A comparative exploration of youth participation in local sustainable development: insights from Italian metropolitan cities

Gloria Fiorani, Ribana Andreea Chiper and Chiara Di Gerio
Tor Vergata University of Rome, Rome, Italy

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to investigate the extent of public participation of youth in strategic planning for local sustainable development, emphasising the establishment of a positive dialogue process between public administration and young people. Previous studies and international guidelines recognise youth as an essential group in the territorial sustainability process but also require a framework for processes and modalities for youth participation.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis was carried out according to a multiple-case study approach conducted from the secondary sources (e.g. planning documents enabling sustainable development at the local level) developed by the 14 Italian metropolitan cities to assess the state-of-the-art and establish similarities and differences concerning the engagement levels found in the literature.

Findings – Although almost all the sample has undertaken a youth engagement process, this research demonstrates that only 6 out of 14 metropolitan cities - corresponding to 43% of the sample - have promoted highly engagement-intensive forms, underlining a total absence of a standardised and recursive approach in which the younger generation is consistently an integral part of sustainability strategies.

Originality/value – This research is innovative as it addresses practical and theoretical objectives simultaneously. The study underlines the adoption of engagement processes by metropolitan cities by considering the participatory methods implemented and providing a framework for enhancing forms of dialogue between young people and public authorities, contributing to the advancement of theoretical understanding and practical implementation.

Keywords Youth participation, Stakeholder engagement, Local sustainable development, Public policy, Italian metropolitan cities

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Several recent studies (i.e. Banjac, 2017; Fabbrizzi *et al.*, 2016; Morciano *et al.*, 2016; Mejias and Banaji, 2019; Huttunen *et al.*, 2022) identify the elements that influence young people's contributions to sustainable development; such as youth activism, education and training for youth, young people in leadership positions, youth entrepreneurship, social responsibility, and involvement in the public-participation decision-making process. Additionally, according to institutions at different levels (i.e. ONU, OECD, UE, and Italy), young people are a significant stakeholder group in sustainable development. Aligned with this vision are the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) and the Declaration on the Responsibilities of Present Generations towards Future Generations (UNESCO, 1997), which recognise the significant role of the young generation. In particular, the first document was decisive in connecting the

concepts of intergenerational equity and sustainable development: it is in the very definition of the latter that this link is crystallised. The second is a conscious awareness of the risks to humanity's survival and how the fate of future generations depends on today's decisions (Imbellone and Laffusa, 2023). Thus, two concepts of equity within sustainable development are acknowledged to be highly relevant: intergenerational and intragenerational equity (Narksompong and Limjirakan, 2015). The Brundtland Commission's Our Common Future promoted the inclusion of effective citizen participation, including the involvement of young people, in decision-making in political systems and as a strategy to ensure intergenerational equity (WCED, 1987). Furthermore, referring to the current European context, the Next Generation EU program supports youth's involvement in the transition to sustainable development through investments in training and education, job creation in the green sector, and youth participation in the design and implementation of funds (Krzaklewska et al., 2023). As a confirmation of the support from the European Union on the topic, reference can be made to the EU Youth Strategy 2019–2027, which includes the Youth Goals, developed within the framework of the 6th Cycle of the European Youth Dialogue to contribute to the realisation of the youth vision by mobilising policy instruments at EU level and actions at national, regional and local level of all stakeholders (Council of the European Union, 2023).

These efforts to encourage youth participation reflect the current global mode of participatory governance to engage multi-stakeholders, assuming that such processes are more democratic (Kwon, 2019). Therefore, the field of sustainability is increasingly recognising youth as an important group, and youth are encouraged to participate directly in the sustainability processes (Singh and Panackal, 2017). Youth participation needs special consideration because their engagement is critical to positive youth development, which can contribute to sustainable development (Gambone et al., 2004). Through these considerations, further in-depth analysis of existing institutional notions of youth participation and inclusion is urgently needed (Bernard, 2016), and the necessity to reflect on the role and function that citizen engagement could have (Huttunen et al., 2022). The current literature requires a framework for processes and modalities for youth participation (Singh and Panackal, 2017; Mejias and Banaji, 2019). Corroborating this, recent studies have revealed a scarcity of literature on the topic (Chan, 2023), confirming the need to support young people and public administrations to promote sustainable value creation (Borojević et al., 2023). However, these studies also revealed that participatory mechanisms often fail to provide adequate or appropriate strategies (Zeadat, 2023), and no research is aimed at understanding how designed institutional arrangements can improve citizen involvement (Mattei et al., 2022). Nonetheless, they should be platforms for dialogue and consensus-building in participatory strategy for local sustainability, both in identifying and solving problems (Almeida, 2022).

In line with such reflections, the article aims to identify different modalities where public institutions involve young citizens in the elaboration process for sustainable development. Thus, the research aims to highlight how public institutions can define a strategy that stimulates active citizenship (Kearns, 1992) and creates a process of positive dialogue with young people. More in detail, the study focuses on a comparative analysis of Italian metropolitan cities, trying to respond to the research question: "*How do metropolitan cities involve youth in the elaboration process for metropolitan sustainable development?*".

The context of Italian metropolises was considered for two main reasons.

First, Italian public institutions are increasingly aware that the sustainable transition path requires the involvement and engagement of new generations. The declination and implementation of the Italian National Strategy for Sustainable Development (Strategia Nazionale di Sviluppo Sostenibile - SNSvS in Italian) and the Regional Strategies for Sustainable Development at the local level (in particular in the Metropolitan Agendas for Sustainable Development and the Metropolitan Strategic Plans - PSM) are addressed through

multilevel governance systems capable of actively involving all the actors of the territory, also and above all the new generations, in line with recent legislative/institutional guidelines. Young people, the transversal and priority axis of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza - PNRR in Italian), are indirect beneficiaries of each of the PNRR's six missions and direct protagonists of two macro-objectives, in line with the Next Generation EU. In addition, Constitutional Law No. 1/2022, on "Amendments to Articles 9 and 41 of the Constitution on environmental protection", introduced among the fundamental principles the protection of the environment, biodiversity and ecosystems, also in the interest of new generations. Bringing the safety of the interests of posterity into the Constitution, even simply by reinterpreting in intergenerational key clauses that already exist and are naturally geared to this perspective (such as the rules on cultural heritage, the environment and natural resources, and others), is undoubtedly a factor that strengthens the policies and measures (that are or may be) adopted at the legislative and administrative level, helps to stabilise them, to place them above the contingent political direction (D'Aloia, 2019).

Second, different local initiatives with a central role for civil society actors have been documented in practice, especially in local sustainability transitions (Frantzeskaki *et al.*, 2016). Indeed, since the early 1990s, youth participation has been one of the critical issues addressed by youth policies promoted and supported by the European Union and the Council of Europe. Particularly, initiatives in this direction at the European, and in particular Italian, level are frequently managed locally (Huttunen *et al.*, 2022). Thus, a relevant context factor relates to the presence of local public authorities capable of establishing transparent rules that guarantee equal opportunities for youth participation (Morciano *et al.*, 2016).

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual background against which this research was established. Paragraph 3 outlines the study design and explains the typology of analysis, sample, sources, and procedure. Section 4 provides the study's results, the following (Section 5) discusses the outputs, while Section 6 highlights the research's main conceptual and practical implications.

2. Theoretical background: youth, sustainable development and public participation

The issue of sustainable development has significant consequences that cannot be neglected (Singh and Panackal, 2017); it is recognised that there is a necessity for everyone to participate in change for an approach that stimulates the commitment of all the stakeholders of society, from businesses to governments, from civil society organisations to individual citizens (Giovannini, 2018). This implies a connection with the Stakeholder theory (ST), which places stakeholders at the centre of strategic thinking and positions relationships with stakeholders as a focus of analysis (Freeman, 1984). ST can be defined as a theory that (1) encourages organisations to acknowledge and consider their stakeholders, which exist internally or externally to the organisation, (2) promotes understanding and managing stakeholder needs, wants, and demands, and thus (3) represents a holistic and responsible framework that goes beyond the focus of shareholders in decision-making processes, which, in turn, (4) enables organisations to be strategic, maximise their value creation, and safeguard their long-term success and sustainability (Mahajan *et al.*, 2023). ST has grown into a widely used construct in business and society research and related streams of literature (Kujala *et al.*, 2022).

ST is utilised for stakeholder analysis, a key method for stakeholder management that recognises and examines stakeholders to determine the best practices for organisations to engage with them (Mahajan *et al.*, 2023). This has led to numerous definitions and frameworks (Friedman and Miles, 2006) for identifying and managing stakeholder engagement (Freudenreich *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, research has utilised the stakeholder

engagement construct to explore numerous issues (Kujala *et al.*, 2022). Stakeholder engagement, defined as the process by which an organisation interacts with its stakeholders who may influence or be influenced by its operations, is fundamental to organisational success. Freeman's (1984) views, corroborated by Clarkson (1995), identify stakeholder engagement as a method to improve sustainability and business ethics. Numerous authors have highlighted the drivers towards more significant interest in stakeholder engagement; among them, Boutilier and Thomson (2011) and Mitchell *et al.* (1997), emphasised the importance of involving stakeholders to navigate regulatory complexities and mitigate risks. Meanwhile, Carroll and Buchholtz (2003) discussed how engagement contributes to a robust organisational reputation and social responsibility.

However, contextualising the focus of our analysis, which referred to the public sector, stakeholder engagement may also present critical issues, such as, as Frooman (1999) emphasised, the process's manipulation by powerful interest groups. Despite these challenges, the literature agrees on the importance of effective and transparent involvement strategies (Bryson, 2004; Ansell and Gash, 2008) to improve the formulation and implementation of public policies, emphasising the need for a balanced approach that guarantees the common good.

As a case in point, public participation connotes the integration of stakeholder engagement within the Public Administration (PA) (Leyden *et al.*, 2017). Public participation defines a relationship between institutions and the community that allows citizens, individually or in an associated form, to contribute to the decision-making and the planning activity of the public administration at various levels of intensity and with different roles (Cittalia, 2016). Thus, public participation is a procedural tool that allows policymakers to include new actors (i.e. citizens) in a policy network and entrust them with design-related tasks (Bobbio, 2019). This practice, which promotes stakeholder engagement, is essential for the characteristics of public organisations, which have to ensure transparency to uphold the legitimacy of their operations and maintain a social licence that allows them to operate without risk to their existence (Lodhia and Jacobs, 2013). In this process, the PA recognises how crucial public perception, public participation and societal expectations are to their legitimacy (Hofer and Kaufmann, 2023).

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed a public participation spectrum based on five hierarchical stages (referring to stakeholder engagement): inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower (Krick *et al.*, 2005). This model highlights an important point: citizens' involvement can be more or less intense, that is, more or less influential (Table 1). However, the intensity of the participation and the weight of influence are not the only sensitive dimensions, as there is no single measure of effectiveness, be it empowerment or political influence (Bobbio, 2019). Thus, systems, instruments and forums can encompass different forms and methods of participation, such as citizen juries and workshops, e-participation or entireties combining instruments (Kurkela *et al.*, 2024).

As stated above, the PA applies the principles of stakeholder engagement through public participation; this model developed by IAP2 is related to the stakeholder engagement activities highlighted in the studies of Kujala *et al.* (2022). In fact, these scholars pointed out three main modes: one-way information flows, two-way communication, and internal structures and their respective tools (referable to Table 1).

Then, public participation enables citizens to play an active role in knowledge creation and implies a policy change, which is critical to moving toward sustainability (Pahl-Wostl *et al.*, 2013; Moser, 2016; Lam *et al.*, 2020). Participation can empower people and thus put into practice democratic ideals to acquire consensus or gain input from citizens' knowledge when challenging complex or unclear problems (Hisschemöller and Cuppen, 2015). Indeed, the participation of citizens is a normative goal in the sustainable development agenda that was established at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Narksompong and Limjirakan, 2015) and the UN 2030 Agenda (Huttunen *et al.*, 2022).

Level of involvement	Objective	Characteristics	Techniques
Inform (1)	Provide stakeholders with balanced and objective information	Unilateral communication There is no invitation to reply	Reports, websites, speeches, lectures and public presentations, . . .
Consult (2)	Obtain information and feedback from stakeholders to support decision-making processes	Limited communication in both directions: the company/public body asks the stakeholders respond	Questionnaires, surveys, organisation of workshops, . . .
Involve (3)	Work directly with stakeholders throughout the planning process to ensure that the needs of stakeholders (groups or individuals) are understood and considered consistently	Two-way, multi-directional communication Stakeholders and the company/public body takes actions individually	Multi-stakeholder forums, advisory committees, participation systems decision-making processes, . . .
Collaborate (4)	Co-operate with stakeholders in all or some aspects of the planning process to develop mutually agreed solutions	Two-way or multi-directional communication between the company/public body and the stakeholders. Learning, negotiation and decision-making on both sides. Stakeholders work together to take action	Joint projects, voluntary two- or multi-stakeholder initiatives, and partnerships
Empower (5)	Delegate decision-making processes to stakeholders so that they share responsibility for decisions and outcomes	New organisational form: the stakeholders assume a formal role in the governance of an organisational organisation or some decisions are delegated externally to stakeholders	Integration of stakeholders in governance structures (i.e. as members as members, shareholders or specific committees specific committees, . . .)

Source(s): Authors own work adapted from Krick *et al.* (2005), IAP2 (2018) and Bobbio (2019)

Table 1.
Level of involvement

However, engagement activities related to the transition pathway are usually limited to specific stakeholder groups, with relatively little attention paid to the general public and citizens (Hölscher *et al.*, 2019); thus, there are many criticisms that the participation is ineffective and costly (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). The issue of the involvement of citizens and stakeholders in political and democratic life is highly debated. It intersects with the effectiveness of decision-making processes and the complexity of public policies.

While everyone seems convinced of the validity of the inclusive approach, when trying to put it into practice, one realises that the terrain is impassable and slippery (Cittalia, 2016). However, the concept of sustainability is essential for all stakeholders who take and implement the concept of sustainability in different stakes (Singh and Panackal, 2017). Specifically, as a stakeholder group, young people have been seen as particularly significant (Bosco Ekka and Prince Verma, 2022) as a source of innovation (Singh and Panackal, 2017). Youths believe in changing and solving sustainability issues and are change agents (Mirela *et al.*, 2015). Kwon (2019) highlights that involvement in the elaboration process is the key to forming a global youth citizen subject. The same author in 2013 identified youth participation as a form of affirmative governance, where control is exercised through positive interventions (Bernard, 2016). However, despite the growing interest in the topic, there are still many barriers to the authentic inclusion of young

people in practice, as it often is superficial, remaining included in discussions that have little effect on policy decisions (Narksompong and Limjirakan, 2015). Furthermore, it is to be considered how young people are often perceived as resources and competent citizens, contrasting with the view of young people as problematic and passive recipients of policies (Checkoway, 2011). Young people and youth advocates need to create, redefine, and recapture powerful spaces where marginalised young people can strengthen their voices to transform the conditions of their society (Gambone *et al.*, 2004; Singh and Panackal, 2017). Initiating dialogues with the young generation is foundational to meaningful youth inclusion (Bernard, 2016). Giving young people opportunities to participate meaningfully in public processes fulfils their rights to social inclusion (Narksompong and Limjirakan, 2015), and it guarantees feedback and replies to inputs provided by the organisations (Bellucci *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, one has to consider how the empowerment of the new generation involves the development of personal and social skills as they exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens within a democratic society (Finn and Checkoway, 1998; Checkoway *et al.*, 2005; Checkoway, 2011). Indeed, as highlighted by sustainability studies (Lang *et al.*, 2012; Miller and Wyborn, 2020), knowledge creation through participatory processes can generate a more accurate diagnosis of the problem, as well as more feasible and legitimate solutions, because in the knowledge creation process are accounted diverse perspectives (Huttunen *et al.*, 2022). Thus, the capacity of youth should be enhanced so that they can play a meaningful role in promoting sustainable development (Hart, 2013). Researchers repeatedly focus on the vital role of future generation leaders in sustainability (Bosco Ekka and Prince Verma, 2022) since youth today bearers of opportunities for economic, political, and cultural development and empowerment (Kwon, 2019).

This framework confirms and supports the relevance and topicality of this study, which aims to investigate the participatory modalities implemented by the public administration to involve young people in the sustainable transition.

3. Research methods

Starting from this theoretical reference scenario, the study adopted a qualitative method to examine how public institutions could involve the young generation stakeholders in elaborating sustainable development strategies. Regarding the category taken as a reference, young people, this research considered the 15–34 age group as indicated by Istituto Nazionale di Statistica - ISTAT [1].

In line with the considerations drawn in the introduction, the analysis focuses on 14 Italian metropolitan cities, in detail Bari, Bologna, Florence, Genoa, Milan, Naples, Reggio Calabria, Rome, Turin and Venice instituted by Law No. 56/2014 (art. 1, paragraph 5), Catania, Messina and Palermo instituted by Sicily Regional Law No. 15 of 4 August 2015 and Cagliari referring to Sardinia Regional Law No. 2 of 4 February 2016.

Specifically, the study utilised mainly secondary sources: the last Metropolitan Strategic Plans and the Metropolitan Agendas for Sustainable Development (where available) approved by the metropolitan councils, the officials' documents attached to them, the additional information available on the websites of the metropolitan cities and the 2022 and 2023 report "I territori e gli Obiettivi di sviluppo sostenibile" carry out by Alleanza Italiana per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile – ASviS [2]. Exclusively for the metropolitan city of Rome, the authors utilised additional primary resources related to their involvement in a project implemented in collaboration with the metropolitan authority and to involve young metropolitans in the definition process of the Metropolitan Strategic Plan and Metropolitan Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The choice fell on these documents for two reasons. The first is because they are two programming documents that allow the territorialisation of sustainable development at the local (metropolitan) level. The second is because they allowed the principle of comparability

between metropolitan cities to be respected since all metropolitan cities must elaborate and annually update their own Metropolitan Strategic Plan (according to law no. 56 of 2014), while as of 2019, the Ministry of the Environment has signed cooperation agreements with all 14 metropolitan cities for the definition and implementation of the Metropolitan Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Therefore, the study was carried out according to a multiple case study approach insofar as each metropolitan city was first considered individually and then together with the others to make a cross-comparison with all the units in the sample through which research results could generally be more reliable than those deducible through a single case study (An *et al.*, 2020; Nicolò *et al.*, 2021).

Considering the research question "*How do metropolitan cities involve youth in the elaboration process for metropolitan sustainable development?*" the research is composed of two phases:

(1) Individuation of the modalities adopted by each Italian metropolitan city through:

- Examining the officials' documents related to metropolitan sustainable development: Metropolitan Strategic Plans and the Metropolitan Agendas for Sustainable Development.

- Searching for additional information on the above-mentioned official websites.

- Completing the perspective overview with the ASviS reports.

Figure 1 highlights the procedure adopted for every sample unit to produce the first step's output. The methodology used to gather information is content analysis, which was conducted without software and lasted approximately five months, continuously updating until December 2023.

Furthermore, considering the paper's objective, both direct modalities, i.e. those for which there is a specific reference within the documents that were performed to address the youth stakeholder, and indirect modalities (reference Table 2) were collected. Information was also collected regarding the tools implemented to engage civil society (citizens) in general. In such
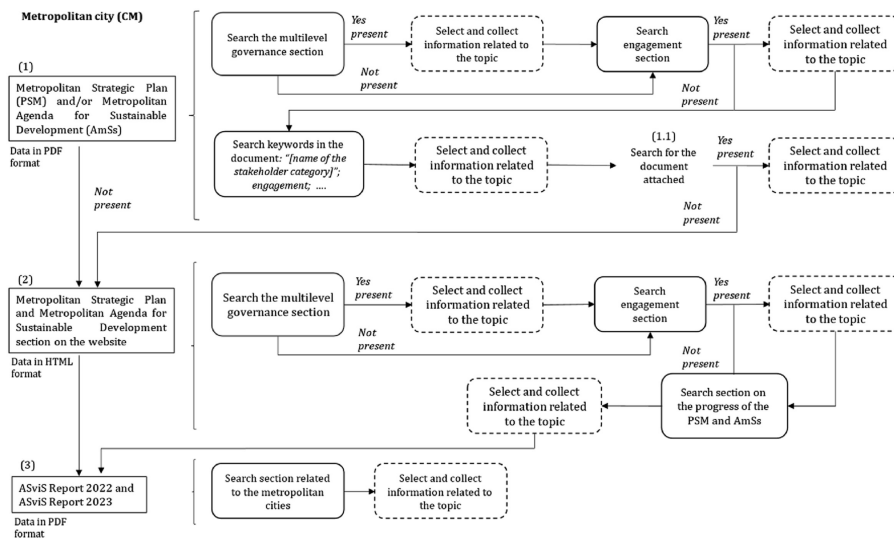
Source(s): Authors' own work

cases, the presence of attached documents or information about the sample involved, in sociodemographic terms, was investigated; therefore, the report's finding regarding the participation of young people allowed these actions to be classified as indirect modalities.

(1) Comparison of identified ways of involving young people and levels of involvement (reference Table 1).

These steps were instrumental in evaluating youth engagement in elaborating local sustainability strategies adopted by metropolitan cities (Figure 2).

4. Results
4.1 Results first step
It is possible to describe the results using Table 2 above, which identifies the modalities utilised by Italian metropolitan cities to involve young citizens in the elaboration process for local sustainable strategies: survey/questionnaire, information activities, educational activities, working tables and funding research scholarship.

Italian metropolitan cities	Modalities Information activities	Survey/ questionnaire	Education activities	Working Tables	Funding research scholarship
Bari	*X*	X	X	*X*	*X*
Bologna	*X*	_	X	_	_
Cagliari	X	*X*	_	_	_
Catania	X	_	_	_	_
Florence	X	*X*	_	_	_
Genoa	X	X	*X*	_	_
Messina	X	X	_	_	_
Milan	X	X	*X*	_	_
Naples	X	X	X	*X*	_
Palermo	X	X	_	_	_
Reggio Calabria	X	_	_	_	_
Rome Capital	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*
Turin	*X*	X	X	_	_
Venice	X	X	_	_	_

Source(s): Authors own work

Table 2.
Modalities utilised by Italian metropolitan cities to involve young citizens in the elaboration process for local sustainable development

In Table 2, italic X's (*X*) highlight the direct actions of metropolitan cities, i.e. those that metropolitan authorities have specifically implemented to engage metropolitan youth. Meanwhile, the Xs not in italic (X) indicate those actions implemented in general to involve local stakeholders in terms of civil society, where evidence of youth participation also appeared. Where the underscore (_) shows that no such information was found, it should be noted that this does not necessarily imply a lack of implementation of the same participation methods but needs to be reported in the resources used in the research or the public domain. Specifically, difficulties were encountered by the metropolitan city of Catania, which outsourced the processing process to an external organisation, which made it difficult to collect the information.

The modalities identified from the study are analysed below.

(1) Information activities

From Table 2, it is possible to highlight how all metropolitan cities implement information activities concerning the implementation status of local sustainable development policy documents in line with the principles of transparency of public authorities. These actions are mainly executed through websites and, to a lesser extent, through specific platforms for educational activities (such as organising seminars, further education/training courses and conferences). This tool is characterised as a preparatory action for the development of higher levels of engagement; as Table 2 shows, 86% (12 out of 14) of the sample do not limit themselves to information only but develop "deeper" engagement strategies.

(2) Survey/questionnaire

According to the available data, 79% of the sample used surveys or questionnaires. In most cases, surveys were conducted online, made public on websites, and structured in two main sections: needs and requirements of the area and suggestions and improvements to be made. Nearly all metropolitan authorities pursuing this modality made information on the respondent sample available in their planning documents or as annexes or reports, making it possible to investigate whether the survey was explicitly aimed at the younger generation (direct modality) or whether young metropolitans took part. However, it was aimed at the entire civil society (indirect modality). Specifically, only the Metropolitan City of Rome Capital conducted such modalities to identify the main expectations, interests, needs and willingness to cooperate on the part of young people in the metropolitan city and to understand their knowledge and opinion on sustainability. In contrast, other metropolitan cities (71% of the sample) utilised questionnaires and surveys as a general tool for civil society participation and consultation without exclusively targeting the younger generation. The remaining 21% of metropolitan cities did not specify this mode of participation. However, the authors did not want to exclude the possibility of this participatory instrument not being implemented.

(3) Educational activities

The educational activities are carried out by 43% of the metropolitan cities. The educational activities include lectures, classroom games, focus groups, Percorsi per le competenze trasversali e per l'orientamento Transversal Skills and Orientation Pathways - PCTO [3], and workshop activities interconnected with the elaboration of the metropolitan strategic plan. The city of Bari has set up a learning area on an online platform with in-depth scientific, cultural and topical information related to the main themes of the Strategic Actions (an indirect tool for involving young people). Genoa organised awareness-raising actions on environmental, economic and social sustainability issues and the participation of civil society in the construction of the Metropolitan Agenda and the knowledge of its strategies, spreading among the citizens of the metropolitan area greater awareness of sustainability issues to develop skills closely interconnected with the PSM (indirect tool for involving young people). Indeed, the city of Bologna has implemented laboratories that include several direct projects specifically addressed to young people to identify their priority needs. It has also organised PCTOs to collect feedback on the "core" proposals of the PSM and gather new suggestions to modify the actions progressively. For the city of Milan, reference can be made to the Youth HUB, dedicated spaces to promote practical activities and projects to foster the participation of young citizens, creating opportunities for skills development. In addition, the metropolitan city organises training events dedicated to the Agenda's themes and territorial strategies, which about 1.000 participants attend. Instead, the metropolitan city of Turin, in cooperation with the Piedmont region, organised interventions to promote the participation of young people in the social and political life of the territory, such as PCTO laboratories on specific issues of the PSM, as well as training projects to enhance the role of local administrators

under 35 years old. The metropolitan city of Rome Capital, instead, organised PCTOs that included frontal lessons, classroom games (simulation on environmental issues) and laboratory activities to strengthen the dialogue with young people, stimulate their creativity and proactive attitude and collect sustainable project ideas in response to the needs of the territory, to create shared value.

(4) Working tables

Working tables indicate the meetings organised by the metropolitan authority in which specific categories of stakeholders participate in discussing policy actions. This involvement tool, aimed at civil society, is implemented by about half of the sample. However, it must be considered that in addition to the cities indicated in Table 2 with an X, the participation of young people is also likely to have taken place in those not highlighted. Moreover, it is possible to indicate that the Metropolitan City of Naples promotes relations and collaborations between the governance and the Forum dei Giovani (Youth Forum) of the metropolitan city of Naples without providing any further explanatory information. On the contrary, the two cities proved exceptionally virtuous by organising specific working tables addressed to young people. For Bari, one can refer to the "Tavolo dei Talenti e delle Nuove Generazioni" (in English "Table of Talents and New Generations"), while for Rome, "Tavoli delle Generazioni Future" (in English "Future Generations Tables"). Both provided for the organisation of several discussion groups referring to each PSM's strategic priorities to identify improvements and possible additions concerning the objectives and programmes in the previous phases. This modality has thus led to direct coordination between metropolitan governance and young people in elaborating the programme documents for sustainable territorial development. Furthermore, to prepare the participants for the discussion, the two metropolitan cities made available additional informative and supplementary documents not in the public domain.

(5) Founding research scholarship

The financing of research projects aimed at young researchers emerges as the instrument of least involvement implemented by metropolitan cities (14% of the sample). Specifically, the funded projects are closely interconnected and often preparatory to elaborating planning documents for local sustainable development concerning specific areas of strategic focus or implementing projects of particular interest. The use of this modality indicates the vital importance recognised concerning research value and the potential of young researchers.

4.2 Results second step

As shown in Table 3, the analysis of the participation and involvement methods implemented by the 14 metropolitan cities enabled their confrontation with the most common levels of engagement found in the literature (Krick *et al.*, 2005; IAP2, 2018; Bobbio, 2019). The output of the second step (Table 3) results from a logical interpretation process; as a result of the analysis of the characteristics of the activities carried out by metropolitan cities, this information was cross-referenced with the specifications in Table 1 (a product of the literature review about levels of involvement, and containing objectives, characteristics and techniques of each level).

Based on the characteristics and techniques identified in Table 1 for the levels of participation, it can be highlighted that:

(1) Information activities fall under the passive level of involvement, characterised by one-way communication from the Metropolitan City to youth stakeholders.

Modalities of involvement		Information activities	Survey/ questionnaire	Education activities	Working Tables	Funding research scholarship
Level of participation	Inform (1)	▓				
	Consult (2)		▓			
	Involve (3)			▓		
	Collaborate (4)				▓	▓
	Empower (5)					

Source(s): Authors own work

(2) The survey/questionnaire belongs to the consultative level in that information and feedback are obtained through, even though limited, communication.

(3) To direct and active involvement, the first levels of two-way participation are manifested in the development of educational activities, capable not only of initiating an exchange of information between the metropolitan authority and the stakeholder young generation but also guaranteeing the development of relational networks aimed at stimulating interactions, even in the medium to long term, between the different actors.

(4) Working tables, conversely, can be classified according to a contributory approach because multi-directional communication is implemented in which stakeholders work together and actively contribute to the pursuit of a shared project.

(5) Funding research scholarship: the motivations are similar to the previous point, as young people are directly involved in the frontline of the policy-making process.

As a tiny percentage of the sample (21%) reached the level of collaboration, integrating and involving stakeholders (particularly youth) in the PSM process can be said to be completed. Empowerment, recognised as the deepest stage of engagement, in which stakeholders take a proactive and formal role in governance, indicates a level of engagement that metropolitan cities have not yet approached, as they have to maintain control over the process as per legislation (Law 56 of 2014).

5. Discussions
Thus, the analysis output can also be reproduced graphically through a two-dimensional representation (Figure 2) that assesses the level of engagement adopted by metropolitan cities.

The variables considered are the modalities weighted according to their level of engagement and the number of metropolitan cities.
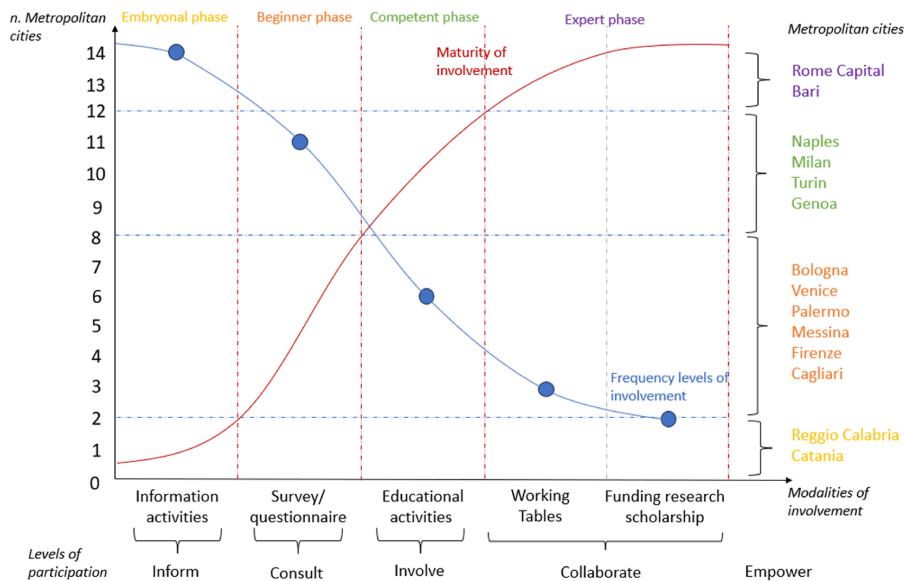
Source(s): Authors' own work

The blue curve representing the frequency of engagement levels is intended to highlight the number of metropolitan cities adopting each modality analysed. As stated earlier, it shows an unbalanced distribution towards the lower levels of involvement.

In particular, the territorial entities most explore informing and consulting. This may be due to its faster implementation and relationship management and its simultaneous ability to reach more young stakeholders with a lower input/use of monetary, organisational and time resources than the other levels (Bobbio, 2019). Moreover, the failure of metropolitan cities to reach the highest level of empowerment is due to several reasons related to the constituent elements of this stage of involvement and the organizational-normative characteristics of the entities as part of the public administration. For the former, it must be considered that this level involves complex and multiple difficulties, including the need to protect individual autonomy and voice, curb interests and power imbalances (Stenseke and Jones, 2011), promote reason and impartiality, and cultivate critical learning and collective action (Hajdarowicz, 2022). Additional critical issues can be due to participant withdrawal, which can affect the ability to make meaningful decisions rather than a lack of accountability (Clark *et al.*, 2019) as practical implementation requires transparent structures for dialogue and deliberation, the appointment of ambassadors within organisations, and phased involvement (McVittie *et al.*, 2015). The complexity becomes even higher when referring to public administration. As mentioned in the previous section, considering that the level of empowerment implies that stakeholders take a proactive and formal role in governance, it can be challenging to apply. Metropolitan cities must maintain control over the process per Law 56 of 2014. Moreover, generally referring to public administration, Article 4 of Legislative Decree No. 165 of 2001 defines how the governing bodies exercise the functions of political-administrative policy-making, defining the objectives and programs to be implemented, as well as verifying the correspondence of the results of administrative activity and management to the guidelines given, it isn't easy, therefore, to formally delegate to

individual citizens (in this case youth) part of the policy-making process for which they cannot consider themselves responsible in an official way. Therefore, this mode of engagement would require special legislation for its implementation.

In contrast, the red curve indicates the maturity of involvement associated with metropolitan cities. i.e. the level of engagement adopted by each metropolitan city in the stakeholder engagement activity and, more specifically, the youth stakeholder in developing local sustainable strategies. Lower levels of maturity correspond to a minor level of engagement; conversely, a high level of maturity corresponds to a deeper level of engagement.

From Figure 2, an evolutionary path can be determined, including:

(1) Embryonal phase (14%): Catania and Reggio Calabria are in an embryonal phase, adopting only 1 out of 5 modalities and remaining on a passive level of involvement (not activating any channel of listening and dialogue with their young stakeholders).

(2) Beginner phase (43% most significant sample): Cagliari, Florence, Messina, Palermo, Venice, and Bologna pursue a one-way initial form of listening to the young category.

(3) Competent phase (29%): Genoa, Turin, Milan and Naples are characterised by a collaborative approach.

(4) Experts phase (14%): Bari and Rome adopt a strategy to establish a deep and long-term collaboration with their youth stakeholders according to a contributory approach.

It is possible to observe that five out of seven metropolitan cities in the south and islands focus on the first level of engagement or in the "beginner phase". It is adopting a lower commitment to youth involvement in sustainability policymaking. In contrast, cities in northern Italy and Naples (as an exception for the south) position themselves in the "competent phase" by focusing on engagement activities to establish an initial two-way dialogue with youth stakeholders. The "expert" phase, on the other hand, presents those metropolitan entities that have implemented all the modalities achievable by metropolitan cities (except empowerment for the reasons explained in this section), highlighting a high commitment in terms of resources (organisational and monetary) oriented to a long-term and unified vision. Also, the discriminating element in this case, as observed in Table 2, is that this cluster encompasses those metropolitan cities that have implemented the most significant number of direct youth engagement modalities. It is specified how only a few metropolitan cities have implemented such actions to engage the young metropolitan generation (Table 2, reference X in bold).

6. Conclusions
According to Mejias and Banaji (2019), in the current political context, research on youth participation must expand into new and emerging spaces to discover the breadth and depth of youth citizenship. The literature shows how local authority intervention can stimulate youth involvement in public strategies by activating institutionally controlled spaces for youth participation to develop more egalitarian relationships between public actors and young people (Morciano et al., 2016). Indeed, Kwon (2019) studies highlight how even young people have raised the need for accountability in this area on the part of public authorities. This is instrumental in stimulating political innovation through dialogue between the public administration and the younger generation (Banjac, 2017). This need is even more significant in sustainable development, where sustainability and youth have a high level of interconnection (Bosco Ekka and Prince Verma, 2022). Theory suggests that approaches adopted at the public level must recognise the complexities and multidimensionality of

sustainability policymaking, be reflexive and openly question policy objectives as well as be participatory (Narksompong and Limjirakan, 2015), including young people as positive agents for sustainability and actors capable of helping to respond to problems in the transition pathway (Singh and Panackal, 2017).

Therefore, in line with theoretical and normative references, the study conducted a careful analysis concerning the involvement of the young generations in the strategic definition process of local sustainable development policies. This research is innovative because it fulfils a twofold objective.

From a theoretical point of view, it contributes to filling the gaps in the literature on the need for more insights into the active role of young people in sustainable development. It contributes to broadening knowledge regarding public participation as a facilitative method of encouraging active citizenship of the younger generation, resolving issues in the area, and disseminating a culture of responsibility and impacts in sustainable development. Thus, the research presents how metropolitan cities can activate a dialogue process with young people through different instruments (conducting information and educational activities, administering surveys/questionnaires, organising discussion tables and funding research projects) at varying levels of communication (inform, consult, engage and collaborate), referred to the stakeholder engagement process.

From the other practical point of view, the study highlights the state of the art in engagement processes, considering the participatory modes implemented and providing a framework to improve the forms of dialogue between young people and public authorities. During the research, it was found that there is a gap not only from a literary point of view regarding the topic under analysis but also an absence of treatment at the level of reports and dossiers highlighting the state of implementation of youth engagement modalities for public policies of sustainable development. This result represents a distancing element from the institutional and normative directives highlighted in the introduction section (e.g. PNRR, SNSvS, EU, UN, 2030 Agenda).

The design of participatory processes attracts expectations of transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, equity (Kurkela *et al.*, 2024) and legitimacy to generate awareness that the activities of public institutions are aligned with societal norms and values (Deegan, 2002).

It is possible to conclude that, while considering the various programme/institutional guidelines at the national and international level, as well as the literary current on the subject, metropolitan authorities (local level) implement sporadic modalities of involving young people in sustainability strategies, focusing on passive and/or unilateral communication levels (57% of the sample). Although there are a few good practices (Rome and Bari), there is a lack of a unified standard and formalisation of the process, both in terms of context conditions (enabling and functional for young people to participate in the process) and implementation (tools adopted by the metropolitan authority). Reaching standardisation is essential in public administration for several reasons, as this plays a crucial role in promoting rigour, comparability and progress in the field of public administration. First, it allows the results of different studies to be compared (Graham, 2006) to assess the effectiveness of interventions and policies accurately. Second, it ensures consistency in data collection and analysis, improving the reliability and validity of research findings (Andersson *et al.*, 1987). This is particularly important in public administration, where evidence-based decision-making is essential. In addition, standardisation facilitates replication of studies, enabling verification of results and advancement of knowledge in the field (Decastri and Buonocore, 2021), and allows the development of common frameworks and models that can be used in different contexts, promoting collaboration and sharing of best practices (John *et al.*, 2014).

Therefore, it is necessary not only to increase such intergenerational democratic spaces but to develop a framework to encourage good governance and qualify, in general, public

administrations, and specifically, metropolitan cities as a consistent (intents not only formally) and reliable (effective integration of the outputs of the youth participatory process into strategies) reference point.

To conclude, the research is affected by some limitations. First, secondary sources on institutional websites may not contain complete details as the information may still need to be available to the public. It is also necessary to consider that metropolitan cities are at different levels of PSM development, drafting, and implementation, which may also affect the levels and modes of engagement adopted. Therefore, it is necessary to continue monitoring these factors over time and explore additional levels of public agencies, such as regional and national, to understand their evolution and to investigate progress towards increasingly higher and more structured forms of participation. Furthermore, exploring the modes of dialogue and the issues addressed is essential to provide a comprehensive view of the topic. It is crucial to assess whether and how the results of such consultations influence public policies and strategies. This study can then provide a basis to investigate further or support the involvement of young people in the subsequent implementation phases and promote a co-production perspective.

Notes

1. ISTAT is the Italian public research institution that carries out general censuses of population, services and industry, agriculture, household sample surveys and general economic surveys at the national level: http://dati-giovani.istat.it/#:~:text=Salvo%20eccezioni%20opportunamente%20segnalate%2C%20la,dai%2015%20ai%2034%20anni

2. ASviS, established in 2016, is a network of more than 300 actors committed to implementing the UN 2030 Agenda. ASviS aims to foster the development of a culture of sustainability at all levels, analyse the implications and opportunities for Italy related to the 2030 Agenda, and contribute to the definition of national and territorial strategies for the achievement of the SDGs and to the creation of a system for monitoring progress towards the SDGs: https://asvis.it/missione/

3. PCTO (in English Transversal Skills and Orientation Pathways) was introduced by the MIUR - Ministry of Education and Merit by Article 1, paragraph 785, Law No. 145 of 30 December 2018. The PCTOs are aimed at secondary school students and are structured in the context of educational planning with the fundamental contribution of the local area (companies, cultural institutions, research centres, etc.) to develop transversal skills and the ability to orientate oneself in personal life and social reality.

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Corresponding author
Chiara Di Gerio can be contacted at: di.gerio@economia.uniroma2.it