# CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE LOCAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE ITALIAN METROPOLITAN CITIES CONTEXT

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**Abstract**
*The challenges to achieving sustainable development are multiple and complex. They require profound changes in culture, lifestyle, actions, and attitudes. According to scholars and normative indications, strong collaboration between all the stakeholders in society holds a fundamental role in establishing a more equitable and sustainable society. Indeed, Italian public institutions, at the national and local levels, are increasingly aware that the sustainable transition path requires the involvement and engagement of civil society. In that sense, the participation of civil society in governance and policy-making processes aims to strengthen the relationship between local institutions and citizens, introducing a fundamental paradigm shift towards multi-level collaboration. Therefore, the paper intends to investigate the extent of public participation of citizens in strategic planning for metropolitan sustainable development (local level). The analysis, conducted from the secondary sources developed by the sample, identified the engagement practices adopted by each of 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. Although almost all have undertaken a citizen engagement process, this research demonstrates that only approximately half of the sample have highly promoted engagement-intensive forms, highlighting a total lack of use of the recursive approach, in which the citizen is an integral part of sustainability strategies.*

**Keywords**
*citizen participation; collaboration; italian metropolitan cities; local sustainable development; public participation; public policy; stakeholder engagement.*

## Introduction

Sustainable development refers to systemic changes society needs to respond to environmental crises (Köhler et al., 2019). According to institutions at national and international levels, public participation is a prerequisite for sustainability transition (Li et al., 2018). Engagement is seen as a way to empower the participants, enabling them to act for and envision sustainability (Wittmayer & Schäpke, 2014; Hölscher et al., 2019). Only in recent years has research on sustainability transitions expanded rapidly, diversified in terms of topics and geographical applications, and deepened

concerning theories and methods (Köhler et al., 2019). Indeed, the participation process, in general, has not been central in sustainability transition studies (Huttunen et al., 2022). However, with an increasing interest in developing ways and methods to support, create, and govern sustainability transitions, the engagement of different societal actors has become increasingly important (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016). This means enabling them to influence transitions, encouraging them to act about transitions, and benefiting from their perspectives and knowledge (Huttunen et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, engagement activities, such as the transition arena, are usually limited to specific stakeholder groups, with relatively little attention paid to the general public and citizens (Hölscher et al., 2019). In addition, the various scholars have focused, in most cases, on deepening the public participation of citizens in specific sustainable development problems or goals, such as environmental, waste management, green innovation, natural resources, transportation, infrastructure, and so on. Thus, in the literary context, more studies and investigations are needed into the overall concept of citizens' contribution to sustainable development through the instrument of public participation.

Therefore, this paper focuses on citizen stakeholder participation in sustainable development policies and strategies, analyzing how public authorities involve citizens to collaborate in the transition process, as per SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals). More in detail, the study focuses on a comparative analysis of Italian metropolitan cities, trying to respond to the research question: RQ "*How the metropolitan cities involve local citizens 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 civil society. The declination and implementation of the Italian National Strategy for Sustainable Development 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 line with legislative/institutional guidelines. Second, public participation in the decision-making process for the government of local authority planning and agenda is crucial and significant, and if not handled systematically, will trigger public protest and negative perceptions of the government and lead to the failure of the national or local agenda (Abas et al., 2023). Indeed, different local initiatives with a central role for civil society actors have been documented in practice, especially in local sustainability transitions (Frantzeskakiet al., 2016).

**Literature review: citizens participation and sustainable development**

Sustainable development and sustainability have appeared as concepts to help address the economic, environmental, and social impacts from previous generations on this generation and future ones through a holistic perspective (WCED, 1987). One of the most recent initiatives for sustainable development is the 17 United Nations

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their 169 targets, which were agreed upon by 195 states and covered the most critical points that modern societies need to address to become less unsustainable (UN, 2019). The SDGs are indivisible; they need to be addressed as a whole and not through a silo mentality (Li et al., 2018). The government designed the SDGs for the government, as indicated in the Agenda 2030 declaration (UN, 2019). In parallel to governments, organizations (civil society organizations, companies, education institutions, public sector organizations, and hybrid ones) have been instrumental in driving sustainability (Barreiro-Gen et al., 2019; Abas et al., 2023), according to the SDG 17 (UN, 2019).

Thus, the issue of sustainable development has significant consequences that cannot be neglected (Singh & Panackal, 2017); it is recognized that there is a necessity for everyone to participate in change for an approach that stimulates the commitment of all components of society, from businesses to governments, from civil society organizations to individual citizens (Giovannini, 2018). Public participation defines a relationship between institutions and the community that involves the possibility for 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 - Fondazione ANCI Ricerche, 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). The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed a public participation spectrum based on five hierarchical stages: 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 (Fig. 1). It shows the empirical action decision-makers should take to fulfill the goals.

Moreover, the Spectrum helps decision-makers define the role of the public in the engagement process and decide how much influence the public has on the decisions allowed (Abas et al., 2023). However, the intensity of involvement and the weight of power are not the only sensitive dimensions, as there is no single measure of effectiveness, be it empowerment or political influence (Bobbio, 2019). Additionally, it enables citizens to play an active role in knowledge creation and implies a policy change, which is critical to moving towards sustainability (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2013; Moser et. 2016; Lam et al., 2020). Participation can empower people and thus put into practice democratic ideals to acquire consensus or to gain inputs from citizens' knowledge when challenging complex or unclear problems (Hisschemöller & Cuppen, 2015). Also, it allows the general public to engage in and contribute to better planning solutions (Uittenbroek et al., 2019).

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 et al., 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 (Abas et al., 2023). While everyone seems convinced of the validity of the inclusive approach, when trying to put it into practice, one realizes that the terrain is impassable and slippery (ANCI Research Foundation, 2016). As citizen engagement

can also contain a risk of slowing down and unnecessarily complicating the development process, there is a need to find a balance in citizen engagement and identify the beneficial places for involvement with reflexivity regarding the ways of participation (Huttunen et al., 2022). Indeed, more and more researchers have been considering making public participation more effective (Li et al., 2018). However, the concept of sustainability is essential for all stakeholders who take and implement the concept of sustainability in different stakes (Singh & Panackal, 2017).

| LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT | OBJECTIVE | CHARACTERISTICS | TECHNIQUES |
|---|---|---|---|
| Inform (1) | Provide stakeholders with balanced and objective information. | Unilateral communication. 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, ...). |

*Figure 1. Levels of involvement (Source: Adaptation from Krick et al., 2005; IAP2, 2018; Bobbio, 2019)*

**Methodology**

The current study adopted a qualitative method to examine public institutions' modalities to involve civil society, specifically the local citizens' stakeholder category, in elaborating sustainable development strategies.

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 established 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 utilized 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 other officials local, regional and/or national institutions involved in the designing process and the report "I territori e gli Obiettivi di sviluppo sostenibile" ("The territories and the SDGs") carry out by Alleanza Italiana per lo Sviluppo Sostenibile – ASviS[1].

The research is composed of two phases. First, the individuation of the modalities adopted by each Italian metropolitan city through:
1) Examining the officials' documents related to metropolitan sustainable development: Metropolitan Strategic Plans and the Metropolitan Agendas for Sustainable Development.
2) Searching for additional information on the above-mentioned official websites.
3) Completing the perspective overview with the ASviS report.

The second step is comparing the identified modalities of involving local citizens and the levels of involvement (reference Figure 1).

**Results and discussion**

It is possible to describe the results using Figure 2 above, which identifies the modalities utilized by Italian metropolitan cities to involve local citizens in the elaboration process for local sustainable strategies: information activities, survey/questionnaire, educational activities, and working tables.

In Figure 2, the X's (X) highlight the direct actions of metropolitan cities, i.e., those that metropolitan authorities have specifically implemented to engage directly metropolitan citizens, not as a representative of enterprises, associations, or other types of organizations. Where the underscore (_) indicates 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 that was not reported in the

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[1] The Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development (ASviS) was set up on 3 February 2016, on the initiative of the Unipolis Foundation and the Tor Vergata University, to spread the culture of sustainable development, in particular by raising awareness in Italian society, in economic and social actors and institutions, an understanding of the importance of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development approved by the UN Assembly in September 2015, by setting up a network with over 300 actors dealing with issues that can be traced back to aspects included in the Sustainable Development Goals.

resources used in the research or not available for the public. Specifically, difficulties were encountered in the metropolitan city of Catania, which outsourced the elaboration process to an external organization, making it difficult to collect the information.

| Italian metropolitan cities | Modalities | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Information activities | Survey/ questionnaire | Education activities | Working Tables |
| Bari | X | X | X | X |
| Bologna | X | – | X | – |
| Cagliari | X | X | – | X |
| Catania | X | – | – | – |
| Florence | X | X | – | – |
| Genoa | X | X | X | X |
| Messina | X | X | – | – |
| Milan | X | X | X | – |
| Naples | X | X | – | X |
| Palermo | X | X | – | – |
| Reggio Calabria | X | – | – | X |
| Rome Capital | X | X | X | X |
| Turin | X | X | X | – |
| Venice | X | X | – | – |

**Figure 2. Modalities utilized by Italian metropolitan cities to involve citizens in the elaboration process for local sustainable development. (Source: Authors' own contribution)**

The modalities identified from the study are analyzed below:

*Information activities*

From Figure 2, it is possible to highlight how all metropolitan cities implement information activities regarding the 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 used for educational activities (such as seminars, further education/training courses, and conferences). The information activities were mainly carried out in the last steps or the final step of the elaboration process of metropolitan sustainable strategies. This modality is characterized as a preparatory action for the development of higher levels of engagement.

*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 the metropolitan authorities pursuing this modality made information on the respondent sample available in their planning documents or as annexes or reports. Also, in 30% of the cases, in specific areas of the survey or through areas on official sites, proposals related to specific projects or objectives of the metropolitan strategy were collected. Specialized committees reviewed these.

### Educational activities

The educational activities are carried out by 43% of the metropolitan cities. The educational activities include mainly workshops and focus groups, lectures, classroom games, and *Percorsi per le competenze trasversali e per l'orientamento / Transversal Skills and Orientation Pathways - PCTO*[2]. All of these are interconnected with the elaboration of the metropolitan strategic plan. Some examples follow. The city of Bari has set up an online learning area with in-depth scientific, cultural, and topical information related to the main themes of the Strategic Actions. Genoa organized 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. The cities of Bologna, Milan, and Rome have implemented laboratories that include several direct projects to identify priority needs, collect feedback on the "core" proposals of the PSM, and gather new suggestions to modify the actions progressively.

### Working tables

Working tables indicate the meetings organized by the metropolitan authority in which specific categories of stakeholders participate to discuss policy actions. These provide an opportunity to draw up a vision of the future and development centered on sustainability as a shared and indispensable value for tackling the local challenges linked to the country's global ones. The involvement tool, aimed at civil society, is implemented by almost half of the sample. The working tables were structured in several meetings, each dedicated to a macro-objective or strategic line of the metropolitan strategic plan. In most cases, these meetings were carried out after the draft strategic plan had already been prepared, and different metropolitan cities made additional informative and supplementary documents outside the public domain available to prepare the participants for the discussion.

In some cases (around 33%), these tables were combined with meetings with specialized stakeholders. In addition, it should be noted that where the underscore is present (synonymous with non-application), tables were organized with

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[2] 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.

representatives of businesses, associations, or other types of organizations. It is also interesting to note that three metropolitan cities (Rome, Naples, and Bari) have organized working tables for the youth citizens category.

As shown in Figure 3, the analysis of the participation and involvement methods implemented by the 14 metropolitan cities enabled their confrontation with the levels of engagement found in the literature (Krick et al., 2005; IAP2, 2018; Bobbio, 2019). Based on the characteristics and techniques identified in Figure 1, it can be highlighted that:
- *Information activities* fall under the passive level of involvement, characterized by one-way communication from the Metropolitan City.
- The *survey/questionnaire* belongs to the consultative level in that information and feedback are obtained through, even if limited, communication.
- 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 local citizens' stakeholders but also guaranteeing the development of relational networks aimed at stimulating interactions, even in the medium to long term, between the different actors.
- *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. Thus, this modality has led to direct coordination between metropolitan governance and citizens in elaborating the program documents for sustainable territorial development.

| Modalities of involvement | *Information activities* | *Survey/ questionnaire* | *Education activities* | *Working Tables* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Inform (1)* | ▓ | | | |
| *Consult (2)* | | ▓ | | |
| *Involve (3)* | | | ▓ | |
| *Collaborate (4)* | | | | ▓ |
| *Empower (5)* | | | | |

Level of participation

**Figure 3. Comparison between the modalities of involvement and the levels of involvement (Source: Authors' own contribution)**

43% of the sample reached the level of collaboration; integrating and involving stakeholders in the PSM process can be said to be completed. Empowerment, 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 must maintain control over the process as per legislation (Law 56 of 2014).

**Conclusions**

Public participation is essential to achieving sustainable development goals (Li et al., 2018). The engagement activities, such as the transition arena, are usually limited to specific stakeholder groups, with relatively little attention paid to the general public and citizens (Hölscher et al., 2019). In most cases, the political institution's approach is the consultation processes of professional spokespersons employed by nongovernmental organizations, such as trade unions or environmental organizations (Uittenbroek et al., 2019). This approach leaves out citizens wanting to participate on their terms, such as participating through diverse activist groups, sometimes called the unruly public, and also those needing to be recognized representation (Huttunen et al., 2022). Additionally, a fundamental component of authentic participation, according to the European Institute for Public Participation, is the ability of interested actors/stakeholders to change their opinions, allowing individuals to come to a shared knowledge of the challenges and solutions rather than simply exchanging ideas (Barreiro-Gen et al., 2019).

Thus, the study carefully analyzed the involvement of the local citizens' stakeholders in elaborating local sustainable development strategies. This research contributes to highlighting the state of the art in engagement processes at the local/metropolitan level; the study provides evidence of the participative methods implemented to involve the single citizens, not as representatives of the organization but as a resident who are confronted with the problems of the area daily. So, the research offers a way to improve dialogue between citizens and public authorities.

It is possible to affirm that while considering the various national and international program/institutional guidelines and the current literature, local authorities implement sporadic modalities of citizen participation in sustainability strategies, focusing on passive and/or unilateral communication levels (half of the sample, Figure 4). Only a few good practices (Bari, Naples, and Rome) implement all the different modalities of involvement; it also is interesting to highlight how 29% of the metropolitan cities do not follow a linear passage of the different levels of participation (for instance, Reggio Calabria).
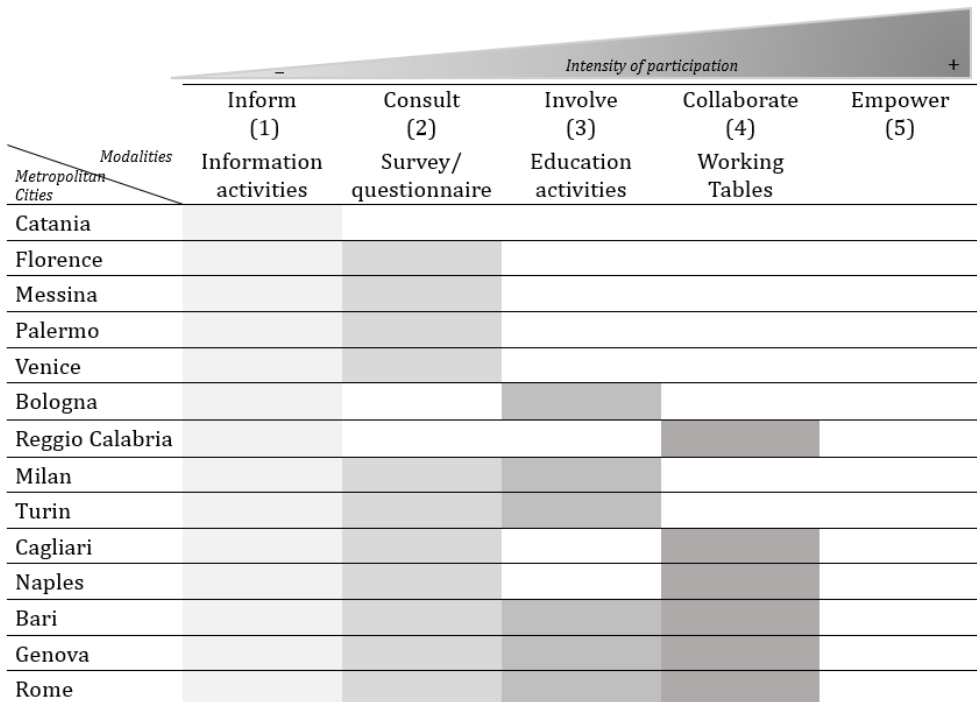
| Metropolitan Cities / Modalities | Inform (1) Information activities | Consult (2) Survey/ questionnaire | Involve (3) Education activities | Collaborate (4) Working Tables | Empower (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Catania | ■ | | | | |
| Florence | ■ | ■ | | | |
| Messina | ■ | ■ | | | |
| Palermo | ■ | ■ | | | |
| Venice | ■ | ■ | | | |
| Bologna | ■ | | ■ | | |
| Reggio Calabria | ■ | | | ■ | |
| Milan | ■ | ■ | ■ | | |
| Turin | ■ | ■ | ■ | | |
| Cagliari | ■ | ■ | | ■ | |
| Naples | ■ | ■ | | ■ | |
| Bari | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | |
| Genova | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | |
| Rome | ■ | ■ | ■ | ■ | |

*Intensity of participation* (− to +)

**Figure 4. Output of the comparative analysis (Source: Authors' own contribution)**

There is a lack of a unified standard and formalization of the process regarding context conditions and implementation; thus, it is necessary to increase these democratic spaces to encourage good governance and qualify metropolitan cities as coherent and reliable points of reference.

To conclude, the research is limited, using secondary sources that may contain incomplete details, or some information may still need to be made available to the public. Also, the metropolitan cities are at different levels of Metropolitan Strategic Plan development, which may also affect the levels and modes of engagement adopted. Therefore, further monitoring is necessary over time, as well as in other contexts, to understand the evolution of the phenomena.

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