

## Community development and social participation

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*Abstract:* - The paper presents the result of the action research project issued in Palermo (Southern Italy), in disadvantaged urban suburbs, methodologically based on the Kurt Lewin's field theory - that is a three-step spiral process of planning which involves reconnaissance; taking actions; and fact-finding about the results of the action – in order to develop the social participation and the social change. The principal aim of the project was the empowerment of participants, obtaining their collaboration through participation, giving them acquisition of knowledge for a real social change.

*Key-Words:* - Community Psychology, Social Participation, Empowerment, Urban Context, Neighborhoods, Palermo

### 1 Rebuilding background: an introduction

The most recent studies in the field of participatory project show how each action/intervention should be an expression of the target communities, project planning, in fact, implies to know the reality in which we work, where we act, with the ultimate goal of making grow sense of responsibility, power, skills and sense of community in subjects and defined contexts, so that they may be able to cope with certain problems, systems by enabling effective action and controlling involved people solutions. Starting from this premise, the Italian Association named “ES - Empowerment Sociale”, in collaboration with the Community Psychology professorship at University of Palermo, has developed action plans for urban communities at multiple levels, aimed at involving the local community in its entirety and not in compartmentalized sectors [1]. The work on the suburbs of the city of Palermo (Southern Italy) has started from the observation of condensation, as usually happens in urban environment, of the most problematic aspects, in terms of poverty, growing territories fragmentation process, with more heterogeneous spaces and populations, broken social ties, strengthening of social marginality. Generally these processes mark urban

peripheries or central neighbourhoods. It is necessary to investigate phenomena and to structure proposals that could affect people life course [2], especially when we talk about combating material and existential poverty that force to face situations that are often unsustainable [3].

In Palermo 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.). To born and grow up in contexts where all of these factors are concentrated is not only a disadvantage from an opportunities point of view, but it also exposes to a significant impact on a more strictly personal level, affecting the system of perceptions and expectations [4]. Therefore, we

tried and try to promote community development in a strategy of social intervention, in which participation is one of the dimensions that characterize the community [5], highlighting the collective actions designed to recognize, promote and enhance the resources present at the local/contextual level, individual, group, in a path through which you can promote the community in the broadest sense of the term and with it also the social relations, that may come to much higher levels [6]. 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 [7]. In this sense, some fundamental aspects emerge, that underlie the community actions. In our specific case, the main elements are:

- promotion of forms of prevention and psychosocial wellness in different contexts;
- attention to involve the target groups that are both the object but also the subject of participatory interventions;
- 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 with the collective processes.

## 2 The story of a work and training

In this perspective we thought of the “Community Development and Social Participation Project”, that involved several members; a macro project, run by more actors who, together, have formalized an “institutional network” formed by associations operating in the third sector, one of these, the above mentioned schools neighbourhood 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, universities. The territorial area involved in the project is the seventh district of the city of Palermo, which includes the suburbs of San Filippo Neri (ZEN), Pallavicino, Tommaso

Natale, Arenella-Vergine Maria, Partanna Mondello, Strasburgo. These geographical areas of the city present strong and significant differences, both structural and economic, cultural, social and environmental [8]. Such a various context needs specific and targeted interventions involving the whole social actors (children, families, senior citizens), not forgetting the “community” dimension where they belong, using intervention strategies that involve participatory action as a strength and an asset to the community as a whole. The intervention in question can be defined as a real multi-project, both from a structural and functional point of view; it involved more than 5000 people, including direct and indirect beneficiaries and combined, therefore, different axes and areas of action.

*Operators Training Area.* ISAS (Institute of Social and Administrative Sciences), training institute and our 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 behaviours allowed to develop, during the course activities, a model of intervention with and for young people, marked by forms of activism and self-promotion.

*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 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 [9].

*Law, School and Children Area.* widespread lawlessness, school dropout, vandalism, bullying, violence, are the “wounds” that mainly afflict the neighbourhood, which is why the involvement of children as actors in the forefront, is a priority of our interventions and school, our 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), so as to create alternative opportunities for emerging and to harness the potential of each in relation to the group and context.

*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, counselling), 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.

*Urban-environmental Area.* The wellbeing means also and above all living in a not degraded neighbourhood; but the image people have of Zen, the suburb of Palermo, however, is not always the same. the only representation of this neighbourhood, which was acquired by

many, is the one linked to the idea of suburban ghetto. The idea project we wanted to believe was that it is not fortunately just decay. With the cooperation of planners and architects team, who care for the physical appearance of the neighbourhood, we worked for 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.

### 3 Participatory evaluation: the change project

The evaluation 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 [10]; 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 [11].

## 4 Conclusion

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 are 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. In our opinion, a good social intervention has to be methodologically funded on Cunningham's action research model [12], which consists of three steps (group development and formation, evaluation and intervention).

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