Civic Imagination: Engaging Communities for a More Inclusive and Sustainable City

Award Scheme	**Guangzhou Award**
Sustainable Development Goals	**Goal 11 - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable**

Summary

The City of Bologna adopted a strategy aiming at permanently enabling citizens to collaborate, thus making the city government share responsibility with the community in the care and sustainable use of spaces and in a fair allocation of local resources.

Background and Objective

The milestones of this policy are: a “Regulation on public collaboration between citizens and the city for the care and regeneration of urban commons”; permanent Participation Laboratories in each of the 6 City Districts where individual citizens and groups of them discuss on the use of resources; they also foster networking and are antennas for the needs of their territory. The Municipality launched various public calls for the use of City-owned spaces to be regenerated and animated, thus offering development opportunities to the local community but also a tool to revive certain areas of the city and to create a sense of community. BACKGROUND INFORMATION The “Regulation on public collaboration between citizens and the city for the care and regeneration of urban commons” was the starting document adopted by the City. Furthermore, the Mayor gave Deputy Mayor Lepore a specific responsibility on “Civic Imagination”. Participation and citizens’ activation was included in the Municipal Planning Document as one of the identified transversal priorities. More than 40 people within the municipal administration work on civic activation specifically or use civic engagement as a key for their activities. ORIGINS The civic imagination policy was developed gradually since 2014 to respond to two different needs. On one hand, citizens – traditionally very active and engaged in Bologna - were asking the city administration to let them improve their neighbourhood by painting a bench or managing an abandoned space, but it was not possible: the municipal regulations didn’t allow citizens to operate on public areas. At the same time, local decision-makers perceived that there was no trust in politics (shown by a 30% drop of vote in 2014 regional elections). The aim was to change the relation with the citizens, to rebuild trust and offer them some tools to be engaged for the benefit of their neighbourhoods, so as to build a more inclusive and sustainable city. To measure the outcomes, the numbers of participation were analysed. Signing a pact with the City or participating in District Labs meant that the involved actors trusted the administration. The work was managed by the Active Citizenship Unit of the City of Bologna, with the Civic Imagination Office, created within the Urban Innovation Foundation, in collaboration with the University of Bologna. The team started with an internal design work for a one-year plan, then intermediate bodies and community leaders were involved to share and co-design the work; new connections were stimulated by sharing information, listening to people, organising public meetings. Then specific actions were co-designed and priorities selected. Also, participatory budgeting was launched in 2017: 84 projects were proposed and 6 selected by the citizens; the vote of 14.584 people decided how to use a share of the municipal budget (1 million). So citizens were put at the centre of the decision-making process and large parts of the city could be improved and regenerated thanks to civic engagement supported by the City. The City invested about 200,000 euros per year for the overall structure and for the organisation of activities. In addition, some small funding was given to support the Collaboration Pacts and public calls for the regeneration of specific spaces. 1 million was made available for the projects voted through the participated budgeting process.

Outcomes and Impacts

Since May 2014 the city has counted 408 implemented collaboration pacts; 15.000m2 of city walls were cleaned; in 20 schools, students took care and regenerated annexed green areas and decorated or renovated school walls; 40 green areas were regenerated, also fostering social cohesion with the creation of community gardens. Moreover, a number of refurbishing actions were carried out on the street furniture, like the renovation of 110 public benches. All the implemented actions show how the collaboration between citizens and city administration helps neighbourhoods be nicer and more inclusive places. But results were also the large participation in Laboratories, 2500 people in 2017, as well as the numbers of participatory budgeting: 84 projects proposed and almost 15.000 voters. The indicators of the strategy are the number of participants in Labs, Budget vote, etc. and the quality of collaborative projects.At the same time, the budget that the City made available for citizens to decide how to spend (1 million for participatory budgeting) shows the commitment of the City administration. Bologna University Center for Advanced Studies on Consumption and Communication is in charge of impact measurement and evaluation, with the Civic Imagination Office. Some examples of the above mentioned tools are “The objects library” and “Re-use with love” that were created with two Collaboration Pacts. They both focus on the re-use of objects and clothes for social purposes and they create

events to promote re-use. Another pact allowed the repainting of the walls of a kindergarten, in collaboration with an Art Lyceum, by creating a mural representing scenes from a book about nature, an initiative with the further objective to educate to life in the open air. Further examples include the regeneration of Piazza Cavour gardens in collaboration with Bologna traders' association; the creation of a new service for cyclists with Dynamo, the bike station that promotes green mobility in town. Another tool, the District Labs, allowed to decide with citizens which buildings were going to be refurbished with European Structural Funds the city is receiving.

Innovative Initiative

The initiative is evolutionary, since it started gradually and is now going on and widening up. Civic engagement has always been very strong in Bologna – a centre of the Resistance against Nazism and fascism during World War II – the first City in Italy and second in Europe to create a Civic network, Iperbole. It was thus natural that Bologna would be the first in Europe to adopt a Regulation on urban commons. In 2015 there was a City Districts local Reform that identified the Districts as territorial nodes meant to be antennas to detect the local needs and to promote networking by giving value to the relations among people and to the activities of local associations. As a consequence, the District Labs were created as a permanent context for dialogue and project design. The civic engagement strategy is changing the way the city administration works: it has created a number of tools – the Regulation, the District Labs, the Comunità web pages, participatory budgeting, public calls for the use of abandoned public spaces – that allow the administration to work for the citizens and with the citizens. The fact that many City Executives participate in the Labs, that the technical staff of the City works on the design of projects with citizens and associations, is bringing the work of the City closer to the needs and wishes of residents and it is also developing a stronger sense of community, since citizens are uniting to propose improvements to their neighbourhood. The challenge was to rebuild trust: making the whole path very clear and transparent thanks to the use of the Comunità website and the District Labs themselves, helped us in this. The city managed to mobilize a large number of people, but there is still need to involve more young people from high school or University and this is the new focus with a project specifically targeted to them.

Conclusion

Bologna's strategy can be implemented in other cities. Starting from the Regulation on urban commons, up to the district labs and participatory budgeting. Of course each city can adapt it according to the local specific situation. The Regulation has already been adopted by many other Italian cities. Bologna would be happy to support other local administrations around the world to take similar steps. Civic engagement makes the city more inclusive and sustainable: it creates inclusive communities and it grows with practice. For instance, some citizens became promoters themselves: a group from "Via Abba", a local street, of their own initiative translated the information materials about the vote on participatory budgeting for their district into 5 languages and put them in the lobby of all the buildings in their street, to make sure that everybody was informed about the opportunity and could cast their vote. Furthermore, many of the initiatives that citizens propose often foster sustainability: some of the Pacts allow the recycling of objects, others promote the use of bikes, other allow for the use of abandoned buildings and so on. RELEVANCE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable Target 3: Participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management Target 4: Safeguard cultural and natural heritage Target 7: Universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces, in particular of women, children older persons and persons with disabilities Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions for all