

## Community Participation in Urban Suburbs. The Italian Case of Z.E.N. Slum of Palermo

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*Abstract:* - Based on Kurt Lewin's Action Research theory, the paper focuses on an Action Research project issued in Southern Italy, in the disadvantaged suburb of Palermo (Sicily), called Z.E.N., sadly famous as a dangerous and "criminogenic" urban slum, in order to stimulate social participation and to develop social change. The principal goal was the empowerment of ordinary inhabitants, obtaining their collaboration through participation, giving them acquisition of knowledge for a real social change.

*Key-Words:* - Community Psychology, Empowerment, Social Participation, Urban Context, Palermo, Minority Groups.

### 1 Introduction

The most recent studies in the field of participatory project show how each action/intervention should be an expression of the target communities. In fact, social intervention implies a deep knowledge of the context. The final goal is making grow sense of responsibility, power, skills and sense of community in involved subjects; in this way they may be able to cope with social exclusion, lack of cohesion, marginalization. The main idea of the project was to implement the community development in ZEN suburb, focusing on social relationships among involved families and promoting human capital.

Starting from this premise, the Italian Association "ES – Empowerment Sociale Onlus", in collaboration with the Community Psychology chair at University of Palermo, has developed action plans for urban communities at multiple levels with aim to involve the local community and minority groups and help them seek "independence, equality, and co-operation" [1]. More precisely, following the recommendation from the literature the Community Psychology adopted an perspective that the relationship or interaction between the individual and her/his environment or social context is essential concern for analyzing an opportunities of promoting the wellbeing of all the persons in that society [2].

In order to implement these premises and contribute to their further use, the plan has targeted the case study of the urban and suburb Z.E.N. area. The empirical evidence has been collected from the

proposed urban and suburban areas from 2000 onwards as follows. Through initial stage of participant observation the report indicated the most problematic aspects of the residence of the areas are: poverty, growing fragmentation of territory, emerging heterogeneity of spaces and populations, broken social ties and increasing social marginalization. Furthermore, the continuing general trend in each identified area from 200 onwards indicated on a need to elaborate on these processes in depth. To that end, a new research agenda requires to adopt the factors which could affect people life course [3], especially combating material and existential poverty that force communities to constrain unsustainable living conditions [4]. More precisely, this requires to investigate in depth the dimensions of social quality, which combines the various domains and social indicators such as:

- 1) Material security;
- 2) Employment security;
- 3) Housing security;
- 4) Maintenance of health.

These domains and indicators are further addressed through the following areas and a potential link between them.

The dimension of "Social inclusion":

- 1) Inclusion in social security system;
- 2) Labour market inclusion;
- 3) Housing market inclusion;
- 4) Health service coverage;

- 5) Inclusion in education system and services;
- 6) Political inclusion;
- 7) Inclusion in community services;
- 8) Social status inclusion.

The dimensions of “Social cohesion”:

- 1) Economic cohesion;
- 2) Social status cohesion;
- 3) Political cohesion;
- 4) Public safety;
- 5) Altruism.

The dimensions of “Empowerment”:

- 1) Social and cultural empowerment;
- 2) Political empowerment;
- 3) Economic empowerment;
- 4) Social psychological empowerment.

The interrelationship between these areas is based on objective indicators and subjective indicators, aiming to point on a social exclusion model. For example, with regard to the value and strategy of empowerment, the principle of community or citizen participation is strictly relevant. In other words, the citizen participation refers to the ability of individuals to have a voice in decision-making, providing them to define and address problems and the dissemination of information gathered on them [5]. That could further constitute the basis for the usage of participatory action research in community psychology, where community members are often involved in the research process by sharing their unique knowledge and experience with the research team and working as active participant [6]. Furthermore, the social work in the wider horizon of the community development also provides an possibility to be involved with different perspectives and themes of a broad field of intervention through engagement of the peoples who work in these areas/services, required skills and trainers who should help them recognize, implement, acquire reading skills and action, without forgetting the context of the community but also, more generally, the social context, that comes into play in front of a user who, for example, has lost his/her job, the teacher who does not understand the behavior of adolescents or the district that calls for strong action to eliminate crime which prevents the inhabitants to live well.

## 2 The case-study of Z.E.N. Suburb

Giving these background, the case study of slum Z.E.N. has been selected due to high level of poverty and its accompanied aspects. Poverty is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon with

specific historical, economic, social and political origins, which manifests itself in a variety of forms. Poverty is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon with specific historical, economic, social and political origins, which manifests itself in a variety of forms. Poverty is conceptualized not merely in terms of income and assets but also in terms of human capital factors. Concerning our field experience in Palermo (Sicily, Southern Italy), in the dangerous slum named Z.E.N. (North Zone Expansion), which is the context in which we operate, the burden of deprivation and poverty is photographed by some variables that distinguish different shapes and dimensions of poverty: economic poverty (lack of regular work, a secure income, etc.), urban planning (lack of adequate housing in good condition, lack of urban communities, etc.), political agenda (absence or low proportion of institutions in the area and/or the presence of mafia networks), socio-cultural poverty (low educative levels, school drop-spread, reproduction of cultural backwardness and outdated patterns), relational poverty (lack of capital made up of a relationship of trust you can count on, existential loneliness, family breakdown or oppressive family ties, etc.).



Fig. 1, Palermo, the Slum/Ghetto Z.E.N.

To born and grow up in these contexts is not only a disadvantage, but it also exposes to a significant impact on a more strictly personal level, affecting the system of perceptions and expectations [7]. On early 2000' showed that through the use of participatory action research and community photography, it could be problematized those borders and creating spaces for young urban youth to engage in processes that position them as agents of inquiry and as “experts” about their own lives. As the data reveal, by listening to young people’s stories, by giving them the opportunity to speak about their lives and by collaborating with them in

designing plans of action to address their concerns, we can more effectively frame research questions and teaching pedagogies around their understandings of violence and urban life. By examining their lives via participatory action research, young people are provided with opportunities to take deliberate action to enhance community well-being.

The project aimed to promote community development in a strategy of social intervention, in which participation is one of the dimensions that characterize the community [8], highlighting the collective actions designed to recognize, promote and enhance the resources present at the local/contextual level, promoting social relations inside the community in the broadest sense of the term [9]. Within this perspective, we considered the development of human potential as a process that involves a change in relations between individuals in developing countries and contexts where their actions are acted out [10]. In this sense, some fundamental aspects emerge, that underlie the community actions. In the Z.E.N. case, the main elements are the promotion of forms of prevention and the psychosocial wellness in different contexts; the attention to involve the target groups that are both the object but also the subject of participatory interventions; the reflection to consider both the subject and the context in which the subjects themselves are inserted, articulating the objective and subjective data with the individual and the collective processes.

In this perspective the “Community Development and Social Participation Project” involved several members; a macro project, run by more social actors who, together, have formalized an “institutional network” formed by associations operating in the third sector, local schools, social services for children and families, local health planners, architects, educational institutions, parishes, schools observers in the area of early school leavers, sports promotion bodies, university. The territorial area involved in the project is the Seventh District of the city of Palermo, which includes the suburb of Z.E.N. These geographical area of the city present strong and significant differences: structural, economic, cultural, social and environmental ones [11]. Such a various context needs specific and targeted interventions involving the whole social actors (children, families, senior citizens), not forgetting their belonging “community”, using intervention strategies that involve participatory action as a strength and an asset to the community as a whole. Participation is fundamental for liberation. In fact, liberation is not a possess or a

grant. Liberation is collectively and individually built, obtained and won. This explains why liberation psychology has adopted and employs participatory methods. As observed, Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a methodological process and strategy actively incorporating those people and groups affected by a problem, in such a way that they become co-researchers. Their participation places the locus of power and of control within their groups, mobilizes their resources, leads them to acquire new ones, in order to transform their living conditions, their immediate environment and the power relations established with the groups or institution in their society [12], [13].

The mentioned intervention can be defined as a real multi-project, both from a structural and functional point of view; it involved more than 5000 persons, including direct and indirect beneficiaries and combined, therefore, different axes and areas of action. With regard to the Operators Training Area: ISAS (Institute of Social and Administrative Sciences), training institute and partner, in particular, dealt with the professional resources to train competent staff (community development agents), able to spend their knowledge and their experience/competence in problematic and contradictory contexts of action. The training intervention focused on different levels, highlighting the intra-and inter-components, and its action on multiple dimensions has required a strong effort by practitioners to work together, in order to build common areas of action and reflection and comparison. The development of social-educational methods and strategies to prevent potentially risky behaviors allowed developing, during the course activities, a model of intervention with and for young people, marked by forms of activism and self-promotion.

Referring to the Family Area, a long experience of working in this field has enabled us to detect how, today, we assist to a gradual transformation of action patterns put in place by social services to support the parenting. Being a parent does not always mean having the required role and skills; moreover a training program that is not referred to the family component is practically useless and mostly incomplete and inadequate. During the project, for example, an association of mothers, (“Mamme tutor”), was founded; this shows us as these figures are important in a project that aims to reach participation and social inclusion. Parent, in this specific case, becomes, with their children, the active participant of the experience, sharing spaces of action that lead to growth, confrontation and possible actions for change [14].

With regard to the Law, School and Children Area, it is known that widespread lawlessness, school dropout, vandalism, bullying, violence are the “wounds” that mainly afflict neighborhoods; so, to involve children as active participant in the forefront is a priority of interventions and school, privileged partner, often as a backdrop and a glue, especially to create engagement with the minor, demonstrating openness and wider collaboration. Participation and social action, therefore, decline in the actual activities that engage boys (sports events in the square and in the district, games, computers, painting, hiking, recreational events), in order to create alternative opportunities for emerging and to harness the potential of each in relation to the group and context. Literature shows that educational process focuses on the attitudes of teachers, students and parents, knowledge, self-knowledge and self-education. Contemporary student needs to know the source, support, emotional mechanisms. The level of emotion is always in close contact or in conflict with reality [15]. Concerning, University and Social Services Area, a substantial support was provided by local social services on one side and by university on the other. The first, by direct contact with the families, the child, school, associations, apply intervention strategies tailored to each subject (interviews with the psychologist, family support, counseling), bearing problems affecting the child, but also the context of origin. The Community Psychology group at University of Palermo provided and provides scientific support, advice, supervision and research-action on the field, in order to fully meet the real needs of the community, through targeted group actions transformed into visible and tangible results, and possible areas for social change.

Finally, the Urban-environmental Area was involved too. The wellbeing means living in not degraded neighborhoods; but residents’ image of Z.E.N. suburb, however, is not always the same. The only representation of this neighborhood, which was acquired by many, is the one linked to the idea of ghetto. The project idea we wanted to develop was the environmental rehabilitation by the local Program of urban regeneration and sustainable development of the territory (Prusst), in order to provide them with proper guidance on what are the needs and expectations of the local community, through a careful needs assessment and through appropriate detection tools.

Aims	Indicators	Criterion of success
Constitution of the coordination group	Number of involved institutions	Involvement of at least 5 institutions
Project Planning	Objectives list and operative strategies identification	Identification of 4 multilevel objectives and related operative strategies
Volunteers recruitment	N. of recruited volunteers	At least 120 volunteers
Realize material for the program	Fascicle set up	Coordinating Group consensus
Evaluation tools development	First version	Pilot phase concluded
Evaluation tools development	Final version	Working group consensus
Volunteers training	Volunteers formation	Participation of 90% of volunteers in meetings
Defining activities planning	Project plan	Respected planning
Participation in program activities	N. of users	5000 users

Table 1, The project scheme

### 3 Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research is a type of qualitative research that allows the researchers and community members to work together to improve some aspect of community life or solve an area of local concern. Action research involves repeatedly and systematically planning, conducting, evaluating the activity and critically reflecting on it. The evaluation of, and reflection on one activity influences the direction of the next activity. Unlike most quantitative research methods, PAR is an approach that allows community members to participate, learn from each other, and effectively address issues that threaten their livelihoods, health, and life. PAR requires that program managers, stakeholders or donors work jointly with community members, thus allowing cultural, geographical and economic factors to be included in the analyses. Because PAR methods require researchers and stakeholders to work closely with community members, communities establish and build partnerships that empower them to tackle their problems, and decide on feasible solutions. Another distinctive feature of PAR is the belief that social oppression is not only rooted in material conditions but also in the means of knowledge production. It is only when the people concerned develop their own processes for generating knowledge and acquiring the means of asserting this knowledge face-to-face the knowledge of the dominant class that they can challenge their oppression on a durable basis.

First, to work in a quickly changing context does not allow considering the social as a field, but forces to think about the development of a territory as a whole. The welfare services (especially the social and health ones) should be considered within a more comprehensive development of a territorial area, designed as a cross between local and global dynamics and the welfare state should be considered as a lever of development rather than, as often happens, as a weight. Welfare services and business planning strategies, therefore, move within contexts

that are also deposits of critical intersection between global and local levels through the everyday lives of people: on the one hand, increasing the risks and on the other decreases certainty of information sources. The challenge of the welfare in recent years of globalization is to go out from merely assistance, without entering the mercantilism. It occurs to develop and support systems able to create quality social welfare, which is a quality in human relations; that is the aid provided by organizations and services, in an organization vision of welfare as a relational order, and that depends on the ethics of aid that inspires action; the relational configuration is adopted for those in need (which runs from the figure of a service consumer to approach that of the “prosumer”), whose satisfaction becomes incumbent on the community and in the network of stakeholders. The criterion for evaluating the quality is to consider whether and how the model generates / regenerates rather than destroys / consumes social capital. Social change and well-being have been intertwined in community research and action, as much as being used as political common-places. While politics affect the lives of citizenry and the collective space they share, communities are part of that space. Community Psychology and the study of the political sphere share some basic epistemological premises:

- 1) The ever present interlocutor character of reality, whose existence is daily and collectively constructed by the people in every human society in its different ways of manifestation.
- 2) The need to develop a holistic approach to community processes and events.
- 3) The need to employ a critical stance in their approaches.
- 4) The transformation of the psychologists’ role from experts into dialoguing participants, with specific knowledge to be shared.

The political character of community work resides in its capacity to influence the social structure by changing power relationships through changes in people’s behavior. In fact, communities may produce significant changes and even become an active minority. If community participation is generated, then some of the stakeholders will develop a political quality linked to their capacity to represent their communities. In the community development strategy there are various elements and plural values that underlie the praxis. We may clearly distinguish the following items:

#### A. Education

To instruct people on basic aspects of life community become an enlargement in their

awareness about everyone may hold, in order to discover himself/herself as resource to help community.

#### B. Operative principle

It aims to identify needs, instruments, human resources and tools to operationally do the change-oriented choices.

#### C. Assessment

The process of change must be monitored through regular dialogue between the actions put in place and the general aims explicitly taken.

#### D. Democracy

This is a people’s movement, promoted by people and for the people, in which the spirit of participation of all groups (voluntary organizations, recreational, sporting, civic, etc.) contributes significantly to the success of the program or to its failure.

#### E. Social policy

Community development implies the cooperation between local forces and governative authorities, with a growing enhancement and influence of minority groups.

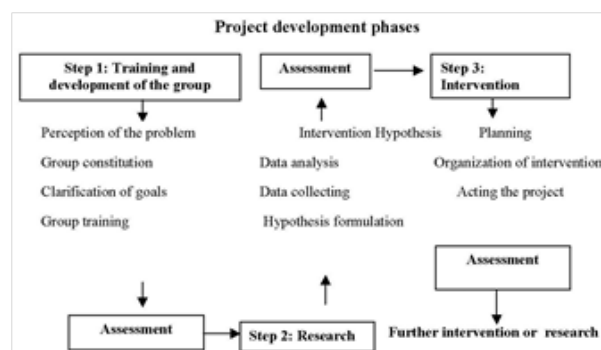


Fig. 2, Project steps.

In our project, the assessment process has been articulated in: ex-ante evaluation (evaluation of the context, critical analysis of the conceptual idea, made even before the actual implementation) process evaluation (analysis of the adequacy of methods of intervention, of program characteristics, recipients and implementation arrangements. It consists of: adequacy of resources compared to the priority objectives, adequacy of the organization and resources, consistency of the working methods adopted in relation to its objectives; adequacy of working methods), evaluation of results (analysis of the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of the

program played in achieving the objectives. It consists of: analysis of the correspondence between results and objectives; change occurs after the intervention, verification of the underlying assumptions).

A relevant question to report and monitor systematically, for example, is the problematic definition of the action between success and ability to engage the social change [16]; another one is dealing the frequent confrontation with the phenomena of organized crime, the ways in which promoting the operators' turnover and finally the difficult management of the participation, that is promoted in terms of political governance [17]. In the necessary passage from an assistance model, that is the social *maternage*, to the peer advocacy model, the support isn't seen as a replacement (the reference figure) but as an accompanying and recognition of person with his skills. If the purpose of social intervention is to develop user's autonomy, the good operator is who works for his death. Social operators' principal aim has to be become "unnecessary", that is make people able to take care of themselves for their real social change [18].

Another relevant question is due to the fact the world is changing faster than ever because of social and economic factors, which have been significantly impacted by technology. Today, the need for a critical use of information is more important than ever. In a digital world where the amount of information doubles every two years, individuals need to evaluate resources carefully and determine how to use relevant information to solve problems and make their decisions [19]. It is no longer principally a matter of getting information: it's getting the right information at the right time to do things right and to do the right things, especially in community groups. Particularly, referring to youth, it should be observed the relevance of digital citizenship; it crosses curricular lines. On a systemic level, the entire learning community can examine digital citizenship competency alongside subject matter standards in an effort to develop an interdependent matrix of learning [20].

## 4 Conclusion

Finally, urban territory knowledge also includes a promotion action that has as its core activities the residents' involvement. The motivation to promote the characteristic features of an urban context is often the desire to affirm and to rediscover the common roots of a local community. In fact, whenever there is a process of integration among

countries of the same geographical area, the territorial elements becomes a factor both of aggregation and distinction for the local population. This often leads to the intersection of different cultures and lifestyles. Many local communities, almost as a response to the fear that this could turn into a homogenization of their main characters, tend to discover and enhance their origins in order to maintain a shared sense of belonging to a smaller community. With a regard to the anthropological studies, it could be observed that within the community of fieldwork the researcher is not only an intruder but also an active component in the dynamics of group relationships of the local scene and production of meaning and significance. Precisely for this reason, Barth defines this process as a "significant articulation" between two worlds, the encounter between the anthropologist and the local, that is, between the ethnographer and the reality that he/she is studying [21]. According to Fabian, what is produced in the search field, then, is also inter-subjectivity, although the distinctive element is the style in which the ethnographic account is processed [22]. Moreover, continuing to referring to the local community and social/anthropological observer or psychologist it is necessary to reproduce the dimensions within which takes place the process of construction of anthropological knowledge, taking into account that in the game there are no longer an observer as subject and an object observed, but two interacting entities, each one more or less firmly tied to a specific universe of recognition. In our opinion, a good social intervention has to be methodologically funded on Cunningham's action research model [23], which consists of three steps (group development and formation, evaluation and intervention). As demonstrated, participation empowers people, directing them to their conscientization. This last element begins with the people's participation and the discussion-reflection which is part of the sequence action-reflection-action. This process supposes a variety of ways to problematize naturalized modes of understanding and interpretation daily life. In fact, problematization is the way to challenge accepted explanations for those phenomena that have been assumed as normal and logical in daily life, but which make people's life difficult and hard. From theory to practice, in Italy, in last decades has recently grown a new type of local associationism, which is based on the character of solidarity networks in municipalities at all territorial levels. On the one hand, is the element of local and participatory different areas of action which

provides a strong impetus to the growth of local forces and their ability to make strategic changes in the field of participatory democracy, in consumption, production purposes, the Government environment, cultural diversity, citizenship and inclusive development styles, and the other a strong need to become partners and in many cases, promoters of the European and global policies and, until now mainly dependent on agreements between nation states. In this sense, a kind of federalism seems to project the municipal forms and roles of cities in new supranational policies, opening the prospect of a Europe of regions and municipalities. In other words: from particular to general, from the node to the plot. However, the interaction between political resources and those of active citizens cannot be resolved as a simple arithmetic sum, but with the principle of collective subsidiarity, according to the prospect of taking care of the commons, articulating with the public and private sectors in a shared governance model.

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