

Citizen participation in public planning: A literature review

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ABSTRACT:

The aim of this work is to present an overview of participatory practices through the evolutionary synthesis of so-called "ladders of public participation", created in the last 50 years. The paper shows how, through them, the role of public participation in planning addressed the redistribution of power between those who govern and the governed. The definition of participatory democracy, the motivation of all actors, ICT and the conceptualization of the planning and decision-making framework are all factors for participation offered to the public. Thus, the paper contributes to considering a possible new ladder of participation.

Key words: participation; democracy; ladder of participation; participatory research

1. INTRODUCTION

Too many [...] plainly are accustomed to think of town planning as an art of compass and rule, a matter to be worked out, between engineers and architects almost alone, and for their town councils. But the true town plan, the only one worth having, is the outcome and flower of the whole civilization of a community and of an age.

(Geddes, 1915, p. 210-211)

With these words, Patrick Geddes, one of the fathers of modern urban planning in the early years of the twentieth century, prophetically put forward an idea which was very close to what we now understand as a process of participatory planning. However, only since the sixties, has the issue of

participation [1] begun to stand out in the scientific debate and planning practices (Balducci, 1991; Comerio, 1985; Davidoff, 2001; Fera, 2008; Friedmann 1987, Olivetti, 2001, Moatasim, 2005).

Over recent years, concertation practices have been given a further boost. In fact, the disciplinary debate has shifted from the concept of participation to that of participatory democracy (Allegretti, 2007), meaning a new form of democracy that goes beyond the original concept [2]: the deliberative component acquires an added value to the planning. In fact, in the democracy which underlies the traditional concept of participation there may be a temporal sequence between representative democracy and participatory or deliberative democracy, where «the first (representation) is the formal (and minimal) basis for the existence of a democratic state and the second (participation) is the result of going beyond formal democracy» (Gangemi, 2009, p. 107).

Participation is thus understood not only as an opportunity for consultation and accountability of the actors and citizens, but also as an opportunity for involvement in democratic activities which, through the equal inclusiveness of the various points of view, then have outcomes that lead the individual expressions to group options, if not to the general will. This inevitably implies socio-territorial economic changes at all levels of local government (Carver et al., 2001). This ethical view replaces the concept of pragmatism widely expressed by local power-holding decision-makers.

Bobbio speaks about participatory democracy as a « general aspiration of society» (Bobbio, 2007, p.7), where the participatory approach becomes an integral part of the practices for good urban governance. Today the community considers the sharing of cosmopolitan experiences (Sandercock, 1998) and common perspectives, rather than physical distance. Magnaghi, explained participatory democracy as «a liberation from the market» (Magnaghi, 2007, p.135), but recalls how some decision making factors are influenced by often unresolvable problems around negotiating tables.

These reflections highlight how the objective of participatory practices remains the building of consensus which is open to the definition of planning agreements. This favours the intervention of all city users, not just those who think that they have more influence on the results because they have the power to control the future urban landscape (McCann, 2001).

However, there are critical aspects which limit public participation. In an article written over 10 years ago, Lawrence Walters identifies some aspects which are still valid today, such as the fact that some problems are just too complex and difficult to understand for the community; the natural tension in reaching a rational balance between efficiency and democratic participation; the absence of a real willingness to redefine the roles of the public decision makers, putting these roles into question; and finally the consideration that participation is a complex process that wastes of time and money (Walters et al., 2000).

Literature on the subject often starts from the assumption that people want to intervene in the decision-making processes in order to express their views and put forward new proposals to the experts and that they are just waiting to be given the opportunity and the cognitive tools to do so. However, in reality «progressive» administrators, (Forester, 1998, p. 68), confident of the potential of participatory practice can come up against widespread apathy in the local population.

To overcome these problems it is necessary that both administrators and the community are actually willing to manage the communication, cooperation, and problem-solving together. « The collaborative approach [...] is important, as is motivation» (Innes et al., 2003, p.14).

The community is therefore perceived as the gateway to the success of a project of participatory democracy, but it is also possible to imagine participatory democracy as an essential element for the development of the community. It is therefore essential to know and say how convenient it is to carry out participatory democracy and assume social responsibilities in the procedures of multilevel governance and the relationship between institutions and individuals.

2. THE LADDERS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE LAST 50 YEARS.

Active participation of the different actors is a process which follows rules, procedures, quantitative and qualitative criteria. In this sense, there have been many attempts at definition, classification and cataloguing of participation that seek to challenge the distribution of power of those who govern and those who are governed. Although much has been written about the advantages, limitations and paradoxes of deliberative and participatory democracy, very little is found with explicit reference to the democratic quality of participatory decision-making processes. Among the

attempts to build an interpretative scheme, it should be noted that of Sherry R. Arnstein, who in 1969 put forward the ladder of participation, which is still considered the classic starting point which authors refer to. However, although different families of models have been formulated from her *typology of citizen participation* – such as other “ladder” models, the wheel model, deliberative practices model and the target-centric approach (Ciaffi et al., 2011) – for this research it was decided to explore the "family" of the ladder model.

2.1 ARNSTEIN'S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION (1969)

In 1969 Sherry R. Arnstein proposed *A Ladder of Citizen Participation* which, although being over 40 years old, is still considered the best-known and most frequently cited model. The author, in a provocative analysis of various American experiences at that time, classified the different categories of participation using the metaphor of a ladder, in which each rung «corresponds to the extent of citizens' power» (Arnstein, 1971, p.2). This starts with the total exclusion from the decision-making to a substantial increase in the responsibilities of citizens (Figure 1), following a procedure which is more qualitative than quantitative. The ladder is nothing more than a schematic representation of the complex social interactions that are formed between the community and administrators in the processes of land use and transformation. Arnstein defines a grid of eight levels divided into three fundamental categories which, following an ascending order, are perceived in a context of «power and powerlessness».

In the lowest part there is *Non participation* which includes *Manipulation*, and *Therapy* (i.e. the activity of support or treatment). It is carried out by professionals and known as community participation because it is compared to the powerlessness of mental illness. Powerholders identify and cure the social problems without removing the causes. In other words, the politicians, who are not driven by good, inclusive intentions, provide citizens with a «corrective therapy», through for example, «solicitation, rhetoric», etc. etc.. to try to overcome the possible difficulties encountered in their decision making. (Gangemi, 2010, p.12). In the intermediate category there is apparent participation: *Degrees of tokenism*. «The term used by scholars [...] is tokenism, which refers to the practice of producing various types of currency that does not have value in itself, like monopoly

money, [...] chips for gambling, etc.. [...] but it only gains value in the context in which it is used». (Gangemi, 2010, p. 13). In this intermediate level aspects of dialogue are introduced which let people be heard but cannot ensure that their considerations will be carefully examined by the local government. The *Degrees of tokenism* are made up of three factors. *Informing* makes people aware of their rights and is therefore the first important step towards participation, even if at this stage the community is only informed of the proposals already established. *Consultation*, and *Placation* are strategies to manage conflict. Finally, in the highest category there are three values that provide the citizens with power (*Degrees of Citizen Power*). Firstly, *Partnership* which according to the author operates following optimal participatory criteria when citizens themselves have the ability to finance and obtain initiatives and not through authorization by the local government. *Delegated Power* and *Citizen Control* are guided by citizens.

Arnstein therefore considers that in order to talk about participation, it is essential that the community is not manipulated becoming completely subject to the power of administrators, but plays an active part in decision making. The community must also be ensured transparency of information and a real possibility to change the results in the transformation of the territory. The participatory issue is therefore put forward according to the principles of value and quality rather than quantity of participation, and precisely for this reason it must be privileged in its treatment.

The literature is full of suggested versions used in different circumstances and for different purposes. Below different versions are presented, highlighting those which try to introduce innovative features into the previous steps.

2.2 COMPARISON OF THE VARIOUS FORMS OF THE LADDER OF PARTICIPATION

One of the first versions that attempted to change the original scale was the «new ladder of citizen participation» by Connor, published in 1988. After identifying the limits of Arnstein's scale, he identifies the origin of participation in areas of conflict where it is necessary to «prevent and resolve public controversy » (Connor, 1988, p.250).

Two main sections within its scale are recognized by the author, ranging from *Education* to *Resolution - Prevention*. The first refers to interactions involving the *General Public* and is made up

of three steps: *Education* (Connor's *Education* is nothing more than Arnstein's *Manipulation*, considered by the author as non-participation); *Information feedback* and *Consultation*. According to the author *Consultation* should be used as a participatory technique when the *Education* and *Information feedback* approaches have not achieved a significant success, or when there is a significant gap between knowledge and acceptance of the proposal. (Connor, 1988, p. 253). The second macro section looks at the role of leaders in various strategic areas of government (in co-design, mediation, or in the resolution and prevention of possible disagreements) and is made up of *Joint Planning; Mediation* (involving two roles, «one is the technical expert, who argues the specifics of alternative solutions, and the other is the behavioural leader, who focuses on mutual acceptance and understanding among those involved, creative problem-solving and negotiating processes»). Connor, 1988, p.255) *Litigation, Resolution - Prevention*.

With the presence of *Litigation* Connor's ladder sees the aspect of conflict as being well integrated into the participatory process, which implies a necessary willingness to dialogue right from the early stages in order to address emerging issues.

Wiedemann and Femers introduced a new model, in which participation is not inserted inside a pyramid with the leaders at the top and the community at the base (Wiedemann et al., 1993). In their ladder the first two steps (*Public right to know* and *Informing the public*) reflect a common idea that the concept of "access to information" is itself a form of participation in decision making (Tulloch et al., 2003); guidelines are implemented to inform the population, but at this stage they are not authorized to respond.

Continuing from the bottom up, the remaining steps are made up of: *Public right to object* (the community may object to political choices in the drafting of a plan or project, but does not have the right to modify it); *Public participation in defining interests and actors and determining agenda* (here we see the first step to real participation. The public is involved at an early stage in defining and discussing the issues on the agenda of policy makers); *Public participation in assessing risks and recommending solutions* (the population is involved in the evaluation of the impact of possible decisions and can make a contribution by formulating plausible solutions); *Public participation in*

final decision (citizens actively choose the criteria to assess, achieve and sustain the final decision).

Thus the authors ideas differ from the theories of Arnstein in as much as their objective is to analyze the different aspects of participation, providing guidelines to the promoters of participatory processes who deal with the public administration.

At around the same time, David Wilcox proposed an interpretation of the ladder which starting from Arnstein's original, promotes a participatory process in which he tries to be absolutely neutral. So in the five levels he identifies, not one is better than another, but each is suitable in very specific and different times of the process (Wilcox, 1994). Wilcox then divides the ladder into five main levels: for the first time the first step is made up of *Information* (to be applied at all levels of participation), followed by *Consultation* (the administration gives the people a chance to choose between different actions of intervention but does not give them the possibility of developing other projects beyond those proposed or in participating in the implementation of those actions. Wilcox, 1994, p.11); *Deciding Together* (the problems in managing the entire process are amplified, because it can mean surrendering the decision-making power to the people without sharing the responsibility of carrying out the decision. *Deciding Together* brings the approval of each other's ideas choosing between options developed together. At the same time the principles of *Consultation* are applied to improve it. In fact, options are generated together and the procedure is always chosen unanimously. Wilcox, 1994, p. 12); *Acting Together* (consists in deciding on and applying choices. It is necessary to have a common language, a shared understanding of the objectives and the means to achieve them, but above all complete trust between those involved and an agreement on "what is to be done". Wilcox, 1994, pp. 12-13). Finally there is *Supporting local initiatives o Supporting independent community interests* (this is the level of greatest *empowerment* because it enables the community to develop and execute the plans drawn up with their full involvement which in turn leads them to create new forms of organization to raise funds and develop projects. Wilcox, 1994, p. 14).

The conceptual approach proposed by David Wilcox shows that the higher levels are the evolution of the characteristics of the lower levels improved over time. One is not better than another, (since

each one is representative in the participatory process at different precise times) but it is agreed that *partnerships* cannot exist without communication or consensus building.

In this overview, another ladder of great importance is that of Dorcey et al., (published in the same year as that of Wilcox because it introduced into the processes of planning, the concept of *advice* i.e. the competence of experts expressed in terms of consultancy, evaluation and implementation of a given process or also in terms of management or co-management of public policies (Dorcey, et al., 1994). The authors hypothesized a ladder of eight steps where, however, the participatory process can change from one step to another without necessarily following the steps they indicate, which is due for example to particular public pressure or the use of different instruments deemed necessary in the different phases of a single process (Schlossberg et al., 2005). From the lowest rung the steps are: *Inform; Educate; Gather information, perspectives; Define issues; Consult on reactions; Task ideas, seek advice; Seek consensus; Ongoing involvement.*

Ecosfera also revised Arnstein's ladder, in which the degrees of intensity of participation are analysed without judging them on their value, promoting a participatory process aimed mainly at public administrators. The ladder proposed by Ecosfera, is divided into five main levels which, although represented in categories actually represent a continuous, uninterrupted and orderly sequence in which there is no clear distinction between the different levels. In this sense, they are summarized as follows: Non-participation, Information – Communication, Consultation, Collaboration – Active Involvement, and finally Self-Production – Self-Management.

The lack of participation (*Non-participation*) can be summarized by the term «decide - announce - defend», that is, in general, the operational programs for the processes of transformation and use of an area are prepared in “locked” places. The version presented is final and therefore must only be defended from probable criticism. Administrations adopt the theory and may be faced with a process subject to external requirements, such as deadlines, making the mechanisms of listening and interaction appear unproductive or even an obstacle to the course of the process. However, sometimes there is awareness in the adoption of the exclusive process, motivated by a possible link between the public administration and the conservatism of public opinion, believing that controversial decisions or high technical content cannot be presented effectively if the problem is

prematurely exposed to the public. The decision makers consider themselves the only ones who are able «to fully express the public interest on a subject and risk making a decision. [In case the decision made comes up against opposition, then it can be stopped or changed]. [...] In the meantime, however, it is considered necessary to proceed without consulting the citizens». (Ecosfera, 2001, pp. 17-18).

The Active Involvement, (Collaboration – Active Involvement) is approaching to the concept of *empowerment*, where in the processes of urban transformation, a significant decision-making power is assigned to those actors who at first did not possess that power. The decision maker takes on the role of 'neutral entity' favouring a partial transfer of power through the promotion of a process of shared work. However, there can be a stimulus from below by groups who, although not part of the decision-making process, want to participate in the proceedings. Consequently, a partnership is formed in which all the partners find themselves in the situation of making available and exchanging resources equally. In these conditions some movements promoting the participatory process are found, such as the advocacy planners who defend the excluded. (Ecosfera, 2001, p. 20-21).

With Self-Management (Self-Production – Self-Management) it comes at the top of the ladder suggested by Ecosfera, where, ideally, control is given directly to citizens (present or future) in all stages of the process. Although it is difficult to manage from the bottom in every way and at every stage, there are cases of direct management of settlements that have managed to implement a planning process like this [3].

The balancing of roles and cooperative approaches evolve the further we go up the ladder. In fact the public actors who initially have all the decision-making powers then become public actors who need to see the community as playing an active part in decision-making.

In collaboration, active involvement or self-management, where there is a greater intensity of participation, a real weight is given to those who are generally «excluded or marginalized», completely transforming the balance between government and citizens. In fact, the interaction changes from the first level of the ladder where the government discloses information rigorously and in one direction, to the highest levels where dynamics are inserted in which listening and

confrontation take on characteristics «of equal interchange of information, values and responsibility» (Ecosfera, 2001, pp.17-18).

Another original interpretation is represented by the synthesis carried out by the *Manuel européen de la participation* produced by Urbact-participando network (AA.VV. 2006a, pp 81-84). It was taken as an example model, because it is managed by the network "Participando", one of the first to be established at an international level (founded in 2003), but also one that has the most partners.

Different experiences of participation are presented, belonging to cities with different cultural, social, organisational and economic conditions, which have highlighted several issues which help to identify three contrasting tensions around which the challenges of participation are played out. This gives a better understanding of the contemporary city, from its «prediction» of the future to its regulation and planning. The manual, therefore, differs from other interpretations of the ladder of participation by seeking on an international scale, to section the levels of participatory processes (AA.VV. 2006, p.56). The elements which the Manual discusses are the introduction to and the discovery of new challenges for participation (*le défis de la participation*) which, if on the one hand have been introduced by urban and territorial issues, they have also given rise to three main tensions, Inclusion and Exclusion; Top down and Bottom up, Centrality and Marginality.

In the first (Inclusion and Exclusion) analysis is conducted based on the assumption of a criterion of evaluation that analyses the ability, but also the willingness to consider instances within the process of the different actors, without distinction «between "those who are inside" and "those who are outside", between those who are integrated into the city and those who are excluded from politics or material and social resources». The construction of collective knowledge is a primary condition so that an active and conscious participation of as many citizens as possible occurs. To obtain these results, it is essential to redefine the relationship between expert knowledge and common knowledge "translating" the language of the "experts" without losing its content and enhancing new forms of social communication to rebuild the public space together (AA.VV. 2006b, p.82). The information then takes on a meaning of the construction of comprehensive and innovative accessible social communication, which can lead to urban and social regeneration

starting from resources rather than problems. «Communication and information are generally confused in the process of participation. Information is the weakest level of participation when limited only to transmitting data. On the contrary, the concept of communication refers to the implementation of a training program with the inhabitants which is regarded as the highest level of participation, coupled with a sense of awareness in action» (AA. VV. 2006b, p. 75).

The second tension (Top Down and Bottom Up) opposes a descending hierarchical approach to an approach that starts from local resources and issues. This difference is often manifested in tensions between institutions which do not have the capacity on the one hand to gather wealth from society and on the other, to implement projects and initiatives from social organizations. Often these initiatives which come from below, fail to develop due to lack of support from the institutions themselves, whereas at other times, they are self-organized promoting new approaches that are close to the ideals and criteria to which the people aspire individually and collectively (AA.VV. 2006b, p. 83).

The last tension, between the *core* and *marginalized areas* sees the term periphery in contrast to the concept of the centre, a place with central functions (Gambino, 1986). The concentration of central functions in a specific area favours the formation of city centres, industry, and neighbourhoods. As a direct consequence the excess of central functions in an area determines the depletion of other areas. Quantity denies quality and the periphery spreads into places privileged for their nature, in which the character of the most significant environmental components and of the natural and historical and cultural landscape is sacrificed.

These three tensions are combined and overlap, creating difficulties for attempts at self-organization of the community and effective public policy that can respond to new social needs with the aim of achieving a better quality of life. Possibilities of overcoming these challenges successfully depend on the ability of the community and politically active to rise above them.

Based on these assumptions, the manual concludes with a challenge to the link between participation and beauty, that is to say participation is not only a problem of processes or procedures, indifferent to concrete results, «participation is the most effective method to ensure the quality of projects, buildings, public places of the city» (AA.VV. 2006a, pp.81-84) building in that

sense a link between ethics and aesthetics. The last challenge of participation comes from this realization: places transformed by citizens in the course of participation, through the combination of daring and experimental expert knowledge with deep and sensitive local knowledge, adhere to the community by giving it a greater sense of belonging.

More recently, with the publication in 2010 of the article *E-democracy as a technological aspect of participation* Giuseppe Gangemi made a critical reflection that has led to «a new proposal of the ladder of participation: the tree of participation», in which « the offer of participation by the public administration» and «the question of citizen participation» (Gangemi, 2010, p. 25) is summarized. Using the metaphor of the tree, the author divides the different stages of participation into five main levels, as summarized from the lowest: Civil society «live» (this is the first level, defined by the author as the «land». It is the starting point where the citizen lives his daily life. From here several alternative routes branch out based on the choices made, starting from the same point of departure. Ibidem); Civil society which participates but not substantively; Civil society which informs; Civil society which acts; Civil society which participates formally and substantively.

The figure of the tree is meant to imply the branching out of choices, which (starting from Civil society which acts, which is where the first form of participation appears), the author exemplifies in three possible alternatives. In fact it is useful to consider the eventual character of the participation itself. Participation is never a process completely defined ex ante, it is not a process to be achieved in a direct and intentional way, but it can also be presented as a by-product of actions aimed at other purposes.

2.3 THE LADDER OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION APPLIED TO NEW TECHNOLOGIES

From the second half of the nineties, participatory planning integrated with information technology produced a great deal of enthusiasm which was put into many experiences (Myers et al., 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997; Kingston, 1998; Talen, 2000; Craig et al., 2002; Balram et al., 2003; Batty, et al., 2003; Steinman et al., 2005) and during this period the importance of social education of the whole community emerged.

At present, the development of Public Participation GIS (PPGIS) confirms and documents that the technology allows users to participate in the production of information, rather than remain passive consumers.

In this regard, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has articulated five levels of public participation - to inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower - each successive level allows a greater impact on the overall process. Low levels of participation (inform, consult) involve the use of information tools such as interactive websites, public meetings or focus groups. Higher levels of participation (involve, collaborate, empower) allow feedback and the consequent practical implementation of community projects, through tools which go beyond an mere expression of willingness by those involved.

The levels of participation presented by IAP2 are based on Arnstein's ladder of participation, creating the conditions to rethink it from the view of ICT in the context of PPGIS. For example Jankowski and Nyerges recognize four hierarchical levels of participation which they call the «umbrella of participation». These levels are Communication, Cooperation, Coordination and Collaboration.

The purpose of the lowest level, Communication is the interaction of the different actors through the exchange of different ideas, while Cooperation, starting from ideas developed in the previous phase, develops a comprehensive agreement although there is no interaction between individuals. Coordination occurs when there is a planned implementation of cooperation activities to strengthen a «synergic mutual gain» (Jankowski et al., 2001, p.49). In the top step there is Collaboration, which happens when you work in an almost simultaneous way to understand or implement the same activity together. These steps, projected into the world of technology and PPGIS, aim to exploit interaction and collaboration towards a collective process. In fact, the actors involved, the technology and the data operate as if they were a single «amalgamated» system.

Carver (Carver et al., 1998) and Kingston (Kingston, 2002) articulate their ladder on the role of communication and the exchange of information, where on the lowest rung the information flow is essentially one-way from the server to the client, from public to private, the user receives the information in a passive way, there is no interaction between the parties. Participation can only be

talked about when communication becomes synonymous with two-way interaction, dialogue and collaboration through sharing of knowledge and propositions, but above all, feedback.

McCall offers a different ladder which starts from measuring the intensity of participation (from the bottom rung: Participatory Spatial Planning as information sharing; Participatory Spatial Planning as consultation Participatory Spatial Planning as involvement of all local and external stakeholders in the decision-making process and Participatory Spatial Planning as a start of actions). The author then analyzes the goals that an inclusive process must have, promoting facilitation, mediation and empowerment, noting the difficulty in implementing empowerment, often due to the resistance of the local politicians and apathy or fatalism of the same community (McCall, 2003, pp. 557–558).

Schlossberg e Shuford hypothesize a matrix with different types of "public" along one axis and various types of "participation" along the other. According to the authors the understanding of the place where the process takes place is essential for its greater credibility and effectiveness. In fact, when the opportunity to network and communicate starts to become important, it is necessary to deal with phenomena which might or might not be present in interactive participation. In their model, for example, web pages are enough to inform and consult only the *netizens*. Consequently, the choice of tools to facilitate effective participation should be dictated by the constraints of the web and the characteristics of the actors in the participatory process (Schlossberg et al., 2005).

Yet in documenting and evaluating the effects and impact of PPGIS, it is difficult to "account for" the contribution of geo-spatial information technologies. The results are not so clear when trying to understand and interpret the impact of changes and participatory projects using GIS, perhaps because the adoption of PPGIS often focuses on particular cases, without then interpreting them on large scale planning frameworks that regulate the adoption and use of technology.

On the one hand, technological instruments can be used to increase and establish a participatory democracy, involving large groups of people and encouraging feedback between community and administrators in decision-making on local, regional and national policy. On the other hand they can support unidirectional communication aimed exclusively at capturing consent [4]. This could lead to an instrumentality (or manipulation) of public opinion, giving perennial power to those who have safeguarded their interests while the public are oblivious to how far away the expected

promises are (Sanders, 1997; Saward, 2000; Young, 2001; Cohen, 2003). If the difficulties related to accessibility can be overcome, there are no «guarantees against the manipulative presence» (Forester, 1998, p. 81) of governments, except through the definition of an agenda which democratically collects the needs felt by the population, working for a better quality of e-government without exclusively treating the interests of the administration (Nixon et al., 2007, p.15).

3. TOWARDS A NEW LADDER

At the end of this process of analysis of the different scales, a comment must be made on how they all relate. The different scales were distinguished as four basic types of participation: the first, the traditional concept manifests an idea based on the power pyramid in which interest in the involvement of civil society begins to emerge (a concept which today has become a key part of international rhetoric). The second is characterized by a change in the cultural paradigm with a strong ideological vision. The third, contemporary, flips the power pyramid and proposes a vision of the future which is less ideological and more realistic (Figure 2). At the same time a fourth type develops which offers the Public Administrations new ICT technologies.

Although in the different ladders the territorial valence changes (from “traditional”, physical and measurable territory to virtual, immaterial and strongly influenced by ICT), there is a common thread which connects them and which can be summarized as the “reaction to information”. It is intended as communication (and not just as simple *information*, which represents the transmission of a message, but in this context it means interaction). This is the first essential step to talking about participation, because it is characterized by fundamental prerequisites (such as the level of expertise of the participants, the ability of the different actors to process information connecting them with decision-making processes that are called into question), which increase the quality of the information to the extent that not only is there communication but also reaction.

It is at this point that the citizens, with their own assessment of the policy options, can play a decisive role (Bobbio, 2004, pp.127-128), through, for example, a “plan of results”. This would allow the combination of the dual purposes of accountability and learning through a process of

learning (how public resources were used and what the results were) and mutual adjustment. Participation thus becomes a tool that can improve the process of evaluation of policies, programs, projects and services.

Although over the years many models have been developed often resulting from very different disciplinary paradigms, the ladder of participation is measured, in principle, by two main factors: the degree of the population's interest in the public choices and the distribution of decision-making powers. This is regardless of how they are proposed; a clearer distribution of power of those who govern and those who are governed (Arnstein, 1969); conflict resolution (Connor, 1988); ideological orientation aimed primarily at promoters of participatory processes (Wilcox, 1994); towards urban processes (Dorcey et al., 1994); an administrative approach (Wiedemann and Femers, 1993) and (Ecosfera, 2001); aimed at expanding participatory processes in an international context ("Manuel Européen de la participation", 2006); an approach that links the supply of public participation with the population's demand to participate (Gangemi, 2010).

Figure 3 clarifies this concept: the process is shown through the use of two simplified parameters, the first (opening of the process), defines the degree of involvement that ranges from a minimum, where institutions and/or private parties are subject, to a maximum, when the process is open to all. However, the second parameter (decision-making power) goes from a maximum, where the parties involved have equal rights, to a minimum, where rights are only given to institutional representatives or so-called powers that be. Through this probably forced simplification, it is possible to understand that an ideal participative process must have the highest involvement of actors (and not just the so-called stakeholders) and the maximum delegation in order to decide and affect choices. All intermediate positions that may arise can be traced back to the "ladder of participation" proposed by Arnstein on.

In this way it is possible to identify and explain that a *concerted process* requires the involvement of only a few actors, but guarantees to those involved an equal right to decide. A *negotiation process* includes the involvement of so-called strong subjects and the choices are made and established according to the power that they express. Therefore the decision-making power is biased towards the interests of a few. Finally, when all possible subjects are involved, therefore

applying maximum openness to the process and contrarily decisions are restricted to a small group and the possibility to influence the choices is not equally granted, then there is a case of participatory democracy, in which an *inclusive and participatory evaluation process* takes place. In it there is an involvement such as to delegate to others the chance to decide according to its own interests. It is certainly a difficult reality to practice and conceptually dangerous, just because it proposes the citizen who lives to serve democracy instead of democracy that exists to serve the citizen.

These processes, in turn, give rise to three dimensions, which are closely related to each other, which articulate the theme of participation when they are practiced to not substantiate choices already made. The first, based on involvement, which in its minimal form is translated into concerted action and able to take on direct or mediated forms [5], gives weight to the choices also based on contractual regulations. To be as such, a participatory process must include interaction, mediation and negotiation and when this is not possible conflict takes over and the process moves into the second dimension. For this to occur it is necessary that the issues dealt with are known, heard and paradoxically also controversial. The third, which is even more complex because it is the product of a process based on the proposal of a plan or a shared program, produces a decision-making model that uses both on the one hand consultation and on the other conflict.

For each of these dimensions we can identify a condition of citizen participation, where there is a path of growth and learning for the participants, in which the informed citizen becomes the heard citizen, later becoming the responsible citizen.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Retracing the evolutionary stages of the "ladder of participation" it can be seen that participation is not a value in itself but an opportunity to govern with care: the more extensive the process the better you have to oversee the methodological point of view.

It is therefore necessary to always take into account aspects such as motivation, values, and expectations of the actors involved so as to ensure the quality of participation that can (and should)

be assessed both in terms of immediate satisfaction of participants and in terms of relevance of all that is produced during the participatory process.

However, literature on the practical applications has shown that, if you look at certain aspects, for example, putting people first followed by technology; starting to plan with the people and with the tools available - Conroy et al., 2004, Simmons, 1987 -; reflecting on the fundamental paradigms of the global system; remembering that participation is a process that solves problems and not just mere data processing - Ramasubramanian, 2010, pp. 152-155 - etc, it is possible to achieve the goals with a greater adherence to the decision-making of all stakeholders, through the pursuit of effectiveness, efficiency, social justice and sustainability in the long run.

Obviously there is no single recipe by which to decide on the degree, the breadth and depth of the participation of users and citizens: each time the participants and the methods to manage the participatory process better have to be defined carefully.

Some recent planning experiences give us a hope in the belief that we have reached a turning point for the future of the region and its communities, perhaps because at last, what Geddes in 1915 prophetically said is being taken into consideration: «it is people we are planning for: not mere places» (Meller, 1990, p. 241).

NOTES

1. It is important to remember the sociologist George Hillery, who in 1955, in his studies of rural communities in the United States, pointed out the distinctive features of the community, «the term community refers to a group of people who have a sense of belonging together and who thought their organised relationships share and carry on activities in pursuit of their common interests». (Hillery, 1955, p.117). Hillery also introduces the concept of self-sufficiency of the community. In other words, he introduces the concept of "self-governing democracy".
2. The terminology *participatory democracy* appears for the first time in an article by Kaufman (*Human Nature and Participatory Democracy*) and was developed in the sixties in the United States, thanks to the Declaration of Port Huron in 1962, by students of the SDS

(Students for a Democratic Society), in which the concept summarizes demands for greater democracy in central and local government decision-making phases, plus transfer of responsibility to groups and individuals and other contingent political issues. In the seventies, the concept is then taken up by Carole Pateman in the book *Participation and Democratic Theory*.

3. In Rotterdam, the Netherlands, in 1993 the Neighbourhood Management Company was founded in Stedenwijk. It is an initiative founded by two housing associations which guarantees a correct and efficient system of building and urban maintenance, encouraging the participation in new opportunities for the residents who are the founders of the company and the main customer. Results are seen in a greater social stability of the neighbourhood and the improvement of services. Ecosfera, 2001, p. 49. Citizens directly manage the urban transformations entrusting the purely technical roles to a third party (a minority). With the concept of self-management the role of technical figures has changed, becoming referents for the community and not just for public administrators.
4. As noted by Thomas et al., citizens perceive websites as the primary means of gathering information and interacting with the public administration. (Thomas, et al., 2003, pp. 83-102).
5. If the scale and size of the operation is small (for example a neighbourhood) the possibility of resorting to forms of direct participation will be greater.

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Figure 1. Arnstein's Ladder of participation (1969).

TRADITIONAL LADDERS (PYRAMIDAL POWER)		LADDERS OF THE NINETIES (STRONG IDEOLOGICAL VISION)			CONTEMPORARY LADDERS		
ARNSTEIN (1969)	CONNOR (1988)	WIEDEMANN E FERMERS (1993)	WILCOX (1994)	DORCEY, DONEY E RUEGGEBERT (1994)	ECOSFERA (2001)	MANUEL EUROPÉEN DE LA PARTICIPA- TION (2006)	GANGEMI (2010)
DEGREES OF CITIZEN POWER	LEADERS	Public participation in final decision	Supporting local initiatives o supporting independent community interests	Ongoing involvement	Self-Production – Self-Management	Centrality and Marginality	Civil society which participates formally and substantively
Citizen control	Resolution - Prevention	Public participation in assessing risks and recommending solutions	Acting together	Seek consensus	Collaboration – Active Involvement		Civil society which acts
Delegated power	Litigation						
Partnership	Mediation						
DEGREES OF TOKENISM	Joint planning	Public participation in defining interests and actors and determining agenda	Deciding Together	Task ideas, seek advice	Consultation	Top down e Bottom up	Civil society which informs
Placation	GENERAL PUBLIC	Public right to object	Consultation	Consult on reactions	Information – Communication		Civil society which participates but not substantively
Consultation	Consultation			Define issues			
Informing							
NON PARTICIPATION	Information feedback	Informing the public	Information	Gather information, perspectives	Non-Participation	Inclusion and Exclusion	Civil society «live»
Therapy	Education	Public right to know		Educate			
Manipulation				Inform			

↑
LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION

Figure 2. Comparison of the various forms of the ladder of participation.

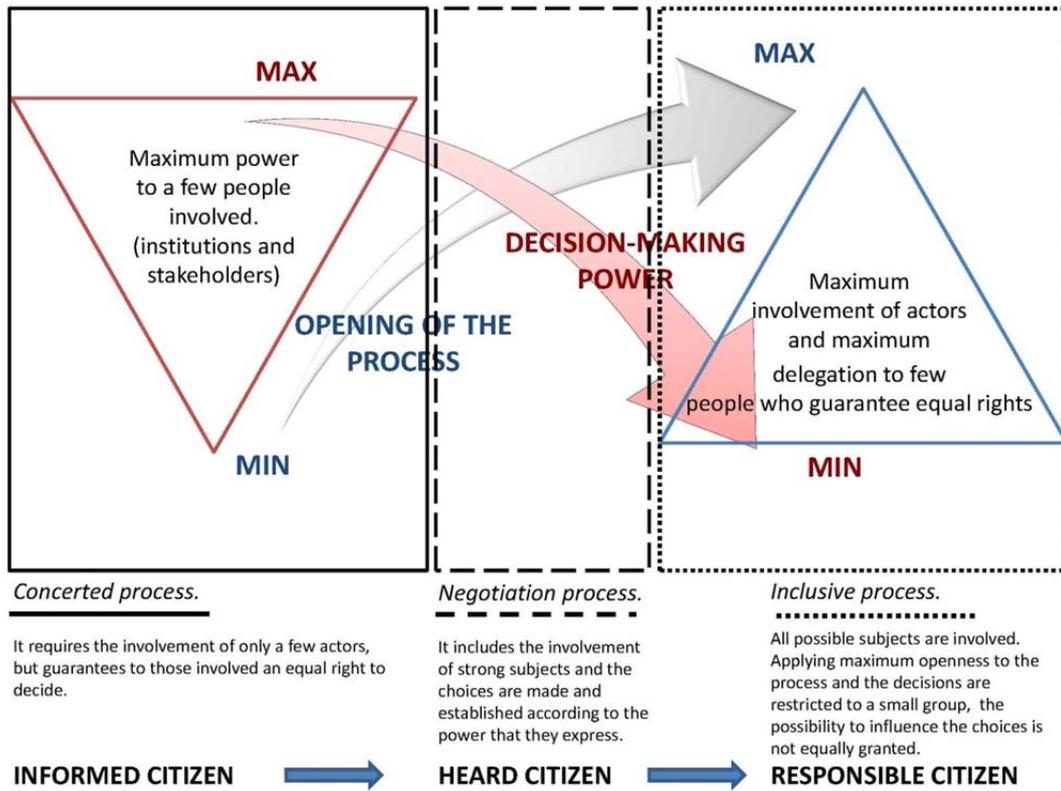


Figure 3. The Participatory process through two parameters: opening of the process and decision-making power