



A “Lost” Youth Generation? Reflections from a Community Assessment Study in Italy

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Abstract

In the last decades, a growing attention has been given to the analysis of the condition of young people in Italy, as well as in other countries, following a recognition of the need to consider them as active and responsible social citizens. Attempts have been made to improve the relationship between the younger generations and public institutions, and reduce the distance between them, synonymous of a democratic deficit, through efforts at involving youth in decisional processes at different levels (local, national, etc.). In this paper we approach the issue from a Community Psychology theoretical and methodological perspective, by describing the first steps of an ongoing participatory community assessment study. The aim was to involve different members of a specific local community, in the analysis of youth participation, in order to shed light on the existing opportunities and resources, as well as on the obstacles and constraints. A multi-method approach was used, including community profiling, analysis of documentary sources, unobtrusive observation, interviews (n = 15) with key informants, content analysis of media, and focus groups (n = 30, age 15 to 30 years, 16 males). The findings will be discussed, pointing to possible directions to improve youth active citizenship.

Keywords: Civic participation, political participation, empowerment, youth, community, community assessment, participatory action research (PAR).

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1. Introduction

Since late 1990 a growing attention has been given to the condition of young people in different European countries, following the recognition of the need to consider them as active and responsible citizens. Initiatives for improving the relationship between the younger generations and public institutions have increasingly been made, through efforts aimed at involving youth in decisional processes at different levels (local, national, etc.).

Despite these attempts to improve young people interest for the common good and active citizenship, everyday life shows a persistence of a widespread individualism. National surveys on Italian youth conducted during the last decade (Buzzi, Cavalli, & De Lillo, 2007) indicate that health, family, friends and economic wellbeing are the leading values in young people life, whereas social involvement, civic and political engagement and participation are considered less important, as well as the active role of youth as citizens (Cicognani, Albanesi, & Zani, 2011; see also data from the PIDOP project[†]). As regards organizational membership, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2013), the total number of young people aged 14-24 years donating their time to voluntary organizations has increased in the last two decades years from 7% (1993) to 12% (2012). Even those youth who are not involved in voluntary organizations participate regularly in organized activities offered by their community, and only few of them

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are not involved at all in any activity. Recreational groups are the most popular; religious organizations, though less popular, still involve a significant 10% of young people. Analyzing participation in a sample of 1410 young people aged 14-30 years ($M = 21$ years old), Leone (2011) found that 65% had been/were currently involved in one or more associations. Cultural associations were the most popular (27.4%), followed by sport and scout groups (ranging from 14% to 18%). Student organizations and parish groups were less attended.

In this paper we focus the analysis of youth participation at a local (community) level. The aim is to describe the results of the first steps of a participatory community assessment project aimed at analyzing types and levels of youth participation, as well as resources and obstacles to participation in the specific context. We will first describe the theoretical background of the study, rooted in Community Psychology.

2. Local community, citizens' participation and empowerment: Theoretical background

The theoretical and methodological approach to citizens' participation is based on Community Psychology perspectives (e.g., Orford, 2008; Zani, 2012). Key concepts are (local) community, individuals as active subjects, empowerment.

Community and individuals

The notion of "community" is ambiguous and polysemic (see Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002); a central component is the feeling of belonging to a collective entity, or "sense of community". Such feeling arises when people share significant aspects of their life and experience interdependence with others. Sarason (1974), emphasised the importance of the supportive functions of the social networks within the community, and therefore, of the subjective component of social relations. Different components of the feeling of community have been identified to describe different degrees of involvement: community, communion, sharing of the ecological-environmental conditions, sharing of a community identity. There is community when individuals' actions originate from a common belonging subjectively experienced. When referring to community, we also include a territorial dimension, i.e., the neighbourhood or the town where individuals live. A further element of the community is the existence of an organized structure, a social system. On this point, following Lewin (1951), the notion of community can be conceived as an organized system of forces, in which individual and collective action are the product of the relationship with a specific environment. Assuming the constant interdependence between individuals and the environment implies assuming that they influence each other and that actions and outcomes are the product of such dynamic interdependence. In this perspective, individuals' choices and decisions are based on intentions, expressing the constant interaction with others in the different contexts in which they are embedded. Therefore, it is assumed that individuals are active agents, thanks to the tension arising from the relation with the external world. What is needed is to direct such tension towards specific aims.

Individuals as active subjects and participation

The concept of participation is complex and sometimes vague owing to the multiple forms that it can take depending on the situation (Wandersman & Florin, 2000). A core element is active involvement of individuals in the community to which they belong. By participating, individuals extend their relationships to the whole community, through involvement in discussion and dialogue as instruments for the construction of possible shared worlds, common decisions and responsibilities. Participation is considered also a precondition for the promotion of individual and community empowerment.

Besides political participation, related to the choice of the political and administrative elites, there are spontaneous ("grassroot") associations of individuals and forms of involvement of citizens in public activities of local interest. The latter can be temporary or permanent; they are formed with the aim to produce social changes in the community, but the motivations for participation are different, ranging from altruistic to egoistic (self-interest or group-interest). Spontaneous associations can be considered *bottom up* forms of involvement, whereas citizens' involvement in public activities can be considered a *top down* form of participation, that can take differ forms depending on the degree of power allowed to individuals (e.g., ranging from consultation/public listening to participatory planning of interventions). Different models of participation (cf. Cornwall, 2008) have been advanced in the attempt to distinguish typologies of community participation based on the dimension of power and power sharing; some of these models aimed to describe forms of participation involving young people together with adults (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). A broad classification includes the following: information (citizens are informed of the activities of their community), participation to events as mere consumers; support to community activities and management of

activities (allowing citizens a greater involvement and responsibility); shared decision-making processes. However, only the collective definition of problems and needs, as well as collective evaluation of the outcomes, allows individuals to become active subjects and “owners” of the choices of the community.

In the literature within political sciences, sociology, psychology, different factors have been investigated as determinants of active participation; these include individual characteristics, psychosocial processes (examined both at individual and group/context levels: e.g. family, peer group, school, etc.), structural and macro social factors (see Cicognani, Albanesi, & Zani, 2011). From a psychological and subjective point of view, and following Lewin’s thinking, in order to engage, individuals should perceive the presence of needs and problems, and secondly, they should perceive adequate material and personal resources to reach the goal. Moreover, they should experience a strong feeling of *self – efficacy* in order to proceed toward the desired goal, and produce a significant change in the initial situation. Further, participation is related to sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In fact, without a strong feeling of belonging and the perception of having some sort of influence over the community, participation initiatives are unlikely. In order to participate in their community, individuals should perceive that their actions can satisfy both their own personal needs and the needs of community members, with whom they share feelings of emotional connection, a common history and similar experiences (Chavis & Wandersman; 1990; Davidson & Cotter, 1989).

Participation and empowerment

The concept of participation is closely related to empowerment. Following Rappaport (1987) and Zimmerman (1999; 2000), empowerment can be conceived both as an outcome of participation (which benefits both the individual and the community) and a material and psychological precondition of participation.

In fact, in order to engage, individuals should perceive themselves as having capacities and resources allowing them to positively influence the environment and produce change. Moreover, participation requires the awareness of the possibilities to access necessary material resources. Not all citizens in a community can promote actions capable of changing a situation, because material resources are distributed unequally and are not accessible to everybody. How to allow an equal access to resources to all citizens is a critical question.

Considering the outcomes of empowerment, several studies, including Cantor e Sanderson (1999), emphasise the strong association between participation and wellbeing: in fact, the efforts made to reach significant goals can strengthen self-efficacy and agency, thus increasing individuals’ psychological empowerment. According to Kieffer (1984), an empowered individual is capable of exerting control over his/her life; by participating in the activities of the community, he/she can gain power by increasing his/her awareness of community conditions. Within participatory contexts of the community individuals can increase their competences in identifying the needs and can develop adequate strategies to reach their goals.

Further, as the aim of participation is to solve individuals’ problems as citizens, participation becomes an opportunity to experience social inclusion and emotional connection with the community, as well as for generating change by enhancing personal and collective empowerment.

In conclusion, community empowerment is favoured by four elements: the power to generate or hinder changes (psychological and social), the awareness of having knowledge, instruments and abilities to adequately deal with the problem, self-esteem (personal and collective), strengthened and maintained by feelings of belonging and sharing of a common history.

3. The study

The study described in this article is a community assessment project representing the first step of a broader participatory action research (PAR) started in 2010. The project was developed following the findings of a quantitative survey conducted with a representative sample of high school students living in the city of Arezzo (Tuscany, an Italian region that was traditionally well-known for the high level of citizens’ participation), showing unexpectedly low level of interest and participation in their community.

General aims were, firstly, to analyse youth civic participation in this specific local community and the range of factors (e.g., structural, cultural, political, economic, social, psychological, etc.) that may affect levels of participation. Secondly, by involving the community in the research process, we aimed at promoting a collective reflection and engagement among community members on how to improve young people participation. Operationally, in this study by “youth” we mean individuals between the ages of 16 and 30 years old.

4. Methodological approach

Following the PAR methodology, we used a multi-method, (participatory) community assessment approach. This involved collecting both objective data on the structural characteristics of the community and subjective data on the perceptions and representations of different community members, including youth, capable of providing a broad picture. Moreover, the choice of a participatory community assessment approach was due to the attempt to enhance community members' capacity to reflect on their own situation and actively engage in finding appropriate solutions (empowerment). Such methodological approach moves from the assumption that the local community should be considered as a network of interactions among citizens, groups and organizations, owners of implicit knowledge and specific and different competences.

Instruments and participants

The choice of the research instruments was partly made during the research process, following the first data collected and analysed, as we attempted to deepen the knowledge and understanding of specific issues emerging from the preliminary analyses or suggested by some participants. This procedure is consistent with the action research iterative cycle (Lewin, 1951), where preliminary results and emerging questions arising from the initial analysis may require to go back to the context to collect further information to advance understanding of the phenomena. In detail, the following instruments have been used.

Community profiling

We firstly used the method of "community profiling", to obtain a broad picture of the contexts of this local community, in terms of structural and demographic information. This method, developed within Community psychology, conceptualizes the community as a system where both objective and subjective elements interact. By accurately analyzing different areas (profiles), it provides a description of social, demographic, institutional, economic, cultural structure of the community, including the interactions and power dynamics between social groups. Besides its dynamic conception of the local community, this method allowed to construct a preliminary network with key informants in the community, necessary for the subsequent phases of the study. Among the key informants, a central role was played by the Major of the municipality and the council member in charge of youth policies, who were contacted in the early stages of the process, and supported the proposal. For the purposes of this study we collected the following profiles: economic, demographic, public services (social, health, educational, recreational), institutional and cultural.

The aim of community profiling was to produce a general description of this local community and of youth, and specifically, of the existing forms of youth participation and of the resources (personal, environmental) available to young people living in this local community for participation. Specific questions that we addressed were the following: number and typologies of youth, their distribution in the territory, occupation (students, working and in which sector), initiatives of the public administration for youth, existing public and private services for youth, youth activities during their free time, young people and volunteering, young people and politics, alcohol and substance use. Different sources of information for the community profiling were used, including documentary sources, archival data, interviews with key local stakeholders (see below).

Interviews with key informants on youth

The second phase of the study included interviews with key informants. Participants were identified taking into account the results of community profiling (e.g., including representatives of the organizations, institutions and places that were found to be more relevant for young people). Specifically, we selected different types of individuals who, based on their professional or personal experience with this population, could provide an accurate picture of youth and youth participation in the local community. To this purpose, we firstly identified the social actors that most frequently interacted with youth in this community. The semi-structured interview schedule asked about participants' perceptions and representations of youth in this community (e.g., places attended by youth, activities, deviant behaviors, relationship with politics and volunteering), an evaluation of young people resources for participation (personal, environmental-structural and their adequacy) and proposals for enhancing or supporting youth participation.

A total of 15 interviews were conducted, involving the following key informants: three teachers of different types of high schools, two directors of volunteering associations (of different dimension and typology), two barmen of two different bars/pubs attended by youth in the evening/night: the head of social work services of the prefecture; two shopkeepers, one of whom living in the main square of the historical center (St. Michel), the main recreational place for youth during the afternoon and the evening in the

weekends; the director of the main recreational center for youth of Arezzo Province; two local politicians of different political orientation; a street worker of the association in charge of a prevention project.

Observation of youth

Following the initial information arising from these data, we decided, as a third phase of the study, to use unobtrusive observation of some key contexts of the community where different typologies of youth congregate, in order to more systematically analyze and verify some issues mentioned by key informants in the preceding phase. Specifically, the aim of this part of the study was to obtain more information on the characteristics of the places more frequently attended by youth in this community and on their actual behaviors in such places. From the information collected from key informants, we identified five places, attended by different types of youth: (1) a youth center; (2) a square located in the historical part of the city where most of the youth between 15 and 19 years congregate every day, till late evening; (3) a commercial center with a cinema which acts as a meeting and recreational place for youth between 20 to 30 years old; (4) the public National library, which attracts a considerable number of students; and (5) one of the most active organized groups in the community (a musical group). Observations were conducted over a period of two weeks, every day and in different hours of the day, by two observers. Information collected included number and typologies of youth present (sociodemographic characteristics, e.g. age, gender, nationality) as well as their behaviors, social interactions and their use of the territory.

Analysis of media sources

In order to deepen the analysis of public perceptions and social representations of youth in the local community, we also decided to analyze the local media, by collecting and analyzing the articles concerning young people or produced by young people themselves (e.g. letters to editors) in the previous six months. This led to restrict the focus on one single local newspaper ("La Nazione"), the only one including information of interest for our topic (a total of 26 articles on youth was collected). Moreover, at this step of the study an unexpected but relevant event occurred which produced a considerable impact on the local community: a national TV channel broadcasted a program on teen lifestyles involving also youth from this city (as exemplary of a city of Italian province, to be compared with a larger city such as Milan). A considerable portion of the programme was devoted to preadolescents use of alcohol and drugs during the evening, and youth interviewed also described an episode of sexual harassment on a 13yr-old girl by a group of male peers. The programme created a considerable discussion in the community, also because some day after the video was posted on YouTube, where many youth posted their comments. We thus decided to include, as additional key informant, the journalist author of the programme, and we analysed the reactions to the programme both in local newspapers and the comments on YouTube.

Focus groups with youth

Finally, in order to investigate young people perspectives on themselves and their views and experiences of participation, we used focus groups. We conducted four focus groups with different typologies of youth, for a total number of 30 participants, ranging from 15 to 30 years, 16 males and 14 females. One focus group involved adolescent students (15-18yrs-old), which appears as a "vulnerable" group in this community, a second group included migrant adolescents and youth, a third group involved young adults (20-30 years) both university students and workers or unemployed, and the fourth group was composed by members of the organized group previously involved in the observation, in order to obtain information on youth belonging to associations (a minority in this territory). Focus groups were conducted by a moderator (psychologist, with expertise working with groups of young people) with the help of an assistant observer; questions addressed the following issues: most relevant social problems for youth (as an introductory question, participants were shown pictures depicting different types of social problems and were asked to select the most relevant for them and explain their choices), perceptions and relevance of youth participation in the community, perceived opportunities for participation offered by the community, personal and group experiences of participation, proposals for enhancing youth participation. The data emerging from all these different instruments, were content analyzed in order to identify the key themes.

Overall, this approach allowed to obtain – and to integrate – different types of data (objective, subjective) and perspectives (key informants in the community, young people, researchers), and hopefully to get a more accurate overview of the situation of youth participation in this community.

5. Findings

In the following, we will focus on the key themes emerging from the study. We will first describe the community context under investigation, considering its objective (structural) characteristics that act as potential resources and obstacles for youth participation. We will then present the perspectives of the stakeholders and subsequently, the perspectives of youth themselves. In the end we will consider participants' opinions on how to enhance participation.

The community context: structural resources and obstacles for youth participation

Arezzo is a middle size provincial city located in Tuscany (central Italy). It is an old settlement and its origins date back to the Etruscan period. Its extension is 386.25 Km² and the total number of inhabitants is 100.455 (30 April 2011). The number of youth in the age range 15-30 years is 15376 (4193 in the 15-19 years age range). 7822 are male and 7554 female. The economy of the city has been characterized by a rapid and radical transformation since 1950, from an agricultural economy, to the emergence of engineering companies, textile industries and jewellery companies (which have become a prominent and leading sector in Italy). This transformation led a considerable number of residents to abandon rural areas and move to the city. An important problem that the economy of this city is currently facing is generational replacement. Most of the existing companies (e.g., jewellery, textile industries) are family-based, and an implicit expectation of many of these families is that their offspring will take on the role of their parents in leading the family enterprise when they retire; actually, it is estimated that 40.8% of the companies in the area will be taken over by offspring. The impact of this phenomenon is that these youth feel that their future is somehow predetermined by their family and, owing to the financial well-being they enjoy, do not feel the need and motivation to continue their education and personal cultural growth.

The information collected on the services available to youth (educational, social, health, cultural-recreational) indicates that the local administration made a strong effort to promote projects and initiatives for young people, with an aim to both enhance young people involvement and prevent risky behaviors and outcomes. Existing services include, among others, youth information services, youth centers, a large community prevention programme against risks, sports infrastructures, dance, music and theatre schools, cultural associations. Further opportunities for involvement are offered by political parties and volunteering associations. Overall, the community offers several initiatives and contexts for involvement and socialization, where youth can find opportunities for development of expressive, educational and relational competences; a limitation is that these are located mostly in the urban area. Moreover, such initiatives and services are mostly adult-driven; they are useful to involve young people, but do not allow a really active participation as citizens. With the exceptions of the two youth centers, most of the places where youth can meet during their free time are characterized by passive consumption (such as bars, pubs, discotheques).

Examining the data on youth participation, provided by political parties and volunteering associations, a different picture emerges. A very small number of youth, especially young adults, are actively involved (e.g. 81 are member of political parties, mostly males; and 334 – two thirds of whom male – are member of volunteering associations). Those youth who volunteer, have generally a former experience of civil service and appear to be motivated by social values of cooperation and solidarity. Some of them are volunteering as part of their university assignments, thus suggesting that the motivations for volunteer work include the opportunities to satisfy personal needs. The recreational and expressive dimension and the attention to individual quality of life seem to be more important than active engagement for the community. Active participation in the organization of community initiatives only concerns a minority of youth. The attitude of youth toward the existing opportunities can be described as passive consumption rather than willingness to engage for the collective good. Consistently with this, health workers and police sources report an increase in alcohol and substance consumption over the last decade, together with the increase of risky patterns of alcohol use (drinking and driving, drunkenness episodes, use of other substances) associated with a general lowering of the age of initiation.

Youth participation: the perspective of key informants

A common theme emerging from the interviews is the description of the youth population of the city in negative terms as "*indifferent to the world*", with a low willingness to decentralize and to accept novelties. Even though they perceive great potentials in young people, adults agree in describing youth as incapable of managing their inner world and showing a low level of awareness of self and the world in comparison to previous generations. Teachers describe youth as lacking needs and desires, and incapable to face everyday difficulties and problems, as the increasing number of suicides demonstrates.

Indifference and individualism are the traits used by adults to describe local youth but also a broader national phenomena. Young people are depicted as detached from the adult world and from political and social activities. Regarding volunteering, most key informants report that the percentage of active youth is very low and a considerable part of active participants are university students who are doing volunteering activities as part of their curriculum. Teachers report that adolescents show some interest (curiosity, surprise) towards school projects aimed at involving them in volunteering activities, but most of them do not participate. The director of the volunteering association explains the lack of participation as due to youth ignorance (lack of knowledge) about the existing opportunities for participation. The local politicians report that “*volunteering has always been a source of pride*” for the local community; in their opinion, the low levels of involvement by local youth should be explained by national economic circumstances. The Major specifies that a minority of youth are regularly engaged in volunteering (“*In part it is a strange form of volunteering, devoted to the ephemeral, to all those types of playful activities that the city districts organize, but there is also a high quality volunteering, devoted to social issues*”), even though “*the youngest, who did not have the chance to be socialized towards more valuable cultural activities*”, join the groups who are using drugs on the weekends, and their major interest is “*following fashion, to resemble TV or realities characters*”. Regarding political participation, all participants agree that it is absent: young people do not talk about politics, do not participate in groups or public events, and appear detached and disheartened. According to the Major, today’s youth appear to be motivated by “*the awareness of their own self-advantage*”.

Teachers point to youth’s low awareness of their rights as citizens. The street worker confirms the low levels of engagement, and points to the responsibilities of the local administration. In his opinion, in this city, contrary to other neighbouring towns, there is low willingness to involve local actors and youth for a common goal.

Participants agree in describing youth’ activities and interests confined into their private world, including home, gyms and nightlife places and entertainment. Choices seems to be a mass phenomenon governed by fashion trends: in particular, several respondents describe the tendency by youth to attend specific places and the presence of “trend setters” that dictate the places that are considered “fashionable” and thus the choices of recreational places. According to barmen, the group of youth most subject to the influence of these “role models” is adolescents (below 18yrs). Many participants report the worrying tendency by youth (and also some adults) to conform to specific models of luxury and unruliness, to the point that look and appearance seem to become real obsessions.

The majority of key informants agree in reporting a worrying increase in alcohol and substances consumption among local youth, consistently with the trends at national level. Most worrying is the substantial lowering of the age of first initiation “*at sixteen youth use marijuana and often they sell it in the streets near bars and pubs or near square S. Michele*”. Drinking alcohol and using drugs seems to be considered a normal habit and a guarantee of having fun. Barmen confirm this trend, which is supported by the amount of money that youth spend on drinks and discos on a typical Saturday night: according to barmen, the average expenses range from 50 euros among 16-18 year olds to 200 euros and even more for 25-30 year olds.

These phenomena were considered by participants as reflecting a more general trend in the Italian society, even though they identify a local specificity which is explained by the particular economic and social background of the city. The transformation from an agricultural society to an economy based on industry has been too rapid and not supported by a parallel cultural growth. “*From the hoe to the Mini*” is the expression used by one director of volunteering associations. In his opinion, the citizens of Arezzo, compared with other neighbouring cities with a similar cultural heritage, seems unaware of these resources and incapable to value them. The numerous initiatives that the local administration attempted to promote, attract a limited part of the citizens. Similar considerations are made by the responsible of a youth centre, who points to the difficulties to accept changes and the distrust towards novelties. Teachers emphasise the distance between the world of adults and the world of young people, and suggest that this situation is encouraged by adults in the first place: the lack of awareness by youth of their own rights and responsibilities is seen by teachers as a result of the lack of an adequate collaboration between local administration, experts, responsible of youth associations and youth themselves.

The perspective of youth on participation

With few exceptions, when asked to discuss about participation and opportunities for action in the focus groups, most young people showed *attention* and *interest*. Moreover, from their reactions two aspects

emerged: the apparent lack of knowledge on the importance of participation, and the feeling of "*forced detachment*" associated to the issue.

Among the social problems discussed in the focus group, participants mention immigration, citizenship rights, the role of women, but especially environmental issues ("environmental disasters", pollution, waste of energy, use of new building technologies). This issue is prominent in the group of adolescents, whereas young adults mention a wider range of problems. Migrant youth mention the risks of exclusion from the majority of the Italian population; even though they acknowledge the initiatives of some social groups and local churches in support of migrants, they feel that their rights as citizens are far from being fully recognized.

The second most important issue for youth is work, considered as a "*right to live a calm and wealthy life*", precondition to "*buy a house and create a family*". When reflecting on social issues (including work), the reference to the personal sphere is almost inevitable, as if the issues of interest become a problem when they have consequences for oneself and personal life (e.g. "*without a job I cannot buy a house*", "*I will have to rely on my parents' help*").

Political issues (such as vote and participation to public events) are not salient, and participants' comments are negative (e.g. "*they [politicians] are all a bunch of buffoons*", "*politics is false*", "*they are the ones who make money*"). Regarding volunteering activities, only one participant reported (past) experiences within a religious association, defined as "*intense and deep*", as well as "*formative*". However, all participants, though agreeing on the importance of such activities, report that it is impossible to devote their time to volunteering, "*it would be important, but who can devote his time, life and money to others?*", "*we barely manage to survive ourselves*". More participants (young adults and members of the formal group) report experiences of civil service, and provide a detailed description; some of them describe such activities as emotionally involving (in particular some participants who took care of peers affected by psychiatric illness). Nonetheless, when reasoning about the choice of devoting their time to helping others, the need to receive a monetary compensation seems to be essential for most youth: "*I knew that I was doing an experience and at the same time I received payment for that*".

Members of the organized group (music group) mention that initially, the desire to participate to a valued activity for their local community was more important than the consideration of the amount of engagement (in terms of time, work, etc.) that such activity required. It appears that belonging to such group had a strong potential for socialization, since members try to find opportunities to meet also outside the formal context of music activities. "*we organize soccer games*", "*before and after music practice sessions we often meet to have some drinks*".

Migrant youth and adolescents, as well as some older youth, do not report any experience (social, political, civic), but their explanations differ. Migrants showed some surprise, bewilderment and resignation when asked about political participation: "*what should we do?*", "*and who would listen to us?*", thus showing their perceptions of forced exclusion from the public life. Young adults who did not report experiences of active participation, mention the lack of time and of economic resources: "*after studying and working I cannot make it...I finish working at 17.30 p.m., after a whole day spent melting and welding gold chains, in the evening I really need to go out and have some drinks with my friends or I will die!*". Political, civil and social activities are considered as an additional burden, besides study and work, and not as a right.

A somewhat similar explanation was provided by adolescents: "*after school I have soccer training*", "*I go to the gym*", "*who has time for that?*", are typical responses, which well synthesise also adolescents' tendency to postpone their decisions and choices to adulthood, and the feelings of anxiety arising from assumptions of responsibility and autonomy. In sum, even though there is a widespread agreement among participants on the importance of their active involvement and participation in the community, on the other hand they tend to justify their lack of engagement with reference to **lack of time** ("*it is important but there is no time for that*", particularly young adults); **age** ("*it is important but we are still young for that*", particularly adolescents), and **lack of competences** ("*it is certainly important, but who listens to us and how can we do it?*", particularly migrant youth).

All participants feel that they have limited instruments to express their views and have an influence over their community. Vote is considered as a means to express their choice, but at the same time they are aware of the low effectiveness of such choice (young adults) and the perception of the limited importance of such action (adolescents). Migrant youth show a critical (and somewhat resigned) attitude: "*[local] politicians talk and talk, but in the end, they do nothing*"; "*they say that they want to engage youth, but in the end they only care about their self-interest*", "*we are forced to go out of town to find something interesting*", "*luckily I study in another city*".

When reflecting on non-conventional forms of participation, interestingly, young adults and some members of the organized group mention the experience of the youth political movement of the late sixties, which they consider exemplary of youth participation and thus a target of admiration, and even “envy”. “Once youth had a voice and were heard; now we are a mass of big sheep”, “how can you tell these things to younger youth, they only think about wearing fashionable dresses and getting drunk”, “these were completely different times”, “anyway, all this was useless”.

Adolescents have favourable opinions on the activities of the district in preparation of the annual festival (“Giostra del Saracino”, the main cultural event of the city, which attracts a lot of tourists); they have established a youth committee in charge of managing the activities of youth in the district and of organizing recreational and sports events. Members of the organized group are satisfied of the opportunities offered by this group to take on roles and responsibilities. Such responsibilities, experienced particularly during the annual festival and the national and international events to which the group participated, is perceived as significant in order to learn multifaceted competences.

Proposals for enhancing youth engagement and participation

Proposals differ between adults (key informants) and youth. Considering *key informants*, most participants suggest the importance of better knowing the condition of youth living in the community: “The community needs to know its citizens, or any intervention project will be useless”. Moreover, there is agreement on the need to address interventions especially to the youngest group (13-14yr-olds), which seems to be a “vulnerable” population. Further, adults stress the need of citizenship education at school, through a stronger collaboration between political institutions and the school system. According to participants, there is no point in organizing such activities out of school, because “in their life so programmed and marked by routines the exceptional event has no chance to be accepted”.

Enhancing youth’ awareness of their rights as citizens is the first step, according to teachers, to promote an active role in their community. A further point is the need to increase tolerance and respect for other people. A greater openness towards the external world and diversity should encourage youth to engage in new activities, different from the usual ones (routine and self-centred). Some participants proposed that political parties should reserve some positions to youth or allow them to organize activities that can help to gain school credits. As reported by the director of a youth centre, some associations are attempting to come to an agreement with the municipality in order to involve youth in organizing events and recreational activities. A greater collaboration between local administration and schools is advocated also by politicians, in order to increase activities of cultural interest (theatre, music, etc.). The Major argues that the problems of youth and possible solutions should be contextualized in the wider society, for example starting citizenship education much earlier, creating good role models, deconstructing and re-constructing TV and media. The street worker points to the need of compulsory education for all professional figures involved in youth policies and enhancing networking among them.

Most *participants to focus groups* found it hard to reflect on the topic under discussion and elaborate proposals. Members of the organized group and adolescents proposed to extend to the whole community the model of youth organization of the activities adopted for the folk festival; in their opinion, this could facilitate the involvement of the whole youth population. It is clear from such proposals that youth priorities concern the organization of “recreational events” and “socialization” during their free time; no proposals were advanced concerning political and civic involvement. Young adults proposed to create more places for socialization, and acknowledge the need of educating youth to participation. Migrant youth agree, even though they feel that a deeper reflection on political and civic issues would be important: “it would be important to organize public assemblies to talk about our needs”.

6. Discussion

This paper presented a case study on a specific Italian community, characterized by a peculiar history and structural conditions (e.g., economic, political, cultural, etc.), which impact also on young people opportunities and resources, as well as obstacles and constraints, for civic and political involvement. Despite these specificities, the findings can be applicable to some extent to youth from other parts of the country, and even internationally.

A key to understand youth’s condition in that particular Italian city can be summarized by the words of one of the participants to focus groups: “whoever reflected on these issues?” which exemplifies both the novelty and the interest for the topic. It was clear that the majority of youth experienced difficulties in understanding and give meaning to participation, and this testifies the lack of knowledge and awareness of

their rights of action in the public sphere. This is confirmed by narratives of youth who consider political and civic participation as a burden, instead of a right, since it adds to the multiplicity of activities of their free time. It is worth noticing that, in participants' views, it is free time that should be enriched with further initiatives. In fact, the organization of recreational places and initiatives is considered an urgent need. On the one hand, this suggests the presence of a proactive attitude regarding requests for greater opportunities for socialization; however, on the other hand, imagination and goal setting appear to be restricted to the domain of play and recreation, where youth are asking for greater attention from local authorities. On other issues, delegation and disengagement are the prevalent attitudes, and most youth seem to lack an authentic space for thinking on politics. This is especially true for younger youth; distrust and distance toward political elites and the community are more typical attitudes of young adults, including migrants.

A further issue is the constant reference, especially among the youngest, to the dimension of the present and the "now". Recurrent expressions are "*it would be important, but now there is no time for that*", "*there is nothing we can do*", even when asked to reflect on their own resources and needs as young citizens. It seems that youth lack the possibility of thinking and planning their future, they lack the capacity (that should be typical of their age) to imagine different worlds, and find it hard to perceive themselves in the role of active agents and responsible of their lives.

The picture emerging from the different sources of information is complex. Let's summarize it considering firstly the community in terms of resources and limitations for youth participation.

The analysis of community profiles and the observations of contexts where youth congregate indicate that public institutions (local and provincial) are very sensitive to youth policies: the interventions and services available are numerous, both in the domain of prevention of risk and promotion of youth engagement and participation. However, many of the existing projects seem to be aimed primarily at enhancing mere involvement rather than stimulating active participation. There is a fundamental difference between "induced" participation and "solicited" participation: the former is a proposal that continues to keep youth in the condition of consumers of services. Their freedom is actually freedom to choose between a recreational place or an activity proposed by others. The observation of the meeting places proposed by the municipality confirmed the perceptions of the key informants: despite their good intentions, youth centers are attended by a minority of youth corresponding to a particular typology, and for this reason, they become exclusive and stigmatizing. Moreover, some activities are attended only by adults.

The community is perceived as strongly conditioned by its economic history. The sudden transformation from an agricultural to an industry-based economy, the consequent increase in economic wellbeing of most inhabitants, not supported by an adequate cultural development, seems to play a crucial role as (structural, macro level) explanatory factors. The typology of the leading economic activities (family based) is also a relevant factor. These aspects appear related to the role and importance attributed to education, training and cultural development in general, and seem to be responsible of the attitude of "closure" toward the external world, both as a psychological state of mind of individual citizens and as characteristic of the organizational culture of the local enterprises.

Let's now try to ask the question "who are the youth of this community? What are their resources which could influence their active citizenship?"

Results clearly show that political, social and civic engagements have been replaced by the organization of free time and the care for individual quality of life. Many forms of youth engagement are related to playful and recreational activities, and sense of belonging to the community seems to be associated mostly with the annual folk festival, context in which youth can really feel protagonists. Besides this event, youth feel constrained in choosing between the few centres available, or move towards other nearby localities and cities offering other types of initiatives.

It seems that youth are not capable to think of themselves as active agents of change in their community context, and they seem confined into a role of "passive spectators". Bounded by their homes, gyms and discotheques, the attitude of most youth seems to be "to wait", willing to be involved in some transformations but not to provoke them. A critical aspect is the tendency of youth to delegate the defense of their right of citizens to others, while they aspire to conduct a calm life between family, work and friends. Distrust in institutions, avoidance of responsibilities and perception of uncertainties of work conditions seem to contribute to the exclusion of youth from community life. Most initiatives aimed at enhancing engagement come from adults and only minimally from youth themselves.

In conclusion, it seems difficult to promote youth participation without promoting the development of the subjectivities of these youth: they should be able to perceive themselves as active citizens and not as spectators. In this perspective it becomes important the role of the community and of the school as places where it can be possible to value self-reflection as citizens and potential agents of change. This is the

direction towards which we need to proceed, starting from a discussion on the results of the study and the effort to initiate a collaborative action research with the involvement of all relevant social actors and institutions, including citizens and youth. This process is ongoing, and the initial reactions from the local administration and the larger community have been encouraging.

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