (that is typical of industrial societies) by adding a third actor that is central in knowledge societies : universities. It claims that the potential for innovation and development can be expressed through the hybridization and interaction among these three actors (“innovators”) to generate new institutional and social formats. The quadruple helix adds to this model a new actor to be involved in innovation : the creative civil society, meaning mainly media and culture practitioners.

The quintuple helix theorised by Iaione and de Nictolis (2016) expands this conception of civil society identifying two ontologically different actors of innovation within its extension: the organised civil society and the non-steadily organised, informal or not consolidated civil society. They both act for the common interest and contribute to the construction of the community-State. However, the former has a know-how that can generate social innovation also as an incubator for the innovative energy of the latter, composed by any single social actor who acts to share and/or collaborate around a common resource to contribute to a local process of economic and institutional development. The quintuple helix model is the basis for a new form of governance that stems from “the practical experiment of social, economic, and institutional innovation, and therefore from processes and methods” (*Ivi*, p. 82) and is shaped by the characters of each territorial community. Collaborative governance, then, transforms the ‘territorial government’ into ‘territorial governance’ based on stable partnerships between the ‘public as a subject’ (public institutions) and the ‘public as a community’ (formed by responsible enterprises, cognitive institutions, the civil society organised in the third sector and active citizens) (Iaione, 2015).

According to Arena and Iaione (2015; see also Foster and Iaione, 2016; Iaione, 2016; Iaione and De Nictolis, 2016), co-governance is a radical reform of local systems that emerges as a necessity for local administrations to be able to manage current phenomena. This necessity is determined by the weakening of the public actor resulting in insufficient public resources to satisfy all the citizens' needs that used to be covered by the Welfare State. This equally originates from the emergence of glocal challenges, such as climate change, that cannot be efficiently addressed by any of the social actors alone, but need a multi-level intervention that can be guaranteed only by the collaboration of all the social components. This is well resumed by Lisa Bingham :

“Collaboration means working together with diverse interests to achieve common goals across boundaries and in multi-agency, multi-sector, and multi-actor relationships. It may include the general public, state, regional, and local government agencies, tribes, non-profit organizations, businesses, and other nongovernmental stakeholders to address issues that cannot easily be addressed by any one organization on its own” (2009, p. 274 in Iaione, 2016, p. 425).

Moreover, local administrations are confronted with the reality that change ‘started from below’, as active citizens are willing to engage to improve collective well-being and to protect common goods, and they spontaneously share resources and capacities to provide collective solutions to their needs.

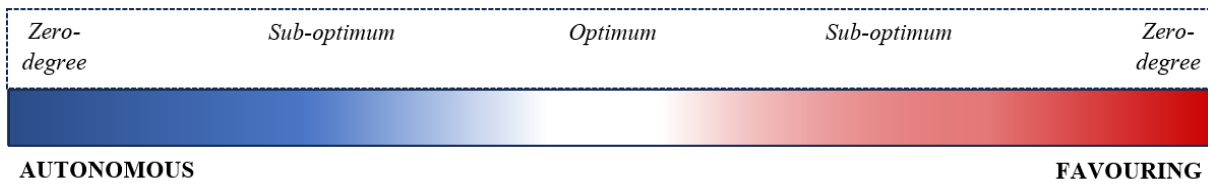
Co-governance, as a form of participatory and deliberative democracy, aspires to be a form of social justice and redistribution of decisional power. It follows the motto that “[public] institutions must learn to ‘close the circle of delegation’ to give back to citizens part of the delegations they received” under representative democracy (Iaione, 2015, p. 48). In the so-called ‘Co-City’ (Iaione, 2016), a collaborative community shares with institutions the responsibility for decisions, but also for actions in view of the general interest, thus empowering citizens and modifying relationships among the stakeholders. This is possible through the direct participation of citizens from the exploratory phase of a project, through design and up to production and management of goods and services (Selloni, 2015). Co-designing improves citizens’ subjective empowerment, i.e. feeling potentially capable to influence decisions, and transforms single citizens with individual aspirations into a collective actor. Co-production, on the other hand, improves citizens’ objective empowerment, i.e. their objective capacity to influence decisions, redistributing power in as much as the people become not only consumers, but also producers. According to Pestoff (2012, in Selloni, 2015, p. 116), co-production guarantees both an improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery – what Cabannes and Lipietz (2015, 2018) define ‘technocratic logics’ – and the achievement of social objectives of people’s empowerment and democratisation – what

Cabannes and Lipietz (*Ibidem*) define ‘political logics’. Co-management is a higher form of redistribution of power, involving citizens in the definition of roles and rules, i.e. in the governance, of collaboration.

This connection between collaboration, participation and power redistribution is an essential point in this theory to assess the potentialities of co-governance for the efficient management of common goods. In effect, “Ostrom demonstrated that the degree of inequality among individuals that should cooperate is one of the main factors limiting cooperation’s potentialities. Less inequality corresponds to more cooperation.” (Iaione, 2015, p. 34). Therefore, the redistribution of voice and power from public institutions to the community is essential to reduce inequalities. This, in turn, enhances cooperation. According to the economist Amartya Sen, it also provides the necessary factors for a real socio-economic well-being of the individual and of the community, represented by the individuals’ freedom to fully develop their capacities and by the “ethical and cultural bonds that link the individual to its community and create an atmosphere of freedom” (Sen, 1993, 2009, in Iaione, 2015, p. 47).

The actual redistribution of power in real-life civic collaboration can be measured using what Iaione (2015, pp. 68–72) calls ‘the gradient of subsidiarity’ (see Figure 3). Inspired by the Italian constitutional definition of subsidiarity as public authorities “favouring the autonomous initiative of single and associated citizens to carry out activities of general interest” (Article 118(4)), this gradient places on one side of the spectrum public authorities’ ‘favouring’, and on the other citizens’ ‘autonomous’ initiative. The different intensity of these two conditions produce different levels of horizontal subsidiarity. The *optimum* of subsidiarity is therefore a perfect balance between the two factors, where a real dialogue, a participatory-deliberative exchange and a process of empowerment are at the basis of a peer-to-peer alliance between institutions and citizens. The *sub-optimum* of subsidiarity is when public authorities delegate public functions or services to private actors, but in a collaborative and sharing spirit, using participatory methods and empowering techniques (unbalance towards the ‘autonomous’ end). Another situation of *sub-optimal* subsidiarity is whenever public institutions expect, require or impose collaboration to citizens, denying the crucial dimension of their responsible freedom (unbalance towards the ‘favouring’ end). The *zero-degree* of subsidiarity is when the public government is transformed into a form of self-government rejecting any relationship with the general community (complete skewing towards the ‘autonomous’ end) or, conversely, when a public government considers citizens as workers or financiers at their own disposal, asking them to fill its organisational or financial gaps (complete skewing towards the ‘favouring’ end).

Figure 3: The 'gradient of subsidiarity' (elaborated from Iaione, 2015)



Some critiques to co-governance come from both scholars and civil society organisations. The critiques are not much on the theory behind it, but on its actual application in Italian cities. Urban sociology and participative urbanism generally remain pretty sceptical about the contribution of the legal science (co-governance was firstly developed as a tool of administrative law) to support active citizenship. Their main claim is that laws and regulations tend to clip active citizens' wings, by weighing down spontaneous initiatives and movements 'from below' and imposing participation to compliant citizens (Mannarini, 2009 in Ciaffi, 2015). Selloni (2015) also highlights the risk of a drift from co-governance to citizens' exploitation and responsibilities-removal from the public and the third sector, while Ciaffi (2015) reports of many cases of so-called participatory regeneration processes lacking any will from public subjects to abdicate their authoritative role to take a peer-to-peer position with civil society and non-organised citizens.

Carlone (2022), giving voice to social movements, discusses how the municipality of Bologna, a pioneer in urban commons regeneration and collaborative governance, still presents many difficulties in playing its role of participation enabler and in integrating the instances coming from spontaneous citizen institutions in the city's political agenda. She adds that the institutionalised participation designed by the application of Labsus's *Regulation* (2022) resulted in a substantial exclusion of the less structured and institutionalised CSOs from the processes, and in a constriction of diversified experiences and instances into predefined administrative paths. These are the main critiques moved also by social movements as *D(i)ritti alla Città* ((St)R(a)ight to the City) (DAC, 2021), contesting the fact that what is participation in appearance results to be just a way to legitimise the administration's political addresses and interventions. In fact, they claim, there is no possibility for the civil society to intervene on the structure and methodologies of the participatory process, nor on the identification of the commons to regenerate or on the type of project to construct on them: participation is limited to very practical and limited aspects of a pre-determined 'regeneration' process (Comitato ESA, 2019; Boarelli, 2021).

### c) Theoretical frameworks : What kind of citizen participation in decision-making ?

“Participation” is a term used to describe a multiplicity of meanings and practices that can differ as much from one another as simple information from citizens’ self-organisation. This means that very different kinds of participation exist, as already mentioned when presenting Cabannes and Lipietz’s three competing logics (2015, 2018), as well as Cabannes’s grid to analyse PB experiences (2004) and Iaione’s ‘gradient of subsidiarity’ (Iaione, 2015). These kinds of participation are different in terms of the rationales behind them, their purposes, the nature of their objects, their practical functioning, and the actors they involve.

According to political approaches to participation, the real factor determining it is “the equalisation of power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors in formal or informal decision-making processes” (Carpentier, 2016, p. 72). This is substantially different from sociological approaches that see participation as having a double meaning: “It means both taking part, that is, acting so as to promote the interests and the needs of an actor as well as belonging to a system, identifying with the ‘general interests’ of the community.” (Melucci, 1989, p. 174 in Carpentier, 2016, p. 71).

I will first introduce one of the most famous categorisation of the kinds of participation based on a political approach, i.e. Arnstein’s ‘ladder of citizen participation’ (1969). Despite some aspects of this theory have been criticised since its publication, it still is a useful model to locate a wide variety of participatory experiences. The paragraph will be closed by the presentation of Wates’s ‘Participation matrix’ (2000), an operational tool that simplifies Arnstein’s ladder by focusing on the interactions between authorities and communities in the different steps of a single project.

#### ***The ladder of citizen participation***

As already mentioned, Sherry Arnstein’s theories are one of the most well-known examples of political approach to participation. Her iconic definition makes it clear :

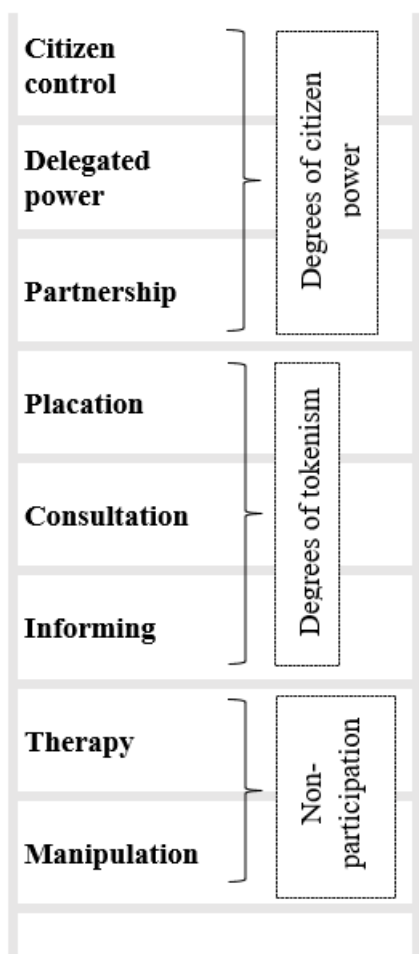
“[...] citizen participation is a categorical term for *citizen power*. It is the *redistribution of power* that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future. It is the strategy by which the have-nots join in determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parcelled out. In short, it is the means by which they can induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society.” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216; emphasis added)



The author further stresses the central role of redistribution of power to make sense of the whole participatory process, at least from the side of the ‘have-nots’, i.e. of the citizens that do not have social, economic or cultural resources and power to make their voice heard and/or concretely intervene in decision-making within their community :

“Participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the power holders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit.” (*Ibidem*).

Figure 4: *Eight Rungs on a Ladder of Citizen Participation* (Source : Arnstein, 1969, p.217)



Based on these premises, the author built a ‘ladder’ made up of eight consecutive rungs representing different levels of participation. The rungs move from the minimum level of participation – or, to say it with the author’s words, ‘nonparticipation’–, passing through three levels of ‘tokenism’, up to three maximum levels of participation, i.e. ‘citizen power’ (see Figure 4).

*Manipulation* (1) corresponds to the creation of citizen advisory committees without any real role out of being ‘educated’ and supporting powerholders’ decisions. *Therapy* (2) is performed when citizens are involved in activities that are not aimed at finding a solution to problems, but at reaching collective acceptance of the existing situation. In an approach where participation means redistribution of power, both these levels are considered as ‘nonparticipation’, as they do not imply any kind of empowerment of the have-nots.

*Informing* (3) is a one-way flow of information transferred from officials to citizens where the latter are pure

receptors of decisions taken from above and on which they cannot give feedback nor negotiate. *Consultation* (4) adds to information the possibility for citizens to express concerns and ideas (in oral or written form), but always in a pre-defined way and providing no guarantee that they will be taken into account in final decision-making. Just like the two preceding levels, *Placation* (5) is a form of ‘tokenism’, as even in this case the label of participation is used by powerholders to sit around a table with citizens without giving them any real power to intervene on decision-making. However, in this case citizens are called to advise or plan interventions for the common

good, but the legitimacy and/or feasibility of their advice, and therefore the final decision to take, is judged by powerholders.

The last three levels are labelled by Arnstein as ‘citizen power’, in that they are the only ones where an effective transfer of some degree of power from powerholders to have-nots actually happens. In *Partnership* (6), a negotiation between citizens and powerholders to share planning and decision-making responsibilities, without possibilities for unilateral change, allows for a certain level of redistribution of power. This can be favoured by a certain organisation of the power-base to which community leaders are accountable and by the presence of citizens’ leaders that are paid for their efforts and of technicians hired directly by organised citizens to help shape feasible and sustainable proposals. *Delegated power* (7) describes a situation where citizens obtain a dominant role and accountability in decision-making about a specific project or plan; in this case, powerholders need to start negotiating with citizens to ensure the respect of their own interests. In this kind of participation, citizens’ groups or committees are delegated power to plan specific (parts of) projects, generally under the formal framework of a contract defining agreed budget, program specifications and the specific powers that have been delegated to them. *Citizen control* (8) is the maximum level of ‘citizen power’ meaning that participants can govern a program without intermediaries between them and the source of funds, assuming the complete responsibility for policy and managerial aspects and being in the position to negotiate the conditions for outsiders to change them. Whenever the final approval rests in the hands of powerholders (e.g. the public authorities providing funds), it is not possible to talk about citizen control.

It is worth noting that Arnstein (1969) warns from the risks hidden in both sides of the ladder : if Manipulation is described as a distortion of participation into a “public relations vehicle by powerholders” (*Ivi*, p. 218), arguments against Citizen control are the risks of separatism, inefficiency, “minority group ‘hustlers’ [...] just as opportunistic and disdainful of the have-nots as their [...] predecessors” and lack of correspondence between the control gained and the actual economic resources available.

Arnstein’s contribution to the political approach to participation as power has been seminal and is still the reference for scholars approaching participation issues. However, limits of this theory have been shown both by the author in the same article and, during the more than fifty years that separate us from its publication, by many social scientists. They criticised and reviewed the ‘ladder’ to describe ever-changing and always-more complex participatory processes (Collins and Ison, 2009; Carpentier, 2016; Varwell, 2022).

The main critical points reported by Collins and Ison (2009) are that : (1) “participation is assumed to be hierarchical in nature with citizen control held up as the ‘goal’ of participation”, which is not always “participants’ own reasons for engaging in decision-making processes” (Ivi, p. 361); (2) the linear character of the ladder, not accounting for inconstancy of policy problems nor for the different levels and types of participation that can be necessary to cope with them; (3) “Arnstein’s ladder suggests that roles and responsibilities change only in relation to changing levels of power”, whereas “more complex set of relationships [...] exist in many ongoing participatory situations, where roles are less easy to define and responsibilities emerge during, and as a consequence of, the participatory process itself” (Ivi, p.362); (4) the lack of context of Arnstein’s notion of participation, which makes it difficult to make sense of the context in which the ladder is used; (5) the lack of insights on how to progress participation as a collective process between all the participating actors when dealing with highly contested or undefined issues; (6) the conception of power as a commodity (held by one actor or the other) used by Arnstein conflicts with other views that consider power as relational, “as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain [...], never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth” (Foucault, 1980 in Ibidem).

### ***The Participation matrix***

As explained until here, different levels of power redistribution tend to correspond to different levels of citizens’ involvement in institutional projects and processes. Wates (2000) proposes an operational classification describing some of the rungs of Arnstein’s ‘ladder of citizen participation’ through the level of community involvement in the subsequent stages of a project (Table 2).

We leave aside the theoretical and conceptual dissertation that could be done about the fact that Wates uses the terms participation and community involvement as interchangeable and the consequent differences that this can determine in the corresponding notions. What matters to our purpose is that he categorises the levels of community involvement in Information, Consultation, Partnership and Self Help (Community Control), making explicit reference to Arnstein’s ladder. The table is aimed at schematising “how different levels of participation are appropriate at different stages of a project”, while the shaded areas underline where most community planning operates (Wates, 2000, p. 10). According to Wates, the crucial point for ensuring good and participatory community planning is that a partnership is built between authorities and community to jointly plan and design interventions (the dark purple area in the

matrix). Less importance is given to the actor who initiates the action, while some form of collaboration is necessary in the last two stages, either as joint implementation and maintenance or as implementation and maintenance by authorities supported by community consultation (*Ibidem*).

Table 2: Participation matrix (Source : Wates, 2000, p. 10)

|                                       |   | <b>Project stages</b>                                  |   |   |  |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
|                                       |   | <b>Initiate</b>  | <b>Plan</b>                                     | <b>Implement</b>                                  | <b>Maintain</b>                                  |
| <b>Level of community involvement</b> | <b>Self Help</b><br>Community control                                 | Community initiates action alone                       | Community plans alone                           | Community implements alone                        | Community maintains alone                        |
|                                       | <b>Partnership</b><br>Shared working and decision making              | Authorities & community jointly initiate action        | Authorities & community jointly plan and design | Authorities & community Jointly implement         | Authorities & community jointly maintain         |
|                                       | <b>Consultation</b><br>Authorities ask community for opinions         | Authorities initiate action after consulting community | Authorities plan after consulting community     | Authorities Implement with community consultation | Authorities maintain with community consultation |
|                                       | <b>Information</b><br>One way flow of information<br>Public relations | Authorities initiate action                            | Authorities plan and design alone               | Authorities implement alone                       | Authorities maintain alone                       |

The perspective in Wates’ ‘participation matrix’ (Wates, 2000, p. 10) is not a theoretical one, but an operational one to support professionals and public officers to manage community planning projects in a context where funding and accountability are detained by local (public) authorities. The matrix is introductory to a practical guide to support community planning from the point of view of principles and methodology, and aims at underlining the extreme importance of this stage of the project.

Both Arnstein’s ladder (1969) and Wates’s matrix (2000) consider a context where the only two existing actors are the government (‘the public’) and citizens. When other actors are at play in influencing decision making, such as the market, economic lobbies, the third sector, or others, the situation is more complex, and reducing it to a balance of power between public authorities and ‘citizens’ can be too simplistic. Arnstein’s and Wates’s works were written respectively more than 50 and 20 years ago : although they still represent a reference for the analysis of citizen participation, they need to be translated into the more complex reality of today’s world, as for example re-interpreting them in light of the quintuple helix model (Iaione and De Nictolis, 2016). However, it is interesting to note that even Arena and Iaione (2015), talking about

contemporary governance in Italy and despite starting from a quintuple helix model, in the end define an essentially bipolar ‘gradient of subsidiarity’ to measure the balance between public authorities’ and citizens’ action.

#### **d) Methodology of the research**

This section presents how the methodology of case-study research and the specific case to analyse have been chosen, as well as the design on which the research work is structured.

The research stems from the author’s interest in getting a better understanding of the clash between the existence of long-dated institutional participatory processes and the persistence of hard opposition between local administrations and social movements in some cities in Emilia-Romagna region (Italy). Considering participatory processes going on since more than a decade (and in some cases since several decades) and being continuously sponsored by left-wing local administrations as the distinctive quality label of their territorial policy making, questions arise around the actual aims of these processes, as well as around who really takes advantage from them and in what way.

After a quite extended preliminary research involving literature review, participation to civil society assemblies and a couple of exploratory interviews, the following general research questions emerged:

- Why did municipalities decide to formalise and support processes of citizen participation in decision-making over time?
- How has participation been understood and implemented in these institutional processes according to their different purposes?
- Has the existence of long-lasting formalised participatory projects changed participating citizens’ power and relationship with the Municipality in these cities, and how?

The preliminary research confirmed that my research questions could be adequately addressed using a descriptive case study, as (1) they were “how” or “why” questions, (2) I had little or no control over behavioural events, and (3) my focus of study was a contemporary phenomenon – a “case” (Yin, 2018). Moreover, my intention was to understand a complex social phenomenon as citizen participation in local decision-making and to focus in-depth on the “case” of institutional participatory projects using a holistic and real-world perspective, two more conditions that, according to Yin (*Ivi*), strengthen the preference for case-study research.

The literature review suggested some theoretical guidelines to orientate my research, mainly the concept of participation as power (Arnstein, 1969; Cabannes and Lipietz, 2015, 2018), typical of a political approach, and the acknowledgement of the possible coexistence of various aims and levels of participation in different phases and actors within the same process (Wates, 2000; Arena and Iaione, 2015; Cabannes and Lipietz, 2015, 2018). The applicability of the categories proposed by the studied authors, namely Cabannes and Lipietz's (2015, 2018) 'three competing logics', Iaione's (2015) 'gradient of subsidiarity', and Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation' – and its operationalisation in the 'participation matrix' by Wates (2000) – to answer 'why' and 'how' questions about participatory processes in Emilia-Romagna cities constitute therefore the theoretical proposition structuring the research.

An embedded single-case study design, studying the succession of participatory projects in one city, was chosen. This was motivated both by methodological considerations, as the longitudinal nature of the analysis can be adequately captured by a single-case study, and by practical reasons, namely the limited time and resources available not allowing for the extensive analysis of multiple cases.

Moreover, a relativist-constructivist approach seemed to be the best epistemological orientation to answer my research questions. "Captur[ing] the perspectives of different participants and focusing on [...] their different meanings" (Yin, 2018, p. 47) is crucial to illuminate the different reasons and objectives behind institutional participatory processes, as well as their meaning and the change they generate in the relationship between local administration and citizens. The different perspectives could therefore be analysed through the combination of official documentation about institutional participatory processes and different participants' points of view on their actual implementation.

Once this general research design was set down, I screened potential cases to study through my research. As already mentioned, my initial orientation in the choice of the case to study was to work on cities in Emilia-Romagna, a region traditionally characterised by left-wing, progressive administrations with an orientation towards social issues, and by a very strong third sector. Nevertheless, the region has been touched in the last decades by an important shift towards privatisation and a retraction of the Welfare state for budgetary as well as political reasons. The selection of the case study was based on a one-phased approach. I collected some information on participatory projects in the main cities of the region and the choice of Reggio Emilia as the territory to analyse was determined by the lack of previous academic research of this kind (differently, for example, from the much more studied case of Bologna) and by the availability of data sources both through the municipal website and through my knowledge of the local

context. Having chosen a single-case study design, these considerations were enough to orientate my choice towards this case.

This case study can therefore be defined as ‘the institutional participatory projects promoted by the municipality of Reggio Emilia on the whole municipal territory between 2008 and 2023’. Collecting the point of view of ‘citizens’, as well as assessing the changes generated by the projects on the relationship between the administration and the ‘local population’, would require the integration of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies and the availability of resources well beyond the scope of this dissertation. Therefore, the research focuses on the points of view of some municipal representatives and active citizens that have participated in at least one of the projects in the period under study. The case is analysed as an embedded case study where, within the above-mentioned case, three different projects are analysed as sub-cases :

- i. *“I Reggiani per esempio”* (“Reggio Emilia people, for example”) (2008-2013)
- ii. *“QUA - Quartiere bene comune”* (“HERE - Neighbourhood as a common good”) – 1st edition (2014-2019) and 2nd edition (2020-2024)
- iii. *Consulte Territoriali* (Territorial Advisory Councils) (2023 – 2027).

The general research questions mentioned above were reviewed to better fit with the selected case study as follows :

- Why did the municipality of Reggio Emilia decide to formalise and support projects for citizen participation in decision-making over the past 15 years?
- How has participation been understood and implemented by the municipality of Reggio Emilia in the past 15 years, and how did this evolve through the different projects?
- Has the long-lasting existence of institutional participatory projects changed participating citizens’ power and their relationship with the Municipality over the past 15 years, and how?

Data has been collected from three main kind of sources :

- Documentation, namely the regulatory frameworks and the final reports (where available) of the participatory projects under analysis. Most of these documents are available online, while some were provided by municipal offices as they exist only in printed form (especially the ones concerning the first project);
- Semi-structured interviews with 6 municipal officers (5 with technical and 1 with political roles) that followed the projects with different roles and 9 representatives of

the civil society (4 from the organised civil society and 5 from the non-organised civil society) that actively participated in one or more of the projects under analysis (see Annex I). Interviewees were chosen through a snowball effect but trying to diversify their profiles as much as possible in order to obtain the widest possible variety of points of view;

- Direct observation of one open meeting with citizens and two public plenaries of the Territorial Advisory Councils. The meeting with citizens was the introductory one to present the Territorial Council and collect the first proposals from the people. The two plenaries were chosen as they were the final ones conducting to the redaction and approval of the Territorial Plan. My participation in the meeting has been of pure observation. However, some chats with the participants before and after the meetings also provided some interesting insights.

The collected data have been organised in a table (see Annex II) helping to recompose the mosaic of information obtained through the different sources both for descriptive and for analytical purposes. The analysis was performed studying data both horizontally (i.e. crossing different sources on the same project) and vertically (i.e. comparing information about the different projects). Pattern matching was later used to make sense of the findings, by verifying the applicability of the analytic categories suggested by the theories presented in paragraphs b) and c) of this chapter to answer the research questions.





## 2. INSTITUTIONAL PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES IN REGGIO EMILIA

Reggio Emilia is a middle-size city of around 170,000 inhabitants (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2021b) lying in Emilia-Romagna region, in northern Italy. Being the capital of the homonymous province, this municipality attracts workers and visitors from the surrounding municipalities, being at the centre of the well-connected provincial territory that is characterised by a plain countryside northwards (Padana plain) and by hills and mountains southwards (Appennini mountains). The municipal territory is crossed on the East-West directory by the Emilia street, that connects all the main cities of the region, and whose path is followed by one of the main highways in Italy (connecting Milan and Bologna) and by both the low and high-speed railway. These mobility axes are important territorial landmarks, determining a higher density of residential neighbourhoods and hamlets around the Emilia street and a higher economic and commercial development of the northern area of the city, hosting a high-speed train station serving different provinces, and the highway exit.

Reggio Emilia, together with the surrounding cities of Modena and Parma, produces 42% of the added value of the industrial and manufactural system in the region, and 33% of the totality of enterprises (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022a). The average income in Reggio Emilia in 2015 was of around €30,000 per year, higher than the regional (€22,870 per year in 2017) and the national one (€20,670 in 2017). However, this wealth is not equally shared among the different age and social classes, as the average income of the range 16-34 years old is €16,435 per year, and 31.3% of the taxpayers declare an income of less than €15,000 (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2021b). Its population is slightly decreasing, especially concerning foreigners, and is growing old, with a 10% increase in the people aged more than 80 and a 20% decrease of the population aged less than 6 years old (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022a). Foreign citizens are still 16.77% of the total population of Reggio Emilia, a by far larger percentage than in the whole Emilia-Romagna region (12.3%) and in the whole country (8.7%) (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2021b).

Reggio Emilia has a tradition of leftist municipal administrations. In fact, the city was always governed by the communist party since the beginning of the Republican era in 1946 until 2004, when *La Margherita* coalition first and, since 2009, the Democratic Party gathered the heritage of both the communist, socialist and catholic left-wing parties in a large centre-leftist party of social democratic, progressist inspiration. This tradition left a strong heritage in the socio-economic composition of the city, characterised by a massive presence of cooperatives (both in the productive sector and in the management of public and private social services), by hundreds of associations (active in the fields of social assistance, culture, sports, leisure activities,

environmental activities, etc) and by 27 social centres (managed by local associations or affiliated to national networks – as ARCI) representing active aggregation points that are well-rooted in the neighbourhoods.

Since around 15 years, the municipality of Reggio Emilia holds at the centre of its national and international communication strategy its innovative approach for children education, its high standards of living, its engagement for the provision of diffused and accessible public services and its tradition of civic participation through the slogan “Reggio Emilia, the city of the people”.

The municipality of Reggio Emilia was chosen as the case study for this research on institutional participatory processes in cities. This choice was driven by the fact that it is a middle-size city that, since at least 15 years, has been investing in institutional projects aimed at involving citizens in the definition and realisation of local actions to take care of common goods and to improve their quality of life at the neighbourhood level (and, in some cases, at the city level). The three projects analysed on this research present some significant differences, caused by the succession of mayors and municipal councils, the evolution of needs and the methodological adaptation through a learning-by-doing approach. Nevertheless, important lines of continuity can be traced, sketching a quite coherent, continuous and evolutive process. As stated by Testa, Berni and Santangelo,

“many cities that, starting from the new millennium, had undertaken an innovation process inspired by a smart city paradigm with an accentuated digital characterization, [...] have today updated their strategies towards more collaborative governance of the city and a more welfare-oriented model. [...] Reggio Emilia has attempted to decline these tools by integrating them within an already tested urban strategy, based on civic collaboration and on the collective governance of the city as a common good” (2022, pp. 1024–1025).

The good knowledge of the context by the researcher was an additional positive factor that made the collection of data and the direct contact with municipal and citizens representatives easier and more effective.

The research analyses three main projects : *I reggiani per esempio* (‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’) that took place between 2008 and 2013 (paragraph a); *QUA – Quartiere bene comune* (‘HERE – Neighbourhood as a common good’) that, after a first successful edition in the period 2014-2019, was proposed in a second edition starting from 2020 and until the end of the current municipal term in 2024 (paragraph b); and the *Consulte Territoriali* (Territorial Advisory Councils) formed in early 2023 and whose mandate will end in 2027 (paragraph c). In the municipal vision, this 15-years process started from mapping the experiences of civic engagement existing in the city, going through the strengthening of local networks for the co-

design and co-realisation of operational solutions to neighbourhood's needs and the preservation of common goods, to arrive to the formation of elected councils bringing the voice of the citizens up to the policy-making phase. It is worth saying that these projects are not the only fields where the municipality of Reggio Emilia has adopted participatory approaches in needs analysis and in the definition of interventions, as similar processes are now used by different departments (e.g. health, intercultural policies, education, etc). However, in these cases participants are only practitioners or experts in the specific field under discussion, with no place for common citizens. Therefore, these three projects were chosen as the main experiences of participation open even to common citizens, voluntary associations and informal groups.

In the next paragraphs the projects are explained in detail, while Chapter 3 will be devoted to analysing them through the analytical lenses introduced in Chapter 1.

#### **a) *'I reggiani per esempio'* project (2008-2013)**

*I reggiani per esempio* ('Reggio Emilia people, for example') is considered by this research as the first project promoted by the municipality of Reggio Emilia and aimed at supporting citizen participation at the local level. A concomitant experience of participatory budgeting was done in 2007-2008, but it involved only a few neighbourhoods of the city and was never repeated again. Therefore, it is not analysed in this research.

The project was conceived in two moments: the first part (phase 1) was launched at the end of the first term of Mayor Delrio (2004-2009) and, following his re-election, it was given continuity and diffused at the national and international level through phases 2, 3 and 4 during Mayor Delrio's second term (2009-2013).

The official objectives of 'Reggio Emilia people, for example' are stated in a strategic document published in 2011 as

“to support and enhance the activism and protagonist role of citizens in the direction of that form of horizontal subsidiarity sanctioned by article 118 of the Italian Constitution. Horizontal subsidiarity understood as public and not private, as sharing of objectives and needs, participation in public policies, collaboration, mutual trust and not as abdication of institutional roles and responsibilities. With the 'Reggio Emilia people, for example' project, the Municipality initially wanted to bring order and enhance the forms of subsidiarity already present in the area, to then stimulate the involvement of the organized and non-organised community in the realization of public policy objectives.” (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2011b, p. 4).

Moreover, the project was seen as a crucial contribution to the Mayor's vision and effort to put together again the pact between public administration and social networks of citizens looking for 'a way to be a community', as none of the actors can achieve this challenge alone (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2011a). The enhancement and strengthening of social capital is seen as crucial to support this effort:

"The diffusion of the orientation that sees social capital as a moral horizon considering the others as values and not as useful resources is what transforms a collective group of individuals into a community" (*Ibidem*, p.16).

However, and leaving aside for a moment political rhetoric, the 'Reggio Emilia people, for example' project was also implemented as

"a way to build an organic vision of the relationships between the municipal administration and the local civil society. There was a need to rationalize the economic engagement between the municipality, donors and organised civil society, as every department had its own relationships in its specific field of intervention, multiplying communication channels, planning efforts and focal points between local associations and different municipal departments. For the administration, this was a waste of economic and relational resources." (Interviewee 5).

The project paved the way for a more organic vision where the different social needs and third-sector interventions on the ground could be read as an interconnected process and supported through a call for proposals where local associations could merge their different fields of work in one structured project and deal with a single municipal counterpart.

This was done through a four-phase project (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2011b):

- *Phase 1* (2008-2009) was about *mapping* social capital by inviting citizens to spontaneously share good news, self-narratives of positive experiences of mutual aid and solidarity that they knew or participated in. More than 300 experiences were collected in a publication called "Good stories. Experiences of solidarity, social responsibility and active citizenship in Reggio Emilia" (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2011a) and diffused through local mass media and public events;
- *Phase 2* (2010-2012) supported the *design* of actions for the common good. This was done through the concrete promotion of the empowerment of intermediate bodies and the active citizenship of individual citizens who were called to present ideas and project proposals to collaborate in achieving local government objectives. Two public tenders were launched: in the first one (for years 2010-11) 175 proposals (40% of the 439 proposals received) were funded, while in the second one (2012) the funds went to 97 proposals (38% of the 253 proposals received);

- *Phase 3* (2011-2013), partially overlapping with phase 2, was dedicated to the *promotion of individual volunteering* in favour of the civic engagement experiences and civil society organisations mapped during phase 1. The aim was to extend the already existing ‘Youth Leverage’, proposing volunteering to people aged 15-29 years old, to the whole population by launching a ‘Civic Leverage’ involving citizens up to 99 years old. More than 600 people adhered to the project and offered their time to contribute to civil society initiatives at the local level;
- *Phase 4* (2011-2015) *exported the active citizenship model* developed with ‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ to the national and European level. The project was the model for similar experiences in other Italian cities, in the Emilia-Romagna region and in four European cities thanks to the project ‘Euforex - Europeans, for example’.

The civic initiatives mapped in phase 1 addressed such a wide span of fields of intervention as: children education, women’s rights, care of the elderly, support to people in a condition of high fragility and marginality, human rights, intercultural activities and services for immigrant people, activities with people with physical or mental illness, addiction, disabilities, prisoners, and young people, environmental preservation, workers’ rights, arts, culture and local history, and leisure activities (sports, fun, social centres, parishes, neighbourhoods) (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2011a). This extreme variety of activities was organised in four main objectives for the projects to be supported with the calls for proposals: 1) living a peaceful life (elderly, disabled, families, children, interculture, urban safety); 2) providing a good cultural and educational offer (culture, theatre); 3) living in a city that looks to the future (enhancement of the historical centre, aggregation and entertainment in some neighbourhoods and hamlets, touristic promotion of the city); 4) moving better (sustainable mobility – home-to-school route, carpooling) (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2010).

As presented above, the project saw large participation from citizens and civil society organisations, in line with the historical associative and cooperative tradition of the city, and managed to reach very different age groups. Associations and non-for-profit organizations, ecclesial and moral entities and informal groups of residents were the main targets of the call for proposals, while ¼ of the budget was reserved for projects presented by sports associations and schools (*Ivi*). The total budget available for the first call was of €800,000, while for the second call €400,000 were allocated (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2013).

Analysing the ‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ project as described above, someone might claim that it cannot be properly considered as a participatory project *stricto sensu*. The concrete output of the project was essentially the realisation of initiatives in the neighbourhoods planned

and implemented by coalitions of civil society actors and financially supported by the administration, in a quite traditional way.

However, it was included in the research as it was the first step undertaken by the municipality to pave the way for a more active participation of citizens in local governance, and to recognize that

“on the one hand, it is unthinkable to find solutions [to the complex challenges of our society, ed.] out of the institutions of democracy and of the welfare state; on the other hand, is illusory to leave this responsibility and burden solely to them. Citizens’ contribution is fundamental, both as social capital entrepreneurs and as “ordinary” contributors [...]” (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2011a, p. 20).

In other words, as explained by a municipal representative directly involved in the project,

“‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ calls sought to reason on defined public policy objectives while trying to leave civil society organisations free to hybridize the solutions and project proposals with which to achieve these objectives. It was the first attempt to break the municipal reasoning by sectors of intervention and to think in terms of rationalization and common planning. It was a sort of great ante-litteram co-design.” (Interviewee 5).

#### **b) ‘*QUA - Quartiere bene comune*’ project (2014-2019 and 2020-2024)**

*QUA - Quartiere bene comune* (‘HERE – Neighbourhood as a common good’, hereby called *HERE*) is a project aimed at the application of the homonymous working protocol regulating the

“forms of collaboration between citizens and the administration for the care of the city and of the community, which develop within the participatory processes envisaged within the policies for responsible citizenship and the smart city” (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2017, art. 1(1)).

This protocol has been the basis for two seasons of municipal projects (corresponding to the two terms of Mayor Vecchi) aimed at realising a model of collaborative city – or Co-city (Iaione, 2016) – and of urban co-governance. This, according to the official municipal intentions, meant giving the local community a protagonist role during the whole life-cycle of the interventions in the neighbourhoods (from problem analysis to final evaluation) and applying the collaborative protocol in different fields of policy-making to make citizens’ needs and participation a crucial criterion for intervention and allocation of resources. This, in turn,

was supposed to give a strategic approach to collaborative practices (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2019).

The two seasons of the project had similar objectives and were based on a very similar regulatory framework, but they also presented some differences due to the adjustment of the second edition of the project based on the experience and tools acquired during its first edition. I will first introduce the general framework of the HERE projects, to focus at the end of the paragraph on the differences between them and the ‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ project, as well as between the first and the second edition of HERE.

The elaboration of the HERE protocol in 2014-15 was motivated by different drivers:

- A *demand for participation* in decision-making and in the preservation and enhancement of material and immaterial common goods coming from active citizens (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2020);
- The local administration’s *duty to favour and support citizen participation*, in compliance with Article 118(4) of the Italian Constitution concerning horizontal subsidiarity, in order to maximise its potential of modernisation of public administrations by enhancing their institutional capacity to give efficient and effective answers to people’s needs and civic rights enjoyment (*Ivi*);
- The local administration’s *need to find a new way to build relationships* with their citizens and between centre and periphery after the abolition of *circoscrizioni*<sup>3</sup> (municipal districts) for cities under 250,000 inhabitants in 2010. *Circoscrizioni* had always been very important points of reference for the people in Reggio Emilia, as they were an easy access point to the administration for reclamations, proposals, and active engagement. This role was facilitated by their physical presence in the neighbourhoods, the fact that they were composed by ordinary residents and that they had their own budget to respond locally to people’s solicitations (Interviewees 5, I, II, III, V).

Confronted with these challenges, the municipality decided to experiment a new model based on shared responsibility to manage the relationship with their citizens at the neighbourhood level. The municipal objective, by implementing the HERE protocol, was therefore to apply the constitutional principle of horizontal subsidiarity in a more ‘functional’ way, avoiding its

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<sup>3</sup> *Circoscrizioni* are municipal administrative districts aimed at enabling citizen participation, consultation and basic services management at the sub-urban level. *Circoscrizioni* are established through the election (open to all the residents of the district) of a council and represented by a president. They manage a budget for the provision of the services under their responsibility according to the municipal regulations. With the law 191/2009, Article 2(186b) (the financial law for 2010), they were suppressed for all the municipalities with less than 250,000 inhabitants (Camera dei deputati, 2021).



translation into a multiplicity of punctual and scattered requests and proposals addressed to the central municipal offices that are hard to manage and to prioritise. This was done by offering a regulation supporting the development of networks and forms of governance at the neighbourhood level allowing for the negotiation of local priorities. Participating citizens and civil society organisations were therefore supposed to come up with an agreement on common proposals representing the priority actions in their territorial unit for which they asked the municipal support (Interviewees 2 and 5).

This was done through the introduction of ‘Citizenship Workshops’, i.e. the processes based on the principles of participation, loyal collaboration and deliberative democracy through which the administration and active citizens develop projects of social innovation at the neighbourhood level in one specific territorial area. Through these processes, shared responsibilities are taken by both actors and formalised through the signature of ‘Citizenship Agreements’. The latter are formal documents that define the reciprocal engagements taken by the administration and the participating civil society (organised and non-organised citizens), and are signed by all the involved subjects. They contain a common reading of the territorial context, the identification of common objectives and the formalisation of engagements and responsibilities connected with the initiatives to implement, including tools and spaces to share and financial resources to manage. The municipality usually offers funding for current expenses and logistical and coordination support, while participating citizens and associations offer material resources, spaces, skills, and volunteers for the realisation of the projects (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2017, 2021a).

As already mentioned, the two main actors involved in the HERE project (and protocol) are (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2017, 2019):

- The *municipal administration*, represented by its political and administrative branches involved in the co-design process because of their specific competencies. A new professional role was defined within the local administration, the Neighbourhood Architect, whose task is to strengthen active citizenship and local ecosystems by playing a role of mediator in the conflicts emerging in this process and of generator of solutions and innovative project ideas. The specificity of this role is given by its temporal and spatial flexibility and innovative working methodologies, actively moving its activity in the territorial areas of reference to meet the people and understand network dynamics

and needs in their local contexts. The only municipal representatives allowed to sign the Agreements, however, are the Mayor or a delegated alderman or alderwoman;

- The so-called '*protagonist citizens*', meaning individuals and citizens taking part in social aggregations that engage in taking care of the city and of the communities in the city neighbourhoods and hamlets. The right to sign Citizenship Agreements is restricted to citizens having residence or conducting proven activities in the territorial area concerned by the Agreement, and to the legal representatives of associations and groups having operational headquarters and operating in the same area. The representatives of public and private institutions or organisations are fully entitled to participate in the project, provided the structure they represent is active in the territorial area object of the Agreement. The residents of territorial areas not concerned by the Agreement can participate to and intervene in Citizenship Workshops, but they cannot sign the final document.

Citizenship Workshops are structured into four main phases (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2017, 2019, 2020):

- *Phase 1*: this phase is aimed at *co-defining needs and instances* of the neighbourhood that are not addressed by traditional municipal interventions and public services provision. This is done by listening to people's needs and proposals and trying to balance and cross them with the Neighbourhood Architects' reading of the neighbourhood specificities. The Architects, through the dialogue with the civil society organisations and the single citizens participating in the workshops, try to translate the different priority needs emerged from this analytic phase into possible solutions, by composing organic projects based on the collaboration of multi-actor networks and on innovation;
- *Phase 2*: this phase is aimed at *co-designing* new policy solutions that can more effectively address the identified territorial needs and instances. This is coordinated by the Neighbourhood Architects, who discuss the proposals emerging from the Workshops with the internal administration services to evaluate their technical and economic feasibility, their relevance and their coherence with policy objectives. On the basis of this negotiation with municipal services, the Architects prepare a draft of Citizenship Agreement. This draft is shared with the participating citizens before official approval,

using participatory and deliberative procedures to reach the widest possible adhesion to the proposal;

- *Phase 3*: this phase concerns *making mutual commitments* as defined in the Citizenship Agreement. The municipal administration states its commitment through the approval of the Citizenship Agreement by means of a Municipal Council resolution. Citizens and associations, on the other hand, sign it in an official public moment. At this point, the Agreement becomes part of the municipal planning to ensure its viability and concrete feasibility within the various policy programs;
- *Phase 4*: this final phase includes the *co-management, co-monitoring and co-evaluation* of the Agreement. This phase is constantly coordinated by Neighbourhood Architects. They make sure that the different actors engaged in the Agreement implement the agreed interventions in collaboration with the other partners, and guarantee the provision of material and logistical support by the municipality. During the management phase, the indicators agreed and established in a collaborative manner within the Agreement are constantly measured by the subjects implementing the interventions to allow for a final evaluation and reporting of the achieved results. Co-evaluation occurs at different levels: indicators of result on the users of every intervention on the ground, the achievement of the expected results for each territorial area, and the level of success of the whole participatory policy.

Once one Agreement is concluded by reporting the results achieved, the cycle of participatory co-design, co-planning, co-managing, co-monitoring, and co-evaluation starts again. This can require the elaboration, signature, implementation and evaluation of a new Citizenship Agreement, or the renewal of the previous one.

Similar processes can be activated in the framework of Urban Workshops, involving more than one territorial area or the whole city to deal with issues concerning wider territories and communities (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2017, art. 7(b,c) and 2(1h), 2021a).

The municipal administration invested in the HERE protocol as a way to involve citizens in the co-management of public affairs, where

“Public affairs in this case are represented by the territorial area in which citizens live their active and affective lives. We imagined that this could be considered as a common good not in a physical sense but in a more value-based, metaphysical sense. However, it also has physical manifestations, as the quality of life in a neighbourhood is not made up of utopian ideals but of concrete things. The neighbourhood becomes a common good when its residents, collaborating with the

administration, can impact on the quality of life in it from the point of view of both caring for the people and caring for the territory” (Interviewee 5).

Therefore, the projects realised through the HERE protocol relate to two different categories (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2017, 2019, 2021a):

- Projects aimed at *caring for the community*: interventions aimed at improving the provision of human services, and at expanding initiatives offering people with different needs greater opportunities for sociality, education, creativity, access to knowledge, well-being, sports activity, and integration between cultures and worldviews. The involvement of the final users of the interventions is favoured by the administration in this field, to improve their contribution to the general interest through the production of material, immaterial and digital commons;
- Projects aimed at *caring for the city*: interventions aimed at the protection, conservation, maintenance and accessibility of physical spaces considered as commons (parks, squares, streets, etc), but also at the promotion of social agriculture and of the natural and historical value of places. The interventions on public assets, spaces and buildings can be proposed both by the administration and by citizens, and can have different intensity: occasional care, constant and continuous care, shared management, regeneration and reuse.

In the framework of the two editions of QUA, protagonist citizens’ participation in the neighbourhoods has been sought through different means of communication. The municipality invested in online channels as the institutional website and social media pages, as well as in offline communication methods as posters in the streets, flyers and word-of-mouth supported by local aggregation structures as the social centres (Interviewee 2).

The first edition of the project saw the signature of 27 Citizenship Agreements and the implementation of 163 initiatives. A budget of around €800,000 was spent by the Policy Structure for Participation Policies afferent to the Department of Housing and Participation to implement them, in addition to the budget spent by other municipal departments for maintenance interventions urged by the Neighbourhood Architects (Interviewee 5). 1,540 people participated to the different Workshops’ meetings (around 30 participants/meeting). 988 participants were individual citizens participating as volunteers (0,59% of the total resident population) and 552 were CSOs representatives (35,84% of the contacted associations). More than 50% of the total participants in the Workshops (33% of the single citizens and 78% of the associations) signed the Agreements, showing a pretty high empowerment rate, understood as the capacity of transforming dialogue and negotiation into concrete collaborations on the

ground. The users of the common goods, spaces and services made available and accessible through the first edition of the HERE project were around 14,000 (8,2% of the total residents) (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2019).

The second edition has seen a slightly higher budget devoted to the HERE project within the Policy Structure for Participation Policies. The budget has been in general equally split among the different territorial areas, even if some differences in the final allocation can be found in reason of the different quantity and expensiveness of the implemented initiatives (Interviewee 5). The data for the evaluation of the second edition of the project are currently being collected, therefore it is not possible to give precise information about them in this text.

After this overview on the two editions of the ‘Neighbourhood as a common good’ project, some considerations about the differences between them and the ‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ project can be made.

The motivations behind the promotion of the two projects are the first point of discontinuity. Despite a common vision concerning the importance of finding direct and functional channels for the municipal administration to discuss and plan together with citizens, ‘Neighbourhood as a common good’ was built as a possible solution to a problem that did not even exist when the previous project was launched: the elimination of the municipal districts (*circostrizioni*) and the consequent loss of the main link in the civic participation chain. At the same time, the literature on shared administration, horizontal subsidiarity, and collaborative governance saw its main development in the early 2010s in Italy, paving the way for forms of administrative experimentation and citizenship agreements (Interviewee 5).

This explains the main novelty of HERE compared to the previous project: the transition from a relationship where the civil society was a mere beneficiary of municipal communication and funding opportunities to a relationship based on co-design and shared responsibilities, where the civil society is an active subject in the discussion and implementation of interventions at the neighbourhood level. This also required an adaptation of the administrative structure to provide for the necessary internal and external communication channels to support this relationship. A municipal office delegated to participation with a specific budget was established after 2014, as well as internal working tables gathering together the local public services to coordinate their actions for the care for the community and for the city. The creation of the new professional role of the Neighbourhood Architect, managing the coordination of the whole collaborative

process, was also an innovation not only in Reggio Emilia, but on the national administrative scene (Berni, 2021).

Finally, a geographical division of the municipal territory was studied to put into practice the participative protocol. 18 neighbourhoods and hamlets were identified as the territorial units on which the projects and networks were built (plus the historical city centre in which the work was conducted differently, given its importance for the whole city) (see Figure 5).

As already mentioned, the two editions of the ‘Neighbourhood as a common good’ project presented very similar objectives, functioning, participating actors and contents, but also some important differences.

In terms of objectives, the second edition of HERE was oriented towards a stronger attention to experimental projects not included in traditional policy planning and capable to identify highly innovative and sustainable solutions (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2021a). Moreover, while the first edition was launched as an experiment of new collaborative models, in the second edition the administration sought to consolidate the working and collaborative procedures that were evaluated as functional, and to adjust the aspects that needed some improvement.

In this sense, one easily remarkable difference concerns the organisation of the municipal territory in territorial units: the 18+1 neighbourhoods of 2014-2019 were replaced by 8+1 territorial areas, each containing several neighbourhoods and hamlets (55 in total) (see Figure 6). This choice was driven by the need to synchronise the Citizenship Workshops and the interventions in contiguous neighbourhoods, and by the willingness to give a more strategic role to the collaborative action, working on wider areas to test the protocol on the challenges of more complex systems (*Ivi*).

A ‘Territorial atlas’ for each of the 8 areas was developed, performing a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the demographic, social and economic characteristics of each of them to identify some priorities and potentialities based on a desk review (using data collected by

different municipal services). Territorial atlases are now the basis for discussion in phase 1 of the Citizenship Workshops (Interviewee 2).

Finally, while the first edition was focused on the co-governance of small interventions concerning specifically the neighbourhood community, the second edition had a wider scope, covering four areas of co-design (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2021a):

1. *Spaces and parks as common goods*: co-design of activities of preservation and cultural and environmental regeneration of four ancient buildings and the surrounding parks placed in the outskirts of the city;
2. *Community spaces and networks*: co-design in the neighbourhoods with local associations and citizens on the model followed by the first edition;
3. *Parkways and greenways*: co-design of the identification, cleaning or opening of a network of bike and walking paths using the green areas inside and around the city to enhance slow mobility and connectivity, and to improve the accessibility of parks and urban woods for jogging and leisure;
4. *Transforming social centres into 'Neighbourhood Houses'*: co-design process aimed at re-assigning social centres<sup>4</sup> to the coalitions of local actors proposing the best projects in terms of civic participation and rooting in the neighbourhoods. The need for this work stemmed from the fact that social centres' activities had become more and more focused on leisure activities for the elderly, losing their role of inter-generational territorial point of reference. The new Neighbourhood Houses have been assigned to groups of civil society actors that agreed to share physical spaces provided for free by the municipality to implement a variety of activities including sports, cultural, handicraft, and leisure time activities dedicated to all the age groups.

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<sup>4</sup> Municipal buildings assigned to non-for-profit entities as a place of aggregation and service provision.

Figure 5: Map of the 18+1 neighbourhoods of the municipality of Reggio Emilia (QUA – Quartiere bene comune, 1st edition 2014-2019) (Source: Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2019)

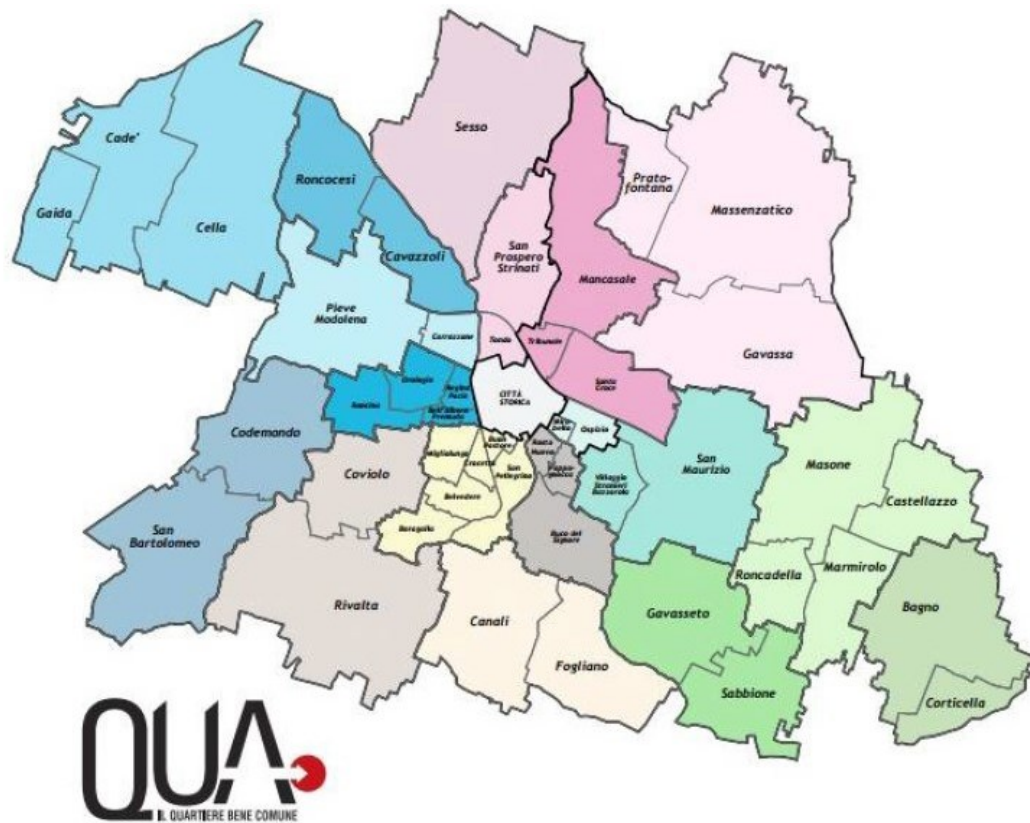


Figure 6: Map of the 8+1 territorial areas and of the 55 neighbourhoods of the municipality of Reggio Emilia (QUA – Quartiere bene comune, 2nd edition 2020-2024) (Source : municipality of Reggio Emilia website [www.comune.re.it](http://www.comune.re.it))





### c) *Consulte territoriali* (Territorial Councils) (2023-2027)

*Consulte Territoriali* ('Territorial Advisory Councils', hereby called 'Territorial Councils' or simply 'Councils') are chronologically the last participatory project launched and supported by the municipality of Reggio Emilia. Technically speaking, Territorial Councils are not a project themselves, as they have been institutionalised through their insertion in the municipal Regulation concerning citizen participation. However, they are here considered as a project as they are still in their first and experimental term after being designed and introduced through the 'EU Arenas' project<sup>5</sup> (2021-2024). The project also involves the creation of a City Science Office in Reggio Emilia. It has the task to support the administration in the elaboration of new policies and regulatory frameworks by developing applied research projects about themes of strategic relevance for the city, notably in the fields of administrative and social innovation, digital innovation and eco-environmental transition (Berni, De Franco and Levi, 2022; Berni, Santangelo and Testa, 2023).

Territorial Councils are not a substitute or an adaptation of the previous 'Neighbourhood as a common good' project, but a new part in the co-governance structure built by the municipality to structure its relationship with the actors of the 'quintuple helix'. It adds a new dimension to the co-design process defined through the participatory protocol 'Neighbourhood as a common good': co-planning. This means involving citizens and the organised civil society in the definition of the policy programmes, and not only of the policy solutions as foreseen by the protocol. The latter, however, is still the preferential method to implement the most innovative parts of policy programmes requiring collaboration among different actors. Simple procurement procedures for the purchase of goods and external services are foreseen, instead, to implement more traditional or straightforward solutions contained in policy programmes (Interviewee 5).

The main driver for the creation of Territorial Councils is the same that pushed towards the implementation of the HERE project: the need, perceived by both the municipal administration and the people, for a new "chain to bring needs upwards and solutions downwards" (Interviewee II) after the abolition of *circoscrizioni*. HERE was a first step towards the achievement of this objective, but it had a limited field of action (proposing micro-projects or helping to decline municipal projects in the real life of the neighbourhoods) and, given its

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<sup>5</sup> 'EU Arenas - Cities as Arenas of Political Innovation in the Strengthening of Deliberative and Participatory Democracy' is a project funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme. The project is providing Reggio Emilia with the opportunity to dialogue with three other cities (Gdansk – Poland, Voru – Finland, and Józsefváros – Hungary) and with a group of universities and research centres to work on administrative innovation aimed at building regulatory frameworks that allow for the implementation of local participatory processes where the national legislations put today legal hurdles to their development. For more information visit: <https://www.euarenas.eu/>.

intervention-based nature, lacked a stable group of representatives acting as point of reference for the neighbourhood.

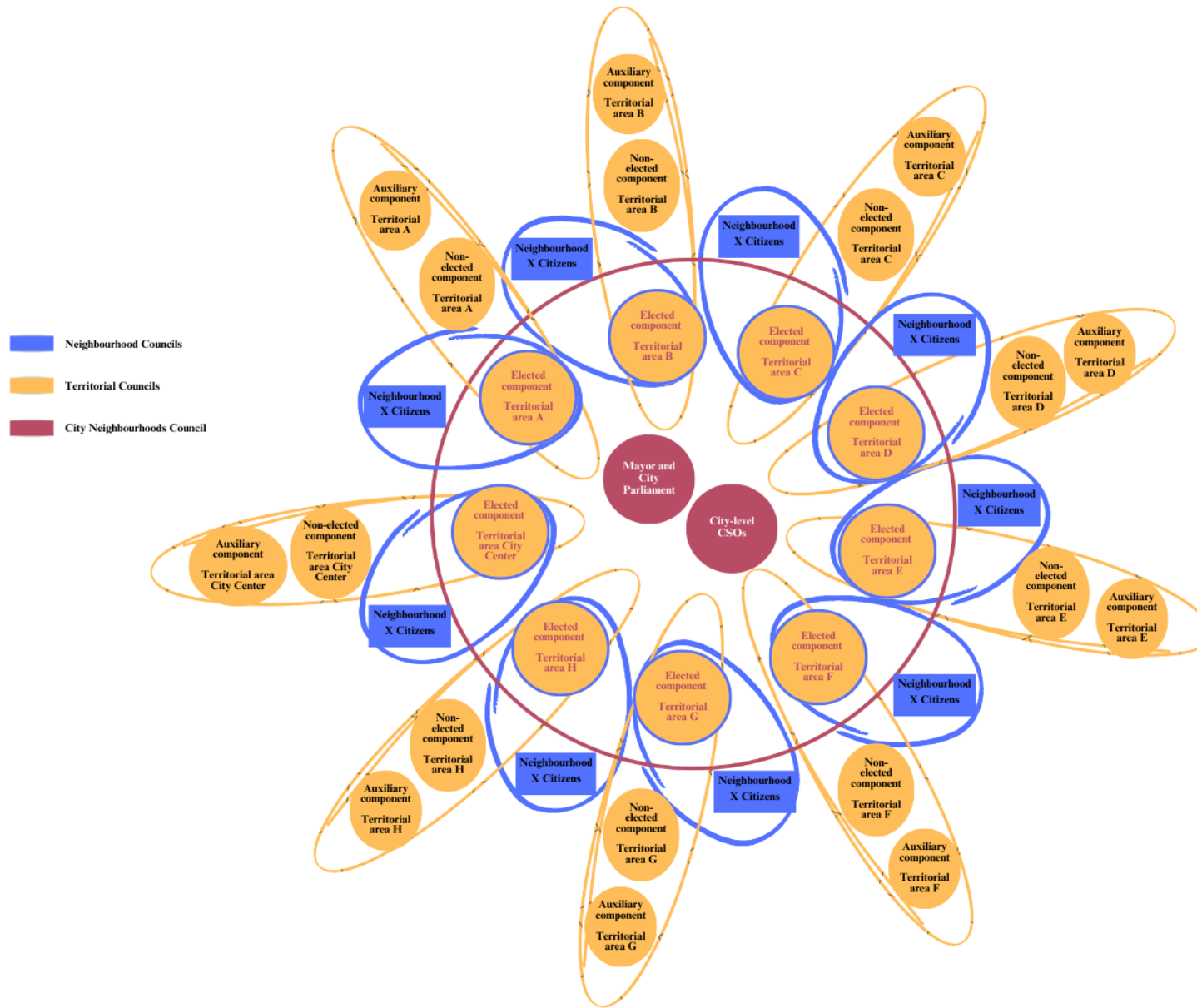
On the contrary, Territorial Councils are groups of citizens' representatives elected by universal suffrage and in charge for 5 years. They have as a main function to co-plan local policies together with the administration by representing the needs, problems and resources of the territory (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022b, art. 1(6a)). For this purpose, Territorial Councils have a double function:

- a *propositional function*, collecting the needs, instances, critical points and potentialities of the territory they represent and translating them into an annual Pact for Sustainable Development and Innovation (PSSI). The pact identifies the priorities for public action coherently with the needs emerged from the people (*Ivi*, artt. 13(1a) and 14(1));
- an *advisory function*, expressing compulsory (but not binding) opinions about public policy programmes concerning the territory they represent, after solicitation from the municipality. The Territorial Council should be asked an opinion on issues as the municipal budget, the General Urbanistic Plan, the Sustainable Mobility Plan and all the other decisions concerning their territorial area (*Ivi*, artt. 13(1b) and 14(1)).

Other objectives of the Councils identified by the administration and by their members are to “let the people get closer to the municipal machine” (Interviewee III) and to work as a ‘filter’ between the municipality and individual citizens (Interviewees 5 and V).

The former means that, through Territorial Councils, common people can obtain specific information about the interventions under debate within their territorial area and better knowledge of the municipal functioning, to help them understand the reasons and reasonings behind municipal choices, as well as how to propose solutions falling within the competencies and capacities of the local administration. The latter, on the other hand, concerns the aforementioned need of the administration to rationalise citizen participation. The Councils should therefore avoid that plenty of scattered instances and proposals from the citizens arrive directly to the administration, by playing a role of filter and mediator. By discussing and trying to combine proposals together during deliberative sessions, the Councils should be able to send to the concerned offices a small amount of already clarified and prioritized requests.

Figure 7: The organisation of the three levels of Territorial Councils (elaborated from Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022b)



Coming to the practical functioning of Territorial Councils, it is important to start from the differentiation of three levels:

- a) *Neighbourhood Council*: an assembly to be held at least once per year, where the representatives elected for one specific neighbourhood (the smallest territorial units represented in Figure 6) meet the residents they represent to report on their work and to collect residents' feedback and new instances (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022b, art. 2(1g));
- b) *Territorial Council*: the real operational level of the Councils. It gathers together the elected representatives of all the neighbourhoods of each territorial area (the larger territorial units marked with letters A-H in Figure 6), as well as a non-elected component and an auxiliary component (see below). The members of the Territorial Council meet on a regular basis to discuss the needs, proposals and criticalities emerged from the neighbourhoods and to elaborate the PSSI on an annual basis (*Ivi*, art. 2(1h));
- c) *City (Neighbourhoods) Council*: an assembly formed by the members of all the 9 Territorial Councils and by the representatives of the associations that work on a municipal and supra-municipal level and that explicitly ask to be part of it. The City Neighbourhoods Council must meet at least once per year to open a field of discussion about the state of art of local public policies and of the relationship between the municipality and the territorial entities. They can also ask to meet the Mayor to discuss relevant topics concerning the whole city (*Ivi*, art. 2(1i)).

Territorial Councils are composed by:

- I. An *elective component* formed by neighbourhoods representatives elected by universal suffrage in their territorial unit, meaning by all the people from any origin and nationality, aged 16 years old or more, and registered as residents in the neighbourhood. They are elected among a list of self-proposed candidates respecting the same criteria mentioned for electors as well as the requirement not to be holding another public, religious or military role and to fulfil the legal criteria for holding a public role<sup>6</sup>. Candidates can run for a neighbourhood other than the one where they reside if they have their main working, studying or voluntary activity there. Elections are regularly held every 5 years and they are considered valid regardless of the number of voters. Every neighbourhood is represented by 2 or 4 members (depending on the number of inhabitants) respecting the equity of sexes (e.g. the man and the woman who took more votes are elected, regardless of the fact that they might have less votes than the second more voted candidate of the other sex). Youth representativeness is promoted by

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<sup>6</sup> As stated by art. 10 of the Legislative Decree 235/2012.

guaranteeing the presence of at least two members under 25 years old in the Territorial Council. Two coordinators (one man and one woman) are nominated by the other elected members to be the contact point with the administration and to coordinate the sessions and the work of the Council (*Ivi*, artt. 6 and 10);

- II. *A non-elective component*, in a proportion of 75:100 with the elected component. These members are representatives of formal entities (e.g. associations, social cooperatives, unions, groups of shopkeepers, etc) based in the territorial area that, just after elections, explicitly demand to be part of the Council. Other structures can be invited by Councils members to participate in the sessions because of their competency on a specific topic or as permanent participants, but have not the right to vote (*Ivi*, artt. 6 and 8);
- III. *An auxiliary and facilitating component* composed by one professional facilitator identified by the municipality (who takes part in plenaries with the function to support and observe the advancement of the works), the City Science Office (see above), and three nominated municipal councillors working as contact points within the municipal council (two from majority and one from opposition coalitions) (*Ivi*, artt. 6 and 9).

For a visual representation of the Councils' structure, see Figure 7.

Participation in the Territorial Councils' activities is completely voluntary (no compensation is foreseen), except for the members of the auxiliary component when participation is included in their work tasks.

The Territorial Councils' work includes these actions:

1. *Training*: some training sessions were organised in the beginning of the project to improve the members' knowledge about the role and functioning of Territorial Councils, the role of Council coordinators (as responsibilities-holders and not as power-holders over the rest of the Council and the residents they represent), as well as their skills in teamwork and in listening to the residents (Interviewees I, II, VI);
2. *Listening to the neighbourhoods*: Territorial Councils collected the residents' points of view on the priorities for municipal intervention in their area and on possible solutions to existing needs by organising public meetings in the neighbourhoods, social initiatives in the public space, as well as disseminating an online questionnaire (supported by the institutional online channels of the municipality) (Interviewees I, VI, VII, VIII). The municipality, on the other hand, is testing Hamlet, an online collaborative platform that everyone can access using digital identity credentials and that should facilitate the participation of citizens and collective entities

in the neighbourhood affairs on a double channel (online/offline). In fact, the platform should provide an online community notice board, a public space accessible to everyone for exchanging information and contacts and some private spaces for Territorial Councils, territorial services, and the co-design of projects among different territorial actors (Interviewees 2 and 4);

3. *Deliberative sessions*: these sessions are open to the elected, non-elected and auxiliary members; other participants can be invited to intervene because of their experience in a specific field, and common citizens can participate in plenary sessions as observers. An annual calendar of compulsory plenary sessions with the presence of the municipal facilitator are established by the municipal office in charge for participation policies at the beginning of the year. Extraordinary plenary sessions can be held, as well as sub-group sessions to discuss about specific themes or specific neighbourhoods (Interviewees I, II, IV, V, VI, VII). The Councils work during the year to share, validate and prioritise the needs, proposals and criticalities emerged from the neighbourhoods in view of the redaction and approval of the annual PSSI at the end of October<sup>7</sup> (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022b, art. 14);
4. *Dialogue with the administration*: Territorial Councils have different options to obtain information from the administration about plans and interventions in their area and to discuss about proposals and criticalities. One possibility is to invite aldermen/alderwomen or representatives of municipal technical offices to their sessions (*Ivi*, art. 16(1)), or to have direct discussions with the facilitators and the three municipal councillors dedicated to their territorial area (*Ivi*, art. 9(1, 3)). Another option is to attend the sessions of the municipal council and/or commissions (with the right to speak reserved only to coordinators) (*Ivi*, art. 12(2)). Finally, they can ask for the organisation of a Unified Territorial Conference of Services, where the members of a Council and the representatives of concerned municipal services can discuss, validate and prioritise the needs, proposals and criticalities emerged from the neighbourhoods, in view of the redaction of the PSSI. In these meetings, the municipal services can reject the instances coming from the neighbourhoods after motivating this choice (*Ivi*, art. 14(3));
5. *Redaction of the PSSI*: the PSSI is a document based on the Territorial Council's work and on the preparation of the annual planning documents by the administration (Single Programming Document and Budget Estimate). It has to be prepared by the Council with the support of its auxiliary component, approved by the city government (the assembly of aldermen and

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<sup>7</sup> At the time of the conclusion of this thesis, the first PSSI had just been approved.

alderwomen) and signed by all the members of the Territorial Council (*Ivi*, art. 14(5)). The PSSI translates into policy objectives for the following year the needs and proposals emerged from the neighbourhoods, prioritised through the Territorial Council's deliberations and evaluated as coherent with the commitments already made by the municipal administration. The municipality, through its concerned departments, takes the responsibility to implement the policy orientations contained in the approved document. The document is composed by a strategic part, defining three strategic objectives for the territorial area for the following year (or years), and an operational part, where possible interventions to achieve them are proposed (*Ivi*, art. 14(6)). The interventions can be managed in a traditional way, through a public tender for the purchase of goods and services, or using the participatory protocol 'Neighbourhood as a common good' to build new public-private-third sector partnerships to co-design innovative solutions with the support of Neighbourhood Architects (*Ivi*, art. 14(7); Interviewees 3 and 5);

6. *Reporting the Council's work to their residents*: the Territorial Councils' members organise at least annually Neighbourhood Councils' meetings where the representatives of each neighbourhood report to their own electors on the work they did during the year and illustrate the PSSI approved for the coming year (*Ivi*, art. 6(2)).

Territorial Councils can work on objectives and interventions aimed at both caring for the community and caring for the city, as defined in the project 'Neighbourhood as a common good' (see b) of this chapter). Among the main themes addressed by Territorial Councils during the first year of work emerged, for instance, green areas and parks, the maintenance of public assets, urban security, streets cleaning, mobility, welfare, and schools and education. Moreover, the Regulation for democracy and urban and climatic justice (see the next paragraph) (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022b) foresees the PSSI as the basis for the possible elaboration and implementation of 'Climate City Contracts', enhancing the synergies at the neighbourhood level among projects as the development of renewable energy communities, urban forestry, and parks adaptive to climate change (Testa, Berni and Santangelo, 2022).

Territorial Councils have no budget, neither for the living costs of their activities (public meetings and events, communication, etc) nor to manage the implementation of the interventions contained in the PSSI. For this reason, they need to agree on the contents of the PSSI with the municipality, as they rely on the inclusion of their proposals in the annual budget of the concerned municipal departments and of the Participatory policies department (which supports the implementation of the actions foreseen applying the 'Neighbourhood as a common good' protocol). Small expenses for the running costs of meetings and communication activities (printing posters and flyers, social media

management) can in general be covered by the municipality, but each expense must be authorised by the municipal office of reference.

The main formal difference of Territorial Councils from the previous projects is that they bring participation from the design-of-solution to the planning-of-policies level. The co-design part is not abolished but is absorbed by the new system as one of the possible outcomes of the work of the Council. Another difference, descending from the change in the scope of the participatory process, is that in ‘Neighbourhood as a common good’ the participants were only those directly interested in the interventions in the neighbourhoods, whereas Territorial Councils are based on elections and therefore on the principle of universal representativity (Interviewee 5). However, the non-elective component remains representative of the ‘interested participants’ similarly to the previous project. Moreover, with this new project the administration encourages the transformation of collaborative projects into forms of social, cooperative, and community entrepreneurship, to ensure their economic sustainability on the long run (Interviewee 2). According to Councils’ members, the main differences they see with the previous projects come from the larger freedom enjoyed by Territorial Councils compared to the HERE working groups. This allows for less formal working methods, a more spontaneous interaction among members and communication with citizens, given the peer-to-peer nature of this dialogue. Moreover, higher expectations than in the past are placed in the will of the municipality to give continuity to the initiatives emerged from the new system because of the more structured institutional framework defining the Councils (Interviewees I and II).

#### **d) The Regulation for democracy and urban and climatic justice in Reggio Emilia**

The Regulation for democracy and urban and climatic justice in Reggio Emilia (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022b) has been elaborated by the administration, with the support of the City Science Office, in the period 2021-22 and approved by the Municipal Council in September 2022. It aims at collecting and systematizing the previous regulations concerning citizen participation at different levels, and it introduces the institution of Territorial Councils.

The Regulation is composed by five sections:

- I. General principles and provisions (co-governance framework)
- II. Co-planning: Territorial Councils
- III. Institutional participation tools, referendums and local public debate
- IV. Digitalisation, open and inclusive communication and enabling infrastructures
- V. Final provisions.



Moreover, an additional section called “The collaborative process: the protocol for co-design” (Levi, 2022) is under elaboration and was supposed to be approved by the end of the year. It should introduce the participatory protocol ‘Neighbourhood as a common good’ in the Regulation with some adaptations from the previous versions (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2017).

The main adaptations introduced to the protocol presented in Paragraph b of this chapter by the new Regulation concern (Levi, 2022):

- *Territorial scale*: Citizenship Workshops can be implemented on a neighbourhood, territorial area or urban scale, depending on the complexity of the subject and on the social and spatial structure of the city;
- *Focus*: the attention moves from outputs (in terms of co-production of goods and services) to impacts of the collaborative process. This will be assessed through the introduction of impact indicators measuring different types of impacts: 1) urban and territorial impacts; 2) environmental impacts; 3) socio-economic and cultural impacts; 4) socio-sanitary impacts; 5) technological and digital impacts;
- *Duration*: Citizenship Agreements as applied during the two seasons of HERE had very tight deadlines, becoming excessively demanding for participating citizens and making it difficult to achieve a significant change on the ground. The new regulation binds Citizenship Agreements to the PSSI, which can establish objectives over 2-3 years with the possibility to review them annually. This should allow for a more flexible management of the processes in terms of time and territorial extension;
- *Introduction of the Climate City Contract*: as already mentioned in Paragraph c, it is a particular type of Citizenship Agreement specifically focused on climatic transition and the achievement of carbon neutrality.

### **3. WHY PARTICIPATION AND WHAT KIND OF PARTICIPATION? ANALYSIS OF THREE INSTITUTIONAL PARTICIPATORY PROJECTS IN REGGIO EMILIA**

This chapter builds upon the elements presented in the previous ones to apply the theoretical propositions and the analytical tools presented in Chapter 1 to the case study presented in Chapter 2. The aim is to use those frameworks as a theoretical support to organise and interpret the collected data and answer the research questions. However, it will also be an opportunity to test the validity and adequacy of these tools to analyse institutional participatory projects in Italian cities based on the co-governance approach.

#### **a. Analysis of the reasons and objectives behind the support of the municipality of Reggio Emilia to institutional participatory projects**

The analysis of the reasons and objectives described in Chapter 2 is crucial to identify the logic underpinning the support of the municipality of Reggio Emilia to participatory projects in the last 15 years. However, as suggested by Cabannes and Lipietz (2018), simply analysing the objectives officially (or informally) stated by the administration is not enough for this purpose. In effect, much can be understood about the real logics underpinning participatory projects by putting in the right framework information about who (and how) is supposed to participate, as well as some financial, normative and territorial features of the projects. Moreover, comparing the drivers of the projects under analysis with the ones underlying the co-governance theory can help better understand the choices made by the administration about the shape to give to citizen participation in Reggio Emilia, and the adequacy of the co-governance paradigm to the local context.

#### ***Three competing logics underpinning participation***

Applying the analytical grid developed by Cabannes (2004; updated in: Cabannes and Lipietz, 2015) and presented in Chapter 1 (see Table 1) to the three institutional participatory projects representing my case study allowed to put order in the big quantity of information collected. The grid, originally built by professor Cabannes to assess a city's PB profile and to devise locally-specific PBs, has been slightly adapted to be applicable to other forms of participatory processes driven by local authorities (adaptations marked in *italic*). A colour code has been used to mark the level of arrangements corresponding to each project for the 18 indicators proposed by the grid. This makes it quite easy to grasp the overall level of arrangements of each project, as well as the evolution of the arrangements over time. It is useful here to remember that maximum arrangements (marked in green in Table 3)

tend to correspond to what Cabannes and Lipietz (2015, 2018) call a ‘political logic’ underpinning participatory processes, while intermediate and minimum arrangements (respectively marked in yellow and orange in Table 3) tend to highlight the presence of what the authors call a ‘good-governance logic’ and a ‘technocratic logic’ behind the processes. There is no participatory project in the world presenting only one level of arrangements, meaning that the interpretation of the logic underpinning a project is not straightforward, and that more than one logic can coexist within the same project. Moreover, it is worth underlining that the assessment made through this research is retrospective in what concerns the first two projects (‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ and ‘HERE – Neighbourhood as a common good’), while for the Territorial Advisory Councils it portrays the situation when the research was concluded (approximately one year after their formation). Therefore, it is mainly based on the Regulation of the Councils and, to a lesser extent, on comments and suppositions made by participants up to now, and could (and hopefully will) evolve in the coming years. Evolution is a key characteristic of all experimental and participatory processes, and this is why Cabannes and Lipietz’s analytical grid is also conceived to support local authorities in the improvement of these experiences.

Analysing the dimension of *citizen participation (Ia)*, we can notice a clear prevalence of intermediate and minimum arrangements, with the only maximum arrangement being represented by the form of participation in Territorial Councils (2). However, even this datum has to be contextualised: although elections were actually open to everyone (even to minors between 16 and 18 years old and to non-citizens having a regular residence in the municipal territory), a participation rate of 3,59% (Carlino, 2022), as well as the quite evident homogeneity of the elected representatives (in terms of socio-economic situation and origins), raises doubts on how much this instrument has given a universal representation of the city population in this first term. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, while in HERE only citizens that are directly interested and ready to get actively involved in the interventions are supposed to participate, Territorial Councils set the institutional basis for wider participation.

Concerning the instance of final budget approval (1), in the first two projects the budget was approved before the participatory process, that was aimed at prioritizing and deciding how to concretely employ small portions of pre-determined resources. Then, Citizenship Agreements had to be approved again after their participatory elaboration. This corresponds to a minimum arrangement. PSSIs, on the contrary, are the result of the participatory process managed by Territorial Councils and, after being approved by the municipal government, flow into the municipal plans that are approved by the municipal council. This corresponds to an intermediate arrangement. Another aspect that can be remarked is that budgetary priority decisions (3) in the last project have been assessed as an intermediate arrangement, as Territorial Councils and municipal services should discuss together to

prioritise the needs and project proposals to be included in the PSSIs. The different departments involved should then allow the implementation of the Pacts through their own planning and budgets. However, only time will tell us if this will prove true.

Concerning the community vs citizen participation (4), it should be noticed that ‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ project did not have a specific focus on neighbourhoods, but in practice it supported very localised interventions concerning specific communities. With HERE a double level was achieved, as neighbourhood communities were mainly involved, but in the second edition broader projects involving the whole city were also managed through the protocol. Finally, as mentioned in Chapter 2, Territorial Councils are structured on three levels, from the neighbourhood to the city level. However, until now, only the two inferior territorial extensions have been put in practice, remaining on a dimension of community participation.

Another remark should be done concerning the assessment of an intermediate arrangement for the degree of participation of the excluded in Territorial Councils (5). No specific priority is foreseen for the participation of or planning for excluded groups. However, it would not be fair to overlook the importance given by the electoral system to gender equality and young people representation, as well as the opportunity given to non-Italian residents to participate both as candidates and as electors. Nevertheless, the participation rate of excluded groups in the elections was almost insignificant, as it is their representation within the Councils.

Finally, and still concerning Territorial Councils, their capacity of oversight and execution of the implementation of the approved priorities (6) will be mainly limited to the projects managed through Citizenship Workshops. Concerning the priorities that will be implemented directly by the municipality through ‘technical solutions’, they will only have the right to make public interrogations to the city council, to the Mayor or to the city government to ask for clarifications about delays or deviations from the approved Pacts.

Overall, we can notice a slow shift towards higher-level arrangements concerning citizen participation over time, especially after the introduction of Territorial Advisory Councils. However, the logic underpinning the analysed projects remains mainly good governance. This is clear by observing how the local administration is looking for a way to reconnect its ties with citizens and to identify representatives that can help them in this challenge. However, it is also clear that, beside the rhetoric of ‘being a partner at the same level of the others’, the municipality wants to keep full control of the processes and of the crucial nodes of decision making.

Table 3: Dimensions and variables for differentiating self-denominated Participatory Projects (PP) experiences (adapted from Cabannes, 2004, pp. 20–21)

| DIMENSIONS                            | VARIABLES   | REPFE <sup>8</sup> | HERE <sup>9</sup> | TAC <sup>10</sup>  | MINIMAL ARRANGEMENT                      | INTERMEDIATE ARRANGEMENT   | MAXIMUM ARRANGEMENT  |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--|--|--|---|
| <b>Ia. PARTICIPATORY (citizens)</b>   | 1. Instance of final budget approval                |                    |                   |                    | Executive (partial consultation)         | Council (consultative)   | The population (deliberation and legislative approval)                   |   |
|                                       | 2. Forms of participation                           | N/A                |                   |                    | Community-based representative democracy | Community-based representative democracy open to different types of associations | Direct democracy, universal participation                                |   |
|                                       | 3. Which body makes budgetary priority decisions?   |                    |                   |                    | None                                     | - Existing social or political structure<br>- Government and citizens (mixed)    | Specific commissions with elected council members and a citizen majority |   |
|                                       | 4. Community participation or citizen participation |                    |                   | 1 <sup>st</sup> ed |  | Neighbourhood level  | City-wide level, through thematic contributions                          | Neighbourhood, regional, and city-wide level                                      |
|                                       |   |                    |                   | 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed |  |  |  |   |
|                                       | 5. Degree of participation of the excluded          |                    |                   |                    |  | Thematic and neighbourhood plenaries   | Neighbourhoods, themes (including civic issues)                          | Neighbourhood + Thematic + actor-based, preference for excluded groups (congress) |
| 6. Oversight and control of execution | N/A   |                    |                   |                    | Executive                                | Non-specific commissions   | Specific commissions   |   |

<sup>8</sup> Reggio Emilia people, for example

<sup>9</sup> HERE – Neighbourhood as a common good (1st and 2nd edition)

<sup>10</sup> Territorial Advisory Councils

|   |  |     |  |     |  |  |   |
|---|--|-----|--|-----|--|--|---|
| <b>Ib. PARTICIPATORY (local government)</b> | 7. Degree of information sharing and dissemination                               |     |  |     | Secret, unpublished                    | Limited dissemination, web, official bulletin, informing delegates | Wide dissemination, including house-to-house distribution |
|   | 8. Degree of completion of approved projects (within two years)                  |     |  | N/A | Less than 20%                          | 20% to 80%   | Over 80%  |
|   | 9. Role of legislative branch  |     |  |     | Opposition                             | Passive, non-participation   | Active involvement  |
| <b>II. FINANCIAL AND FISCAL</b>             | 10. Amount of resources for <i>approved projects implementation</i>              |     |  |     | Less than 2% of capital budget         | From 2% to 100% of capital budget                                  | 100% of capital and operating budgets                     |
|   | 11. Municipal budget allocation for functioning of <i>participatory projects</i> | N/A |  |     | Municipal department/team covers costs | Personnel and their activities (i.e. travel)                       | Personnel, activities, dissemination, training            |
|   | 12. Discussion of taxation policies  |     |  |     | None                                   | Deliberation on tax policies                                       | Deliberation on loans and subsidies                       |

|                                   |  |     |  |  |   |  |   |
|-----------------------------------|--|-----|--|--|---|--|---|
| <b>III. NORMATIVE / LEGAL</b>     | 13. Degree of institutionalisation             |     |  |  | Informal process                          | Only institutionalised or only self-regulated annually               | Formalised (some parts regulated) with annual self-regulation (evolutionary)                      |
|                                   | 14. Instrumental or participatory logic        |     |  |  | Improvement in financial management       | Ties with participatory practices (councils, roundtables)            | Part of the culture of participation, participation as right (i.e. San Salvador)                  |
|                                   | 15. Relationship with planning instruments     |     |  |  | Only <i>PP</i> (no long-term plan exists) | Coexistence of <i>PP</i> and City Plans, without direct relationship | Clear relationship and interaction between <i>PP</i> and Planning in one system (e.g. a congress) |
| <b>IV. PHYSICAL / TERRITORIAL</b> | 16. Degree of intra-municipal decentralisation | N/A |  |  | Follows administrative regions            | Goes beyond administrative regions                                   | Decentralisation to all communities and neighbourhoods  |
|                                   | 17. Degree of inclusion of rural areas         |     |  |  | PB in either urban area or rural area     | The entire municipal territory                                       | Entire municipality with specific measures for rural areas (preferences)                          |
|                                   | 18. Degree of investment                       |     |  |  | Reinforces the formal city                | Recognises both formal and informal city, without preferences        | Priority investment in most needy areas (peripheral, central, rural)                              |

Passing to the analysis of the *participation of the local government (Ib)*, we see that the situation is quite uniform with a substantial totality of intermediate arrangements. The only exception concerns the degree of completion of approved projects (8), where the ‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ project saw a very high rate of implementation of the approved action. This, however, was quite predictable, given that the CSOs themselves had to implement projects in order to obtain funds. Moreover, it is worth noting that many of these indicators have been assessed as intermediate arrangements because of the information collected on their actual implementation and effectiveness, despite their official definition could have been assessed as a maximum arrangement.

It is the case, for instance, of the degree of information sharing and dissemination (7). Although the municipality shared information about the projects and their results through different communication channels (including local mass media, posters in the streets, the official webpage and social media accounts, specific events, and in some cases even house-to-house pamphlets delivery), the perception is that actual awareness on the existence and results of these projects is still limited. This is evident if we consider that, even among the interviewed Council members, only a few had a clear idea about the HERE project, and that many of them mentioned spreading the word about their existence and role among the residents of their neighbourhoods as one of the main efforts they had to make. It seems that the municipality has made quite significant efforts to promote the events and the achievements of the projects themselves. However, it did not put the same energy in presenting them as the output of a complex collaborative work (they rather appear as initiatives by the administration) nor in promoting participation in the co-design and co-implementation phases.

A similar consideration can be made about the role of the city council (9): they were allowed to participate in Citizenship Workshops and the auxiliary component of Territorial Councils includes also three members of the city council, however it seems that until now their role has been very passive, and their presence almost imperceptible.

Finally, the degree of completion of approved participatory projects (8) is a crucial aspect that scored very well in the past projects but is still impossible to assess at this stage for PSSI (it will be evaluated in 1-2 years). This point will probably discriminate between the success of the Territorial Councils experience and its failure. Huge expectations have been created *vis-à-vis* the citizens that are participating in this process: if they will be disregarded, the hope to relaunch them and to attract more citizens to participate in the future will be almost null.

Overall, the logic underpinning the local government’s participation in the three projects seems to be essentially good governance. The administration is aware of the need to get directly



engaged in the construction of collaborative governance but, either consciously or unconsciously, not enough is done to make participation more effective and widespread. Nevertheless, the fact that different communication channels have been experienced and that a link between Territorial Advisory Councils and the city council has been formally established means that, if the willingness to go towards more radical forms of participation will emerge, there will be concrete possibilities for their implementation.

Coming to *financial and fiscal aspects (II)* we can see that, on the one hand, the municipality allocated some budget for both the participatory projects' staff (as Neighbourhood Architects and administrative staff) and for the realisation of the projects activities (communication, logistics, some trainings, etc) (11). On the other hand, the resources available for the implementation of both Citizenship Agreements and PSSIs are quite limited compared to the municipal budget (10). As a matter of facts, for the time being there is no clear indication about the budget that will be devoted to the implementation of PSSIs (not even concerning the solutions built through the HERE protocol), but we can imagine that it will not substantially differ from the one invested in the HERE project.

Finally, no discussion of taxation policies has been the object of any of the participatory processes under analysis (12). This, however, is in line with most of the participatory experiences in cities around the world.

All in all, the analysis of these indicators reflects quite well the good-governance inclination and the stated objectives of the municipality of Reggio Emilia for supporting these projects. The municipal focus is not at all on the management of economic resources by citizens, but much more on the creation of a collaborative relationship where administration and citizens share resources and competencies to find common answers to local needs. This translates in the lack of a clear-cut budget to be debated (the debate is on actions, and the budget is just a tool to implement them) and in the municipal interest in guiding the projects with a comprehensive control also on their functioning.

Passing to *normative and legal aspects (III)*, the institutional nature of the three projects is clear (13): they were launched and regulated by the administration and, in the cases of HERE and of the Territorial Councils, this was done through the approval of a specific municipal regulation by the city council. These regulations were designed by the municipal services in charge of participatory policies without consulting citizens and not leaving a real space for debate within the city council before their approval. Many meetings were devoted to present and to discuss them but, according to opposition councillors, there was not a real disposition for mediation. Some remarks that emerged from the evaluation of the first edition of HERE were applied to

the following edition and in some way to the Territorial Councils, but no open discussion nor even a survey with citizens was done on this topic.

The indicator that saw the clearest evolution over time was the instrumental vs participatory logic behind the projects (14). ‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ was a minimum arrangement, as it had the rationalisation of the financial and relational engagement with civil society among its main drivers. HERE was conceived as a protocol available to all the citizens willing to participate in the improvement of their own neighbourhood. It was developed in the context of a broader transition towards participatory approaches, such as the structuring of internal forms of co-governance (working tables among different municipal departments and services). In the same period, participation of experts and community representatives in the design of projects became the standard especially in addressing sensitive issues, such as intercultural policies. For these reasons, it was assessed as an intermediate arrangement. Finally, Territorial Advisory Councils were assessed as maximum arrangements because they overlap with those forms of internal and expert participation, but they also go one step further by recognising participation as a right (universal election) and a duty (different municipal representatives expressed the idea that who is not ready to put some efforts to solve problems in his/her neighbourhood is not entitled to complain about them) (Interviewees 2, 3, 5). However, the promotion and fulfilment of this right is still quite weak.

Another indicator assessing the integration of the participatory projects within the governance structure of the municipal administration is their relationship with medium-term planning instruments (15). In this case, the first two projects were assessed as intermediate arrangements, as a General Urban Plan (PUG) and other thematic city plans have always existed, but the relationship of participatory projects with them has never been direct. However, it is worth reminding that some outcomes of Citizenship Workshops were included in the last PUG in 2021, although this was done by Neighbourhood Architects and the municipal Participation Services, and not directly by citizens nor in a structured and pre-defined way. Territorial Councils, on the other hand, were assessed as maximum arrangements, as PSSIs should flow into the municipal plans for the following 1-2 years. However, it is not clear how mandatory it is for municipal departments to respect their proposals, nor if they will also be considered for the implementation of longer-term plans.

All things considered, the normative and legal dimensions seem to unveil both a good-governance and a technocratic logic. The creation of better ties with citizens and forms of co-governance is surely sought. However, the high institutionalisation of the regulatory process, based more on research on administrative law than on direct contributions from citizens, is

functional to rationalise the processes on generally pre-defined frameworks and to avoid an excessive disruption of the dominant political address. The fact of keeping the connection between participatory instruments and the City Plans quite loose might be interpreted in this sense as well.

Finally, the *physical and territorial aspects (IV)* are stable on intermediate arrangements. Efforts were made to adequate intra-municipal decentralisation units to the needs of the different territories (16), to extend the participatory projects to the whole municipal territory, encompassing both urban and rural areas (17), and to promote participatory actions not only around big regeneration sites or in the better-off neighbourhoods, but even in more peripheral and needy areas (18). However, neighbourhoods and communities do not have autonomous participatory structures, but converge in territorial areas made up of five to ten different neighbourhoods. In addition, no specific intervention is designed for rural areas that instead lament municipal negligence towards them, and the actual investment in needy areas is left to the good will of participating citizens.

Therefore, we can say again that a good-governance logic undoubtedly underpins the projects, but they still suffer from an unbalance of attention and investments bending towards more central areas. This produces territorial discrimination and results in a loss of confidence from the residents of the most unheard neighbourhoods and hamlets, increasing the distance between their inhabitants and the administration.

After analysing in detail Cabannes' analytical grid, we move on to check five other aspects that are identified by Cabannes and Lipietz (2015, 2018) as characteristic elements that can help identifying the presence of the three logics in a real-life process. They are summarised in Table 4.

Trying to interpret Table 3 and Table 4, we can say that the main logic underpinning the three projects is good governance (need to find a mediator to interact with citizens and to 'filter' their proposals after the abolition of *Circoscrizioni*). The effort to institutionalise both the 'Neighbourhood as a common good' protocol and the Councils through municipal regulations makes the projects a bit less flexible but should ensure their survival after the end of the current municipal mandate. This and other efforts made by the municipality in the framework of these projects might pave the way for more political logics underpinning participation in Reggio Emilia. However, if this will come true will depend on the political willingness of the coming city governments and on the level of activation of citizens to ask for more radical forms of participation.

Table 4: Characteristic elements of Participatory Projects (adapted from Cabannes and Lipietz, 2015; 2018)

| Reggio Emilia people, for example   | HERE – Neighbourhood as a common good (1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed.)   | Territorial advisory councils   |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Institutional anchoring within the local government</b>  |   |   |
| <p>Technical: “Decentralisation and participation” service</p> <p>Political: Alderman of the Care for the community</p> | <p>Technical: “Responsible citizenship and Smart City” services, then “Participation Policies” service</p> <p>Political: Alderman of Participation Policies</p>   | <p>Technical : Policy structure for “Participation Policies” (within the administrative area “Territorial planning and special projects”)</p> <p>Political: Alderman of Housing and Participation</p>   |
| <b>Contributions to reversing priorities in cities</b>  |   |   |
| <p>No possibility to intervene on priorities (call for proposals designed by the administration)</p>                    | <p>Intervention on priorities as a side effect (through the Neighbourhood Architects’ reading of the context), in general only prioritisation of already defined areas of intervention within predefined budgets.</p>   | <p>Defining priorities as the core objective but only at the territorial area-level and no actual decisional power (still to be verified if these priorities will translate into actual policies)</p>   |
| <b>Deliberative quality and degree of participation of active citizens</b>  |   |   |
| <p>No real deliberative process</p>   | <p>Mainly quantitative data have been collected, but a more qualitative insight is given by the empowerment rate (% of participants of the Workshops who also signed the Agreement) that was measured in 2019 at more than 50% (33% of the citizens, 78% of the associations).</p> <p>In general, interviewees described a situation of quite low turnover and participation mainly from the organised civil society.</p> | <p>Quite high turnover (compared to QUA), first participatory experience for many elected members. The non-elected component, instead, had a lower turnover.</p> <p>Territorial Councils’ meetings are quite actively participated, even if some very active members with political experience tend to take more space than the less experienced ones. Strict municipal deadlines seem to subtract time to deliberations.</p> |

| <b>Investment in educating citizens and public officers to participation in decision-making</b>  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <p>Trainings about volunteering (seen as a form of participation as active citizenship)</p>  | <p>No diffused trainings for citizens, only presentations of the projects and a cycle of 5 events in 2021 called “Democracy according to us” (but it saw a very low participation).</p> <p>No real trainings for public officers, but facilitation of internal working tables gathering together local public services to coordinate their actions for the care for the community and for the city.</p> | <p>A cycle of 4 events in 2022 called “Democracy according to us” was organised for the citizens before the election of the Territorial Councils (but it saw a very low participation). Some trainings were provided to Territorial Councils members (especially coordinators).</p> <p>No real trainings for public officers, but internal working tables gathering together local public services to coordinate actions for the care for the community and for the city.</p>  |
| <b>Institutionalisation of the process and of the participants’ power</b>  |   |  |
| <p>Entirely institutionalised (even if the thematic areas emerged from the collection of ‘good stories’, only some of them were selected based on municipal priorities).</p> | <p>Institutionalisation of the ‘rules of the game’ in a municipal Regulation (approved by the municipal council). However, priority thematic areas for each territory were co-decided and between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition there was some adaptation of the rules driven by both municipal officers and citizens feedback.</p>   | <p>The municipality dominates the regulatory framework (Regulation elaborated by technicians and researchers, unclear timings and procedures for the presentation of the PSSI). Some operational features derive from citizens’ evaluation of previous projects and an online consultation was done with the possibility for citizens to provide comments before the approval of the text.</p> <p>Given the experimental nature of this project, some flexibility exists in the interaction between Councils’ coordinators and municipal officers.</p> |

On the other hand, a technocratic logic was partially lying behind the ‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ project, while it is less present in the following ones. However, choosing co-governance as a form of participation, stimulates participation not only in co-planning and co-design, but also in the co-production of the solutions. This might be seen as a technocratic way to rationalise the economic and organisational resources of the municipality, devolving to CSOs and to common citizens the responsibility to provide them and to implement public policy objectives in their neighbourhoods.

### ***Co-governance***

Comparing the reasons lying behind the diffusion of co-governance in Italian cities and the elaboration of institutional participatory projects in Reggio Emilia, similar drivers can be pinpointed.

According to Arena and Iaione (2015), co-governance emerges as a necessity for local administrations determined by:

- the *presence of active citizens* that are willing to engage with their resources and capacities to improve collective well-being and to protect common goods;
- the *weakening of the public actor*, and the consequent lack of resources to satisfy all citizens’ needs;
- the *emergence of glocal challenges* that need multi-level answers.

Reading transversally through the three projects analysed in this research, we find that:

- the *presence of a very dense fabric of active citizens and CSOs* in Reggio Emilia and the will to coordinate their actions to support municipal policies has always been a crucial driver. The consequent need to rationalise the resources invested in the relationship with the third sector was another reason that pushed towards the elaboration of participatory dynamics managed by a designated department. According to the interviewees, it seems that they recognise themselves in the definition of ‘active citizens willing to engage to improve collective well-being’ and ‘spontaneously sharing resources and capacities to provide collective solutions to their needs’. However, inferring that this disposition is shared by the majority of the population might be incorrect. Many citizens, on the contrary, hope that the public sector plays a stronger role to solve their problems as they do not want, in addition to working and paying taxes, to also spend their free time in volunteering to cover the gaps of the municipality;

- the *weakening of the public actor* and the need to find new ways to answer citizens' needs and to communicate with them was also a central issue. This was especially evident starting from the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of 'Neighbourhood as a common good' when, after the national abolition of *Circoscrizioni* (see note 3), the need of a joining link between the city neighbourhoods and hamlets and the central administration was strongly felt. It remains the main driver for the creation of Territorial Advisory Councils;
- the *need to find multi-level answers to glocal challenges* had in general less importance in the development of these projects (with the exception of actions addressing intercultural issues). However, it gained in importance in the last developments of Citizenship Workshops, where the HERE protocol is supposed to be applied to energetic transition projects (e.g. to support the creation of Renewable Energetic Communities) (Berni, De Franco and Levi, 2022; Testa, Berni and Santangelo, 2022).

A form of mimetic adaptation to the prescription of the Co-City model surely had a certain level of importance in the development of the HERE protocol and of the Citizenship Agreements. However, it is better to talk about normative isomorphism (Bonazzi, 2002 in Cataldi, 2011) in this case, as the municipality of Reggio Emilia did not uncritically apply the Labsus model of Regulation for Collaboration Pacts (Labsus, 2022), but made an effort to adapt it to its context and to use a progressive approach in its application (Interviewee 5).

This can be seen also in the definition of common goods in Reggio Emilia. In the 'Neighbourhood as a common good' Regulation, they were defined following the same lines as the Labsus model. However, in the new Regulation for democracy and urban and climatic justice in Reggio Emilia, their definition was further complicated as follows:

“the tangible and intangible goods, services and infrastructures, which the territorial communities and the Municipality, also through deliberative, collaborative and co-governance procedures, recognize as functional to the collective urban well-being and/or instrumental to the achievement of objectives of full development and fulfilment of the person. For this reason, the Community and the Municipality take action towards them based on the principle of civic collaboration which finds its constitutional foundation in the combined provisions of the articles. 2, 3 paragraph 2, 4, 9; to the principle of community of interests pursuant to articles. 2, 38, 43 of the Constitution; to the principle of horizontal subsidiarity, pursuant to article 118 paragraph 4 of the Constitution, to share the responsibility for their co-creation, care, management, governance and regeneration in order to improve their collective enjoyment by present and future generations and the achievement of objectives of environmental sustainability, climate neutrality and social inclusion.” (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022b, art. 2(1d)).

This clearly reflects the importance assumed by administrative-law experts in the elaboration of the new regulation. It might also be functional to an enlargement of the definition of commons, to potentially apply the new participatory processes managed by Territorial Councils to any issue concerning the local dimension, while remaining in the conceptual area of co-governance.

Coming to the main objectives of co-governance (Arena and Iaione, 2015), they can be identified as:

- a subjective and objective *empowerment of citizens* (see page 28) through social justice, redistribution of decisional power and shared responsibilities;
- the *transformation of 'territorial government' into 'territorial governance'* based on stable partnerships between public institutions and the other actors of the quintuple helix (Iaione and De Nictolis, 2016);
- an *improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery*.

The main objectives of the projects stated by both official documents and interviewed municipal officers were:

- 'Reggio Emilia people, for example':
  - Enhancing the social capital existing within the organised and non-organised civil society and capitalising it in a strategy of territorial governance involving both public and private social action (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2011a, 2011b);
  - Improving and rationalising the system of relationships among the administration, donors and the third sector (Interviewee 5);
  - Promoting citizen participation to collective decision-making processes through deliberation and the application of horizontal subsidiarity (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2011b) (this last objective was probably in the long-term vision of the administration at that time, but no action was taken in this direction in the actual implementation of the project).
- 'Neighbourhood as a common good':
  - Shared responsibility in the government of public affairs and provision of adequate empowerment tools to the community through dynamics of collective discussion (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2021a);
  - Implementing the principle of subsidiarity in a functional (organised) way (Interviewee 5);



- Improving the quality of life in the neighbourhoods, also by supporting experimentation to find innovative solutions to existing problems (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2021a).
- Territorial Advisory Councils:
- Planning public policies in coherence with the needs of the territory (co-planning) (Comune di Reggio Emilia, 2022b);
  - Strengthening the relationships existing among active actors in the neighbourhoods to let them find collective solutions without referring to the municipality for each request or proposal they may have (Interviewee 2);
  - Creating an intermediary structure listening to citizens and bringing their voice to the administration (Interviewees 2, 3, 5, 6);
  - Let citizens approach the ‘municipal machine’ to understand reasons and reasonings behind the choices of the administration (Interviewees 2, 5).

Even here, it is clear how the vocabulary and the concepts used to set the objectives of the institutional participatory projects in Reggio Emilia is in line with the co-governance approach. Two points that can be pinpointed through the three projects are citizens’ empowerment through shared responsibilities and decision-making, and the rationalisation of the communication and relationship between the local administration and the organised and non-organised civil society. At the same time, it is interesting to observe the efforts to progressively increase the forms of citizens’ empowerment, from the simple enhancement of their voluntary actions for the common good to the construction of institutional councils where this social capital can be strengthened and transformed into proposals and actions of public policy. However, despite the political discourses embracing the quintuple helix model, the involvement of the five actors in the analysed projects is still incomplete. If the creation of the City Science Office involved cognitive institutions in the local governance, the participation of organised and non-organised civil society is still almost completely separate from the relationships existing between the municipal administration and the (for-profit) private sector. Closing this gap could be an objective for the future development of institutional participatory projects in Reggio Emilia.

To conclude, we can see that the reasons and objectives of the municipality of Reggio Emilia to formalise and support processes of citizen participation evolved over the past 15 years to adapt to their achievements and to different external conditions. However, two main common threads were the municipal need to find functional ways to communicate with citizens and the

will to favour the concrete participation of citizens through the sharing of needs, resources and competencies.

Crossing these findings with those emerging from the analysis of Cabannes and Lipiets's logics underpinning participation, the centrality of a good-governance logic is confirmed. Moreover, Cabannes's analytical grid helps us to unravel the official objectives of the projects as aimed at sharing decision-making with citizens and at building peer-to-peer networks among the quintuple-helix actors. Despite apparently suggesting a political logic underpinning the projects, these objectives do not always correspond to their practical implementation. The municipality tends to have a much stronger role than the other actors, being the only owner of actual decisional power and the manager of the project itself. This introduces us to the next paragraph that will further analyse the 'how' questions, i.e. the kind of participation proposed by institutional participatory projects in Reggio Emilia.

#### **b. Analysis of the kind of participation proposed by the different participatory projects in Reggio Emilia**

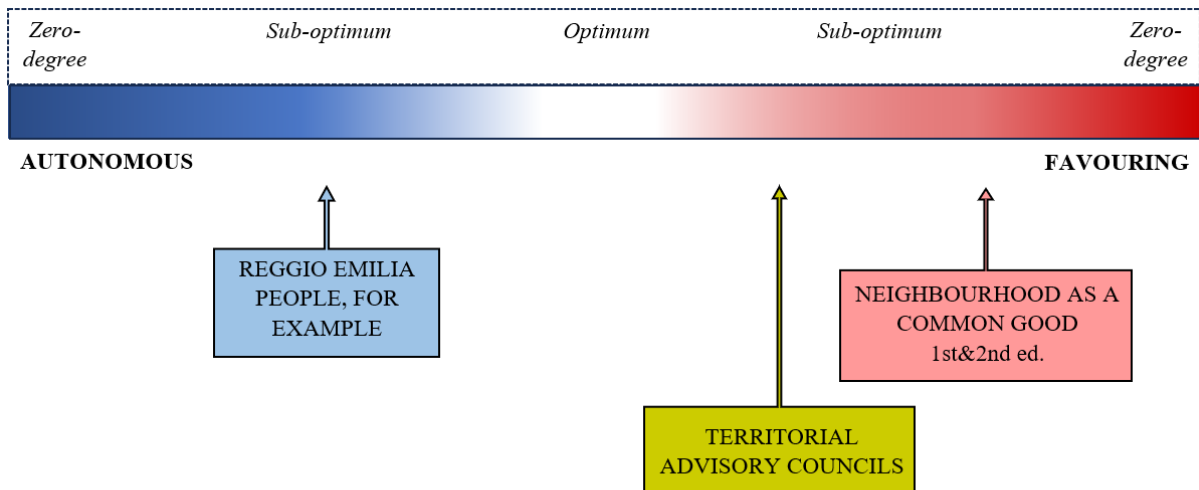
Moving forward to analyse the type of participation that was proposed by the different participatory projects in Reggio Emilia in the past 15 years, Iaione's 'gradient of subsidiarity' was used as a visual representation to reflect on how they applied the principle of subsidiarity. Taking into account the reflections around the categorisation proposed by Arnstein with her 'ladder of citizen participation' was helpful, as well. Moreover, Wates's participation matrix allowed to get into a more focused dimension, and to account for the operational nature of the analysed processes.

##### ***The gradient of subsidiarity***

As explained in Chapter 2, the official objectives of the analysed projects were generally in line with co-governance and the application of the principle of subsidiarity. However, trying to locate them on Iaione's 'gradient of subsidiarity' (2015) can help to evaluate their real contribution to the implementation of this constitutional principle.

Figure 8 shows that none of the projects achieved the optimum of subsidiarity, as the three of them skew to sub-optimum levels of subsidiarity.

Figure 8: Three institutional participatory processes on the 'gradient of subsidiarity' (Iaione, 2015)



Note: M = municipality; C = citizens.

'Reggio Emilia people, for example' has been located at the level of the sub-optimum towards the 'autonomous' side. This means that this project did not put into practice a real form of horizontal subsidiarity, as there was no participatory-deliberative exchange between municipality and citizens, nor a real empowerment of the latter. The prevalence of the 'autonomous' dimension depends on the fact that the project built on actions autonomously started by the citizens, that were later supported by the city government through a financial, operational and communicative assistance to the ones that could cover some areas of pre-established public policies.

The two editions of 'Neighbourhood as a common good', on the contrary, were located on the opposite side of the gradient, in a position of proximity to the sub-optimum towards the 'favouring' side. This is because, in this case, the project was strongly directed by the administration, who set the rules of the game and designated the professionals in charge of opening the space for discussion, collecting inputs and transforming them into projects that could suit pre-established areas of intervention and budgets (the Neighbourhood Architects). Moreover, the possibility to concretely participate in implementing the solution was essentially a precondition for citizens to propose an issue as a priority. This partially excluded the citizens with less social, economic and time resources.

Finally, Territorial Advisory Councils have also been placed around the sub-optimum of subsidiarity in the 'favouring' direction, but a bit closer to the optimum. Differently from the 'Neighbourhood as a common good' project, who collects citizens' needs and inputs and transforms them into projects are common citizens themselves (the Council's members and coordinators). Moreover, a direct dialogue between citizens, represented by the Councils, and

administration (technical and political representatives) exists and is encouraged, even if it does not translate into real forms of deliberation. The Councils can collectively propose policy areas and projects and express opinions when requested, but the final decision on what to include in the PSSIs, as well as on how to translate them into public policies, is still completely under the control of the administration. However, an important change towards the optimum is that the alliance between citizens and institutions can concern not only actions to be co-produced, but also broader themes that go beyond civil society's implementation capacities.

Even if the institutional participatory projects in Reggio Emilia have come closer to the centre of the gradient over time, they are still quite far from representing the so-called optimum of subsidiarity. In order to take some more steps in that direction, citizens should have more power to deliberate directly with the municipal representatives responsible for the problems they are dealing with. Moreover, citizens should be involved in the evaluation of the Regulation for democracy and urban and climatic justice in Reggio Emilia that is foreseen two years after its approval. Finally, they should directly manage a small budget, or at least be guaranteed a minimum budget to implement the priorities and proposals set in the PSSI.

### *The ladder of citizen participation and its critiques*

Arnstein's 'ladder of citizen participation' (1969) has been a reference to assess the level of participation of the citizens in so-called participatory public programs for more than 50 years. It has largely been used by scholars referring to a political approach to participation, as the ladder is based on the assumption that participation means redistribution of power. As mentioned in Chapter 1, however, in the last decades some critiques to this approach have been raised, as it appears too simplistic and linear to be properly applied to real-life situations.

In the following lines, I will start verifying the coherence of the main critiques to Arnstein's ladder (see Chapter 1) with the analysis of my case study. This will allow me to apply the 'ladder' model in a more critical way to avoid getting stuck by its partial inconsistency with the projects under analysis and to account for the multiplicity of outcomes that emerged from the same project or Regulation.

Among the critical points reported by Collins and Ison (2009), the more relevant for my case study are:

- *the hierarchical nature of the ladder, having as its maximum level 'citizen control', does not necessarily correspond to participants' own reasons and aspirations for engaging in decision-making processes:* interviews with participating citizens unveiled that very

different reasons supported participants' engagement in the projects, from obtaining recognition for their voluntary activity (Interviewee II), to strengthening their network (Interviewees I, III, IV), to feeling useful and taking care of their neighbourhood (Interviewees VI, VIII, IX), to providing a channel to bring citizens' needs and requests up to the power holders (Interviewees II, V, VI, VIII, IX);

- *the linear character of the ladder does not account for inconstancy of policy problems nor for the different levels and types of participation that can be necessary to cope with them*: the projects unfolded over different phases and ramifications, which makes it difficult to categorise them in a single rung of the ladder. Moreover, although each project (with the partial exception of 'Reggio Emilia people, for example') had its own Regulation formally approved by the city council, their outcomes in different neighbourhoods were quite diverse. This was mainly motivated by relational issues, as the main causes of this diversity of outcomes were explained by the different socio-economic and associative contexts, by the different approaches of the participating citizens and of the municipal referents managing them locally (Interviewees 2, I, IV, IX). Finally, the rung of the ladder on which the different projects are located changes quite drastically if we limit our evaluation to the co-governance of each single intervention or if we look at participation in the project as part of larger policy making;
- *according to the ladder, changes of roles and responsibilities only depend on changing levels of power, whereas "more complex set of relationships [...] exist in many ongoing participatory situations, where roles are less easy to define and responsibilities emerge during, and as a consequence of, the participatory process itself" (Ivi, p.362)*: the shared responsibility introduced by the co-governance model from co-design to co-evaluation did change roles and responsibilities of participating citizens *vis-à-vis* the municipal administration. However, this did not come hand in hand with a corresponding change in power. This was stressed by many members of the Territorial Councils, who expressed discomfort with holding roles and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* both the administration and the citizens they represent without having the economic nor the decisional power to concretely determine what answers to give to their demands (Interviewees I, III, V, VI);
- *Arnstein's conception of power as a commodity (held by one actor or the other) conflicts with other views that consider power as relational, as something that circulates and is never fully in anybody's hands*: as already mentioned above, regardless of formal regulations that do not explicitly foresee the power of making binding decisions for

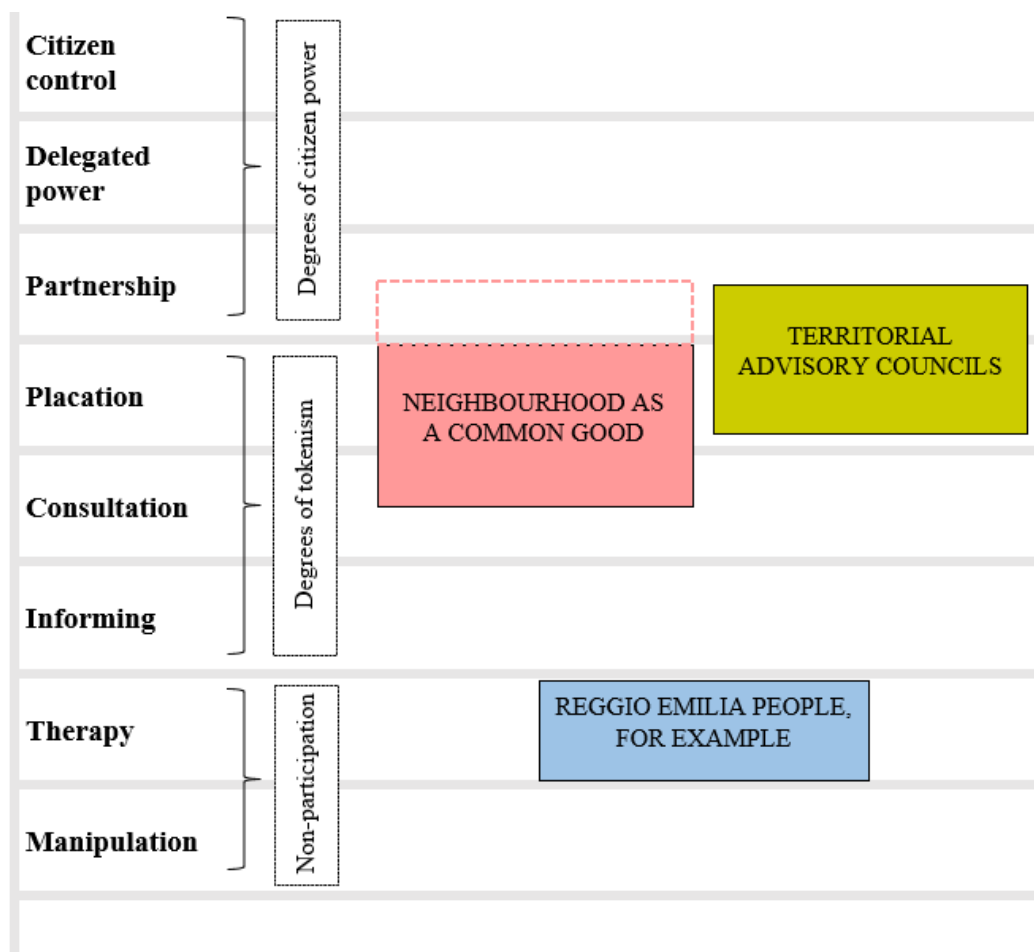
citizens in Reggio Emilia, the actual power of their opinions and proposals appears to depend on the process that brings to their formulation and on the relationship existing among participating citizens and with the municipal representatives. The relational dimension is therefore an essential factor to determine people's power. Moreover, participating citizens (or at least some of them) know that the municipality needs their engagement to make the project work, to find legitimization in the neighbourhoods and to obtain new funds having citizen participation as a condition (as some EU NRRP funds). This is seen by some of the interviewees as an indirect form of power (Interviewee III).

Last but not least, I would add that Arnstein's ladder takes into consideration as the main subject of participation the 'powerless', also defined as the 'have-nots'. However, in the contemporary Italian context they are not the only target (if not a target at all) of participatory projects, that are instead often designed for organised subjects from the middle-class or the lower-middle class. This is true in Reggio Emilia, where the cultural and organisational skills, as well as the time and material resources expected from participants are difficult to find among the 'have-nots', resulting in an indirect exclusion of this part of the society. In addition, Arnstein's idea of a group of participating 'have-nots' as the perfect representatives of a local community is quite idealistic. Real neighbourhood communities are composed of people holding different degrees of socio-economic power, and the degree of power is not the main factor that guarantees a person's representativity of a group. In other words, not only different degrees of 'powerlessness' exist, but also individuals might not feel represented by another person from the same degree of 'powerlessness' because of overlapping cultural, religious, social or political differences. In the case of Reggio Emilia, discomfort has been expressed by some of the interviewees about the fact that the absolute majority of participating citizens, especially in Territorial Councils, have political positions that are very close to the governing party, leaving a very tight space of manoeuvre for different positions (Interviewees 6, VIII, IX). Others highlighted how cultural minorities are visibly underrepresented, as well as other minority groups (Interviewees 2, I, V, IV). The fact that the participants in the first two projects were the ones who knew about the project, had the resources to participate and actively decided to engage in the projects, and that the Councils were elected by a very low share of residents, underlines how representativity in this case cannot be taken as an assumption. However, a positive note is that the Councils' members, or at least some of them, are aware of this issue and are making great efforts to involve as many people as possible to increase their representativity (Interviewees I, VI, VII).

The previous observations show how trying to define the meaning given to the term ‘participation’, even within one single project, is not simple at all. This is caused by the superposition of a multiplicity of factors determining power and the way in which an institutionalised participatory process is enacted by its actors. This means that the municipal administration, and its different officers, can use different levels of active listening, trust in citizens’ capacities to provide meaningful insight, and good faith in the support of these projects. This also means that participating citizens can be more or less representative of the community they are supposed to represent, and can have different levels of awareness of their role, capacity to build constructive criticisms to the administration and to work for the common interest. Finally, this can equally mean that other actors from the quintuple helix may intervene and change the power balances (e.g. for-profit private actors, cognitive institutions, etc).

Keeping in mind all the considerations made above, an attempt to locate the three projects under analysis on Arnstein’s ladder is presented in Figure 9: Three institutional participatory processes on the 'ladder of citizen participation' (Arnstein, 1969).

Figure 9: Three institutional participatory processes on the 'ladder of citizen participation' (Arnstein, 1969)



‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ can be placed on the ‘therapy’ rung. It did not involve the people in a discussion on how to strategically address problems, but it basically provided funding and recognition to volunteers, third-sector workers and proactive teachers to give self-organised answers to collective problems. At the same time, it promoted the engagement of new volunteers to give more stability and sustainability to these autonomous answers to social problems. However, it can be noticed that this project was launched in a period where participatory processes were still at their birth in Reggio Emilia, and that this meant that even the internal organisation of the municipality was probably not ready yet to cope with a broader involvement of citizens in decision-making.

‘Neighbourhood as a common good’ project is probably the most difficult to locate on the ladder, because of the ambiguity of some objectives and practices, but also because some apparent forms of citizen power exist at the initiative-level but do not reflect an actual redistribution of power on a higher level. If we consider the initiative-level, we cannot place it on the ‘consultation’ rung, because taking charge of some of citizens’ needs and proposals is guaranteed by the direct involvement of participating citizens in the implementation of the actions. This, together with the rhetoric of ‘partnership as sharing responsibilities’ promoted by the administration, could even appear as a form of ‘partnership’ as defined by Arnstein. However, even if it is true that responsibilities over planning and implementation of interventions are shared, decisions on the initiatives to implement and the funds to allocate depend much more on municipal will and pre-established programmes than on citizens’ preferences. Moreover, ground rules are not really defined through a form of give-and-take, but by the municipality. What is negotiated and in principle not subject to unilateral change is only the execution of the initiatives themselves. These observations locate the HERE project closer to a form of ‘placation’, as it allows citizens to plan *ad libitum* but the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of their advice remains in the hands of the municipality. If we look at the project in a slightly bigger frame, the location between the ‘consultation’ and the ‘placation’ rungs is confirmed. It is clear that citizen participation was limited to the more or less punctual initiatives that participants could help implement, with no guarantee that these would have been included in following policies nor that sustainability over time would have been given to them. However, it must be noted that, differently from Arnstein’s description of placation, an attempt to evaluate this project beyond merely quantitative indicators and to enhance long-lasting networks of relationships was made by the municipality.

Finally, Territorial Advisory Councils can be located between the ‘placation’ and the ‘partnership’ rungs. The presence of a ‘placation’ type of participation is indicated by the fact



that the Councils members, who are elected and are supposed to represent their neighbourhoods, are not only consulted about municipal proposals but can also plan operational interventions to address the priority problems they identify. However, even in this case the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of their proposals is not in their hands or in external experts' ones, but completely subject to the technical and political evaluation of the city government. Nevertheless, differently from the 'Neighbourhood as a common good' project, the strategic proposals that are included in the PSSIs should become part of larger municipal policies and programmes, and the operational proposals should not be limited to the Citizenship Workshops model, but allow for the discussion of operational interventions by the municipality as well. Even in this case, however, ambiguities remain concerning roles and responsibilities of the different actors, as well as the exact functioning of some parts of this system. This caused dissatisfaction with some Councils members, as they found themselves unable to decide the direction to give to the PSSI for their territory and in some cases had to waive an adequate discussion of the proposals to put in the Pact in order to respect changes in the deadlines imposed by the municipality (Interviewees VI, IX). However, whether participation in the Territorial Councils will remain at the placation level or will become a form of 'partnership' will become clearer during the next year, when the first Territorial Pacts will be put into practice. It will depend much on what relationship the following city government will decide to have with the Councils. An attempt was made by Councils coordinators to remark their collective role and their will to bring to attention some issues that emerged as crucial for the whole city. They coordinated to add to all the PSSIs a common introduction giving a city-wide vision of the role of the Councils and of the themes emerging as priorities in different neighbourhoods (Interviewee VIII). Whether the administration will welcome this kind of proactive initiatives or will overlook them will determine if this participatory experience will jump on the 'partnership' rung of the ladder or will remain a tokenistic form of placation.

Summarising the previous analysis, one can observe that the institutional participatory projects in Reggio Emilia progressed during the last 15 years from a form of non-participation, to forms of tokenism, to a possible form of citizen power. Until the 'Neighbourhood as a common good' project, a sociological approach to participation is more adequate than a political one to describe participatory processes in the analysed context. This approach does not exclude power as a component of participation, but it remains one of the many secondary concepts to support it. On the contrary, with the Territorial Councils we can see the opportunity of a shift towards a more political conception of participation.

However, some aspects already mentioned above risk hampering this transition towards a political form of participation in practice. The most important ones are:

- the lack of representativity of the Territorial Councils given by the way in which they were formed (despite the formal election with universal suffrage, the participation rate to elections was under 4% and they were perceived as a tool of the administration becoming in practice monopolised by supporters of the governing party);
- the little clarity of the budgetary and sectoral limits within which their proposals can move;
- their lack of accountability, given by the difficulty shown by at least some Councils to prioritise their role of representatives of the community to the obedience to the means and deadlines imposed by the municipality.

However, both institutional and citizens' representatives stressed that these new structures have existed since less than one year now, making it difficult to give any kind of evaluation at this early stage.

A final consideration on Arnstein's theory concerns the hard task of defining redistribution of power in the context of institutional participation. As we talk about public policies, imagining that citizens that have not been elected in formal elections recognised by the State can take binding decisions concerning the overall address of city policies and the use of public funds is difficult, except in the form of a referendum (where the participation of the absolute majority of citizens is required). Passing through a validation and harmonisation of the proposals emerged through participative projects with the choices of the administration seems logical and quite inevitable. However, as very well expressed by the member of a Territorial Council, "you can talk about power redistribution if something happens, if a request is followed by an action. Until now, the requests that were met by actions were the invitations to aldermen and alderwomen to our 'internal' meetings to discuss some specific topics. Will something more concrete follow? We will have an answer next year" (Interviewee II).

### *The Participation matrix*

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Wates's Participation matrix (2000) was conceived as an operational tool to support professionals and public officers to manage community planning processes in a context where funding and accountability are detained by local (public) authorities. This applies perfectly to the projects under analysis in this case study, and allows us to jump down from a political and intellectual perspective to a more operational one. The

analysis through the Participation matrix does not aim at assessing the level of participation of citizens in the wider framework of local policy making, but at observing how the two main actors of participation, here called ‘community’ and ‘authorities’, interact in the different stages of a project.

Table 5 proposes Wates’s Participation matrix as already described in Chapter 1 (see Table 2). Shaded areas underline where most community planning operates, and the cell shaded in dark purple is the one indicating a good level of participatory community planning.

Tables Table 6, Table 7 and Table 8 apply the Participation matrix to the three projects analysed by this case study. The cells highlighted in a lighter colour mark situations that exist but are less common in the implementation of the project under analysis. The cell signalling the presence of ‘good participatory community planning’ is marked with thick edges. The analysis done through these tables does not refer to the whole participatory projects, but to the single initiatives or interventions put in place as an output of the projects.

Table 6 confirms what has been already observed about the ‘Reggio Emilia people, for example’ project: it cannot be considered properly a participatory project, as there are almost no steps implemented jointly by the municipality and participating citizens. The most remarkable shortcoming, in participatory terms, concerns the design of the initiatives, which were basically designed by the organised civil society (mainly the third sector) alone. The more collaborative step was implementation, where the municipality provided economic resources and operational support to the implementation of the initiatives. Finally, where it was possible to maintain them after the end of the project, this was mainly done by CSOs alone. In a few cases, the experiences supported by this project were maintained over time by the administration through their inclusion in the following Citizenship Workshops or in other municipal projects.

Table 7 shows the already mentioned shift of the ‘Neighbourhood as a common good’ project towards more participatory practices, especially when analysing the single initiatives supported. Most of the time, actions were initiated by the municipality after consulting citizens on the priorities of their neighbourhood (or of a building, park or infrastructure to regenerate). In a few cases, activities autonomously initiated by the citizens were absorbed by Citizenship Workshops’ collaborative process. The central point of this project was exactly the co-design of the initiatives, where citizens and the administration actively discussed the possible options available to reach the largest possible consensus on the activities approved with the Citizenship Agreements. Even implementation was always joint, as organised and non-organised citizens offered their time, skills and material resources to materially put the initiatives into practice,

while the administration offered some funding, the free use of public spaces and logistical and operational support. The maintenance of the initiatives was in some cases guaranteed by the renewal of the Citizenship Agreements (joint action of the administration and the citizens), while in some cases it was left to the good will and resources of the civil society organisations that promoted them. This meant that some of them were not continued after the end of the project.

Finally, Table 8 well represents the increase in complexity brought by the introduction of Territorial Advisory Councils, even in terms of participatory management of the initiatives or interventions. These can be initiated by the Councils themselves after the collection of a need from the neighbourhoods they represent, but they can also start as a joint initiative between citizens and a specific public service to respond to a collectively identified need, or be the output of a consultation of the Council by the city government. Plan and design will follow different paths depending on the type of action involved. Innovative initiatives to be managed through a Citizenship Workshop will be co-designed, co-implemented and maintained either jointly through the renewal of the Agreement regulating them, or by the community alone if the municipal support will not be continuous. More traditional and ‘technical’ interventions will instead be planned and implemented by the municipality after consulting the Council, and will be maintained by the municipality with or without consulting the community. As most of the project stages have not been implemented yet in the initiatives proposed by Territorial Councils, this analysis is mainly based on what is stated by their official Regulation and on the assumptions made by the interviewees.

Overall, the analysis done through the Participation matrix confirms the progressive trend in the degree of citizen participation and in the complexity of the analysed projects. The practical implementation of the three projects appears to perform better in terms of participatory practices compared to the degree of participation in policy making that derives from taking part in them.

Table 5: The Participation matrix (source: Wates, 2000, page 10)

|                                |   | Project stages   |   |   |  |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
|                                |   | Initiate   | Plan  | Implement   | Maintain   |
| Level of community involvement | <b>Self Help</b><br>Community control                                 | Community initiates action alone                       | Community plans alone                           | Community implements alone                        | Community maintains alone                        |
|                                | <b>Partnership</b><br>Shared working and decision making              | Authorities & community jointly initiate action        | Authorities & community jointly plan and design | Authorities & community jointly implement         | Authorities & community jointly maintain         |
|                                | <b>Consultation</b><br>Authorities ask community for opinions         | Authorities initiate action after consulting community | Authorities plan after consulting community     | Authorities implement with community consultation | Authorities maintain with community consultation |
|                                | <b>Information</b><br>One way flow of information<br>Public relations | Authorities initiate action                            | Authorities plan and design alone               | Authorities implement alone                       | Authorities maintain alone                       |

Table 6: Wates's Participation matrix applied to the 'Reggio Emilia people, for example' project (2008-2013)

|                                |   | Project stages   |   |   |  |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
|                                |   | Initiate   | Plan  | Implement   | Maintain   |
| Level of community involvement | <b>Self Help</b><br>Community control                                 | Community initiates action alone                       | Community plans alone                           | Community implements alone                        | Community maintains alone                        |
|                                | <b>Partnership</b><br>Shared working and decision making              | Authorities & community jointly initiate action        | Authorities & community jointly plan and design | Authorities & community jointly implement         | Authorities & community jointly maintain         |
|                                | <b>Consultation</b><br>Authorities ask community for opinions         | Authorities initiate action after consulting community | Authorities plan after consulting community     | Authorities implement with community consultation | Authorities maintain with community consultation |
|                                | <b>Information</b><br>One way flow of information<br>Public relations | Authorities initiate action                            | Authorities plan and design alone               | Authorities implement alone                       | Authorities maintain alone                       |

Table 7: Wates's Participation matrix applied to the 'Neighbourhood as a common good' project (2014-2019 and 2020-2024)

|                                |   | Project stages   |   |   |  |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
|                                |   | Initiate   | Plan  | Implement   | Maintain   |
| Level of community involvement | <b>Self Help</b><br>Community control                                 | Community initiates action alone                       | Community plans alone                           | Community implements alone                        | Community maintains alone                        |
|                                | <b>Partnership</b><br>Shared working and decision making              | Authorities & community jointly initiate action        | Authorities & community jointly plan and design | Authorities & community jointly implement         | Authorities & community jointly maintain         |
|                                | <b>Consultation</b><br>Authorities ask community for opinions         | Authorities initiate action after consulting community | Authorities plan after consulting community     | Authorities implement with community consultation | Authorities maintain with community consultation |
|                                | <b>Information</b><br>One way flow of information<br>Public relations | Authorities initiate action                            | Authorities plan and design alone               | Authorities implement alone                       | Authorities maintain alone                       |

Table 8: Wates's Participation matrix applied to Territorial Advisory Councils (2023-2027)

|                                |   | Project stages   |   |   |  |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
|                                |   | Initiate   | Plan  | Implement   | Maintain   |
| Level of community involvement | <b>Self Help</b><br>Community control                                 | Community initiates action alone                       | Community plans alone                           | Community implements alone                        | Community maintains alone                        |
|                                | <b>Partnership</b><br>Shared working and decision making              | Authorities & community jointly initiate action        | Authorities & community jointly plan and design | Authorities & community jointly implement         | Authorities & community jointly maintain         |
|                                | <b>Consultation</b><br>Authorities ask community for opinions         | Authorities initiate action after consulting community | Authorities plan after consulting community     | Authorities implement with community consultation | Authorities maintain with community consultation |
|                                | <b>Information</b><br>One way flow of information<br>Public relations | Authorities initiate action                            | Authorities plan and design alone               | Authorities implement alone                       | Authorities maintain alone                       |

### **c. Analysis of the impact of participatory projects on the relationship between municipality and participating citizens in Reggio Emilia**

In the so-called ‘Co-City’ (Iaione, 2016), a collaborative community shares with institutions decisions, but also actions in view of the general interest, thus empowering citizens and modifying relationships among the stakeholders. This paragraph will analyse if and how the institutional participatory processes analysed in this research modified the relationship between participating citizens and the municipality over the past 15 years.

Analysing transversally the three projects and the analysis provided in the previous paragraphs, we can infer that the relationship between the administration and participating citizens has been overall strengthened over the years. Some active citizens, as well as some organisations, have become stable stakeholders of the administration in the implementation of these projects, to the point that some institutional representatives that I interviewed referred to a database of contacts of the citizens who already participated in Citizenship Workshops as the starting point for the communication of new initiatives (Interviewee 2). Despite the risk of co-optation and the low turnover that these dynamics can produce, this can be seen as a good signal that, overall, at least a part of the participating citizens are satisfied with their participatory experience. However, many people also express dissatisfaction with the fact that projects that were supposed to listen to citizens’ needs and to address them with concrete solutions were in some cases oriented by the municipality towards activities that were considered good but not corresponding to the real priorities of the people. Moreover, the general delay in the municipal response to citizens’ warnings undermines the confidence that Territorial Councils’ reports and proposals will be taken more seriously than it was done in the past.

Relying on the interviews conducted in the framework of this research, the main changes that were linked to the municipal support to participatory projects are:

- A reorganisation of the relational network of the municipality, both externally with the opening of easier and more direct communication channels with the third-sector organisations, and internally with the opening of co-governance tables among different municipal offices (Interviewees 5, III);
- The awareness by a part of the citizens that “the municipality opened some spaces where collaboration and dialogue with the public administration is possible. This message from a slogan became a practice. However, there still are parts of the community with whom we [the municipality] have not opened a dialogue, yet” (Interviewee 5);

- The enlargement of the collaborations of the municipality with civil society organisations produced more democratic and competitive relational forms, as expressed by the long-standing president of a social centre who stated that “it’s not as it was before, when to get initiatives approved it was enough to make a phone call as we knew so-and-so within the administration.. now nothing is guaranteed because of personal relationships, we need to put more efforts into designing our proposals” (Interviewee III). However, it is undeniable that the municipal administration maintains very strong relationships with some long-standing CSOs, especially the ones belonging to the political area of the governing party;
- A better understanding of the municipal structure and functioning by the participating citizens, which in turn enhances a sense of mutual understanding and participating citizens’ capacity to ‘speak the language of the administration’ (Interviewees I, II). This was also enhanced by the transparent and apparently open-to-critics approach kept by both political and technical representatives *vis-à-vis* the Territorial Councils (Interviewee VIII);
- A new importance given by the administration to the care of the social ties as the basis to create a sense of belonging in the community and an education to collective interest and to mutual respect (Interviewee I). This also meant finding adequate reference points within the communities that are usually harder to involve, as encouraging the communication among peers results in the opening of communication channels and civic activation that can be hardly achieved by public institutions alone (Interviewee VII);
- The creation of expectations and trust in the usefulness of these projects among the participants, especially with the creation of the Territorial Councils. This is good, but also generates a risk of frustration if participation transforms into an “empty and frustrating process” (Arnstein, 1969). As expressed by an interviewee, “Territorial Councils can be very good or very bad. If some issues will emerge clearly in different neighbourhoods, and no action will be taken to address them, people will be even more angry and frustrated” (Interviewee II);
- An emerging feeling, from some parts of the population, of a further distance between the political representatives and the people. This could seem a contradiction with the fact that the participatory projects since 2014 were developed by the municipality as a way to find a much-needed new connection and communication channel with citizens. However, this feeling was perceived both from some interviews and from observations



of Councils' public meetings with citizens. This can be motivated by the fact that, in the context of a middle-size local administration, people consider the possibility of a direct interaction with political representatives as a sign of interest and active listening to their problems. Participatory projects introduce intermediate roles and structures to filter the municipal communication with citizen. Therefore, if this does not come with the maintenance of an adequate (even if symbolic) presence of political representatives in public meetings, it can produce the perception of politicians that want to get rid of the relationship with their people (Interviewees V, IX).

Overall, the changes in the relationship between participating citizens and the municipality of Reggio Emilia correspond to the objectives of the participatory projects supported in the last 15 years. However, the effective achievement of the objectives set by the municipality will depend a lot on the way in which the Territorial Councils' experience will be transformed into concrete responses to the priorities highlighted by the citizens of Reggio Emilia. As mentioned above, among the changes produced by these years of participatory projects there is on the one hand the creation of expectations, and on the other hand the disillusionment engendered by past frustrations. If the ongoing project will not reach its expected outcomes, both these tendencies might hamper the municipal efforts to create a functional communication channel with their residents through participation. Moreover, it is important to remember that the changes described above have been identified by the citizens who have actively participated in at least one of the projects. A huge challenge for the municipality will be to expand them to a higher portion (and, ideally, to the totality) of the local population, increasing the number of actively participating residents and their representativity.

## FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study addressed the three research questions adopting a linear-analytic approach.

Chapter 1 introduced the theoretical propositions that were later used to analyse the case study using the technique of pattern matching. These theories mainly concern citizen participation, collaborative governance and community planning. They are not absolute explanatory statements, but rather tools, models, and observations that help analyse the reasons and objectives underpinning participatory projects and the degree to which they can be considered 'participatory'. The first research question "Why did the municipality of Reggio Emilia decide to formalise and support projects for citizen participation in decision-making over the past 15 years?" was built on the 'three logics underpinning participation' theorised by Cabannes and Lipietz (2015, 2018) and the connected analytical grid, and on the 'co-governance' theory as presented by Arena and Iaione (2015). The second research question "How has participation been understood and implemented in Reggio Emilia in the past 15 years, and how did this evolve through the different projects?" relied on the 'gradient of subsidiarity' elaborated by Iaione (2015), on the 'ladder of citizen participation' proposed by Arnstein (1969) and on the 'participation matrix' that Wates (2000) proposed to operationalise its rungs in real-life projects.

Chapter 2 was devoted to the presentation of the most salient aspects of the case study. The description of the case study was based on the triangulation of different sources: official (municipal) documentation, semi-structured interviews and the direct observation of some meetings of the ongoing project. Institutional participatory projects in Reggio Emilia were organised in three sub-cases corresponding to three big projects that took place since 2008. The first one is 'Reggio Emilia people, for example' that between 2008 and 2013 mapped the experiences of active citizenship in the city and supported them through funding and the promotion of volunteering. The second one is 'HERE – Neighbourhood as a common good' that through its two seasons 2014-2019 and 2020-2024 brought the Labsus co-governance model and the so-called 'Citizenship Agreements' at the centre of the municipal actions in the neighbourhoods. Finally, the third one are the Territorial Advisory Councils, recently elected for their first turn 2023-2027, that aim at creating an intermediate body representing the citizens in front of the administration for the co-planning of the territorial policies and actions in the neighbourhoods.

Chapter 3 combined the elements emerged in the first two to perform an analysis to answer the research questions. The grids, models and concepts presented in the first chapter were applied to each of the three projects described in the second one. This provided a deeper understanding

of the three sub-cases, but also a transversal vision of the evolution of the whole process over 15 years. Triangulating different sources of information I grasped the more or less coherence of the official regulations underlying the projects with their actual implementation, especially concerning their participatory character. This allowed not only to answer the research questions, but also to identify further noteworthy elements that might be useful to conduct further research or to orientate the future development of these projects.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, and according to Yin's methodology (2018), this case-study research also gave me insights on the generalisability of its theoretical propositions. In my specific case, this meant checking if the frameworks and models proposed by the chosen theories are adequate to analyse institutional participatory projects in Italian cities based on the co-governance approach.

Cabannes and Lipietz 'three competing logics underpinning citizen participation' (2015, 2018), although conceived to describe PB logics, appeared perfectly fitting my case study and more in general participatory projects and processes sponsored by local authorities. However, the 18 indicators composing the analytical grid (Cabannes, 2004) are visibly shaped to evaluate PB experiences, given the high importance given to budget-related measures. Therefore, some of these indicators might result less significant for experiences as those in Reggio Emilia, that are declaredly not aimed at sharing the management of significant budget portions but rather at promoting civic activation and the creation of a collaboration between administrators and citizens. Nevertheless, crossing them with the second table (drafted by me to collect a few more qualitative criteria indicated by Cabannes and Lipietz to define the underpinning logics) I obtained a very complex and insightful understanding of the different reasons underlying the projects over time.

Arena and Iaione's theory about 'co-governance' (2015) was undoubtedly very useful to understand the projects analysed in this case study, especially 'Neighbourhood as a common good' that is the one that most directly descends from the administrative model proposed by the authors. My research confirmed its overall generalisability to institutional participatory projects in the Italian context. Two concepts borrowed from Selloni (2015, in Arena and Iaione, 2015) that were confirmed as generalisable and in line with the other chosen theories are co-design as improving citizens' subjective empowerment (feeling potentially capable to influence decisions and creating a collective actor) and co-production/co-implementation as citizens' objective empowerment (their objective capacity to influence decisions given by a concrete redistribution of power). However, according to my study these concepts well apply to the perception of the participating citizens, but do not necessarily correspond to an actual

redistribution of power as suggested by Selloni. Finally, the ‘gradient of subsidiarity’ (Iaione, 2015) resulted useful to reflect on the application of the principle of subsidiarity, but sometimes a bit difficult to apply to single projects. This can be explained by the fact that it was conceived to describe the global level of subsidiarity of municipal policies, and not of specific projects. Using it in this way, without considering the whole institutional framework around them, results therefore in a reductive application of this tool.

Arnstein’s ‘ladder of citizen participation’ (1969) was applied as it could help simplify the analysis of the levels (or kinds) of participation in different projects. The ladder itself resulted not generalisable to the kind of projects and contexts analysed in my research. The critiques that were moved to it in the past decades by those who highlight the need to ‘jump off the ladder’ (Collins and Ison, 2009; Carpentier, 2016) to understand complex contemporary phenomena held generally true in my case study. However, the combination of the linearity of the ‘ladder’ model with the complexity brought in by its critics was enlightening. It led me to unravel the net of officially declared intentions and actual practices, and to go beyond Arnstein’s politically-appealing categorisations not to overlook real-life complexity that can be very seldom compartmentalized.

Finally, Wates’s ‘participation matrix’ (2000) provided an interesting framework to analyse institutional participation in Reggio Emilia and seems overall generalisable to participatory projects having a municipal-institutional character and addressing neighbourhood-level issues. An aspect that I found very helpful is the fact that it evaluates the projects not as units but as complex interactions where different actors can have different roles and levels of power in subsequent phases. This provided me with a perspective focused on the very operational level of the initiatives realised through the analysed projects, which was missing in the previous theories and added new considerations to my previous findings.

All things considered, the answers to my research questions can be resumed as follows:

- Why did the municipality of Reggio Emilia decide to formalise and support processes of citizen participation in decision-making over the past 15 years?

The main reason and logic underpinning the support of the municipality of Reggio Emilia to citizen participation resulted to be ‘good governance’. This is in line with the collaborative governance paradigm as promoted in Italy by Labsus, and corresponds to the main reasons and objectives pointed out by the municipality for these projects. In fact, the projects drivers were essentially a mimetic adaptation to those ‘new’ administrative principles and the need to find a relational strategy to maintain a direct contact with citizens and to manage the wide component

of active citizens within the local population. The municipal objectives underwent an evolution and expansion over time, but two points remained stable: 1) citizens' empowerment through the enhancement of the social capital and shared responsibilities, and 2) the rationalisation and efficiency of communication and relational channels with citizens. A transversal reading of the three projects unveils the transition from a good governance/technocratic logic in 'Reggio Emilia people, for example', to a full good governance logic in 'Neighbourhood as a common good', to a good governance logic punctuated by allusions to potentially more political logic in the Territorial Advisory Councils.

- How has participation been understood and implemented by the municipality of Reggio Emilia in the past 15 years, and how did this evolve through the different projects?

The kind of participation proposed by the municipality of Reggio Emilia changed quite considerably in the past 15 years. Each project was structured on a different (more or less) participatory model, even if I observed a gradual evolution towards what my theoretical propositions define as 'higher degrees' of participation. Concerning the level of subsidiarity, none of the three projects reached the optimum, but a slow convergence towards it is happening from a situation of clear unbalance in favour of the municipal administration. Concerning the degree of citizen participation, a remarkable shift occurred from nonparticipation in the 'Reggio Emilia people, for example' project, to different levels of tokenism in the 'Neighbourhood as a common good' project (despite official intentions of reaching a degree of partnership that, in my opinion, were never achieved), to a mixture of tokenism and minimum degrees of citizen power in the Territorial Advisory Councils. The cruciality of the interaction between regulations and relational aspects to determine the actual degree of participation reached on the ground was a relevant finding in this sense. Finally, approaching my analytical lens to the participatory dynamics shaping each implemented initiative, I could re-confirm how participation was understood and implemented in a progressive way through the three projects. From a substantial level of self-help in the first project, a shift towards the partnership level is visible in the second one, even if aspects of self-help remained especially in the maintenance step. The third project was influenced by a more complex and less univocal understanding of participation, generally ranging between the levels of consultation and of partnership.

- Has the long-lasting existence of institutional participatory projects changed participating citizens' power and relationship with the Municipality over the past 15 years, and how?

The 15 years of promotion of citizen participation in Reggio Emilia surely affected the relationship between participating citizens and the municipal administration. The changes

detected through the triangulation of my sources underlined the different points of view of the two main actors at play, as well as contrasting effects on citizens' confidence in the municipality. From the municipal point of view, the three projects required an effort to reorganise both internal and external relational networks, but this was paid back by a recognition of this efforts and by the opening of spaces of collaboration with citizens. Another change was the gradual definition of strategies to enhance the quality of communication with citizens, as the use of communication among peers and the better information of citizens about the municipal functioning and the existing participatory opportunities. From the citizens' point of view, on the other hand, the main changes concern the widening of the collaboration opportunities both with other citizens and CSOs and with the municipality, but also their formalisation. The above-mentioned better understanding of the municipal structure and functioning translated for some of them into an increase in negotiation skills. However, two contrasting dispositions exist now among active citizens: some have great expectations about their capacity to influence the municipal decisions, while others saw the interposition of participatory projects and bodies between themselves and the administration as enlarging their distance from the local authority. Concerning the level of power, if we compare the time when *circostrizioni* (municipal districts) managed the neighbourhoods with the level of power redistribution achieved by the analysed projects, we can probably affirm that citizens' power has not increased, but overall decreased. However, it must be considered that the dissolution of municipal districts was imposed by the State and that there was no obligation to the municipality to find participatory alternatives to replace them. This can lead to recognise the municipal merit of keeping a participatory and dialectic channel with citizens open. Nevertheless, especially given the socio-political tradition of the territory of Reggio Emilia, more radical choices in terms of representativity and of power redistribution may be done in the future.

This last observation opens to some further findings concerning representation. As stressed by Vitale (2007), participation is always challenged by representation, regardless of its conflictual, reclaiming or productive function and of the way in which representativity is sought. The weak representativity of neighbourhoods residents by the citizens participating in the institutional participatory projects under analysis was stressed as a critical issue by different interviewees. While the municipal administration tried to fix representation issues emerged in the previous projects by introducing the election by universal suffrage of Territorial Councils, their democratic legitimacy remains weak. This is because, as stated by Pitkin, "democratic legitimacy of representation [...] has an essentially procedural character: it depends much [...] on how it is categorised and controlled to allow for the full freedom of expression of the

suffrage” (1967, in Vitale, 2007, pp. 28–29). In the case of Territorial Advisory Councils, the electoral system and its first implementation was affected by some forms of bias, as the composition of the Councils cannot be considered representative of the neighbourhood communities of which they are expression. There is a marked tendency in the Territorial Councils to avoid internal conflicts, as a consequence of their quite homogeneous composition. However, this does not exempt these experiences from tensions with the rest of the population that did not participate perceiving these projects as ‘functional tools of the municipality’ and that contest their ambivalent relationship with power and weak emancipatory character (Alietti, 2005 in Vitale, 2007). Participatory projects in Reggio Emilia did not proactively work to interact with the mobilisations around ‘urban conflicts’ (Vitale, 2007, p. 20), whose expression is left to traditional procedures as referendums and popular initiatives.

As a consequence, it can be stated that institutional participatory projects in Reggio Emilia in the past 15 years have been essentially configured as forms of induced participation (Mansuri and Rao, 2013) within the well-defined limits of an invited space (Cornwall, 2004 in Carlone, 2022) mainly open to organised and non-organised citizens recognising themselves in the social and political orientation of the municipal administration.

The research presented in this thesis had a mainly descriptive purpose. It presents some of the forms of citizen participation supported by the municipality of Reggio Emilia in the last 15 years and clarifies the reasons and objectives underpinning them, the type of participation that was sought and obtained and the impact they had on the system of relationships between the municipal institution and participating citizens. Further research on the same case study could address the afore-mentioned issues of representation in participation, as well as the role of political and party-political orientations in defining who participates and who does not, and how this gap might be closed. Another open field of research concerns the possible ways to integrate a participation model ensuring actual redistribution of power within a system of representative democracy in the analysed context, where power and accountability are by definition detained by formally elected political representatives.

## ANNEX I - LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Institutional representatives (municipality of Reggio Emilia):

1. Municipal urbanist working on the elaboration of the General Urbanistic Plan
2. Coordinator of the Neighbourhood Architects
3. Director of the City Science Office
4. Member of the City Science Office
5. Director of the Participation Policies structure
6. City counsellor (opposition party)

Civil society representatives:

Organised civil society:

- I. Chief of a boy-scout group and non-elected member of a Territorial Council
- II. President of a network of youth associations and non-elected member of a Territorial Council
- III. President of a social centre and non-elected member of a Territorial Council
- IV. President of an intercultural association

Non-organised civil society:

- V. Coordinator of a Territorial Advisory Council
- VI. Elected member of a Territorial Advisory Council
- VII. Elected member of a Territorial Advisory Council
- VIII. Coordinator of a Territorial Advisory Council
- IX. Elected member of a Territorial Advisory Council



## ANNEX II – DATA COLLECTION TOOL

| Project   | Period    | Type of source of information               | Source of information | DESCRIPTION                     |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|---|-----------|---|-----------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---|--|
|   |           |   |                       | Why ?<br>Reasons and objectives | How ?<br>Main actions | Who ?<br>Participants | What ?<br>Contents | Nature of the output of the participatory process | Main differences from the previous project |
| Reggio Emilia people, for example               | 2008-2013 | Regulations                                 |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Reports                                     |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Interviews with institutional actors        |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
| HERE - Neighbourhood as a common good (1st ed.) | 2014-2019 | Regulations                                 |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Reports                                     |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Interviews with institutional actors        |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
| HERE - Neighbourhood as a common good (2nd ed.) | 2020-2024 | Regulations                                 |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Interviews with institutional               |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Interviews with non-organised civil society |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
| Territorial Advisory Councils                   | 2023-2027 | Regulations                                 |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Articles                                    |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Observations                                |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Interviews with institutional               |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Interviews with organised civil society     |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |
|   |           | Interviews with non-organised civil society |                       |                                 |                       |                       |                    |   |  |

| Project   | Period    | Type of source of information               | Source of information | ANALYSIS        |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|---|-----------|---|-----------------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|---|---------------------|-----------------|
|   |           |   |                       | Who initiates ? | Who plans ? | Who implements ? | Who maintains ? | Distribution of decisional power | Rung of the Ladder of citizen participation | Underpinning logics | Critical points |
| Reggio Emilia people, for example               | 2008-2013 | Regulations                                 |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Reports                                     |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Interviews with institutional actors        |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
| HERE - Neighbourhood as a common good (1st ed.) | 2014-2019 | Regulations                                 |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Reports                                     |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Interviews with institutional actors        |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
| HERE - Neighbourhood as a common good (2nd ed.) | 2020-2024 | Regulations                                 |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Interviews with institutional               |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Interviews with non-organised civil society |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Interviews with organised civil society     |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
| Territorial Advisory Councils                   | 2023-2027 | Regulations                                 |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Articles                                    |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Observations                                |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Interviews with institutional               |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Interviews with organised civil society     |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |
|   |           | Interviews with non-organised civil society |                       |                 |             |                  |                 |                                  |   |                     |                 |

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