

## Participation in theory and practice: methods, challenges and future scenarios

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### Introduction

Participation is one of the most cited concepts in the current debate on public policies in Italy and other countries of the old Europe (Cotturri, 2001). Participation is an implicit principle in the modern idea of democracy: every citizen through his or her right to vote can influence the election of the political representatives and the government plans that best satisfy his or her needs and preferences. The concept of participation is today mentioned with no reference to this type of involvement. In contrast, participation is considered an antidote to the failures of democracy's traditional meaning. The great interest in the concept of participation is based on various reasons which highlight the poor traditional democratic process and legitimacy crisis of the modern idea of democracy. Replacing an old participation model with a new one triggers many complex and articulated issues in social and political sectors which include: the meaning of the participation concept, its goals and management, feasible and expected benefits and limits that could emerge from other models of citizen participation different from those experienced in the elective democracy model. This paper wants to analyze the complexity of these issues and pinpoint the basic aspects of the debate that may turn useful for considerations and research on this subject-matter.

### The definition of democracy and the quality of the democratic process

It is difficult to explain the real meaning of 'democracy'. The term 'democracy' derives from ancient Greek and is formed by "demos": people, and "kratos": power. Therefore, democracy is a concept which refers to the power of people. In a narrow version, democracy is a collective decision-making process which specifically entails the direct and indirect participation of everybody. Decisions are taken after a majority discussion process. (Bobbio, 1982)

In modern societies, the traditional principle of democracy is that of representative democracy which entitles every citizen to elect with his or her vote the representatives of political bodies by choosing programs and ideas that conform best to his or her needs and goals. The fundamental idea of democratic systems is based on the principle that everybody has the right to participate in the management of social and political systems. In complex and articulated social societies, however, decisions cannot be made always through assemblies as in Athen's *polis*. In this perspective, the delegation to elected political representatives is a way to safeguard every citizen's involvement in the *res publica* in historical and social realities where the convocation of

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the citizen assembly is not possible. The mechanism of elective democracy holds different virtues.

The first virtue is that political power is based on citizens' legitimization and in the last instance it depends on it. The election mechanism represents a way to ground political decisions on the citizens' will ensuring a level of consistency between them. It fosters a feeling of community belonging among the individuals and spurs accountability.

The second virtue is linked to the principles of universalism which highlight the fact that every citizen has the right to participate to the *res publica*. So every citizen independent of his origin, gender, religious and political ideas is entitled to the same right, without discrimination.

The third virtue is representation: since every citizen can express his opinion through voting, the elected politician will thus represent the goals and preferences of the majority. When governments are considered the mirror of a nation (in good or bad), we tend to emphasize even metaphorically the elected members as those who represent the people's will, thus, the democratic mechanism is a guarantee of political programs which represent the citizens' will.

The fourth virtue of elective democracy is based on the politician's individual responsibility. During the election period politicians present their program platforms asking for consent. They personally become more visible to public opinion. Once elected they become directly responsible for their work. If they carry out convincing programs for the citizens they will be re-elected; if not, they will personally pay the toll of defaults and wrong decisions.

The fifth virtue is that of political decisions accountability. The logic of general elections imposes on elected politicians at the end of the term the task of accounting for the work done in order to be re-elected. The democratic mechanism, thus, entails incentives to publicize the activities of policy-makers and favors assessment by the electorate.

Elective democracy has been the institution which mostly fostered economic and social development in Western societies worldwide. In the last two decades, however, it registered a decline and the presence of critical features which have shed doubts on the pillars of the democratic model itself. The effects of this crisis have been the subject-matter of many debates and vast literature, analysed as follows: drop of participation rates in general and administrative elections, increased lack of confidence in institutions, growing citizen disappointment in the democratic system. There are obviously many reasons that explain the citizens' estrangement from democratic institutions: since the end of the cultural revolutions of the 1970s and 1960s, contemporary societies have been characterized by dynamics of strong resurgence and the presence of widespread individualistic attitudes and behaviors; high levels of wealth have at the same time watered down the reasons behind past vindications and led to prevailing broad acquiesce toward the status quo. The crisis of representative democracy has been accelerated by the crisis of traditional political parties which played a pivot role in mobilizing and organizing consent towards institutions. (Urbinati, 2006). There has been an increasingly widespread perception of a loss in relevance of national and domestic political decisions in the evolution of the phenomena bearing global origin. Traditional political representation and the institutional mechanisms needed for its reproduction today are considered less crucial compared to those of the

past and in some ways they are less apt to address the new and complex problems of modern societies.

Apart from these plausible explanations of the current crisis in representative democracy, however, there are other reasons for this process both inside and outside the democratic mechanism. We could define these elements as “private vices” of elective democracy that interfere with its public virtues.

The first vice of democracy is synthesized by the fact that political decisions in an elective democracy system are based only partly on the people’s will. After being elected, the political representatives are more committed to holding power than to fulfill the promises made during the electoral campaign, taking advantage of the average citizen’s short memory and that new and more appealing promises can be made in the next electoral term.

The physiological increase in public spending during the election campaign is a clear example of this malfunctioning democratic system, which is the common trend independently from the economic cycle and political position of the governing parties. These promises will be followed by “shadow areas” ruled by decisions which are not based on citizens’ will and easily influenced by vested interests of small groups, when the election day is far away. The threat is that Rousseau’s prophesy in “The Social Contract” might come true: “the idea that people elect representatives who rule in their own name is the denial of freedom itself.”

The second vice of elective democracy is linked to a more formal concept of universalism. In theory, universalism can be achieved only when all citizens vote; however it is impossible because only some citizens vote. There is no such thing as a typical non-voting citizen, but doubtlessly lower participation rates are registered among marginal and less organized groups. If in theory everybody can vote, in practice only more interested and organized citizens tend to do so. Modern political systems tend to be universal in writing but selective in practice and the issue of getting citizens to vote is still unsolved. (Young 1991)

A third vice in the elective democratic system is that the interests represented by the elected politicians are those of the majority of voters and not of the ones who weren’t able to elect their own representatives. Even in a situation of a very high turnout rate close to fulfilling the universalistic principle, politicians might be elected according to aggregation of preference groups that do not mirror the expectations, needs and desires of all segments of the population. Minorities and marginal groups tend to be less important than the members of majority groups.

Substantial representation of the electorate is nullified and democracy is in the facts more formal than real.

Elective democracy’s fourth vice is that it doesn’t have antibodies to avoid instrumental use of power and real control of power-holders’ accountability. The individual responsibility of politicians and the need to account for the results achieved during their administration period are the conditions to legitimate the democratic process. This is limited by information imbalance between citizens and power-holders. In the elective democracy model all citizens are considered equal, having the same rights and duties. The action of voting doesn’t only mean going to the polls since it also expresses our political judgment. In order to achieve this condition citizens need sufficient and uniform dissemination of information, education and awareness.

As Amartya Sen said (1992), the acknowledged judgment is a problem of equal capability as well as equal rights. If these capabilities are not allocated in a balanced way, the people's possibility to assess various options is unequal and risks of information and conscience manipulation will be very high. Lower information levels are associated to easier exploitation; higher levels of education foster participation in voting. The struggle of modern democracy to control the media by political parties is a clear example of how the outcome of general elections is significantly dependant on the ability to manipulate information and influence public opinion.

The fifth vice of elective democracy regards the lack of responsibility of citizens towards the *res publica*. Tocqueville wrote that citizen "apathy" was democracy's worst risk, questioning the citizens' feeling of belonging and spirit of initiative needed to make society and civic spirit work. Elective democracy appears to have a double effect: on the one side in democratic systems every citizen is involved in choosing power-holders and government programs; on the other, however, having voted for the entire legislature period he or she is legally exempt from the power of influencing political decisions. Participation pressure exists but is weak, and as time goes by might determine a separation from the institutions, favoring the development of "apathy" and lack of interest towards the common good and institutions.

The drop in political participation recorded in the last years, lack of trust in modern forms of representative democracy, the crisis of parties and democratic institutions highlight how democracy vices are now core issues in the development and differentiation processes of contemporary societies. These considerations place democracy and the quality of democratic process at the center of the study. The notion of responsiveness as the "ability of power-holders to respond to citizens' demand" is fundamental in defining the quality of democracy. "Responsiveness of power-holders to citizens" is an essential value to be acknowledged for the good functioning of a democratic system and fundamental for "democratic quality" because it involves the satisfaction of demands focusing on the outcome, that is the "capability of a true answer to people's problems" and concurrently the assessment of the representation in action", thus "responsiveness is the ability to respond by satisfying the need of the citizens and social society."

In contrast with democracy, the *quality* of democracy relates not only to the form but to the essence in the management of power and response of politics to citizens' needs: a society can be democratic, but with low-quality democracy; in this case democracy is no longer the ideal solution in managing relations between power-holders and citizens, but a solution which must be urgently improved.

### **Rewriting democracy: from government to governance**

Considerations on the limits of elective democracy and the need to improve the quality of the democratic process have been in the last decade the framework of big changes in public decision processes and the role of the State as political subject. (La Spina and Majone 2000). We have witnessed the shift from a system characterized by prevailing *government* models to a more polycentric and negotiated model defined by many authors on the issue of *governance*.

In literature there are many models and definitions of governance, not always consistent and completely comparable. (Rodhes, 1997) Broadly speaking, governance

relates to the need for greater attention on inclusive decision-making processes that involve actors and other stakeholders. As Pimbert and Wakeford (2001, 23) pointed out, an inclusive decision-making process is especially based on “the active involvement of many social actors and in general highlights the participation of citizens previously excluded.”

According to this definition, the idea of governance is theoretically in contrast with the idea of government. The government model is based on the concept of a strong power hierarchy which envisages a clear definition of the person who is entitled to political roles. Power is granted by elections and the creation of a hierarchy of professionals called to guarantee respect for universal principles of social safeguard and wellbeing. This model rules out responsibility sharing because only the public administration is endowed with adequate knowledge and skills to define the goals, priorities and action methods. Only the public administration is able to guarantee equal service access to all citizens.

Governance, by contrast, clearly overcomes the concept of traditional hierarchy. The governance decision model is polycentric, decisions are never made by a single actor who imposes it upon others. Decisions are made through negotiations, interactions and more horizontal cooperation that highlight the idea of interdependence rather than that of hierarchy or subordination. Governance can take various and different forms but it is always centered on the idea of participation. In governance practices, apart from the way in which they are implemented, the definition and/or search for the solution of a problem are ascribed to various actors who mirror non-hierarchical points of view and interests ruled by the principle of elective democracy.

The use of inclusive and participation practices in decision-making processes is associated with various advantages and benefits deemed crucial antidotes in reducing the risk of lowering quality in the democratic process and crisis of elective democracy.

First of all, the dissemination of inclusive practices offers a signal of political interest in the citizens' preferences and needs and that representative functions are seriously fulfilled even beyond formal constraints of electoral mandate. Inclusive strategies, in this perspective, don't only have an operational value but also a symbolic one; they in fact express an availability and openness that are the prerequisites of interaction and cooperation between political and social institutions.

Secondly, the dissemination of inclusive processes offer citizens and intermediate organizations the possibility to participate in finding solutions to problems that electoral programs don't foresee. They mirror the dynamics of society where incremental option is the only possible way to address problems and planning where strong rationality is continuously threatened by complex and unexpected issues.

Participation in this perspective is a way to continuously renew the legitimacy of political decisions by discussing and elaborating solutions to negotiated and shared problems that are relevant for the institutions and the community.

Thirdly, inclusive processes can help to water down tensions and social divisions based on prejudice, or on information imbalance among social groups and between individuals and institutions. These divides are typical of de-marshaled societies, characterized by uneven and heterogeneous distribution of needs and expectations. By fostering debate, dialogue and the exchange of different points of view within a solution-seeking framework, participation practices can play an important role in reducing contrasts and mediating conflicts doomed to weaken social cohesion.

Inclusive processes thus encourage in contemporary societies the preemptive creation of a consent even in regard to decisions that can potentially harm certain social groups, reallocating resources or shifting them to goals considered more strategic or to a priority regarded as being more familiar.

Fourth, the introduction of inclusive practices promotes and enables a more detailed analysis of problems by involving actors who live and have firsthand experience in problems that need solutions or specific intervention measures. Even minority groups, or those who are not able to exploit their interests in organized representative forms, can intervene to discuss subject-matter or find solutions to problems that have a direct impact on the quality of their life or their future. Many school-projects highlight the enormous inclusive potential of participation practices that can give voice and a floor to those legally excluded from elective democracy processes (in this example, underage students who still cannot vote). Inclusion thus tends to foster innovation and a large responsiveness of policies to the needs of a stratified society with many and different instances and needs.

Finally, inclusion strengthens civic culture, individuals and social groups accountability to the common good. Civic culture is broadly considered one of the basic variables in society; only with a culture that strengthens the common project, that promotes and strongly supports social relationships and produces and disseminates social capital it is possible to talk about a democratic society (Etzioni, 1996; Putnam, 2000). Through inclusion people are called to play an active role in society and cut disengagement incentives typical of political systems that take exclusive responsibility to govern the common good. Furthermore, accountability can trigger individual and group engagement and planning, but also material and non-material resources; strategic urban planning is the typical example where participation and sharing of goals and plans is also a means to gather public and private resources for partnership projects, both institutional and non institutional.

These reasons - often emphasized and translated into an explicitly politically rhetoric language, but also grounded on objectively true and not propaganda issues - have led in the last decade to the dissemination in many countries, especially at the domestic level, of inclusion practices and participation in different sectors such as environmental policies, social, urban planning, etc. Skelcher, (2000) used the straightforward metaphor of "congested State" to describe the framework of these processes. Leading to the idea of decision-making processes which are no longer exclusively linear and hierarchical but shared by actors through intense relationships that overlap typically public responsibilities to contributions, interventions, accountability of actors through a private statute: associations, lobby groups, category representatives, citizen groups, etc. called to offer suggestions, opinions, and share projects and intervention measures as in a typical partnership.

## **Participation tools and practices**

Inclusion processes, in some cases even governed by the law, include extremely different initiatives, practices and activities. Inclusive practices are thus developed in various forms and perceive very different goals. The most popular participation processes today are perhaps those envisaged in the Agenda 21 program on local governments and sustainable development, disseminated worldwide after the

Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro) 1992 and the European Conference in Aalborg 1994 on sustainable cities. In a recent FocusLab survey promoted by national coordination of the Agenda 21s between 1999 and 2004, more than 850 local bodies formally committed themselves to abide to the Aalborg Charter while a recent 2006 study shows how more than 700 local bodies were concretely involved in this type of project and had a local referent in the process (FocusLab, 2004; SNCA21, 2006). Besides the Agenda 21 initiative in the last years, many other explicitly inclusive activities have taken place such as strategic programs, social-health programs, urban participation programs, participated financial statements etc. The introduction of the horizontal subsidiarity principle in the new Article 118 of the Italian Constitution point out the legislator's need to legislatively ground the traditional political concept in a more participative and social way.

Sherry Arnstein (1969) is the author of the subdivision of participation levels which pinpoint some fundamental categories of inclusion processes. For the American scholar, participation can be divided into six levels (plus two non-participation levels or manipulated participation: manipulation and therapy processes), informing, consultation, placation, partnership or co-participation, delegated power and citizen control. The quality of participation varies according to different levels. Informing is a very weak type of participation based on providing citizens with information and indications on problems, reasons and effects of power-holders' decision-making.

To point out its symbolic value, Arnstein considers this type of participation purely formal. Information can be considered as a one-way process which connects the official to the citizen in an imbalanced relation even if focused on knowledge. A typical example of widespread information strategy at local level are the Urps (Citizen facing office one stop shop) where citizens gather information on services, civic initiatives and opportunities in the territory.

A second level of participation is that of consultation. Consultation is a way of managing participation processes by innovating the communication flow between power-holders and citizens: in contrast to informing, in fact, consulting expects citizens to express their own reasons and opinions on subject-matters. The classical example of consultation participation are student committees or senior citizens associations created by many local administrations as venues where to ask for opinions on specific administrative activities or political options on these groups of citizens. Mandatory consultations are also mentioned in the social service reform law (L.328/00) on the action and resource allocation plans as follows - envisaged by art. 3, paragraph 2, letter b of the framework law - "concentration and cooperation between the different institutional levels" and "between them and the subjects mentioned in article 1, paragraph 4, subjects of social-private matters and citizens who participate with their own resources in the creation of the network" (Colozzi, 2002).

The major limit of public consultation lies in its not being an obligation in the decision-making process. An example is the "GM-Nation?" debate recently promoted in Great Britain by local bodies and associations to discuss GMO-related issues through a series of conferences open to all citizens. Over 600 public meetings and 36,557 questionnaires were filled out and sent to the government. Its conclusions, however, were ignored by Tony Blair's Labor Government which, by paradox, had made participation one of the strong points in its campaign for the renewal of English society

(De Cillis, 2006). Consultation can therefore be viewed at an intermediate level of participation. It's on a higher level than informing but it does not ensure actual replacement of the power-holders on the basis of specific obligations or agreements. This is why Arnstein includes consultation within *pro forma* provisions.

A third participation level is the so-called "Placation", or conflict-resolution. According to Arnstein, Placation is a first concrete step towards the structuring of interaction relations between governing and governed parties. It envisages the insertion of a small number of representatives of a minority or marginalized social group within public bodies or Community Action Agencies. Due to the minority position of the representatives, these initiatives turn out to be more symbolic –aimed at lowering conflict-level through interest groups - than representing true power distribution. Moreover, compared to the lower rungs of the participation ladder, it provides equal bearing to minority group and majority group - institutional body representatives.

Partnership is at a higher rung of the participation ladder. Partnership is based on the existence of an explicit and binding agreement between citizens and power-holders who share decision-making responsibilities for a common purpose. Citizen-power-holder co-shared activity sparked off after the mid 1990s, and especially by the financing policies of the Structural European funds (projects such as URBAN, EQUAL, etcetera) followed by the new season of Urban Strategic Planning and the Local Development Plans which promoted new power-sharing and cooperation practices as the basic model of local planning.

Higher participation levels are realized through the so-called Delegated Power and citizen control whereby an Institution hands over a given percentage of its dominant decision-making authority. In Delegated Power citizens have the majority of seats in specifically constituted problem-resolution committees for specified problems. The institutions guarantee that the decisions made within these Committees will be given the appropriate consideration. The typical case of citizen control is the referendum that can be employed as a tool to give citizens unconditional decisional power over specific policies such as Urban Planning or the financing of a project with repercussions over an urban area. Arnstein's Citizen Participation ladder can have pure and mixed practical applications. For example, consultation tables envisaged in Act. 328/00 are a typical consultation case. There are, however, citizen participation practices and experiences which cross the various rungs such as the US Deliberative Surveys or Denmark's consensus conferences which lie half-way between the traditional consultation practice and activities which privilege the quality of communication by disseminating information to participants and focus groups, or group polls which facilitate the circulation of ideas and the creation of shared language tools. (Fishkin, 1991; Klüver, 1998).

The various levels of participation indicate that topics such as governance, inclusive processes and citizen inclusion refer to a plurality of actions and measures that can greatly differ from one another. For example, organizing a borough assembly allowing citizens to voice their views on a traffic plan or giving them the power tool of the referendum to accept or reject the document at stake are all options which follow completely different objectives, methodologies and participation approaches. The great variety of opportunities and possibilities is the key-factor which explains the dissemination of citizen participation throughout Western countries. It may appear simplistic to talk about citizen participation when this concept includes a series of

heterogeneous activities and approaches. This probably explains the success of the rhetoric of participation, which despite the intentions of its promoters, in practical terms is producing a number of significant repercussions on the implementation of true democracy and on citizen decision-making processes held simultaneously to the democratic electoral procedures.

### The limits of participation

The great emphasis placed today by the political class on participation processes, in the light of empirical analysis has not only advantages but also limits. Despite the fact that the limits are the object of less attention in the political debate than the advantages are, it's important to be aware of their existence to adequately define the boundaries and the potentialities of participation tools.

Scientific literature on participation limits is varied and abundant, focusing on topics and aspects that cannot always be visualized within a harmonious framework. (Regonini, 2005) Nonetheless, there are some critical elements of the participative process that are generally noted on the level of empirical research.

#### *Representation*

A first critical element is the problem of representation: who speaks in the name of whom in the framework of participation processes? In a broad sense we can say that participation is marked – to a greater extent than democracy - by strong elements of selection which are hard to manage. (Lowndes, 1995). For example, participation is conditioned by specifically restricted and limited objectives, which, precisely because of their limits, incite the involvement of those brackets of citizens and organizations directly involved in the problem under discussion.

In the framework of welfare policies, stirring participation on issues relating to the quality of life or services to handicapped people promotes the active involvement of individuals and associations involved in this issue. However, citizens who are not affected by this problem will remain out of the picture. The conspicuous presence of the so-called *high demanders* in the context of participation processes risks shifting the attention on topics which touch the interests of few who in this way can exert a spin of influence in the decision-making process to the detriment of those who did not participate in the debates because not interested or non-directly involved in the matter at stake. It is a given fact that participation processes often involve very restricted numbers of people – professionals in the field of participation- since they represent organizations and institutions which will continue financing until participation dynamics need supervision, or “eccentric” brackets of citizens who have enough free time to lead the discussions and the consultative or deliberative meetings.

One of the elements of the participation process started off with Britain's “GM Nation?” debate used to question the results of public debates has been the presence of a large number of activists within the consultation groups which would radicalize positions against the controlled introduction of GMOs (Horlick-Jones and colleagues, 2006). In this case the risk is that the weaker subjects will not take part in the participation process or that they will be represented in a marginal way. Furthermore, if one of the major limits of elective democracy is majority dictatorship, when only a small

number of parties impose their views within the participation process, the risk is that a multi-party dictatorship may be replaced by a single/few-party dictatorship who by means of their position can exert their influence over the decisional process thus simply confirming the *status quo* instead of modifying the unbalances of power which lie at the foundation of the system of public preferences. The idea that participation alone may constitute a tool to enlarge citizens' representation risks being contradicted even by empirical evidence.

### *Responsibility*

A second problem of participation is decision-making responsibility. Within the framework of the participation process, the differences between the responsibility of power-holders and the citizens tend to be faded and hard to distinguish. In this way it is possible for decisions to be taken also within a framework lacking all forms of responsibility which is legitimized by popular consent. The question thus consists in identifying the person who has decision-making powers and is in charge of establishing which parties should participate. For example, in various participative initiatives promoted by local bodies, participants are selected among the supporters of political factions who conceived the initiatives and are therefore more motivated and involved than ordinary citizens would be.

The decisions of the political representatives are thus legitimized by those groups of people who support the politicians' positions and interests still justifying their choices as motivated by the population's requests. The responsibility of the decision thus cannot be ascribed to single individuals but to social groups who are hard to identify and who eventually could become the scapegoats of failure and inconsistency. Participation implemented through these modalities risks reducing the basic principle of accountability instead of strengthening it and may lead to the implementation of policies still less democratic than those which are affected by the limits of elective democracy.

### *Citizens' activation*

A third problematic issue of participation is the potential activation of citizens. In the rhetoric of inclusion which professional politicians often refer to, one has the idea that citizens are waiting for nothing else but an opportunity to participate and express their public spirit for the realization of the common good. In reality, there are only few cases in which citizens are interested in personally participating in the collective identification of solutions to specific problems. This happens because in general, people get activated especially if they are directly affected by a specific problem while they would otherwise be inclined to give priority to their personal problems over participative approaches. Only when faced with highly-emotional situations do large numbers of citizens get directly involved.

When faced with more circumscribed problems, activation tends to be more selective and difficult. This difficulty is caused by the direct impact of the problem on individual citizens but also by other problems: for example, there is less involvement where a culture of participation is lacking. Furthermore, participation increases among population brackets with a higher level of education and among stronger subjects while its decrease follows the downhill path of lower education levels and is present among

the lower classes. Marginalized individuals such as single senior citizens, the handicapped and the poor suffer strong social and psychological disincentives which lead individuals to feel inadequate if asked to take part in open debates. Therefore, when speaking of inclusive processes and decision-making, there is a serious problem concerning citizens' *activation* which cannot simply be solved by giving them greater opportunities and participation sites since greater motivation and empowerment strategies are needed.

### *Mediation*

A fourth critical aspect of participation processes relates to the opportunity of always finding solutions accepted by all which at the same time envisage the different positions. Participation is aimed at creating consensus platforms and therefore identifying mediation solutions to different types of queries. Theoretically, especially in the framework of deliberative democracy, participation takes the peculiarities of rational argumentation: a series of interactions whereby the most convincing argumentations prevail. In practice however, local interests and the difficulties of putting on the same plane players with different skills, the scarce availability of questioning-acquired notions, lead to the emergence and the consequential implementation of compromise solutions rather than more reasonable and appropriate ones.

Mediation is a tool which ensures greater social cohesion avoiding frictions and conflicts that may divide the community. Moreover the quest for mediation may lead to the instrumental use of alibi to justify unpopular but effective measures. Solving differences through mediation doesn't necessarily lead to the identification of the more effective solutions to the problems at stake. In a phase of crisis of the traditional political representatives, of a growing lack of faith in the political apparatus and of increasing social and economic problems, participation processes which reach compromise agreements or which are unable to respond to problems which need to be solved, risk increasing the inefficiency of the political system justifying the *status quo* and the absence of wide-ranging political plans which require strong leadership and strong strategic designs.

### *Expertise*

Another problem of participation is related to the skills that may be included in decision-making processes. Each social interaction is never neutral and its outcomes depend on a series of variables such as participants' knowledge of the matter at stake, the ability to discuss and defend their positions, the grounding of the various stands. Extending decision-making processes to larger brackets of players tends to reproduce the non-neutrality of social interaction without solving it. Bringing together in a team-work project people with divergent and different skills will limit the contribution of those with fewer resources. Giving them the possibility to express themselves and to sustain their own positions in a skilful manner risks, in the most positive case, becoming a mere 'initiation rite' of participation while in the worst scenario may give rise to surrogates of participative democracy which are really aimed at manipulating the dynamics of involvement.

This danger tends to increase in a historical phase marked by the strong influence of the media in creating citizens' preferences and skills and whose opinions are often influenced by the media – radio and television – and not by rational reflection. That citizen in whom are reposed the hopes of triggering a renewed spirit of democracy may turn out to be what Sartori (1995) ironically defined as *homo insipiens* instead of *homo sapiens*. We shouldn't be surprised by the fact that on various occasions the gap between citizens and institutions didn't produce active citizenship but rather it led to the affirmation of what Milewa and his colleagues (1999) defined as "active management", the power management by participation power-holders based on inconclusiveness, undefined debate, and lack of knowledge of the participants. If the focus of participation is an increase in the quality of democracy, participation cannot be described as positive in itself if it lacks the contents and skills enabling the citizen to employ his or her involvement as a tool to raise political response and awareness to individual and social needs and demands.

### *Time and costs*

Finally, participation processes have additional costs than those needed to support the ordinary forms of democracy. The extent of these costs varies and largely depends on the existence of human, organization and economic resources within public administration bodies needed to organize, promote and activate participation. In general terms, it is to be noted that participation is an additional process which requires, for its implementation, complex organization procedures and articulated preparatory and management activity. Participation therefore is not free of charge. Without additional resources it is very hard to manage in the appropriate way. Information measures costs - both in economic and time-consumption terms - can be very high. Especially in those cases where information is hard to retrieve, the communicative process is articulated and the problems to be communicated are complex. (Ungaro, 2004).

When it comes to more sophisticated participation measures, costs can rocket sky-high and necessitate appropriate sponsoring. The most important deliberative survey projects realized by Texas University's Center of deliberative polling envisage paying for the time devoted to participation-debating activity of all citizens involved in the trials (with numbers varying from 200 to 2000 people) amounting to approximately 200 dollars per participant for a daily commitment of about 16-18 hours plus board and transportation facilities (a congress centre or a hotel) for the entire participation period (2-4 days).

The more complex are the participation management techniques the higher are the costs and investments in terms of human, economic and organization resources. If these resources don't exist, if they are scarce or not adequate to perform their function, a new class of "participation experts" is likely to emerge, who are occasionally hired by local administration bodies in their capacities as participation process managers. Once they have fulfilled their assignment, these professionals often carry their expertise away with them preventing their competitive resources from decaying on the shelves of the public administration bodies. Therefore, the outcome risks being that of strong dependency of public bodies on outside professionals. In particular, this phenomenon is amplified in phases like the current one of curbing public spending which reduces the

possibility of structural investments in offices, human resources and competencies so as to manage the participative process autonomously.

These remarks reveal to what extent inclusive processes are in practical terms still seeking their own point of maturity. Participation is to a certain extent a compulsory path to be undertaken in order to renew the foundations of democracy. However, the extent to which participation needs to be stimulated, according to which modality, and for what purpose, are all questions that cannot be considered solved once and for all. But which, on the contrary, turn up with all their complexities each time we are faced with participation dilemma.

### *Conclusions*

Most of the scientific and political debate on the future of democracy and the quality of policies is centered on the issue of opening public decision-making processes, looking for interactions and partnerships between institutions and citizens to improve social society.(Magatti, 2005) The need to broaden the traditional boundaries of democracy is broadly acknowledged. Testing new inclusion practices in institutional *decision-making* processes has taught us in these years, however, to proceed cautiously and rigorously in using participative practices. We must avoid considering these tools as the silver bullet solution for all the flaws of democracy and public policies.

The suggested methods from the analysis of participation processes are the following:

First of all, participating democracy is not in conflict or against elective democracy; in fact they supports each other. Almagisti (2007) deliberately introduced the “concentric circles”, according to which democracy is, first of all, a set of procedures that enable the free election of power-holders by citizens (elective democracy) to which we add context dimensions for effective implementation (participation democracy or deliberative-participation).

An effective elective democracy encourages citizen participation; participation thus strengthens the moral and social pillars of elective democracy increasing people’s trust in institution. When participative and elective democracy overlap the risk of following different goals is very likely. Inclusive processes are thus something that is added to democracy, not an alternative to it. The two levels of democratic process must interact virtuously among themselves. There are still open issues on how these interactions can take place, as to which are the ways and deliberative dynamics to follow. How can the instances of elective and participative democracy be incorporated? Which are the rules to follow in integrating the deliberative process in these two forms of democracy? How can government and governance apply decision-making processes by strengthening them without generating reciprocal discredit or lack of legitimacy?

Second, participation is not a silver bullet solution - valid independently from different problems, characteristics of actors and goals that want to be fulfilled. Participation is a way to address certain problems under specific conditions. According to Ulf Wuggenig’s (2001) metaphor, participation must not be used like a hammer in the hands of a child that hits every person or object he finds in his way. The complexity of the variables involved in each participation process demands complete attention on the

conditions under which participation has realistic changes of becoming a tool for improving effectively the decision-making process. In turn these conditions lead us to further questions: is there a minimum number of requirements needed to start participation? How can we assess the existence of these conditions? Which are the processes, measurements and assessment systems?

Thirdly, participation processes must support inclusion of new requests and not discriminate weak powers and impose strong ones. Even if participation should increase politicians' responsiveness to the citizens' needs, there is a discrimination that legitimates the existence of participation processes. It is the respect of values and basic pillars of democracy: no discrimination in religion, gender, political and religious ideals and the obligation to help everyone to find freedom through work. Carlo Donolo (2005) recently spoke of the problem of "constitutionalizing" participation experiences. Constitutional principles regard mainly "the process, the process outcome, the actors' nature, the games' ecology" (ibidem, 50). These variables, many and contingent by nature, can take different patterns since each participation process is implemented in contexts and ways which cannot be standardized. Legitimacy of participation as a process focused on increasing democracy quality is achieved only if the variables are not in contrast with constitutional principles.

Thus, the strong institutional responsibility in defining the boundaries of participation access criteria (for example, any form of discrimination against participation for weaker citizens is banned), process (for example, rules must be defined in a transparent way, every member can speak) and outcome (for example, decision's outcome must be discussed and not acknowledged only by the members' will). Also in this case methodology suggestions can set the possible behavior but they also pose issues of difficult solution: which are the limits of this institutional responsibility? To what limit can it be applied without creating rigidity, red tape or a weakening in the participation and autonomy expressed and planned by citizens? Furthermore: What is the correct balance between institutions and society? What are the antidotes to the risk of arbitrary prevalence of one actor over the other?

As a logical consequence of the previous issue, the dissemination of participation practices must be supported by the development of tools, resources and methodologies which enable the correct management and planning of participation experiences. Many participation experiences in the last years have come from power-holders, a political group undergoing a legitimacy crisis. The need for participation rarely comes from the citizens. At public administration, executive and operational levels the participation process has been forced as a political and administrative constraint without the knowledge of how to manage it. The case of dissemination through the law in the creation of a participating activity called "area plans" in Municipalities or municipal areas in social policies is a clear example of the opportunity to involve citizens and civil society. The outcome of this practice often imposed practices and work patterns to organizations and professional cultures completely unprepared to manage the new definition of these specific policies. (Fazzi, 2007)

Participation has been frequently realized for formal needs, neglecting the expectations of citizens and social society organizations involved in implementing the plan, generating more distrust towards institution. In order to make the participation experience possible and convincing, people and structures called upon to activate and manage the participation process must have adequate skills, tools and resources to

address the problems and complexity of the new decision-making dynamics. For example managing a focus group or workshop, summarizing results, designing access criteria to guarantee complete representation are activities and tasks that require specific experience and skills that must be acquired in a structured and systematic way.

Participation dissemination must be achieved through investments in human, organization and economic resources and entails specific decisions on the allocation of resources not only after but before the participation process blast-off. We must assess which investments must be allocated in the introduction phase in support of the participation processes: structures? Human resources? Organizational tools and resources? All of these variables together? How and when should human and organizational needs be introduced to promote and manage participation? Using which levy? Top-down ruling? Or just training, best practices and knowledge management?

Finally, dissemination of participation practices for a correct and effective development needs new generation practices, tools and assessment methods. Currently, participation practices are full of expectation that are often only partially achieved in the empiric practice. It is sometimes difficult to assess them because of the ambiguity and not always linear interpretation of the results achieved. As broadly highlighted however, at least from the point of view of legitimacy and consent, these new forms of participation democracy undergo harsher result assessments because the expectations entail an essential feature of proving to the community their validity. (Majone, 1999)

Assessment problems can discourage and water down the effort of introducing, disseminating and acknowledging new perspectives of governance. In this perspective, a repeated, pluralistic and articulated assessment of the participation processes, of their outcome and the critical issues encountered becomes crucial in supporting innovation. The assessment of participation experiences can help to determine more effective and efficient methods and techniques and avoid paths which are too expensive or which produce poor or inadequate results for the effort involved. The governance issue needs the organization and accomplishment of activities focused on best practices, meetings and experience sharing. Governance requires the development of rewarding models for the bodies that are able to improve the quality of policies and activities by participation practices. The innovation of policies is centered mainly on the dissemination and development of imitative and "transfer" behavior rather than decisions from provision of norms and/or laws whose practical need is difficult to understand or hard to translate the inspiring reason into practice. The emerging problem is the following: what kind of assessment? How can it be realized? How can we use the assessment practices to support the learning and rationale? Who must be involved as actors and targets of the assessments?

These considerations highlight how the path to participation and dissemination of inclusive processes to build public policies is today still more of a testing field than acquired certainties and results. The actors called to help formalize a correct participation practice at various levels and individual policy fields are different: policy makers, but also officials and public operators, representatives of intermediate organizations that can gather the citizens' needs, and last but not least citizens themselves at various social levels according to education and income. In this perspective participation is a broad-range developing process a container of potential changes and very important ones, both in practice and in the social representation of

democracy and social spirit. The scholars of these phenomena have to observe in a pondered way the dynamics underway providing suggestions and elements to try and offer a better understanding of how participation can improve democratic life and the quality of co-existence.

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