

# The community advocates: Promoting young people's participation in community work projects

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## *Abstract*

*The article presents the results of research that studied a project in an area of northern Italy aiming to carry out community work interventions to benefit and promote the participation of young people with the support of community advocates. Three community advocates and three community social workers worked with young people to listen to their proposals and help them present their ideas to the relevant local authorities. Qualitative research was conducted to understand in which areas and to what extent young people were able to participate in developing community interventions; what were the outcomes of their participation and what role the community advocates play. Five in-person focus groups with young people and six semi-structured interviews with community advocates and community social workers were conducted. A thematic analysis of the transcript was completed. Results show that youth participation in the definition of social interventions within local communities is helpful on two levels: it allows to identify concrete initiatives of genuine interest to young people living in those areas, and it is an opportunity to experience a process of empowerment generating further interest in participating, active citizenship and social capital. However, it is also confirmed that youth participation is not easy. The research highlights the importance of offering young people specific support to encourage their participation. Community advocates can play a crucial role in preparing young people to participate, deciding what to ask adults, and understanding how to engage with local authorities.*

## *Keywords*

*Participation, young people, advocacy, community work, social work.*

## Community work and young people's participation

The article presents the results of research that studied a project in an area of northern Italy aiming to carry out community work interventions to benefit and promote the participation of young people with the support of community advocates.

One of the most recognised definitions of social work reported in the international literature describes *community work* as the action of practitioners who relate to and help people sharing common interests and concerns to meet and jointly implement initiatives that improve the living conditions in their community (Twelvetrees, 2006). The community is, therefore, not only the beneficiary of the interventions but takes an active role in their planning and implementation. A distinctive characteristic of social work community projects is that social workers can interact with community members interested in participating in their planning process (Panciroli, 2017; Calcaterra & Panciroli, 2021) recognizing them as bearers of experiential knowledge (Borkman, 1976). Thanks to such knowledge, they can help professionals understand their community's needs and identify suitable initiatives to be implemented.

Focusing on experiential knowledge is the prerequisite for initiating social intervention projects that recognise community members' agency and encourage their participation in planning actions to support their well-being (Panciroli & Bergami, 2019). The concept of participation is widely discussed in social work literature (Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; Warren, 2007; Healy & Darlington, 2009; Folgheraiter, 2011; Bell, 2011; Fawcett et al., 2017; Müller & Pihl-Thingvad, 2020); however, the meaning attributed to this term and its implementation can be different at the operational level.

From the perspective of social work studies, participation takes place when citizens are given the opportunity to express their opinions and influence the decision-making process. On this subject, Arnstein describes in a well-known article (1969) a ladder including eight levels of citizens' participation in planning and implementing interventions and social policies (manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, citizen control). According to the author, it is only from the fourth step up that we can actually speak of citizens' participation, whose intensity increases at the topmost levels of the ladder.

Folgheraiter's studies (2009), on the other hand, emphasise the relational dimension connected to the concept of participation. The author reflects on the relationship between social workers and service users and how interventions are the outcome of the exchange of opinions between the two groups. Participation is characterised by a low level of relationality when practitioners define initiatives without service users being allowed to express their point of view on the interventions planned for their well-being. On the other hand, participation is characterised by a high level of relationality when community interventions and initiatives are based on the relation built between different groups of people, whether they be citizens or social workers. In between, we find levels

of increasing relationality, starting from requesting people's feedback on proposed and implemented initiatives to allowing service users to contribute to the implementation of the initiatives designed by the experts and, finally, consulting users before defining the interventions aimed at their well-being.

In community social work projects, a crucial element is recognising community stakeholders' different skills and right to be involved in defining and planning interventions together with social workers. Local authorities' activities intertwine with those carried out by the communities. In fact, they urge citizens to get involved in activities in favour of their neighbours in the belief that well-being can be generated relationally by multiple parties collaborating in a subsidiary way (Donati, 2017; Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017).

In Italy, there is no specific legislation on youth policies. Each administrative area autonomously defines welfare interventions in favour of young people. However, it should be stressed that community social work conducted in favour of young people will be more effective if they are allowed to participate in their planning. Such an approach involves considering young people as being able to make decisions concerning their lives and positively influence local authorities' choices, thus, generating subsidiarity and social capital (Field, 2003; Folgheraiter & Pasini, 2009).

Yet, several studies (Archard & Skivenes, 2009; Barnes, 2011; Diaz, 2020; Gallagher et al., 2012; Sanders & Mace, 2006; Vis & Thomas, 2009; Winter, 2010) show how challenging is for young people to interact with local authorities and participate in the design of interventions aimed at their well-being. Listening to young people and ensuring their participation in decision-making processes seem to be a goal that social services have not fully achieved in Italy too (AGIA, 2020). However, advocates' support proves to be crucial in preparing young people to participate in decision-making processes, and it ensures that their voice is heard (Boylan & Dalrymple, 2009, Munro, 2001; Noon, 2000, Vis et al., 2011), as established by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989, art. 12).

Advocacy is described as the action of speaking up on young people's behalf, supporting them to have a voice and putting their views across (Herbert, 1989, Oliver et al., 2006). It is a relational and anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002; Dalrymple & Burke, 2006; Folgheraiter, 2004, 2007) designed to support people in making their voices heard.

Independent professional advocacy takes the form of the intervention of a practitioner specifically trained to help young people participate in decision-making processes. This means helping young people understand information, conceptualise possible courses of action, and decide what to report to the adults. When necessary, the advocate should help young people express their point of view in formal decision-making processes and make sure that what they report is duly considered. The professional action of the advocate is guided by specific principles: independence, child-oriented work, confidentiality, and empowerment (Boylan & Dalrymple, 2009).

## The Re&Ti project

The «Re&Ti»<sup>1</sup> project aimed to promote young people's participation in defining youth policies and welfare interventions in a large area of northern Italy (Piemonte Region). The project provided community advocates and social workers interventions to support young people in talking with representatives of local authorities and communities in order to plan social interventions for their well-being.

Three community advocates and three community social workers worked with young people to listen to their proposals and help them present their ideas to the competent local authorities.

A community advocate is an independent professional advocate with the aim to work with a group of young people of the same community with common interests or difficulties.

In the Re&Ti project, community advocates had the task of working exclusively with young people to:

- help them conceptualise their needs and proposals;
- help them to present their requests to local authorities;
- make sure the local authorities listen to young people.

The community advocates were identified among young adults from the local area aged 25 years or older who could guarantee to be available to work with young people and who were already recognised as active citizens by them. The community advocates then underwent specific training with a senior advocate and were constantly supervised.

Community social workers — practitioners with specific professional qualifications as social workers — worked with the adults of the community and the representatives of local authorities, submitting the project and preparing them to welcome the young people's proposals, facilitating the meeting between young people and the authorities, and mediating in the case of disagreements on the interventions.

The project was carried out from September 2019 to July 2021 and involved young people between the ages of 6 and 17. More than 400 young people have participated to several meetings with community advocates and community social workers. Their participation has allowed to plan new meeting spaces for children or redesigning the activities of some existing youth services (e.g. day care centre).

## Research purpose and methodology

The research, carried out by the «Relational Social Work» Research Centre of the Catholic University of Milan, aimed to describe the experience of young people's partici-

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<sup>1</sup> The «Re&Ti» project has been carried out by the No-profit Organization «Cooperativa sociale Animazione Valdocco», in partnership with Associazione «Advocacy. Tutela e voce dell'infanzia».

pation in defining community interventions with the purpose of their well-being and the role of community advocates in supporting such involvement.

Qualitative research conducted was based on the following questions.

- In which areas and to what extent were young people able to participate in the definition of community interventions aimed at their well-being?
- What were the outcomes of their participation?
- What role did the community advocates play?

Five in-person focus groups (Acocella, 2012; Linhorst, 2002) with young people were conducted (Brady & Graham, 2019). The focus group meetings were held in a park, a school and a parish classroom and an oratory courtyard. The focus groups' duration varied from half an hour to one hour. The total number of young people participating in the focus groups was 29. Out of them, 20 were males, and only nine were females. The youngest participant was 6 years old, while the oldest was 17; the average age of the people involved was 11,5 years. Each focus group was conducted by two researchers, one with the function of facilitating the group discussion and the other with the role of observing and recording the meeting. Each meeting was recorded and transcribed literally. Subsequently, a thematic analysis of the transcript was carried out (Ritchie et al., 2003).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community advocates and community social workers. These interviews were also conducted by two researchers, recorded, literally transcribed and analysed thematically.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical research standards established by the Ethical Code of Catholic University (Chancellor Decree n. 9350/2011).

## Results

### *Participation from the young people's point of view*

Many diverse requests were presented by the young people which have participated in the project. Although it was impossible to accept all the proposals made by the young people, the project ensured the implementation of many activities they considered relevant.

One common element among the young people involved is the desire to live and hang out in more positive environments, whether in their neighborhood or the locations/facilities they use daily.

We painted a mural in the room and brought some sofas to make it more comfortable (Focus group 5).

We asked to paint the little house that was once red (Focus group 2).

The desire to improve their living environment also resulted in caring for and cleaning the community spaces.

We focused from the start on cleaning up the neighborhood (Focus group 4).

In one area, young people expressed the need to live in an environment «fit for a young person». For this reason, they proposed the introduction of technological tools to facilitate socialisation.

The result was the creation of an interactive bench, that is, a bench that gives suggestions on different topics, for example, a conversation with a stranger. [...] Before the summer, we cleaned all the benches, and now we are collaborating with an artist to help us with the design to give value to our ideas (Focus group 4).

A further request of the young people was to organise workshops on various topics, from sports to cooking, to experiment with new activities and have the opportunity to spend with friends the afternoons. In this case, especially in one neighborhood, the response from the local authorities was very positive and allowed them to organise such workshops for the youngest ones.

We made pizza, did a painting workshop... then we girls did a workshop for girls (Focus group 1).

Significant is the experience of a group of young people who expressed the desire to have a Neighborhood House built as they felt the need to have a place for meeting and socialising.

Getting together to study, get to know each other better... instead of being at home alone, being with others (Focus group 4).

It was not always possible to achieve what was desired, and sometimes, it was necessary to revise the goals set. However, having the possibility of doing something concrete and achieving an objective created positive feelings in the young people, such as the satisfaction of having contributed to the improvement of their neighborhood.

Even if we didn't achieve the goal we set at the beginning, we found an objective worth much more than our initial goal. It was very nice (Focus group 4).

### *The relationship with the adults*

Some considerations of the young people participating in the focus groups concerned their relationship with the adults representing the local authorities and the citizens.

Some reflections of the older participants describe a struggle in being listened to by the adults to whom they wanted to submit their ideas on possible common projects.

We also tried to contact the mayor, but we couldn't reach him for different reasons [...] (Focus group 4).

During this focus group, the young people expressed their disappointment and frustration with the local authorities, which showed no interest in what they wanted to propose to improve their neighborhood.

In other contexts, however, the young people were listened to, and their contribution influenced the decision-making process. Young people could communicate their wishes in an «open» dialogue with the local authority's representatives. They could experience being listened to and appreciated for the proposals they made.

When the mayor came, he said he really liked the idea. When I gave him the flyer, he said he'd read, that he liked our ideas, and I think he will do it (Focus group 3).

The project prompted not only the local authorities but also the adults in the community to assume an active listening attitude. In some areas, young people report they had a positive experience as the adults in the neighborhood committees listened to them and were willing to collaborate concretely, for example, by making spaces available for young people's activities.

The Neighborhood Committee gave us their headquarters, and also the area underneath the warehouse (Focus group 4).

### *Working with the advocates*

However, the relationship between the adults representing the local authorities and young people has not always been smooth, and at times the advocates played an essential role in facilitating communication between the two worlds. In one area, in particular, young people reported how the advocates acted as facilitators in the relationship between them and the rest of the neighborhood.

We asked S. and T., who spoke to the field owners, and we managed to organise an «official» tournament (Focus group 5).

The young people described the advocates' figure and role differently.

In my opinion, an advocate is like someone who supports other people's ideas. [...] we express an idea, and she tries to realise it (Focus group 1).

I think the advocate is like a teacher who helps in group work at school [...] is the one you can ask for an opinion on something. [...] Someone who supported us in this project and didn't propose or carry out an activity that we then had to develop further. [...] He guides us. I don't know how to explain it, though. He was there to listen to us and tell us whether things were feasible or not. I consider her as a guide; I don't know (Focus group 4).

He listens to our ideas, helps us make them more beautiful, and tells them to other people. [...] He is a person who helps to make our wishes come true (Focus group 5).

The focus groups showed that the experience of all the young people who came into contact with the advocates was extremely positive and satisfactory. The young people appreciated the work performed by these practitioners, who helped them express their ideas and be heard by the adults.

At the same time, the advocates also ensured that the adults became aware of the needs of the young people, taking action and, where possible, working to meet them.

The advocates followed different ways to help young people to choose the matters to bring to the adults' attention.

We wrote everything on sheets of paper, and we created a video that also ended up on YouTube (Focus group 3).

In the beginning, we made a poster just to gather some ideas. We chose only one project (Focus group 4).

Drawing and writing on a piece of paper the things we wanted to do (Focus group 1).

The dialogue between the young people and the advocates has been constant throughout the project, allowing the first to reflect on their wishes and express them on every possible occasion.

The advocates were identified among young people from the localities where the project was carried out not based on their professional skills but rather on being already partly active citizens, interested in their communities or reference points for their peers. These individuals then underwent training with experienced advocates and participated in supervision meetings. The young people they worked with provided significant help in understanding how to be an advocate. As often happens, they readily understood how to «use» an advocate and how they could benefit from their work.

Gradually, also through brainstorming and talking with the young people, we understood the role of advocates and their function [...]. They understood that the advocates helped them to open up to others and find the courage to speak up, overcoming the fear of expressing their ideas (Interview - Community Advocate 1).

Consequently, the advocates were urged to look the part and perform their tasks without hesitation.

I sat down with the young people, and I told them: «Okay... the goal is to listen to you and understand what your needs are. I'm not the one who makes decisions» [...] I reported their needs to the work team, who decided to listen to them. This was a crucial moment, and fortunately, it happened at the beginning because it made me understand my role a bit more clearly [...] I just had to say, «I am an advocate» (Interview - Community Advocate 3).



## *Projects outcomes*

The project was an important empowerment experience for the young people of the communities involved.

Thanks to the project, the local authorities were more willing to listen to young people, but most importantly, the young people involved learned to ask for what they wanted and to express what they would like (Interview – D. Community Social worker).

The young people learned not only to reflect on their desires as full members of a community but also to present them. The project stirred in them the desire to be heard.

[The young people] felt they were listened to and wanted to shout, now is the time when they need to shout to be heard by someone higher up (Interview – Community Advocate 2).

It was also significant for the young people involved to be able to present a new image of themselves, free from the adult world's labels and prejudices about their willingness and ability to act.

Relating to adults without the usual labels, let's say, without always being considered hooligans who destroy, dirty or make a mess without being those who are helped by social services. [The young people] have the new identity of responsible people. They amazed everyone, especially themselves and those around them (Interview – S. Community Social worker).

Another important outcome was that the young people could experience that the adult representatives of the local authorities were willing to listen to them.

From the outset, the local authorities were intrigued by the project and open to listening to and dialoguing with us (Interview – S. Community social worker).

They really told me that it had never happened that somebody listened to them so much, that they listened to what they had to say. We saw the municipality's commitment to trying to do things right away and do them well (Interview – Community Advocate 1).

These positive experiences of being listened to and consequent activation led to what we could perhaps consider the project's most significant outcome, which was also mentioned by the young people themselves: the young people's decision to become, in turn, natural advocates for the needs of their peers.

When a youth wants something done in this park, he says it to him or me; we write a letter, sign and send it (Focus group 3).

A couple of guys took the initiative to talk to the rep and agree with each other. They took my place and became the park's spokespersons (Interview – Community Advocate 1).

However, with other groups of young people, the level of activation was so high that the desire to make their voices heard by the adults was widely shared and, therefore, there was no need to entrust a specific youth with the task of advocating.

A nice thing about that group is that everyone feels part of it and feels that they can advocate for their requests (Interview – G. Community Social worker).

Finally, we should mention that the project was also an opportunity for growth for the community advocates. These young «practitioners» reported how it was gratifying and valuable to relate with young people, listen to and help them express themselves, and then see their work have positive outcomes. The following statements describe the concept of reciprocity (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017), a relational aspect of the relationship between advocates and young people: the advocates helped young people, and their support effort resulted in their own empowerment both as advocates and as individuals.

I saw another side of myself. I was not used to listening without giving directions. Thanks to this experience, I could be a child again. I thought that I did not have the courage to speak too. Then I saw the young people find the strength to achieve their things, and seeing them happy is the most beautiful thing! (Interview – Community Advocate 1).

Actually, I feel gratified, and I think that I had the opportunity to get engaged and try to establish deep relationships with young people (Interview – Community Advocate 3).

## Conclusions

The opportunity of expressing their needs and desires, the awareness of being finally heard and achieving what they requested allowed young people to play an essential role in their neighbourhood. They understood that they were not just mere recipients of adults' decisions but could change their environment.

Youth participation in the definition of social interventions within local communities is helpful on two levels: on the one hand, it allows to identify concrete initiatives of genuine interest to young people living in those areas, and on the other, it is an opportunity to experience a process of empowerment generating further interest in participating, active citizenship and social capital (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017; Pedroni et al., 2021). Young people want to participate, and when they are allowed to express their points of view, they do not back down.

However, it is also confirmed that youth participation is not easy and that the world of adults is not always able or willing to listen to them. In Italy, the process of defining youth policies is still hindered by the concepts of childhood and youth as a condition to be protected rather than considered a key player.

The research also confirms the importance of offering young people specific support to encourage their participation (Barnes, 2011; Bell, 2011; Boylan & Dalrymple, 2009;

Kennan et al., 2018; Oliver et al., 2006; Vis et al., 2011). Community advocates can play a crucial role in preparing young people to participate, deciding what to ask adults, and understanding how to engage with local authorities. Young people quickly understand how to relate to these professionals and describe their collaboration as a valuable resource to implement their active participation in community life.

The results of this qualitative study cannot be considered representative of all projects aiming to promote young people's participation in community social work. It should be mentioned that the no-profit organization which have implemented the project was already very sensitive to the issue of young people's participation and interested in listening to them. In Italy, independent professional advocacy to support young people's participation in different context has not yet been established institutionally. This means that advocacy supports can only be organized in the framework of specific projects to introduce independent professional advocacy. Hence, the power to create supports for young people's participation remains in the hands of adults. The research shows the importance to develop a culture of young people's participation, to raise awareness on children's right to be heard, and to increase understanding about how advocacy can be useful in this respect.

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