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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CLIMATE NEUTRALITY: BUILDING A 'GREEN
CONSENSUS' WITH NEW MODELS OF DELIBERATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY
DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

In an era characterized by widespread skepticism of institutions at local, national, and supranational levels, the adoption of deliberative and participatory democracy models has emerged as a promising solution to address pressing global challenges, including climate change and local environmental issues. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) highlights the importance of deliberative policy-making processes in developing adaptation strategies and emphasizes the role of local communities in addressing the climate crisis.

Adopting a mixed-method approach that combines case study with quasi-experimental research, this thesis enables a nuanced analysis of how the World Café could influence individual preferences and individual action.

Specifically, this research assesses the efficacy of a World Café implemented in two urban and two rural/inner areas, in the Emilia-Romagna and Calabria regions. The fieldwork sought to engender shifts in individual preferences and to establish a ‘green consensus’ among participants regarding environmental issues. A total of 58 individuals participated in the fieldwork activities.

The World Café explores three key themes: 1) separate waste collection, a common issue across the four case studies; 2) green urban areas, in Bologna and Cosenza; and 3) renewable energy, in Gazzola and Santa Caterina dello Ionio.

Findings highlight the value of participatory processes in driving grassroots environmental initiatives, revealing actionable insights and innovative co-created solutions. Each dialogue empowered participants to build networks and foster collective intelligence, which in some cases led to changes in individual preferences. This study contributes to the growing body of research on participatory approaches to climate change adaptation and highlights the importance of bottom-up initiatives in driving sustainable transition.

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Introduction

I. Overview of the Research

1. Motivation and Contextual Background

In recent years, the concepts of participatory and deliberative democracy have gained significant traction in both academic and practical political arenas (e.g. Helbing *et al.*, 2023; Talan *et al.*, 2023; Willis *et al.*, 2022). It is noteworthy that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has identified these democratic approaches as promising responses to address urgent global challenges such as climate change. The concept of participatory democracy places emphasis on the active and broad engagement of citizens in the political process, extending beyond the mere act of voting and advocating for a more active involvement in the decision-making process. In contrast, deliberative democracy prioritizes the quality of discourse and reasoning among citizens, aiming to achieve consensus through informed and reflective dialogue, taking into account its various formats (e.g. citizens' juries, deliberative polls®, etc.). Collectively, these frameworks present promising avenues for enhancing democratic governance and addressing contemporary socio-political challenges such as climate change (IPCC, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

Nevertheless, despite the growing interest and experiences in participatory and deliberative democracy, several challenges remain unresolved, such as participatory forums and their relationship with the broader public sphere, taking into account the greater potential of local associations and social movements in promoting multiple forms of democratic expression (Ercan & Hendriks, 2013; Felicetti, 2016). Other challenges are related to the fact that deliberative decision-making processes (e.g. citizens' juries) are complex, costly and time-consuming, and require long-term interactions (Cheyne & Comrie, 2002; Dryzek *et al.*, 2019). The implementation of deliberative and participatory democracy represents a significant step toward the democratization of contemporary societies, offering a valuable opportunity to enhance the Italian context (Cini & Felicetti, 2018). Moreover, as Cini and Felicetti (2018) argue, «the participatory approach addresses the 'quantitative' dimension of mass democracy

by emphasising the political role of civil society. Participatory theory promotes the political inclusion of all individuals, aiming at the enlargement and radicalisation of democratic citizenship». On the other hand, as observed by Cini and Felicetti (2018), although numerous scholars (e.g. Cohen & Fung, 2004), from a normative standpoint, perceive participatory democracy and deliberative democracy as distinct concepts, there is an increasing acknowledgment of their interdependence. Despite conceptual and practical tensions, the view that deliberation and participation inherently pull in opposing political directions is held by a minority of contemporary deliberative democrats (Cini & Felicetti, 2018). Several converging interpretations have emerged to support this perspective. These interpretations suggest that participatory democracy and deliberative democracy are not in competition but rather mutually reinforcing (*ivi*).

This thesis focuses on participatory democracy in two Italian regions, Emilia-Romagna in the north and Calabria in the south, using four case studies, two urban and two rural. While there is a paucity of empirical research examining participatory and/or deliberative experiences within Italian rural/inner areas, especially in southern regions, some relevant studies do exist. For example, Felicetti (2016) offers valuable insights into deliberative and participatory democracy, referencing case studies that are also relevant to the Italian context. These include examples such as the Transition Town Notari initiative in the Emilia-Romagna region and the Transition Vaiai in Sicily, both of which contribute to an understanding of the dynamics of community-level activism in different territorial and socio-political settings.

While urban areas are crucial arenas for climate change adaptation and mitigation, it is also true that rural areas should not be underestimated. For instance, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) pays special attention to the urban-rural linkages, while at a European level, the crucial role of rural areas toward a green transition is emphasized by the EU COM (2021) 345 final.

This research aims to bridge these gaps by exploring the implementation and consequences of participatory and/or deliberative democracy. Conversely, the decision to examine two urban areas (Bologna, in Emilia-Romagna, and Cosenza, in Calabria), alongside two rural/inner areas (Gazzola, in Emilia-Romagna, and Santa Caterina dello Ionio, in Calabria), derives from Putnam's eloquently titled book *Making Democracy Work* (1993). Putnam emphasized that during the 1970s, a uniform institutional framework was implemented across all Italian regions, highlighting a significant correlation between institutional performance and the prevalence of a specific local political culture, which he termed 'civicness' or 'civic culture'. This culture is marked by citizens' active engagement in politics, a high level of interpersonal trust, and a

strong inclination toward cooperation. Putnam (1993) distinguished between a ‘civic’ north, characterized by the presence of ‘horizontal’ bonds, and a south characterized by the presence of ‘vertical’ bonds, marked by dependency and exploitation.

It should also be noted that our research is the product of a doctoral scholarship in alignment with the National Strategy for Smart Specialization (NSSS) and the National Research Program (PNR 2021-2027). These frameworks emphasize the South-North Italy divide, both in terms of research and development expenditure («Universities in Southern Italy employ the largest number of research personnel (approximately 19,000), followed by businesses (just over 10,000), public institutions [...] and private non-profit institutions [...]» - NSSS, p. 32, translated by the author) and graduate mobility and brain drain («Emilia-Romagna is the leading region in attracting young graduates from other countries or regions (+16.2 per thousand), while Calabria holds the record for the net outflow of graduates aged 25 to 39 (-31.1 per thousand)» - PNR 2021-2027, p. 6, translated by the author). However, it should be also highlighted that the doctoral program in ‘Future Earth, Climate Change, and Social Challenges’ was established precisely with the aim of creating interdisciplinary environments capable of going beyond the mere recognition of climate change as a phenomenon related to atmospheric physics and statistics.

Therefore, this research aims to be an action-oriented study, seeking to apply participatory models with the objective of fostering a ‘green consensus’ that may be conducive to a comprehensive ecological transition, taking into account the South-North Italian divide. This involves directly engaging citizens and other local stakeholders such as non-profit organizations and local government officials.

2. Research Questions

Our research is guided by the following key questions, each aimed at exploring how a participatory laboratory, using the World Café format, is able to generate a change in individual preferences:

- How can informal and constructive conversations, structured through the World Café format, foster a deliberate transformation in individual preferences on climate change,

contributing to the formation of a ‘green consensus’ across different territorial contexts, such as Emilia-Romagna and Calabria regions?

- How could urban and rural inhabitants be involved to access the mutual intelligence needed to create innovative paths to climate change issues?

In the context of escalating climate crisis, understanding the mechanisms through which informal discussions can shift individual and collective perspectives is crucial. This research investigates whether the World Café format can effectively bridge diverse viewpoints and cultivate a shared understanding that motivates action. This approach is inspired by the Deliberative Poll® (Fishkin, 2018) and the World Café experiment conducted by Alunni-Menichini *et al.* (2023).

Lastly, urban and rural communities often face different environmental challenges and have varying levels of access to resources. For this purpose, this research aims to identify ways to inclusively engage both demographics, leveraging their unique insights and experiences to co-create solutions.

The findings could inform community leaders and policymakers on how to structure and facilitate conversations that not only raise awareness but also inspire cooperative efforts toward sustainable practices; improved dialogic capacity among citizens could lead to more informed and active participation in environmental decision-making processes, fostering a more resilient and proactive local environment; by fostering inclusive dialogue that bridges the urban-rural divide, the research could contribute to more comprehensive and context-sensitive approaches to climate action, ensuring that solutions are both equitable and effective.

3. Goals of the research and Methodology

The primary objective and challenge of the research is to assess whether a participatory laboratory, in the World Café format (Brown & Isaacs, 2005), is able to generate a change in individual preferences. To achieve this purpose and to evaluate satisfaction levels, knowledge acquisition, and the potential impacts of the quasi-experiments, we employed pre- and post-event questionnaires.

Thus, the research focuses on the following objectives:

- 1) Analyze the theoretical foundations and key principles of participatory and deliberative democracy, addressing the climate change challenge;
- 2) Assess the implementation of participatory and/or deliberative practices within the areas considered;
- 3) Evaluate the impact of these practices on citizens, looking for stakeholders' engagement.

It must be taken into account, however, that the change in individual preferences has indeed been observed in deliberative processes (Bobbio, 2010; Dryzek, 2009; Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010; Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Fishkin, 2018; Floridia, 2017). Therefore, we will opt for an innovative research approach, combining the principles of the World Café (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Löhr *et al.*, 2020; Steier *et al.*, 2015) with a key feature of deliberative processes, i.e. the change in individual preferences, using a qualitative design (Corbetta, 2015).

This approach will enable a focused examination of three key aspects: 1) the individual/participant; 2) the inclusion of some local stakeholders; and 3) the potential impacts of the World Café on participants. By concentrating on these aspects, we will be able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between citizens' participation, stakeholders' inclusion, and the efficacy of the World Café process in fostering meaningful dialogue and generating actionable insights toward sustainability, in line with action-research method (Egmose, 2019; Ventura & Shahar, 2022; Waardenburg *et al.*, 2020).

Another important aspect to highlight is that our fieldworks are not designed as 'mini-publics' (Fung, 2007), typically based on participants' random selection. Instead, our fieldworks are conceived as participatory quasi-experiments open to all members of the involved communities. While both approaches have their merits, participatory laboratories open to all community members can offer significant advantages, for instance in terms of engagement (allowing community members to opt-in empowers individuals, giving them a sense of ownership and responsibility in the outcomes of the fieldworks. This empowerment can foster a stronger sense of community and collective purpose), flexibility (open participatory initiatives can be more flexible and adaptive to the specific needs and contexts of the communities involved), and resource efficiency (by not requiring a random selection process, open participatory initiatives can reduce the time and resources needed to recruit and organize participants).

Given that citizens' needs and participation vary from context to context, it is essential to identify specific and relevant themes and issues for each area involved, in order to facilitate

comparisons between different contexts and help structure the Cafés as spaces for social learning and concerted action (Collins, 2014), making these fieldworks more attractive to residents. The selected themes are the following: separate waste collection (common to all four areas, i.e. Bologna, Cosenza, Gazzola, and Santa Caterina dello Ionio), green urban areas (in Bologna and Cosenza), and renewable energy (in Gazzola and Santa Caterina).

Moreover, in order to avoid or at least limit the impression of the ‘outsider researcher’ (Kerstetter, 2012), we organized our fieldworks in collaboration with local stakeholders such as local associations, municipalities, and other relevant community entities. This collaborative approach aims to foster mutual understanding and ensure that the research is rooted in the local context, thereby enhancing the relevance and impact of our initiatives. The problem of the ‘outsider researcher’ is significant in academic research, particularly in fields requiring close interaction with local populations. Addressing why this is a problem involves several key points, such as the lack of trust (outsider researchers might face skepticism or distrust from the community’s members being studied, which can hinder open communication and the collection of accurate data), cultural misunderstandings (outsiders may lack a deep understanding of the local culture, traditions, and social dynamics, leading to misinterpretations or insensitive approaches that could compromise the validity of the research), individuals’ engagement (empirical research often requires the active participation and engagement of the members of a local community. An outsider might struggle to establish the necessary rapport and collaborative relationships that facilitate such engagement).

4. Integrating Case Studies and Quasi-Experiments for Participatory Democracy

This thesis employs a mixed method research design that combines case study with quasi-experimental research. Case studies focus on an in-depth exploration of a specific case or a small number of cases (e.g. the small number of labs at our Cafés), while quasi-experiments (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Mark & Reichardt, 2009) observe the effects of an intervention in real-world conditions without the strict manipulation of control groups typical of experiments (e.g. the changes in participants’ preferences and the World Cafés).

Case study research eschews the representativeness and generalizability expectations typical of quantitative research methods (Yin, 1981; 2014). For this reason, as Yin (1981) noted, case

studies are often subject to prejudice, even within the social sciences, where they are seen as appropriate only for exploratory phases of research, as leading to unverifiable conclusions, and as less rigorous than other methods.

As Yin (1981) suggested, the stereotypes surrounding the case study method are completely unfounded. Case studies can be used for exploratory purposes, though the method is equally valid for descriptive and explanatory purposes. As Max Weber claimed in the late 19th century, social science aims to *verstehen*, which means to comprehend or interpret (Mulè & Walzenbach, 2024). Specifically, case studies can be used to describe a situation (e.g. a case history) or to test explanations for why certain events occur, or to develop hypotheses.

Nevertheless, when experiments or large datasets are impractical or impossible (e.g. where random control groups are unavailable or unfeasible), a quasi-experiment can be embedded in a case study to evaluate the impact of a theory or a specific method, as in our case the ‘open door’ method. This is particularly relevant for case studies that incorporate quasi-experimental elements to observe changes resulting from an event. This thesis follows such mixed method approach to explore whether deliberative and participatory democracy, using the ‘open door’ method, may yield positive outcomes in overcoming conflicts or resistance to green transition. As highlighted by Yin (1981), one of the challenges of case study research is that, when the context is incorporated into the analysis, the number of variables of interest often far exceeds the number of data points, or cases, available for study. As a result, given that each World Café involved just over ten participants, inferential statistical methods become inappropriate for analyzing the data. Case studies typically involve small group sizes, making quantitative techniques designed for larger datasets inadequate.

In other words, both case studies and quasi-experiments examine phenomena within their specific contexts. For instance, a case study may include a quasi-experiment as a tool to examine whether a specific intervention/event produces changes within the particular case, without claiming to generalize the findings to broader contexts.

The objective of our fieldwork was to focus on specific case studies while applying a quasi-experimental method. This approach was designed to generate hypotheses, particularly concerning the effectiveness of small-scale participatory laboratories. Rather than testing theories on a statistically representative sample, our study prioritized an in-depth analysis of localized contexts and their potential to inform broader research questions.

To this end, 58 participants from four distinct socio-economic and territorial contexts took part in our World Cafés. In Bologna, the majority of participants were young adults (ages 26-33) who had obtained a university degree and possessed a diverse array of professional

backgrounds, including students, professionals, and NGO employees. In Gazzola, participants exhibited a more expansive age range (18-76 years old), with a high school education representing the most prevalent educational attainment. The professions of the participants encompassed a wide spectrum, ranging from retirees to artisans and students. The group from Santa Caterina was predominantly comprised of university-educated individuals between the ages of 26 and 33, with participants engaged in various sectors such as architecture, the arts, and agriculture. In contrast, the Cosenza group exhibited a more heterogeneous distribution across multiple age groups, including professionals, students, and unemployed individuals. These demographic variations offer meaningful insights into how different socio-economic contexts influence engagement in World Café discussions.

The results are highly encouraging. Our work demonstrates that individual preferences can indeed be transformed, providing valuable insights into the potential of participatory processes to foster social and environmental change within the specific territorial contexts, such as the Italian inner and urban areas involved. These findings underscore the need to adopt methodologies tailored to the specific characteristics of social phenomena, where richness of context and depth of insight are crucial features of the research design.

Ultimately, as evidenced by our fieldworks, case studies prioritize depth and a detailed understanding of specific contexts, focusing primarily on internal validity by thoroughly exploring the unique characteristics of a given case or small set of cases. Moreover, our quasi-experiments embedded in the case studies aim to strike a balance between internal and external validity by analyzing interventions in real-world settings (Cook & Kamalodeen, 2023; Yin, 2014).

In summary, this research integrates a quasi-experimental design with a case study approach to assess the impact of participatory democracy conducted across two urban and two rural areas. By employing pre- and post-event questionnaires, the study aimed to assess whether each World Café induced shifts in participants' preferences regarding the green transition.

The combination of case studies and quasi-experiments methods provided valuable insights. The World Café discussions, in particular, uncovered key issues related to separate waste collection, renewable energy, and green urban areas, offering a deeper understanding of local context and challenges. This integrated approach capitalizes on the strengths of both methodologies: the rigor of the quasi-experiment in assessing change, and the richness of case studies in exploring complex, context-specific issues.

The complementarity of these two methodologies is particularly valuable for addressing multifaceted research questions that demand both nuanced understanding of the context and

empirical evidence. This integration not only enhances the robustness of findings but also provides a more comprehensive perspective, enabling researchers to explore the interplay between context-specific dynamics and broader theoretical frameworks. Our work indicates that the joint utilization of case studies and quasi-experiments represents an efficacious strategy for the advancement of knowledge in domains where the implementation of experimental designs is impractical or inappropriate. This integration enables researchers to transcend some methodological boundaries and constraints, drawing on the strengths of diverse methods to address complex problems that require both a profound contextual understanding and empirical validation. By capitalizing on the adaptability of case studies and the potential of quasi-experiments, interdisciplinary research can address intricate questions that overcome some of the limitations of single-method approaches, thereby fostering innovative insights and solutions at the micro-level.

5. Contributions and Originality

The findings of this research contribute to the field of participatory and deliberative democracy at the micro-level. By addressing the gaps in the current literature, such as the lack of empirical studies in the considered areas, this study provides a deeper understanding of the practical implementation and impact of participatory and deliberative democracy on individual preferences within specific Italian areas and a limited group of participants. The insights gained from this research will be valuable for third-sector organizations, policymakers, practitioners, and scholars interested in enhancing citizens' participation related to sustainability and climate change.

This research seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the factors that foster a robust civic culture, thereby supporting the development of more inclusive and effective democratic practices in Italian urban and rural areas, in line with the following Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 7 («Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all»), SDG 11 («Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable»), SDG 12 («Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns»), and SDG 13 («Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts»).

Furthermore, the decision to examine four areas across two distant regions, not only from the geographical point of view, is influenced by the previously mentioned Putnam's work, which points out that while Northern Italy had higher social capital, fostered by a history of local self-governance and civic associations, Southern Italy had lower social capital, resulting from a past of feudal rule and centralized power. Our contribution prompts reflection on the comparison of participation in a northern and a southern Italian region, as well as the role of often marginalized areas, such as rural areas, in discussions about climate change.

We will explore whether we can overcome some of the weaknesses inherent in the World Café format, such as the challenge of effectively connecting with stakeholders (Löhr *et al.*, 2020), assessing whether these stakeholders are willing to sustain collaboration for future deliberative events. On the other hand, other challenges related to communication (communication problems among disciplines, or concerning language differences) and/or interdisciplinarity (interdisciplinarity as a challenge) (Löhr *et al.*, 2020) will be taken into account.

From a methodological standpoint, we will assess the efficacy and practicality of the 'open door' method in both urban and rural settings. Additionally, we will assess its capacity to mitigate biases such as participant self-selection, as observed by various scholars (e.g. Bobbio, 2019). As Stapper and Duyvendak (2020) emphasize, while participation is open to all residents, certain individuals are undeniably more valued than others. Using the World Café format, we seek to explore whether this approach can effectively bridge the gap between «good» and «bad» residents (Stapper & Duyvendak, 2020).

Additionally, we will ascertain whether these quasi-experiments can induce a shift in individual preferences, thereby fostering citizens' participation within the community's democratic life. The World Cafés may create spaces for open discussion and knowledge enhancement, potentially transcending mere awareness-raising about climate change and catalyzing concrete actions to combat this profound and complex challenge. Finally, and no less importantly, we will examine whether these quasi-experiments have the potential to form the foundation of genuine deliberation, particularly in light of the possible issues and concerns that may arise during World Café sessions.

6. Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter 1 reviews the literature on participatory and deliberative democracy, in the context of climate change. This chapter sets forth the research questions that inform this thesis, providing an examination of the methodological approaches employed, namely the ‘open door’ method and the World Café tool. Additionally, the chapter details the criteria and rationale behind the case selection process. Through this comprehensive analysis, Chapter 1 sets the stage for a nuanced understanding of how participatory mechanisms can address climate-related challenges in these specific local contexts.

Chapter 2 elucidates the findings of the empirical research, offering a detailed analysis of the outcomes derived from the World Café sessions conducted in the four selected areas, Bologna, Gazzola, Cosenza, and Santa Caterina dello Ionio. This chapter highlights the predominant themes, critical insights, and actionable recommendations that emerged from each discussion. In addition, it provides a thorough examination of the participants’ perspectives, as captured through pre- and post-event questionnaires. By integrating these diverse data sources, Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive understanding of the participants’ attitudes and the effectiveness of participatory practices such as the World Café in addressing climate change issues.

Chapter 3 discusses the key findings derived from the fieldworks, with a particular emphasis on how individual preferences evolved as a consequence of the World Café sessions. This chapter provides a critical analysis of the shifts in participant perspectives, elucidating some of the factors that contributed to these changes. Furthermore, it addresses both the limitations and strengths of the quasi-experimental design and implementation, offering an evaluation of the methodological approaches employed. Through this comprehensive discussion, Chapter 3 seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on improving civic participation in addressing complex global challenges such as climate change.

The conclusion summarizes the results and evaluates the effectiveness of the adopted methodologies. This will enable us to assess whether and to what extent the initial objectives have been met, thereby contributing to the existing body of knowledge in the field. By reflecting on the strengths and limits of the quasi-experiments, the conclusions propose some avenues for future research.

Chapter 1. Exploring the Nexus of Climate and Democracy. A Methodological Exploration through Action-Research and World Café

Introduction

The nexus of climate and democracy represents a complex and multifaceted domain that demands thorough investigation to fully understand and address the intricate interplay among these critical elements (Baber & Bartlett, 2007; Olsson, 2022). The imperative to explore this nexus emerges from the increasing recognition that climate change is not merely an environmental issue but a profound social and political challenge that intersects with issues of justice and democratic governance (Dryzek, 2013). Nevertheless, within such a framework, citizens' participation and the methods useful at this purpose present some challenges (Allegretti, 2021). One of the foremost challenges is ensuring genuine inclusivity and representativeness in participatory processes. Often, marginalized communities which are most affected by climate change are underrepresented in decision-making forums (Olsson, 2022). This exclusion can perpetuate existing inequalities and hinder the development of just and equitable climate policies. Thus, designing participatory methods that actively engage these communities is crucial. This requires not only logistical considerations, such as accessible meeting locations and times, but also culturally sensitive facilitation techniques that empower all voices to be heard. Another significant challenge is the complexity and technical nature of climate issues (Egmose, 2019; Hager, 2022). Effective participation necessitates a certain level of understanding and knowledge, which can be a barrier for many citizens.

In this context, participatory democracy holds the potential to contribute to the achievement of a 'green consensus' through the transformation of citizens' preferences, the key objective of our quasi-experiments. Engaging citizens in decision-making processes not only increases their awareness of climate-related issues but can also lead to a shift in their priorities and preferences (Bobbio, 2010). When citizens actively participate in collective discussions - particularly when these discussions are well-informed and thoughtfully structured - they may reconsider their personal positions in light of emerging scientific knowledge and ethical considerations. This process of preference transformation is crucial for building a broader consensus on ambitious and sustainable climate policies, as it helps to bridge the gap between individual interests and the common good, thereby facilitating the development of more effective and equitable solutions.

Bridging this knowledge gap requires comprehensive educational initiatives and the use of clear, accessible language in discussions, and the World Café may play a role in that direction

(Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Steier *et al.*, 2015). The World Café approach involves setting up small, café-style tables where groups of participants discuss a question for a set period. Afterward, participants switch tables, cross-pollinating ideas and insights from different discussions. This iterative process not only democratizes the conversation but also ensures that diverse perspectives are heard and integrated.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 1.1 defines key concepts related to climate and democracy, with a focus on the notion of energy democracy (1.1.1). Section 1.2 investigates how participatory and deliberative democracy can facilitate climate action. Subsection 1.2.1 outlines the objectives of the fieldworks, introducing the ‘open door’ method, while Subsection 1.2.2 contrasts ‘open door’ with random selection. Subsection 1.2.3 discusses the importance of transparency and inclusivity in enhancing the quality of the research. Section 1.3 outlines the research question and sub-question. Section 1.4 provides a detailed explanation of the chosen methodology, i.e. action-research, and explores particular techniques such as the World Café and the living lab approach (detailed in Subsections 1.4.1 and 1.4.2, respectively). Finally, Section 1.5 addresses case selection, detailing the role of Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna (1.5.1) and the method step by step (1.5.2).

1.1. The Relationship between Climate and Democracy: Integrating Key Concepts

Understanding the intricate relationship between environmental justice, sustainability, and resilience is crucial in addressing climate change effectively. These concepts are interlinked and collectively form the backbone of effective climate change strategies. This section delves into these foundational ideas, starting with a brief exploration of environmental justice as defined by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 1998:

«Environmental justice is defined as the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Fair treatment means that no group of people, including racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic groups should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, municipal, and commercial operations or the execution of federal, state, local, and tribal programs and policies» (Bullard, 2001, p. 4627).

Additionally, one of the foundational concepts underpinning the entire research, which will also be scrutinized in the fieldworks, is that of ‘sustainability’. Beyond the United Nations

Conferences of Parties (the first COP meeting was held in Berlin, Germany, in March 1995)¹, in 1987 the United Nations report *Our Common Future* (known as Brundtland Report) was released by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). Introducing the concept of ‘sustainable development’ and describing how it could be achieved, Brundtland Report is an essential source for politicians and scholars in the field of the environment: indeed, within the document, sponsored by the United Nations (UN) and chaired by the Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, WCED «explored the causes of environmental degradation, attempted to understand the interconnections between social equity, economic growth, and environmental problems, and developed policy solutions that integrated all three areas» (Jarvie, 2016).

The definition of ‘sustainable development’ within the *Brundtland Report* can be considered as a political engine for the international political agenda from the environmental point of view, since the 1980s:

«Humanity has the ability to **make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs** [ed: bold added]. The concept of sustainable development does imply limits - not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth. The Commission believes that widespread poverty is no longer inevitable. Poverty is not only an evil in itself, but sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations for a better life. A world in which poverty is endemic will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes» (Para. 3, 27)².

On the other hand, the concept of ‘resilience’ refers to a crucial role within the framework of bottom-up efforts to tackle climate change: the IPCC (2018) defines ‘resilience’ as «the capacity of social, economic and environmental systems to cope with a hazardous event or trend or disturbance, responding or reorganizing in ways that maintain their essential function, identity and structure while also maintaining the capacity for *adaptation*, learning and *transformation*»³. Within the IPCC glossary (2018), such term is related to other concepts, i.e. (1) ‘climate-resilient development pathways’ (CRDPs), and (2) ‘climate-resilient pathways’. The first concept refers to the paths that support efforts to end poverty and lessen

¹ <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>

² *Brundtland Report* (1987) is available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>

³ <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/chapter/glossary/>

inequality while fostering equitable and cross-scalar adaptation to and resilience in a changing environment. They raise questions about the ethics, equality, and viability of the profound societal change required to dramatically cut emissions in order to limit global warming (e.g. to 1.5°C) and establish a desirable and liveable future for all. On the other side, ‘climate-resilient pathways’ alludes to «iterative processes for managing change within complex systems in order to reduce disruptions and enhance opportunities associated with *climate change*»⁴.

Thus, according to Van Zandt (2020), the concept of ‘resilience’ should be combined with the idea of ‘adaptation’, considering the ecological definitions: it implies that we need to change our behavior, how we live, how we use the land, or what we do to it. As nevertheless noted by the scholar,

«Resilience becomes important in an era of climate change because it reflects an understanding that we’re no longer in a position to stop change from occurring, or to completely avoid impacts [...] First, and perhaps most widely understood, is that resilience refers to an ability to absorb, withstand, and bounce back. It implies elasticity and flexibility, as well as endurance and durability. Bluntly, it means that we know impacts will occur, and, to survive, we must learn to bounce back from them» (*ivi*, p. 27).

However, Van Zandt (2020) defines the concept of ‘resilience’ as a ‘Rawlsian’ notion, recalling Rawls’ theory of justice, according to which resources should be distributed so that the least-advantaged group receives the most, although the most advantaged people are not excluded by the distribution process (noting the link between the concepts of ‘resilience’ and ‘justice’). The goal of Rawlsian approaches in a disaster or climate change scenario would be to ensure that every person could reach a certain level of resilience. For instance, an adaptation strategy that relocated vulnerable homes from a coastal would likely include significant numbers of both working-class homes and vacation homes given the spatial distribution of coastal homes: ultimately, «if this strategy ensured that the working class households decreased the likelihood of flooding to an acceptable level, it would be a Rawlsian solution even if more affluent households also benefited from the program» (*ivi*, pp. 34-35).

Thus, an in-depth examination of the connection between the notion of environmental justice and the deliberative model of democracy is necessary. Baber and Bartlett (2007), for instance, analyze the relationships in a deliberative democratic context between experts and social movements (e.g. environmental justice movement), providing us with a critical theoretical overview of deliberative democracy. The scholars attempt to respond to the following query by

⁴ *ivi*

recalling three iterations of deliberative theory: «How do *environmental justice* as a social movement and *environmental expertise* as a source of policy reasoning frame deliberative responses to the ecological challenges confronted by developed democracies? » (p. 7). The three iterations of deliberative democracy taken into account by the authors are 1) John Rawls' theory of justice, 2) Jurgen Habermas' critical theory, and 3) James Bohman's full liberalism.

The approach by Rawls is that of public reason, known also as normative precommitment: in this form of deliberation, «one reasons from the little one knows in the “original position” (wherein all information about one's personal situation is hidden by a veil of ignorance) in pursuit of unanimity based on reasons with which anyone similarly situated would freely agree» (*ibid.*). In this way, individual interests are not sacrificed nor reconciled, and they are disregarded as valid arguments for supporting one's viewpoints (*ibid.*). Conversely, the second form of deliberative democracy considered is Habermas' ideal discourse, based more on civic society than on government institutions, and calls for a shared political culture: «for Habermas, deliberation is a process of testing the competing validity claims put forward by citizens in search of a general consensus based upon reasons that are shared, not merely public. In ideal discourse, individual interests are the source of this competing validity claims» (*ibid.*). Within such a framework, «interests must be open to change because citizens engaged in ideal discourse are committed to search for a genuine meeting of the minds, rather than the *modus vivendi* that a less demanding approach, such as full liberalism, might allow» (*ibid.*). Instead, concerning Bohman's full liberalism, it can be intended as a meeting point between Rawls' and Habermas' theories: «in full liberalism, one's individual interests are the primary source of individual preferences and motivation. But the reasons a citizen offers others in support of his or her policy positions must transcend personal interests, at least to some extent» (*ibid.*). Therefore, public reasons must obviously be present, but only in the restricted sense that acceptance is not contingent upon belonging to a specific social group (*ivi*). However, in light of these three theories, the scholars are able to conduct an intriguing analysis of the role of experts and social movements in the struggle for environmental justice, ultimately arguing that «in deliberative discourse, *experts* will play important roles in deliberative environmental politics [ed: providing] both the methods and conclusions of science as those establish the background conditions of our deliberations» (*ivi*, p. 17), although experts' inputs are not sufficient to the deliberative process to have any impact, while a lay perspective is required when they are engaged in collective decision-making. On the other side, social movements also play a crucial role «in establishing the essential preconditions for deliberative democracy (i.e., equality, justice) » (*ibid.*).

However, the relationship between experts and social movements (e.g. Extinction Rebellion), and citizens, could be read within Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, described by Devaney *et al.* (2020), although the citizens' assembly format differs from our approach because it necessarily requires a random selection of participants.

Thus, the link between deliberative democracy and justice is well described by Dryzek (2013), recalling Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice*. According to Dryzek (2013), although Sen's democracy notion is essential for the reconciliation of plural justice claims, Sen's discussion is substantially lacking and insufficient, and generalization is its sin, notwithstanding its pluralism. For Dryzek (2013), «democracy does not guarantee justice, but in a world of plural justice claims democracy is necessary to the pursuit of justice. [...]» (p. 342). In those contexts, the first requirement in every situation where there are several competing claims to justice is a deliberative framework that includes everyone who will be significantly impacted by the relevant collective decisions (or their representatives) (*ivi*). Moreover, as argued by Dryzek (2013),

«Democracy as discussion in the context of plural justice claims should not necessarily be located in any single forum (be it a parliament or citizens' jury), and should not be confined to elected representatives. Collective decisions should not be by simple majority vote, but at the same time there is no need to strive for full consensus. The process should not be guided by unnecessarily restrictive still less singular conceptions of public reason, should not confine itself to rational argument and should not be dominated by adversarial debate or positional negotiation. These principles allow for substantial variety in both institutional form and specific practices, and what is appropriate for (say) global climate justice will differ substantially from what is needed for more local issues. The principles can be applied to the analysis, evaluation and perhaps design of forums and—more importantly—deliberative systems in all the particular contexts, from the local to the global, where justice needs to be deliberated to be achieved» (p. 343).

It is important to highlight that 'climate justice' is the intersection between social justice and climate change, and how, in general, the most marginalized communities all over the world both on a local and global level will be disproportionately impacted by climate change. However, it is important to point out that a set of principles aimed at 'putting a human face' on climate change was released by an international coalition of organizations assembled in Johannesburg (South Africa) for the Earth Summit, in 2002. From the perspectives of environmental justice and human rights, the Bali Principles of Climate Justice redefine climate change. For instance, the first Principle encloses a great and powerful message: «Affirming the sacredness of Mother Earth, ecological unity and the interdependence of all species, Climate Justice insists that

communities have the right to be free from climate change, its related impacts and other forms of ecological destruction» (Principle 1, Bali Principles of Climate Justice, August 29, 2002)⁵.

Addressing the concept of environmental justice in further detail, Olsson (2022) starts from the assumption that climate change and policy responses to it have implications in terms of (in)justice. Indeed, as argued by Olsson (2022), «the predominance of technocratic approaches to climate change has led several studies to stress the importance of a shift to democratic engagement with issues of (in)justice» (p. 2).

It is important to note that Olsson pays attention to four styles of democratic engagement, based on a two dimensions matrix (i.e. ‘political strategies’, including closure-oriented and disruptive strategies, and ‘strategies for social change’, including behavioral-oriented and practice-oriented strategies). The four styles of democratic engagement are synthesized in the following scheme (Fig. 1):

		Political Strategies	
		Closure-Oriented Strategies	Disruptive Strategies
Strategies for social change	Behavior-oriented strategies	Closure-oriented engagement centered on behaviors	Disruptive engagement centered on behaviors
	Practice-oriented strategies	Closure-oriented engagement centered on practices	Disruptive engagement centered on practices

Fig. 1: The four styles of democratic engagement

Source: Olsson (2022), p. 3

Concerning the ‘closure-oriented engagement centered on behaviors’, Olsson highlights that while a lack of support for disadvantaged groups to participate in policy and planning processes for adaptation precludes climate justice, low citizen support for justice-oriented policies is attributable to a lack of ethical frames and moral reasoning. On the other hand, regarding the ‘closure-oriented engagement centered on practices’, while a lack of citizen engagement in deliberations prevents change of systems producing unjust practices, insufficient inclusion of disadvantaged groups prevents change of systems producing unjust practices (*ivi*). Furthermore, the style of ‘disruptive engagement centered on behaviors’, according to the study, seems to have no real-life application, being a mere theoretical construct (*ivi*). Conversely, the style of

⁵ Bali Principles of Climate Justice is available at the following link: <https://www.corpwatch.org/article/bali-principles-climate-justice>

‘disruptive engagement centered on practices’ shows how insufficient mobilization of an ‘us’ against ‘them’ prevents change of systems producing unjust practices (*ivi*). To better understand the issue, as observed by the scholar, «this style of democratic engagement is represented by one problematization implied through prescriptions to mobilize an “us” in order to challenge a privileged “them”, and the “unjust” discourses and practices that reproduce their privilege. As such, this problematization sets the focus on engagement to disrupt and dislocate the systemic production of climate injustices» (*ivi*, p. 12). The issue is explained by the author taking into account three studies: e.g. Di Chiro’s study that, using participatory action research, examines how ‘just sustainabilities’ such as resilience building, can be promoted thanks to a collaboration between academics and disadvantaged groups (i.e. black communities in North Philadelphia, USA). In that case,

«Reflecting agonistic theories’ assumption that hegemonies limit the possibilities for democratic politics and therefore should be contested, the study emphasizes that the dominant narrative of the Anthropocene forecloses a focus on environmental injustices [...]. The assumption is thus that the narrative of the Anthropocene masks injustices and privilege and excludes stories of how sustainable modes of organization in marginalized societies are enacted—the latter point mirrors practice theories focus on arrangements from which sustainable practices emerge. In line with agonistic theories, it is also underscored that the Anthropocene narrative needs to be challenged through peaceful democratic contestation enabled by the mobilization of the narratives of a disadvantaged “us” » (*ivi*, p. 13).

However, Olsson (2022) explores different styles of democratic engagement, examining their potentials and limitations from various theoretical perspectives. The findings emphasize the importance of a multi-perspective view, whether these styles are considered incompatible or complementary. Such an approach is crucial for researchers and non-academic stakeholders involved in climate justice interventions, offering valuable insights for informed and reflective action in climate adaptation and resilience building at the local level.

1.1.1. Energy Democracy: Challenges and Opportunities

Energy is a fundamental component of modern society, powering everything from homes and transportation to industries and technologies. However, access to and distribution of energy resources are not equitably shared, leading to significant disparities among different communities and nations (Vanegas Cantarero, 2020). ‘Energy justice’ emerges as a crucial concept to address these inequalities, emphasizing the need for fair, sustainable, and responsible access to energy resources. Concurrently, ‘energy democracy’ promotes the active participation

of citizens in energy management and policy, striving to democratize energy decisions to ensure they are more inclusive and equitable.

Some scholars talk about ‘energy justice’ to evoke the fact that energy production and consumption are characterized by ethical concerns. Sovacool and Dworkin (2014) define

«An energy-just world as one that equitably shares both the benefits and burdens involved in the production and consumption of energy services, as well as one that is fair in how it treats people and communities in energy decision-making. [...] Energy justice, thus, involves the right of all to access energy services, regardless of whether they are citizens of more or less greatly developed economies. It encompasses how negative environmental and social impacts related to energy are distributed across space and time, including human rights abuses and the access that disenfranchised communities do or should have to remedies. Energy justice ensures that energy permitting and siting do not infringe on basic civil liberties and that communities are meaningfully informed and represented in energy decisions» (p. 5).

Building upon the insights into democratic engagement, Sovacool and Dworkin (2014) provide also an energy justice framework according to which energy decisions should promote:

- 1) availability (people should have access to sufficient, high-quality energy resources);
- 2) affordability (everyone, including poor, should pay no more than 10% of their income for energy services);
- 3) due process (in the production and use of energy, countries should respect due process and human rights);
- 4) information (fair, transparent, and accountable forms of energy decision-making should be available to everyone, as well as high-quality information about energy and the environment);
- 5) sustainability (energy resources shouldn’t run out too soon);
- 6) intergenerational equity (future generations have a right to a good life that is not hampered by the harm that our current energy systems cause to the environment);
- 7) intragenerational equity (everybody has a right to equitable access to energy services);
- 8) responsibility (all countries have a duty and responsibility to safeguard the environment and reduce environmental risks associated with energy).

This framework is defined by scholars as ‘hierarchical’ and ‘cosmopolitan’: the first feature refers to the fact that it aims to prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable first; the second

feature claims that the framework should be universally applicable to everyone, equally, across the world (without, however, considering the specific characteristics of each community).

Nevertheless, a call to action is necessary for a more conscious consumption: as stated by the authors, we all need different amounts of energy to heat our houses, prepare our meals, and get to and from work, and the choices we make about which car to buy, which power provider to use, and which household appliance to buy have very significant moral and ethical repercussions.

Highlighting the moral and equity dimensions of energy production and use, Sovacool *et al.* (2017) focus on six new frontiers of future energy justice research, i.e. 1) involvement of non-western justice theorists (Sovacool and Dworkin (2014) nearly only relied on Western philosophers, like Kant, Habermas, Rawls, etc., when discussing the intellectual foundations of ‘global energy justice’); 2) valuing the non-human world through non-anthropocentric theories (e.g. animal-centrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism); 3) focusing on cross-scalar issues of justice such as embodied emissions (e.g. with 42% of the nation’s electricity coming from wind turbines in 2015, Denmark has a low carbon footprint and may serve as a model for other nations. In fact, when one only considers the effects on the Danish electrical grid, the stats appear favorable. Such a national focus, however, obscures the fact that the development and production of those very wind turbines have externalities that both partially offset their environmental credentials and result in considerable emissions being outsourced to China and South Korea - Sovacool *et al.*, 2017); 4) business models and co-benefits of justice (e.g. reductions in poverty and empowerment of vulnerable groups); 5) managing tradeoffs within and among energy justice principles (to give a concrete example, efforts to reduce energy poverty in India have included increasing coal-fired power, which has concurrently led to an increase in coal mining, some of which is carried out by child laborers); 6) an energy justice conceptual framework reconsidered. Such ideas are primarily distinguished by a comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing energy concerns. Non-western theories (e.g. Confucianism and Taoism of China, promoting the moral path that promotes greater human harmony, and assuming that everything is universal and that the means, rather than the destination, is what matters) might be used in the field of energy, respecting due process in energy decisions, and considering human rights protection when implementing energy projects (Sovacool *et al.*, 2017). Instead, and it deserves to be shortly deepened, concerning non-anthropocentric theories, animal-centrism might be applied to energy avoiding harm and providing benefits for all sentient animals; on the other hand, through biocentrism, energy decisions are guided by consideration of competing claims to a fair share of environmental resources among all living

beings. Finally, ecocentrism entails the idea that an energy system is right when it strives to protect the integrity, diversity, resilience, and flourishing of the entire community, involving formal rights of nature and close, caring relationships (*ivi*). Ultimately, compared to the previous framework provided by Sovacool and Dworkin (2014), Sovacool *et al.* (2017) present an energy justice conceptual framework complemented by other keywords, useful to understand the link between the ‘energy justice’ notion and our research, trying to establish a link between climate change issues, in which energy plays a very important role, and citizens’ participation in such complex dynamics. However, such a framework is organized as follows:

- 1) Availability.
- 2) Affordability.
- 3) Due process.
- 4) Transparency and accountability.
- 5) Sustainability.
- 6) Intragenerational (between individuals, communities, or states) equity.
- 7) Intergenerational (between generations) equity.
- 8) Responsibility.
- 9) Resistance.
- 10) Intersectionality.

The term ‘information’ was previously used to refer to ‘transparency and accountability’, while ‘resistance’ («energy injustices must be actively, deliberately opposed» - *ivi*, p. 687), and ‘intersectionality’ («expanding the idea of recognitional justice to encapsulate new and evolving identities in modern societies, as well as acknowledging how the realization of energy justice is linked to other forms of justice e.g. socio-economic, political and environmental» - *ibid.*) were not previously (explicitly) present. Thus, such a framework should be kept in mind by energy planners, changing its focus from imposing unfavorable externalities on vulnerable groups and future generations to supporting energy systems that improve social welfare and reduce environmental harm, fully implementing, as we shall see, the definition of sustainability. Nevertheless, while energy justice underscores the equitable distribution of benefits and burdens in energy-related activities, another pertinent concept in this discourse is that of ‘energy democracy’. Advocates for energy democracy argue for a shift in power dynamics within the energy sector, emphasizing community involvement and decision-making in the production and consumption of energy resources.

The definition of ‘energy democracy’ used by Burke and Stephens (2017) explains hereby in further detail how the idea encompasses social, political, and economic issues:

«The concept of energy democracy is increasingly being used by grassroots activists in the United States, parts of Europe and elsewhere to call for and justify integrations of policies linking social justice and economic equity with renewable energy transitions. Energy democracy is thus both a novel concept and emergent social movement that connects energy infrastructural change with the possibilities for deep political, economic and social change. The term continues to spread throughout climate justice struggles, trade unions, academic communities, and political parties, while beginning to reach regional and national level discourse» (*ivi*, p. 35).

In other words, the call for ‘energy democracy’ not only advocates for a fair distribution of benefits and burdens in energy activities but also represents a burgeoning social movement. Defined by Burke and Stephens (2017) as a concept gaining traction among grassroots activists, this movement seeks to intertwine policies promoting social justice and economic equity with the transition to renewable energy. As the term permeates various spheres, from climate justice struggles to academic discourse and political arenas, it signifies the potential for profound political, economic, and social transformations on both local and global scales.

Furthermore, as also Opoku and Acheampong (2023) observe, energy is one of the most important elements among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), while Sustainable Energy for All (SEforALL) is the international organization that works in partnership with the United Nations and leaders in government, the private sector, financial institutions, civil society, and philanthropies to drive faster action toward the achievement of the above-mentioned Sustainable Development Goal 7 (SDG7) by 2030, in line with the Paris Agreement on climate. However, the fundamental political democratic beliefs of countries are firmly rooted in the concepts of ‘energy justice’ and ‘energy democracy’ (Opoku & Acheampong, 2023). ‘Energy democracy’, which promotes the idea that people should have a voice, representation, and support in modeling their current and future energy needs, is the foundation of the energy justice movement; in the same way, energy security, energy democracy, and energy transition are all associated with energy justice (*ivi*).

Even though, for their analysis, Opoku and Acheampong (2023) consider some sub-Saharan Africa countries (SSA), it is worth noting that in those countries 1) economic growth is greatly influenced by rural-urban equality in access to electricity and clean cooking fuels and technologies, 2) economic development has been strongly influenced by participatory, deliberative, egalitarian, liberal, and electoral democracies, and 3) it was discovered that the economic growth within those countries was affected differently by energy justice and

democracy. Nonetheless, the final advice provided by the scholars deserves to be mentioned: «When there is an improvement in democratic practices in SSA, the economic growth-enhancing effect of energy justice deepens. We recommend that policies that facilitate equity in energy access and democratic practices would contribute to sustainable economic growth in SSA» (*ivi*, p. 25). Thus, it should be evident that the term ‘energy democracy’ has a broader connotation, embracing the fight for democratically managed and publicly owned energy over corporate ownership of socially significant and environmentally important resources (e.g. Reforming the Energy Vision initiative in New York State) (Stein, 2018).

As highlighted by the Burke and Stephens (2017), a growing sense of urgency surrounding global anthropogenic climate change gives rise to ‘energy democracy’. The concept is mostly used in the USA and Europe, and it is characterized by the aim of reclaiming and democratically restructuring energy regimes and linking social justice and equity with energy innovation: in particular, concerning the energy democracy agenda in the US, the mix of policy instruments holds potential for advancing renewable energy transitions based on the combined goals of resist-reclaim-restructure (Burke & Stephens, 2017). To gain further insight into this issue, Burke and Stephens (2017) elaborate on a list of intended outcomes for each energy democracy goal: for instance, considering the goal ‘resist’ the dominant energy agenda, among the intended outcomes result ‘fossil fuels remain in the ground’, or ‘fossil fuel subsidies end’, or ‘new social alliances are created’ such as unions, environmental groups, municipalities; concerning the goal ‘reclaim’ the energy sector, ‘energy corporations democratize and localize’, and ‘social/public control of energy production and consumption normalizes’ are among the intended outcomes; ‘restructure’ the energy sector alludes, for example, to an energy sector that moves away from the profit motive, with a ‘community power and capacity to control energy systems strengthened’, and where ‘solidarity, inclusion, and open, democratic participation advances’ (*ivi*).

Within such a framework, participatory and deliberative models of democracy may play a very important role: local communities can learn about crucial topics and become involved in participatory energy planning procedures, setting precedents and building capacities for long-term, meaningful public participation in energy system decision-making, although present initiatives frequently fail to develop the ability for deeper participation, instead concentrating on specific projects and technologies and involving only relatively low levels of engagement (*ivi*). Finally, democratizing the energy system requires high levels of participation and engagement, while «deliberative democratic practices can be used to improve the quality of

engagement and help participants develop opinions informed by relevant facts, expert information, and multiple perspectives» (ivi, p. 39).

Additionally, as argued by Burke and Stephens (2017), energy policy design and evaluation can be enhanced by using a policy mix approach to understand the relationships between different sets of goals and policy tools (e.g. participatory energy planning and deliberation, and green subsidies, are both related to the goal ‘reclaim’). The energy democracy agenda cannot be advanced by a single policy instrument alone; rather, a combination of policy tools is needed (likewise, in those circumstances, a comprehensive viewpoint is crucial).

In a context characterized by ‘energy democracy’, the prosumer, defined as «an idealized citizen of energy democracy» (Szulecki, 2018, p. 32), is one of the main protagonists, because he/she is informed and conscious of both ways the energy system functions, the impacts it has, and his/her own role in it.

Moreover, the decarbonization of the energy system and the greater use of renewable energy sources, as we said, is strictly linked to democracy and citizens’ participation. As Hélène Landemore argued, there is «no decarbonization without democratization»⁶: employing this statement, she wanted to put attention to the fact that climate change is not a mere technical issue of prediction, but it brings into play a political process involving questions of justice and equity, considering that for most people, climate change is about local problems (e.g. air pollution, toxic water, and so forth). Nevertheless, the development of renewable energy sources (e.g. solar photovoltaics, biogas plants, onshore wind) allows citizens, cooperatives, or small communities to invest and benefit from it, although ‘renewable energy’ is not always synonymous with ‘sustainability’ (as some of the participants in our fieldworks will also say). The figure of the prosumer is however at the basis of the ‘energy democracy’ concept, not only considering western countries, but also developing countries:

«As a result, over the last two decades these newcomers gained new roles, evolving from passive consumers to active prosumers of energy – most often not yet self-sufficient, but simultaneously producers and consumers of energy. The move from a centralized, mostly fossil fuel-based power sector, towards a distributed energy system that includes a significant number of small and medium power producers visibly affects the energy sector. That process of transition is observable not only in RES champion countries such as Denmark and Germany, but globally, from the industrial areas of the United States to the least developed communities in Africa or South Asia, where distributed energy generation might help societies leap-frog from energy poverty to sustainability. The

⁶<https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/no-decarbonization-without-democratization-by-helene-landemore-2022-08>

increasing role of societal actors, such as prosumers, energy cooperatives, or not-for-profit organizations, has led to the coining of the term ‘energy democracy’» (Szulecki, 2018, p. 22).

As we have said so far, ‘energy democracy’ is a result of a society that is in constant change, in terms of the environment and from a political and economic point of view. In addition, as suggested by Szulecki (2018), the concept of ‘energy democracy’ must be understood in terms of the necessity for greater accountability and democratization of a sector that was (is) traditionally not perceived as requiring public involvement and was (is) often depoliticized. For this purpose, Szulecki (2018) provides a framework for making ‘energy democracy’ an analytical and decision-making tool (Fig. 2).

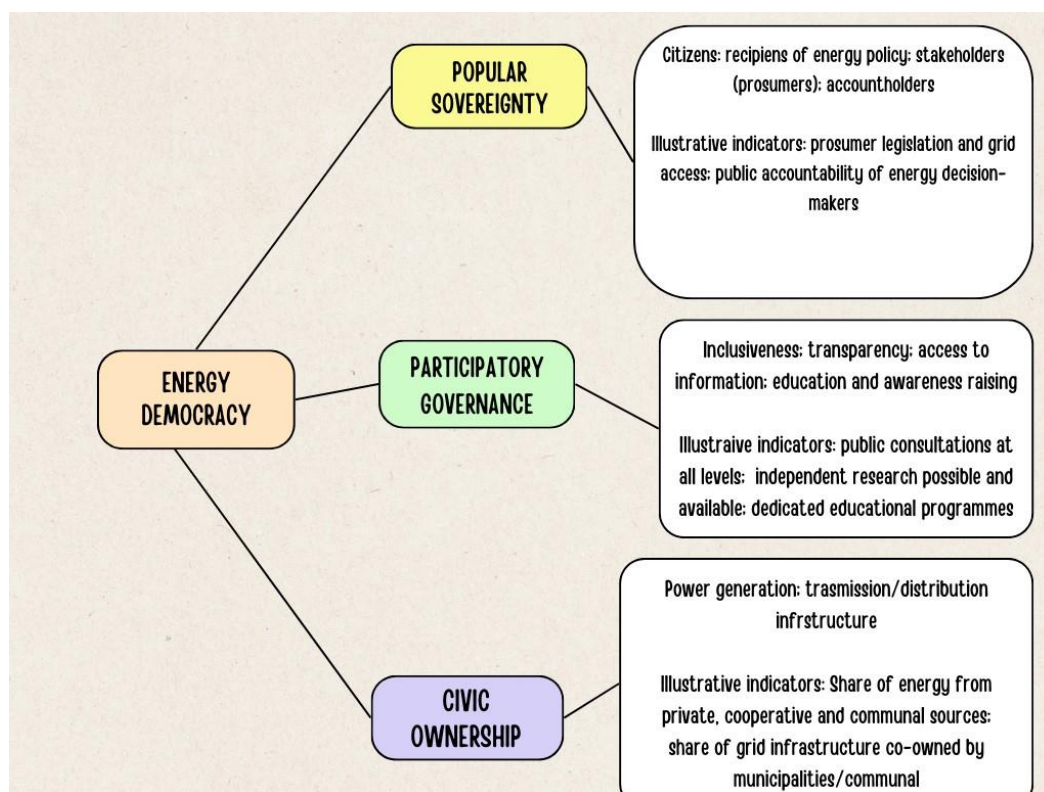


Fig. 2: ‘Energy democracy’: a shift from conceptual to analytical/decision-making tool

Source: author’s elaboration, from Szulecki (2018)

Within Fig. 2, the three dimensions - democratic popular sovereignty, participatory governance, and civic ownership – are associated with specific indicators to enable comparisons and the formulation of policy changes that move toward the ideal of ‘energy democracy’, making it a concrete and operational idea. Obviously, as also emphasized by the scholar, ‘energy

democracy’ is a multi-scale notion that connects the national polity with the individual citizen and is manifesting at all levels of government, which is important. The national political context remains therefore significant, even though instances of local-level cooperative setup or prosumer organization are crucial parts of democratization.

Conversely, a few studies (Juntunen & Martiskainen, 2021) seek to analyze the relationship between these concepts and that of ‘local energy autonomy’, where energy systems are decentralized and able to limit at the local scale input and output energy flows, becoming independent: in such a way, local energy systems could be seen in relation to the presence of renewable energy sources, as a way of direct empowerment of local communities. As observed by Puttilli (2014), the concept of ‘local energy autonomy’ could be intended in a «narrow view» (p. 86, translated by the author), in which a municipality, a province, or a region’s energy balance clearly shows a higher percentage of renewable energy sources. In such a scenario, in the medium-long term, achieving a balance of 100% renewable energy is the reference perspective (*ivi*).

On the other side, it is crucial to take a more comprehensive approach, taking into account how energy is produced and used as well as the interactions with the local dimension: in other words, ‘autonomy’ implies an active role of the local dimension in the use of local energy resources. At the same time, the ability of local actors to pursue their own development strategies autonomously and to actively interact with actors positioned at a supra-local level should be viewed as autonomy rather than «independence tout court» (*ivi*, p. 87, translated by the author). Within such a framework, citizens play a crucial role in the acceleration stage of the energy transition by acting as intermediaries who facilitate collaboration among stakeholders and contribute to tailoring solutions to local needs (Hofman *et al.*, 2023).

However, as also highlighted by Puttilli (2014), Prato allo Stelvio, in the Trentino-Alto Adige Italian region, represents an example of an ‘autonomous’ municipality from the energetic point of view. In that case, there is a comprehensive local energy system that includes wind, solar, hydroelectric, and farm biogas. With all of this, it is possible to satiate the local demand for heat (local heating network) and electricity. Beyond the technical and quantitative aspects, a local consortium in which the residents/consumers themselves are shareholders owns 90% of the hydropower plants, energy, and heat distribution networks (*ivi*). All this enables citizens to actively engage in societal and local energy management decisions, which primarily occur at the general energy assembly of the municipality (*ivi*).

Bernardoni (2021) also points out that the ancient and still-functioning E-Werk Prad (Azienda Energetica Prato) headquarters are in Prato allo Stelvio, next to the town hall. The cooperative,

which was founded in 1926 by 47 inhabitants, constructed the first hydroelectric plant along the Rio Cerin's course and electrified the village while it still lacked an electrical system. The cooperative still provides energy and hot water to the 3400 families and companies in the municipality almost a century after it first began operating, due to four hydroelectric units, four cogenerators, and a 28-kilometer district heating network (*ivi*). In such a context, we can talk about 'community enterprises', as a model of business for the general wellbeing of the community, characterized by citizens' control, in order to avoid financial controls: indeed, citizens, from mere consumers, become co-entrepreneurs, who participate in the sustainable development of the local community (*ivi*).

Conversely, as suggested by Puttilli (2014), it is worth paying attention to the fact that renewables are not necessarily a driver of democratization and energy independence, and this will be shown by a case study chosen for this research project (i.e. Santa Caterina).

In light of the 2007 definition of climate change as a 'threat multiplier' for instability in some of the world's most volatile regions by the CNA Military Advisory Board (MAB) (King & Goodman, 2011), it is evident that the phenomenon is already affecting the lives of people in significant ways. This is not merely due to the observed rise in average temperatures, but also because climate change acts as a 'threat multiplier'. In what sense? The direct effects of climate change, such as extreme weather events, have been identified as a contributing factor in the exacerbation of societal tensions and issues that directly affect people, including the housing crisis⁷.

On the other hand, renewables are often linked to social and environmental conflicts arising, e.g. concerning wind power (Puttilli, 2014). According to the Nimby Forum (founded in 2004, its main goal is to analyze the trend of NIMBY – 'Not in my backyard' – syndrome), in 2012, local committees, groups and organizations in Italy contested 222 electrical plants, the majority of which were facilities for the production of electricity from renewable sources (108 biomass plants, 32 hydroelectric plants, 32 wind farms) (Puttilli, 2014). On the other hand, every conflict and issue related to the social acceptance of a particular component of renewable energy must be contextualized, taking into account many factors (e.g. the geography and chronology of the conflict itself).

⁷ Concerning Italy, for instance, within the island of Ischia (Campania region), in 2022, a huge landslide occurred, due to heavy rain (the images available here are eloquent: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/28/europe/landslide-italy-ischia-death-toll-intl/index.html>)

However, NIMBY syndrome deserves a few extra words and a brief examination, also because of its connection with participatory democracy and community learning:

«NIMBY protests can initiate a process of community learning in which important issues of citizen self-understanding, democratic politics, technical expertise, and issue framing are addressed, resulting in innovative solutions that can serve as models for others. In the end, NIMBY politics often leads to more general changes in the pattern of citizen-state relations and also to technological innovation, with positive results in terms of both environmental outcomes and participatory governance» (Hager, 2022, p. 2)⁸.

All these remarks, far from being exhaustive, help us to understand crucial concepts that are closely linked to our action-research method, as well as particular issues to be addressed within the territorial areas. At once, our quasi-experiments are carried out with the knowledge and awareness that every territorial context is characterized by specific features and challenges from the socio-political and territorial, environmental, and economic points of view.

1.2. Empowering Climate Action through Participatory and Deliberative Democracy

Urban areas have a crucial role in climate action and participation: a ‘just transition’ demands a better comprehension of the potential for both a ‘participatory parity’ among various social groupings (i.e. full partnership in social interaction) and a ‘scalar parity’ whereby political authorities and members of civil society can interact and discuss issues on an equal footing (Ross *et al.*, 2021). Participatory and scalar parities indeed ensure equality and fairness in the fight against climate change (*ivi*). Particularly, within the Leeds Citizens’ Climate Jury, justice theory and Smith’s four evaluative criteria for meaningful deliberation are closely related: 1) ‘inclusiveness’ is comparable to justice recognition; 2) ‘unconstrained dialogue’, 3) ‘just decision’, and 4) ‘sensitivity to plural environmental values and conditions’, «combine to form the deliberative space and achieve representation justice» (*ivi*, p. 1524). Finally, findings from

⁸ The word ‘NIMBY’ has been used in a wide range of academic settings. Early in the 1980s, the acronym ‘NIMBY’ was widely used in American social science literature to refer to a variety of local environmental dangers that sparked community protests. It was most frequently used to characterize neighborhood demonstrations against governmental pollution sources like power plants and hazardous waste disposal sites (Hager, 2022). Other formulations eventually joined NIMBY, such as LULU (Local Unwanted Land Use), NIABY (Not In Anybody’s Backyard), NOPE (Not On Planet Earth), BANANA (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anything or Anyone) (*ivi*). Although it can constitute an important key to understanding our research, we shall not attempt to deeply discuss the complex issue of NIMBY, NIMBY actors may pose a more fundamental challenge to technocratic and top-down decision-making by raising the question of whether the choice to undertake a specific project (e.g. a wind farm) is actually of a technical nature at all or is instead better left up to the larger society. Nonetheless, NIMBY is essentially useful toward political innovation: «NIMBY protest can open new channels for citizen access. NIMBY engages and connects people who have not been politically active in the past. It involves building networks of support among diverse actors, including technical experts and government officials» (*ivi*, p. 9).

this study aim to inform local authorities about the potential role of deliberative processes in achieving legitimacy for transformative action in low-carbon transitions because local governments' declarations of a climate emergency are a recent and expanding global phenomenon (*ivi*). Additionally, according to the study, cities cannot properly address climate change without addressing current and existing socio-economic inequalities (e.g. the need to reduce GHG emissions by more than half will necessitate a change in citizens' behavior); on the other hand, «the LCCJ [ed: Leeds Citizens' Climate Jury] and other similar models provide opportunity for important co-benefits to emerge, such as trust-building, place identity and hope. We therefore recommend the scaling-up and scaling-across of this citizen jury model to other regional contexts given the potential of this model to meet many of the complex elements of just transition goals» (*ivi*, p. 1527).

Thus, as observed by Haas (2014), ensuring that citizens are actively involved in defining problems and solutions in their communities, deliberation represents the main countermeasure to the 'fast democracy' style of problem-solving, «inviting us to engage with each other at the value level and to step away from using shortcuts to form our opinions» (Haas, 2014, p. 1). Additionally, in a deliberative or participatory process, that at this point could be organized as our laboratories using the World Café format, participants are encouraged to co-create an alternative option, 'C', by exploring and coming up with new solutions, rather than debating between two options such as 'A' and 'B' (*ivi*).

In a nutshell, combining three essential components of democratic decision-making, i.e. 1) inclusion (which ensures a wide range of diverse public participation), 2) deliberation (which helps define problems, weigh options, and co-create solutions), and 3) power (which establishes a clear link between citizens' participation, public decisions, and action) (Clark & Teachout, 2013), slow democracy helps us to better contextualize our research method and activities on the ground. But as Clark and Teachout (2013) point out, in order to understand such concepts, it is necessary to think about the story of Portsmouth (New Hampshire).

The closure of the city's once-significant air force base, which resulted in the loss of thousands of jobs, threw the community's economy and social structure into disarray. Due to the city's shifting demographics, two of Portsmouth's elementary schools had low student enrollments, while another was overflowing. For this purpose, the school board created a redistricting committee (in 2000) to find a solution, and they came up with an innovative technique called 'study circles'. A group of 105 citizen volunteers who represented the demographics of the city were recruited by the organizers to take part in a series of small-group discussions. Within that context, the 'study circles' promoted a slow and careful approach to deliberation, and in order

to ensure thorough information gathering, the groups went to all three schools. As parents and neighbors, they also spent many hours exchanging tales, which helped to dispel misconceptions and foster mutual respect. In the end, concerning the discussion of policy options, it was not a mere choice between ‘A’ and ‘B’, but it led to innovative ideas and common ground.

The groups presented their findings to a school board in the process’ final stage, which was more receptive to hearing their suggestions because it had been involved from the start. The 105 ‘ambassadors’ presented to parents and neighbors the board’s plan for \$2 million in renovations to help balance the quality of the three schools. With the proposal’s approval, a disastrous impasse that had lasted ten years came to an end. The fastest way to success turned out to be a ‘slow’ process (*ivi*).

However, deliberative and participatory models of democracy exhibit an alternative conception of democracy that could be closely related to the ‘slow’ approach. As McIvor (2011) noted,

«[...] the most pressing concern for political theorists and social scientists concerned with equality and democracy is that social acceleration now seems interlinked with “desynchronization,” meaning that only certain well-positioned groups and individuals are capable of reaping the benefits of speed. Inhabitants who share a common space occupy vastly different temporalities. Traditional inequalities in turn become more stubborn; a lasting if not permanent inequality develops between those who can adapt and change quickly to new opportunities and others who fall behind. Democracy, in the words of Paul Virilio, is supplanted by “dromocracy”-rule of the quick» (p. 60).

Nevertheless, such bottom-up democratic practices should not remain niche practices. Adopting Latouche’s line of thought (about ‘neorural communities’, fair trade, ethical banks) such experiences should work «to strengthen and build a niche in the ecological sense of the word, without remaining isolated in the trench that allowed them to be born» (Latouche, 2005, p. 91, translated by the author). For instance, as emphasized by Clark and Teachout (2013), ‘study circles’ have been used in Portsmouth for the past fifteen years to address a variety of other topics, such as racism, the city’s master plan, bullying in schools, and last but not least environmental sustainability.

Similarly, the so-called ‘grassroots initiatives’, which evoke our Cafés, can work as flywheels for good behaviors toward more sustainable lives, influencing local businesses and local governments in the process to make areas more habitable and environmentally friendly (Landi, 2015). The term ‘grassroots innovations’ is used to define activist networks and organizations that provide creative bottom-up sustainable development solutions that take into account the local context as well as the goals and ideals of the communities involved: in this way, two

crucial aspects for sustainable development are innovation and community action (although rarely linked), while grassroots projects, in contrast to mainstream business greening, take place in civil society settings and involve devoted activists who test out social ideas as well as greener technologies (Seyfang & Smith, 2007).

Nevertheless, as suggested by Landi (2015), in a multi-level perspective, consisting of three concepts, i.e. 1) sociotechnical landscape (macro-level), 2) sociotechnical regimes (meso-level), and 3) niche-innovations (micro-level). According to this perspective, the three levels of analysis are useful to reach a 'socio-technical' transition: in other words, as bottom-up initiatives, niches innovations, in which our fieldworks perfectly fit, can set up innovative products or virtuous practices of eco-sustainability at the level of civil society. As still emphasized by Landi (2015), niche practices' efficacy depends on regime support (e.g. from the meso-level of local government); on the other hand, innovations and changes at a macro-level can destabilize regimes, creating a downward pressure (climate, industrialization process of a state, an external shock like war, can be considered as examples of changes at a macro-level). The actual challenge and difficulty arise from the opening of a window of opportunity for niche innovations (e.g. alluding to our fieldworks), which allows their success to enter the mainstream.

Finally, it is crucial to note that niches are typically characterized by a competitive relationship with the existing regime, while the goal of such niches is to replace it through new practices: thus, within a sustainability perspective, innovations from niches have the potential to become an added value for the existing system, thanks to knowledge and practices that the regime can use to solve issues and to enhance its features (*ivi*).

Nevertheless, as argued by Sintomer and del Pino (2014), «beyond a few limited experiments in which the idea of “democratising democracy” is taken seriously and real decision-making power is given to participants on major issues, participation in Southern Europe [ed: Italy, France, Spain] has been generally focused on minor issues that may matter for everyday life but are hardly connected to real change at a societal level» (p. 29). According to these authors, although over the years participatory processes have increased in Southern Europe, local elections in Italy (2009) and Spain (2011), with the victory of the right, have led to the end of a few experiments (*ivi*).

The presence of participatory and deliberative arenas, wherein citizens engage in constructive discourse, has the potential to markedly enhance democratic legitimacy and facilitate democratic reform (Cini & Felicetti, 2018). Thus, contemporary democracies, such as Italy, seem to require a significant increase in deliberative participatory bodies to achieve the critical

mass necessary for meaningful democratization, which remains elusive due to institutional resistance to substantial democratic transformation (*ivi*).

1.2.1. Objective of the Quasi-Experiments: The Change in Individual Preferences

The primary objective of our quasi-experiments was to assess the Cafés' capacity to induce shifts in individual preferences among participants regarding separate waste collection (within the four areas involved), green urban areas (within the two urban contexts), and renewable energy (within the two inner areas). Considering the inherent constraints arising from the absence of random selection of participants, and consequently the absence of a representative sample from the population, statistical discussions about our findings are precluded. It is however crucial to highlight that our fieldworks were not designed to instigate tangible changes about specific local issues, such as the socio-environmental impact of an infrastructure: in other words, the aim was not to 'deliberate' on a particular policy issue. In those cases, protracted deliberative and participatory processes would be required.

Instead, the focal point of our fieldworks was the individual, whose political ideologies and cultural perspectives on environmental matters took center stage. Simultaneously, the significance of innovative ideas and solutions proposed by participants within discussions played a pivotal role in shaping the outcomes.

However, the strengths of our quasi-experiments are manifold. Firstly, they have the potential to influence individual preferences by actively engaging participants. Secondly, they create an environment conducive to open dialogue and learning, extending beyond mere awareness-raising to foster concrete actions at both individual and collective levels. Thirdly, these quasi-experiments align with the action-research method, promoting collective learning and a commitment to addressing sustainability issues. Lastly, they can serve as a catalyst for deliberative processes, facilitating dialogue and bridging the gap between talk and action.

1.2.2. Advantages and Challenges of the 'Open Door' Method vs. Random Selection

The most interesting element of a deliberative process is that

«Each participant arrives at the dialogic forum with his or her own judgment on the issue that is under discussion. These initial positions depend on preferences, on beliefs concerning the state of the world and cause-effect relationships; they must be accompanied by arguments that, at least presumably, are capable of being justified in the eyes of the public. The point is that the nature of these initial positions may vary greatly across different situations. They may be more or less definite, more or less solid, more or less malleable. Not all participants enter

the deliberative process with equally well structured or equally firm convictions. And this initial aspect is likely to influence the following process» (Bobbio, 2010, pp. 2-3).

Furthermore, deliberative and participatory experiences aim to lead collective insights toward common goods beyond individuals' raw preferences (Giannetti, 2007). Nevertheless, as emphasized by Elster (2016),

«[...] the central concern of politics should be the transformation of preferences rather than their aggregation. On this view the core of the political process is the public and rational discussion about the common good, not the isolated act of voting according to private preferences. The goal of politics should be unanimous and rational consensus, not an optimal compromise between irreducibly opposed interests. The forum is not to be contaminated by the principles that regulate the market, nor should communication be confused with bargaining» (pp. 34-35).

Such a statement is highly relevant for the whole discourse concerning behavioral changes related to climate change and environmental concerns. Indeed, as argued by Barry (1996), «behavioural changes motivated by the internalisation of particular normative orientations is more effective and longer lasting than behavioural changes based on external or coercive imposition» (p. 122).

Such a point of view seeks to characterize our quasi-experiments on environmental issues, and we will see what our findings are about. However, as Barry (1996) writes,

«[...] Changing one's lifestyle or pattern of consumption in the interests of sustainability is more effective if done out of a sense that one believes it is *right* to do so rather than because one is told to do so, or because it is simply expedient to do so. Sustainability policies then become less a *modus vivendi* or a prudential strategy, but more akin to an ecological version of a Rawlsian 'overlapping consensus'. But for this to work people must be genuinely committed to the moral rightness, rather than a begrudging acceptance, of, for want of a better word, the political 'sense' of sustainability» (pp. 122-123).

As will be seen in the next chapter, participants in our fieldworks emphasized very important concepts related to the main and indispensable aspect of deliberation (i.e. the dialogical aspect). For instance, writing about the Australian Citizens' Parliament, Dryzek (2009) argued that

«Deliberation is a particular kind of communication that ideally induces reflection about preferences, beliefs, and values in non-coercive fashion, and that connects particular interests to more general principles. One of its key virtues is reciprocity: communicating in terms that others who do not share one's point of view or framework can accept. Deliberation is different from adversarial debate. The initial aim is not to win, but to understand. Deliberation allows that people are open to changing their minds» (Dryzek, 2009, p. 3).

These observations are crucial for the importance we give to the micro-level scale. Concerning sustainability and climate change, institutional changes alone are not sufficient, and macro-level reorganization needs to be supplemented with changes at the local and, more importantly, at the micro-level of individual citizens (*ivi*).

Nevertheless, this section explores the advantages and challenges of using the ‘open-door’ methodology rather than random participant selection. The concept of random selection has been regarded as an important aspect by theorists of deliberative democracy since the 1990s (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Floridia, 2017). However, as also emphasized by Talpin (2020), in early deliberative theorists (e.g. Habermas, 1981; Manin, 1985; Elster, 1986; Cohen, 1989), the random selection of citizens was not directly mentioned.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the advocacy for such a method does not automatically translate into the democratization of democracy, as posited by Talpin (2020), by paraphrasing Pateman (2012).

One prominent issue in discussions of deliberative processes is the gap between mini-publics and the broader society, highlighting the imperfect alignment of such a method: «Given that the microcosms, on the Deliberative Poll model, are not designed to reach consensus but instead collect opinions in confidential questionnaires so as to protect responses from social pressure, there will often be disagreement at the end of the process. How does a citizen or voter who has not deliberated deal with that disagreement? » (Fishkin, 2018, p. 146).

Fishkin’s Deliberative Poll®, however, shares common elements (e.g. use of pre- and post-event questionnaires) with our quasi-experiments. As emphasized by Floridia (2017), the Deliberative Poll® aimed to conjoin the three fundamental principles of a normative vision of democracy: political equality, nontyranny, and deliberation. This is precisely why the Deliberative Poll® can be regarded as the pioneering instance of the «*operational translation* of a theoretical model of democratic deliberation» (Floridia, 2017, p. 149, translated by the author). It is important to note that in a Deliberative Poll®, typically involving a cohort of 100 to 200 citizens, participants initially respond to a questionnaire addressing a specific policy issue. Subsequently, those same citizens, organized into small groups, engage in discussion at facilitated tables, exchanging their opinions on the subject and potentially incorporating expert insights. At the conclusion of the deliberative process, another questionnaire assesses the transformation or persistence of initial preferences, along with the varying degrees of intensity in their newly formed judgments (*ibid.*).

The operational framework of Deliberative Poll® serves as the foundation for what is termed ‘mini-publics’ (Fung, 2007) – deliberative arenas of a group of citizens bestowed with the status of a representative microcosm reflecting what all citizens might think if provided with a certain amount of information on the issues at hand, enabling them to engage in proper deliberation (Floridia, 2017).

As emphasized by Fishkin (2018, p. 140), mini-publics are characterized by some criticism:

- 1) «domination by the more advantaged», by promoting inequalities within the process;
- 2) «polarization»;
- 3) «lack of citizen competence», and
- 4) «the gap between mini-publics and the broader society».

Addressing the initial critique, as articulated by Fishkin (2018), it was evident not only in the broader global context (e.g. in US) but also within the specific framework of the European context:

«In the Europolis project the issues were combined into two indices, one on climate change and one on immigration. There were twenty-five small groups that yielded fifty group issue combinations. Only about half of the group issue combinations moved toward the positions favored by the more advantaged in terms of class. However, there was a modest movement, 60 percent, toward the initial positions of the males. In our view this falls short of domination but it does suggest that the males may have had somewhat more influence in the EU discussions» (*ivi*, p. 142).

From the «polarization» point of view, as noticed by Fishkin (2018), «if an issue has a midpoint, the argument is that there will be a strong tendency for the group to move further away from the midpoint starting from whichever side of the midpoint the group starts from. If the mean view of the group starts to the left of the midpoint, the polarization hypothesis is that the group will move further to the left» (*ivi*, p. 143), and vice versa. Within this framework, three mechanisms drive this pattern: an imbalance in argument familiarity favoring the majority side, a social comparison effect pressuring conformity, and undecided individuals leaning toward the majority due to social pressure and lack of strong views (*ibid.*). On the other hand, concerning the «lack of citizen competence», «Rosenberg argues that it is not the political situation but the competence of the public that explains the alleged lack of reasoning ability on public problems. On his view, it is a matter of the cognitive and communicative ability of most citizens, and so questions of public policy are probably best left to experts» (*ivi*, p. 144).

However, other scholars (e.g. Sintomer, 2018) point to mini-publics' limitations, particularly concerning the switch from a single arena, albeit statistically and sociologically representative, to a broader public sphere. Drawing on Fishkin's *Democracy When the People are Thinking* (2018), Sintomer (2018) identifies three issues related to the mini-publics: *Democracy When the People Are Thinking* tackles several problems with early mini-publics, including Deliberative Polling. First, strict methodologies restricted democratic imagination and hindered large-scale implementation. Second, early mini-publics confined deliberation to limited spaces, opposing broader public sphere and fostering a new elitism by managing political involvement. Third, they overlooked power imbalances in real democracies, making it hard to address structural inequalities. New sortition-based experiments in the 21st century aim to resolve these issues (Sintomer, 2018).

As nonetheless highlighted by Floridia (2017), «the concern is no longer merely the absence of «participation» per se, but rather the absence of participation supported by a robust *civiness* and the genuine ability of citizens to form autonomous and reflective opinions» (*ivi*, p. 162, translated by the author).

The concept of 'mini-publics' is anticipated to garner significant traction within academic and political circles. At its core, this concept underscores the critical role of information. It hinges on the presence of well-informed citizens who have access to a wealth of information and exhibit a nuanced and impartial capacity for political judgment (*ivi*). The success and adoption of mini-publics, therefore, rest on the premise that an enlightened citizenry is fundamental to the functioning of these deliberative processes.

Our quasi-experiments are conceived at a micro-level, focusing on nuanced aspects, and apply the same methodology based on the 'open door' method across the four areas (described in Section 1.5), we recognize the imperative of maintaining methodological uniformity for comparability and reliability. This adherence, however, coexists with an awareness of the potential self-selection bias (Bobbio, 2019) associated with the 'open door' method.

It is equally important to emphasize the significance of considering and incorporating the nuances of local contexts. The dynamics and factors influencing citizens' engagement can vary markedly based on the unique characteristics and intricacies of the specific communities or regions involved. Therefore, an overall understanding of these local contexts is essential for refining and contextualizing our observations and conclusions from utilizing the 'open door'.

To enrich our understanding of the complexities inherent in these participatory/deliberative methods, such as 'open door', it is imperative to reference the insights provided by Bobbio (2019). Indeed, Bobbio's discussion sheds further light on the articulated dynamics and

theoretical underpinnings associated with the principles of openness and the implementation of mini-publics:

«Participatory designs are aimed at involving all the people affected by the policy at stake. But, in practice, only a tiny – a very tiny – minority of them can actually participate. As a selection is bound to take place, the problem is how to make it occur. Designers can rely on two broad alternatives that tend to generate the most important distinction in participatory arrangements: (i) *open-door arenas*, i.e. venues where anybody can step in and where participants are thus *self-selected*, and (ii) *mini-publics*, i.e. venues that claim to represent some features of the affected population on a small scale; in this case, participants are selected by the organizers through a certain criterion (e.g. random selection, representation of interests, ideas, discourses)» (Bobbio, 2019, p. 48).

Bobbio (2019) highlights the challenge of achieving broad participation in participatory designs, emphasizing that despite the aim of involving all those affected by a policy issue, only a tiny minority can practically participate. To address this, ‘open-door arenas’ and ‘mini-publics’ often emerge as alternatives in order to face the dilemma of selection. While ‘open door’ method promotes good accessibility, it may result in a skewed representation, as only those with the motivation, time, or resources to participate will do so.

On the other hand, mini-publics, allowing for a more controlled selection of participants based on specific criteria set by the organizers (e.g., random selection, representation of interests, ideas, and discourses), they can enhance the representativeness of the participant group, ensuring a more diverse range of perspectives and experiences (*ivi*). However, the challenge lies in determining the appropriate criteria for selection, as different criteria may introduce biases or limitations. Additionally, there may be concerns about the legitimacy of the selected mini-public in genuinely representing the affected population.

As consistently emphasized by Bobbio (2019), the ‘open door’ characterizes traditional forms of participation, such as public hearings, as well as more modern mechanisms such as participatory budgets and the French *débat public*. Conversely, mini-publics encompass various instruments of deliberative democracy like citizens’ juries, consensus conferences, Deliberative Polls®, and citizens’ assemblies. Mini-publics represent the forefront of deliberative democratic practices, with current theoretical and empirical research predominantly focused on them, the ‘open door’ method is unduly understudied.

In summary, selecting participants in participatory designs involves a trade-off between the openness of participation and the need for a representative sample, while the ultimate goal is to strike a balance that ensures a meaningful and diverse involvement of stakeholders in the

policy-making process. Indeed, as highlighted by Stapper and Duyvendak (2020), the way participation is arranged may favor some residents over others.

It is important to re-emphasize that our quasi-experiments were not explicitly concentrated on a specific local policy issue; instead, they were centered around themes of general interest, such as separate waste collection. It is worth considering that one or more particular local policy issues or conflicts might have emerged organically during our fieldworks, and indeed, this appears to have been the case (e.g. the construction of an off-shore wind farm, during Santa Caterina's Café).

It is for this very reason that the 'open door' method seems not to have exclusively attracted the involvement of citizens already 'active' from the political and/or associative point of view or specifically interested in the matters addressed by the laboratories, as demonstrated, among other factors, by the findings of the conducted questionnaires.

However, the spectrum of participants in the 'open-door' method significantly influences the external validity of the obtained results. The varied backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences brought by participants contribute to a richer understanding of the subject under investigation. While enhancing the depth of insights, such diversity introduces considerations for the generalizability of findings. The challenge lies in navigating the potential skewness submitted by the self-selection aspect of the 'open door'. Recognizing and addressing such an aspect is essential for a nuanced interpretation of results and assessing the extent to which they can be extrapolated to broader contexts.

Our quasi-experiments illustrate that the 'open-door' is not inherently detrimental. Indeed, while biases may be inherent in employing this method, it is equally valid that these biases can yield positive effects on participants in the process: self-selection highlights the openness of a process by ensuring no one is excluded, but it can introduce biases in terms of socioeconomic status (educated individuals are more likely to participate than the less educated and disadvantaged), time availability (e.g. retired people may be more inclined to participate), and preference intensity (the participatory process could mainly attract those highly interested in the issue) (Bobbio, 2019). These biases might skew participation toward the well-off, educated, and those with strong interests in the issue, though the latter can enhance engagement and may counteract social biases if the issue is significant to disadvantaged groups (*ivi*).

However, in some countries, the 'open door' method is preferred for involving citizens. In Portugal, for example, the national Constitution (Art. 2) has fostered a culture of participatory democracy based on 'open door' processes, which allow citizens to engage at any stage (Allegretti, 2021). As a result, Portugal lacks a tradition of 'mini-publics' or deliberative

practices, and concepts like ‘sortition’ and ‘random selection’ have not been central to political proposals for citizens’ involvement (*ivi*). On the other hand, attempts to use random selection have been obstructed by bureaucratic issues from the Privacy Protection Authority (*ivi*). Participatory processes in Portugal focus on involving citizens as individuals, driven by high levels of social mistrust and a preference for direct participation, which explains the success of Participatory Budgeting (*ivi*).

Nevertheless, Allegretti (2021) emphasizes the limits of the ‘open door’, as well as its potential, stating that over the past decade, the widespread adoption of Participatory Budgeting and other mechanisms embracing an ‘open door’, has led to a dual effect: on the one hand, it has marginalized preorganized groups concerning forums where individuals are the primary focal points for dialogue with institutions; on the other hand, it has championed the legitimization of processes founded on the direct expression of will (i.e. co-decision), as opposed to procedures centered around inclusion throughout various stages of deliberative processes (*ivi*).

Our research aligns with the growing recognition that deliberative processes, especially at the local level, should not be *closed* but rather *open* to all who can and wish to participate. In an era where fostering public engagement with climate change is paramount (e.g. Brulle *et al.*, 2012), restricting participatory and/or deliberative processes to randomly selected citizens may not be always desirable. And this is particularly true in smaller-scale contexts, such as Italian inner/rural areas, which are often overlooked but can play a crucial role in climate action.

Likewise, as can be inferred from Fabrinio Mendonça and Schettini M. Cunha (2014), the ‘open door’ enhances the intensity of preferences, and participation is extended to those citizens who are strongly motivated and/or directly affected by the issues addressed within the specific process. Indeed, in their analysis, one of the interviewees highlights the existence of pressures from specific organizations during the preparatory meetings of the seminars: «The pressure of some groups is quite clear. Some get stronger and some operate together» (*ivi*, p. 88). Within such a framework, the scholars state that

«such behavior is not prejudicial to participation. On the contrary, it reflects the engagement of some actors who tend to strengthen the manifestation of intense preferences. However, the logic of competition may restrain deliberation. It is not important to exchange reasons for the qualification of positions. It is not necessary to build mediating proposals that acknowledge different arguments. There is no need to reflect on one’s own positions through the perspective of different ones» (*ibid.*).

Although Chambers (2003) emphasizes that «moderators, random sampling (or at least bringing together people with very different viewpoints), and no voting will reduce group polarization and to that extent enhance deliberation» (p. 320), it is, however, essential to note that even in the context of mini-publics, a degree of self-selection is probable, given that only a tiny fraction of the individuals initially chosen may ultimately choose to engage within the deliberative process (Bobbio, 2019). This phenomenon raises considerations about the extent to which the resulting participant group truly represents the broader population and emphasizes the ongoing challenge of achieving a diverse and inclusive representation in deliberative practices.

Undoubtedly, it is apparent that self-selection phenomena may manifest not only in the ‘open door’ but also in other participant recruitment methods. Isernia *et al.* (2013), for instance, concerning the EuroPolis Deliberative Poll, emphasize how any recruitment method is not immune to risks such as self-selection, referencing the logistical commitment that a large-scale process like EuroPolis has entailed. The latest information provided by Isernia *et al.* (2013) regarding financial compensation to participants can only be interpreted as an inherent bias in this type of process. Furthermore, such an approach could influence the credibility of the process: such an issue was also highlighted by Giannetti *et al.* (2007) concerning a Bologna’s citizens’ jury in 2006 where a company in charge did a random selection of participants, that was affected by the fact that each juror received a gift voucher.

Nevertheless, even though it has been observed that remuneration can ensure a better representation of young people, immigrants, or individuals with a low level of education (Fourniau, 2020), this practice remains a debate among scholars of deliberative democracy. For instance, in the case of Cigéo project, carried out by the French National Radioactive Waste Management Agency between 2013 and 2014, «the Steering Committee considered the absence of remuneration as a condition of participants’ sincere commitment to a demanding deliberative task. [...]» (ivi, p. 388).

Beyond the issue of participants’ remuneration, it is crucial to examine the five dilemmas in public participation design discussed by Bobbio (2019): 1) participation vs. deliberation, 2) online vs. on-site, 3) open door vs. mini-publics, 4) decision-making vs. consultation, 5) hot vs. cold deliberation (whether participatory forums should prioritize non-partisan, cold deliberation, or include partisan/conflictual positions for hot deliberation). According to Bobbio (2019) striking a balance between detached deliberation in safe spaces and heated debates in real-world settings is a key challenge in participatory design for legitimacy and meaningful dialogue. The scholar conveys that «several combinations of the items [...] are possible, and many positions in between may be found for each row. Participatory and deliberative settings

should not be seen as completely alternative paths, but rather as suggestions that can be hybridized. The most interesting arrangements are found somewhere in between» (*ivi*, p. 54). Nevertheless, it is evident that in the event of arranging a large-scale deliberative process (regional, national, supranational), random selection would be indispensable for the successful outcome of the process: in order to give another example, in 2021, ‘America in One Room: Climate and Energy’⁹ project, organized by Stanford’s Center for Deliberative Democracy, virtually gathered around 500 U.S. citizens to deliberate on policy options for achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. This was the «largest Deliberative Poll in history»¹⁰, conducted online with proprietary AI moderation, providing a unique platform for in-depth discussion on climate policy with a representative cross-section of the U.S. electorate¹¹.

Moreover, in that case, deliberation results were presented to the 26th UN Climate Conference (COP26) in Glasgow, demonstrating that everyday citizens can tackle intricate legislative matters and reach practical solutions¹². It is evident how this example diverges significantly from our quasi-experiments, particularly regarding the number of involved citizens and the intended purpose.

It should be emphasized once again that our project does not intend to dismiss the random selection of participants in deliberative democracy spaces *a priori*. As previously stated, this choice was driven by the fact that these were micro-level fieldworks conducted with limited financial resources. However, it is envisioned that, in a future perspective, they could evolve into deliberative processes, using random selection.

1.2.3. The Role of Transparency and Inclusivity in Enhancing Research Quality

Transparency and inclusivity, promoted by the chosen methodology, can contribute significantly to the overall quality of the research in several ways. Firstly, transparency enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of the research process (Elman & Kapiszewski, 2014), allowing stakeholders and participants at the fieldwork activities to understand the methodology, data collection, analysis, and the aim of the research. Additionally, transparency fosters confidence in the validity of the findings: according to Elman *et al.* (2018), «given that increased transparency offers new ways to document and demonstrate rigor and relevance,

⁹ <https://stanforddaily.com/2021/08/12/center-for-deliberative-democracy-focuses-on-climate-change/>

¹⁰ <https://helena.org/projects/a1r-climate-and-energy>

¹¹ *ivi*

¹² *ivi*

transparency also offers new opportunities for political science insights to be made more accessible, credible, and valuable for more people» (p. 31).

However, the difficulties in attaining transparency vary across different research traditions and individual projects, and on the other hand, «there is broad rejection of the notion of one-size-fits all standards or procedures for transparency» (*ivi*, p. 41). As still stated by Elman *et al.* (2018), the Qualitative Transparency Deliberations¹³ «represent a step toward broader debate, offering scholars from a range of research communities an opportunity to develop and express their own consensuses on how to make research transparent» (*ibid.*). Transparent research is nevertheless capable of enabling policymakers to comprehend and apply findings effectively: «When transparency facilitates rigor and relevance without raising significant ethical or legal concerns, it has the potential to greatly increase the social net benefit of a research community's work» (*ivi*, pp. 44-45).

Regarding inclusivity, diverse perspectives and experiences are considered, enriching the data and enhancing the depth of insights. A broader participant pool contributes to the generalizability of the research findings beyond specific demographics or contexts, thereby increasing the study's validity.

Focusing on the example of libraries, according to Griffis & Johnson (2014), those located within rural areas, and involved in their analysis, are mainly characterized by four elements: «1. Provide opportunities for socialization that results in the exchange of information; 2. Help integrate newcomers (and, in one case at least, cultural minorities) into the community; 3. Symbolize local identity (and, though to a varying extent, civic autonomy); and 4. Support not just themselves as a community place but a larger, broader network of community places and organizations» (*ivi*, p. 107). Such features may be seen as something not only related to public libraries (although Gazzola's Café was carried out within a public library) but also related to other spaces in which our fieldworks were carried out. For example, Cittadinanzattiva's offices, in the line of libraries, serve as a central hub for social interaction and the dissemination of information, playing a pivotal role in fostering community engagement and knowledge-sharing, as also demonstrated by 'Community PRO'¹⁴.

We must be aware that the choice of making a participatory fieldwork in a library is not a trivial decision. As argued by Kranich (2020), libraries are an essential element for democratic practices, and librarians are carriers of civic activism for several reasons: firstly, libraries serve as repositories of knowledge, providing citizens with access to a wide range of information,

¹³ <https://www.qualtd.net/>

¹⁴ See Appendix for a complete description of the project

literature, and resources, promoting inclusivity, facilitating public discourse, and supporting lifelong learning. In a democratic society, an informed citizenry is essential for making well-informed decisions and participating meaningfully in civic life.

In other words, libraries may encourage to catalyze a shift from merely informing citizens to engaging them in the issues of community and environment. As stated by Kranich (2020), «democracies need libraries» (p. 121) because they support an informed citizenry, which is crucial for public discourse and democratic participation. Libraries play a pivotal role in ensuring access to information, fostering information literacy, and promoting free expression (*ivi*). They serve as vital hubs for community dialogue and democratic engagement, facilitating the exchange of ideas and the advancement of knowledge (*ivi*).

Within this framework, libraries may be a stronghold of participatory democracy, and «hubs» for deliberative democracy (Kranich, 2010), allowing citizens to promote innovation and change through their empowerment, creating integrated solutions that contribute to the building of an increasingly sustainable future.

Ultimately, an inclusive approach fosters a sense of ownership and engagement among participants, potentially leading to more meaningful and relevant data. It also aligns with ethical considerations by ensuring diverse voices are heard and represented in the research process.

Finally, transparency and inclusivity not only bolster the methodological rigor of the research but also contribute to the ethical conduct of the study and the applicability of its findings to a broader audience.

Such principles are also inherent in the World Café approach: indeed, as emphasized by Lorenzetti *et al.* (2016), the principle 5 of the Emancipatory Learning Charter is referred to the fact that «educators need to address systemic barriers to participation»: educators have an ethical obligation to ensure that diverse and marginalized voices are heard and accounted for by acting as allies and advocates for those who face barriers to participation (Lorenzetti *et al.*, 2016). This includes addressing language barriers, providing accessible locations and resources, and making concrete efforts to identify and eliminate systemic barriers to inclusion also in the World Café format (*ivi*).

Rather than talking about ‘educators’, in our case, we may speak of the role of ‘researchers’, emphasizing the ethical responsibility of researchers to ensure the inclusion of diverse perspectives. In the context of a World Café, this would involve actively creating an environment where all participants, regardless of their background, can express themselves fully, as reiterated from the outset of our fieldworks. As also remarked by Lorenzetti *et al.* (2016), «despite the limitations, we believe that TWC method together with the Charter

principles is a powerful tool to foster transformative learning and social change by creating a space, in which to awaken consciousness, illuminate dominant ideology, act on human agency, and work to reconstitute a more inclusive and interconnected human experience» (*ivi*).

As also Groulx *et al.* (2017) pointed out, the so-called ‘transformative learning’ is an essential concept for addressing climate change issues: transformative learning emphasizes dialogue and reflection to challenge assumptions and foster collective understanding. Such a process is crucial for effective climate action, as it enables community-driven solutions beyond expert-led approaches (Groulx *et al.*, 2017).

Simultaneously, trust and inclusion form foundational principles within the National Action Plan for Open Government¹⁵. Through this strategic framework, Italy has a unique opportunity to actualize the *modus operandi* of open government. Such a framework fosters transparency in governmental actions, promotes stakeholder collaboration, and implements an inclusive digital transformation of public services. The overarching objective is to leverage these initiatives to support the national response to the pandemic, aiming to fortify the resilience required to confront future global crisis. It is important to highlight that the plan actively seeks to identify beneficial synergies with the Forum for Sustainable Development and other national initiatives, such as the National Strategy for Inner Areas. Additionally, it aims to collaborate with organizations already engaged in gathering participatory practices across diverse sectors, including entities like Cittadinanzattiva and Labsus.

As previously emerged, adopting the ‘open door’ method raises various ethical considerations that necessitate careful attention throughout the research process. One primary concern lies in the potential for unequal participation, as individuals with specific privileges or resources may be more likely to engage, introducing biases into the findings.

Furthermore, the ‘open door’ may inadvertently expose participants to risks or vulnerabilities, mainly if the topics discussed are sensitive or contentious. Safeguarding participant well-being becomes crucial, necessitating robust informed consent procedures and clear communication about the nature of the quasi-experiments under the World Café format.

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity is another ethical imperative, given that open participation may lead to increased visibility of participants’ views. Striking a balance between transparency and safeguarding individual privacy becomes a crucial consideration: in this regard, for instance, the Cafés’ pre- and post-event questionnaires were entirely anonymous, and no sensitive data were solicited.

¹⁵ <https://open.gov.it/governo-aperto/piano-nazionale/5nap>

To effectively address these ethical considerations, researchers (e.g. Manohar *et al.*, 2018) commonly employ proactive measures, encompassing the implementation of outreach strategies aimed at diversifying participant recruitment, trying to ensure a broader representation across demographic categories (although it is not a straightforward issue with ‘open door’). Additionally, researchers emphasize the importance of providing comprehensive information about the research objectives to potential participants.

On the other hand, regular communication with participants, maintaining transparency about the research process, and being responsive to feedback are also essential components of an ethically sound ‘open door’ method. Guillemin & Heggen (2009) also emphasize that developing positive interpersonal relationships between the researcher and participant is essential to qualitative research. It is interesting how such scholars combine (1) the ‘zone of the untouchable’ by the Danish philosopher Løgstrup, with (2) the idea of ‘ethical mindfulness’: according to the first, individuals possess a distinct private sphere characterized as a realm of integrity, constituting the inviolable core of their personality, named ‘zone of the untouchable’ by Løgstrup (*ivi*); concerning ‘ethical mindfulness’, a term used by Guillemin and Gillam in referring to ethics in health care, such a term pertains to a set of pre-dispositions or specific features, rather than any singular skill or trait (*ivi*). Combining these two concepts may be useful in qualitative research, highlighting that «paramount within qualitative research is a need to balance establishing rapport and developing rich relationships with participants while maintaining distance out of respect for participants’ privacy» (*ivi*, p. 298).

1.3. The Research Question

The main research question (RQ) that this study addresses is the following:

How can informal and constructive conversations, structured through the World Café format, foster a deliberate transformation in individual preferences on climate change, contributing to the formation of a ‘green consensus’ across different territorial contexts, such as Emilia-Romagna and Calabria regions?

The RQ takes into account the action-research method applied in our research, which incorporates key features of qualitative research. The research also assesses the conversational process for fostering constructive dialogue around climate change-related issues, in the specific

territorial areas. In addition, it offers new possibilities for understanding and implementing bottom-up participation. In this framework, informal and constructive conversations serve as the foundation for enabling mutual intelligence, defined as the capacity of individuals to collaboratively generate knowledge, solutions, and shared understandings through dialogue. Hence, the main research question (RQ) includes elements that may lead to the replicability of such activities.

The RQ entails the following research sub-question (SQ):

SQ: How could urban and rural inhabitants be involved to access the mutual intelligence needed to create innovative paths to climate change issues?

Such SQ is aimed at increasing the citizens' participation in defining adequate, good, and specific projects and ideas, starting from the communities and being able to influence decision-making. There is a growing recognition of the importance of empowering citizens to drive crucial change in their communities. Additionally, there is an increasing acknowledgment that not only urban communities can make a tangible contribution to addressing the key challenges affecting the environment, but that rural inhabitants also have the potential to play a significant role in this process.

In this respect, the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) pays special attention to the urban-rural linkages, and *The Urban-Rural Linkages: Guiding Principles and Framework for Action to Advance Integrated Territorial Development*¹⁶ (2019), considering the vision of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, emphasizes how

«In many settlements, a large number of households live, work in and depend on both rural and urban ecosystems that sustain human life beyond political and administrative spheres. The reciprocal and repetitive flow of people, goods and financial and environmental services (defining urban-rural linkages) between specific rural, peri-urban and urban locations are interdependent; they are the reality of socio-spatial arrangements, creating places with distinct yet interwoven, socially constructed identities» (*ivi*, p. 1).

On the other hand, although nearly all the Guiding Principles are strictly linked with our work, principles 2 (Integrated Governance) and 9 (Participatory Engagement) seem particularly related to our activities. Looking at principle 2 (i.e. Integrated Governance), policies, strategies,

¹⁶ Available at <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/03/url-gp-1.pdf>

and action plans should be horizontally, sectorally, and vertically integrated across the different levels of engagement and synergies between several actors. The horizontal concept entails a geographical perspective that alludes to collaboration across spatial scales in urban and rural contexts. We can state that principle 9 (i.e. Participatory Engagement), constitutes the flip side of the coin, ensuring meaningful participation by people, local institutions, and communities across the «urban-rural continuum» (*ivi*, p. 12), using for instance «participatory dialogue to identify and map potential conflicts and culturally appropriate solutions» (*ivi*, p. 26).

However, cities are currently playing a crucial role in terms of adaptation (that means «adapting to life in a changing climate»¹⁷, reducing our risks from the harmful effects of climate change, e.g. extreme weather events) and mitigation (that means «reducing climate change»¹⁸, e.g. by reducing of heat-trapping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere) to climate change. This aspect is also emphasized by the New Urban Agenda, adopted at the United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development (Habitat III)¹⁹ in Quito, Ecuador, on October 20, 2016.

At a European level, it is important to mention the Rural Pact (launched in December 2021), which the European Union enacted specifically regarding rural areas: it is a framework for collaboration between authorities and stakeholders at the European, national, regional, and local levels. Promoting dialogue on rural issues between public authorities, civil society, businesses, academics, and residents, contributes to achieving the shared goals of the Communication outlining the long-term vision for the EU's rural areas²⁰.

As moreover emphasized by the EU COM (2021) 345 final, «the increased focus on mitigating climate change, including through renewable energy production, is an opportunity for rural areas to combat energy poverty provided that ecosystem services are appropriately valued and business models retain value within rural communities» (*ivi*). Within such a framework, four areas for action are proposed, each one associated with some drivers shaping the future of rural areas for 2040: 1) stronger (empowered communities, access to services, social innovation); 2) connected (digital connectivity, transport links, and new mobilities); 3) prosperous

¹⁷[https://climate.nasa.gov/solutions/adaptation-mitigation/#:~:text=Key%20Points,pipeline%20\(%E2%80%9Cadaptation%E2%80%9D\)](https://climate.nasa.gov/solutions/adaptation-mitigation/#:~:text=Key%20Points,pipeline%20(%E2%80%9Cadaptation%E2%80%9D))

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Available at <https://habitat3.org/the-new-urban-agenda/>

²⁰ COM (2021) 345 final, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0345>

(diversification of economic activities, sustainable food production); 4) resilient (resilience to climate change, environmental resilience, social resilience).

It is precisely in light of these considerations that this thesis shall bring a theoretical and empirical contribution to the overall academic debate, deriving from the local participant observation, and therefore allowing for a first understanding of the specific cases of the environmental issues within the areas taken into consideration.

Therefore, the main research question and the two sub-questions can be synthesized in the following scheme (Table 1):

	Research question	Explanandum	Explanans	Theoretical contribution
RQ	How can informal and constructive conversations, structured through the World Café format, foster a deliberate transformation in individual preferences on climate change, contributing to the formation of a ‘green consensus’ across different territorial contexts, such as Emilia-Romagna and Calabria regions?	Dialogues among citizens in informal spaces recalling everyday life.	The World Café provides a structured and informal environment for participants to engage in constructive conversations.	Understanding the interplay between informal conversations, individual preference transformation, and the emergence of collective consensus on pressing issues (e.g. climate crisis), offering insights into the dynamics of societal change and decision-making processes
SQ	How could urban and rural inhabitants be involved to access the mutual intelligence needed to create innovative paths to climate change issues?	Mutual exchange as an engine of change.	Involving rural and urban inhabitants in accessing mutual intelligence for addressing climate change requires recognizing the unique perspectives, knowledge, and resources each local context brings to the table.	

Table 1: Research question and sub-question

Source: elaborated by the author

In alignment with this framework, this thesis is a comparative research project examining the interaction and engagement of residents within four distinct areas. The study employs a systems design approach, which views the community and its dynamics as an interconnected system, to investigate the effectiveness of the ‘open door’ and the World Café methods in fostering resident involvement and engagement. The systems design approach considers the intricate interconnections between individuals, processes, and structures within a community, emphasizing how these elements influence the outcomes of participatory endeavors. By examining these interactions, the approach facilitates the identification of leverage points for enhancing engagement and participation. For instance, this approach enables the selection of discussion topics that are most pertinent to the specific contexts, ensuring a more effective alignment between the engagement process and the needs and interests of the participants.

Table 1 shows that for the RQ and the SQ, an explanandum and an explanans are mentioned. The RQ and SQ scheme is underpinned by the idea of ‘social transformation’ proposed by Maton (2000), who elaborated a multidisciplinary and multilevel framework for social transformation, emphasizing four «foundational goals»: 1) capacity-building, 2) group empowerment, 3) relational community-building, and 4) culture-challenge. As noted by Maton (2000), «one important “bottom-up” approach to group empowerment is the development of empowering community settings. [...] Social action groups, faith communities, self-help organizations, and voluntary associations are examples of local community settings with empowering potential» (p. 34). These statements identify one of the most important concepts of the study, i.e. empowerment. In this thesis, the concept of empowerment is defined as an increase in the power of participants in our quasi-experiments.

In short, spatial and social distance between individuals generates specific dynamics linked to relational and communitarian poverty (Tavano Blessi & Padua, 2016). Indeed, as observed by Bauman (2011), today’s cities present several places defined as ‘public spaces’, but those places are far from being veritable ‘civic spaces’, because of their emptiness (e.g. Paris’ La Défense) and their connection with the logic of consumption that stimulates the action of individuals, and not inter-action (*ivi*). Such a logic refers to the prioritization of consumption over interaction in today’s public spaces.

These features are obviously more evident in large metropolitan areas, but at the same time all urban areas are not exempt from the same problems. Our activities on the ground will try to understand if these features characterize also the chosen urban (and rural?) areas.

The study focuses on how (and if) citizens contribute to reaching a shared opinion, a general agreement (i.e. consensus), considering the themes that characterize each quasi-experiment, using participant observation. At the same time, the work may be read in relationship with the «emerging university function of co-creation for sustainability» (Trencher *et al.*, 2014), using participatory and action-research, trans-disciplinarity, and living laboratories, in order to establish, monitor, and evaluate experiments, furthermore, using local environments as «open collaboration arenas» (*ivi*).

As noted by Boffi *et al.* (2016), for instance in the light of the differences between north and south Italy, actions aimed at engaging people with limited knowledge around environmental issues, and encouraging projects of citizen science in favorable contexts can be very helpful in the spreading of best practices linked to a greater awareness of environmental protection, through participatory processes able to create a «community of practice». Moreover, as argued by Jonas Egmoose in his book *Action Research for Sustainability* (2019), «in times where we do not have any final answers to the social environmental challenges we are facing, the experimental approach of public engagement in particular offers opportunities for exploring new and different ways to deliberating on the role of science in society. [...] The real potential and challenge of public engagement is to work and create changes *with* people, not as research objects but as citizens in a democratic society» (p. 5).

Nonetheless, in our case, the relationship between theory and research is characterized as being open and interactive as much as possible, while the psychological interaction between the scholar and the actors (e.g. participants like individuals and stakeholders) is based on empathy from the perspective of the studied subjects, as required by the qualitative approach (Corbetta, 2015). On the other hand, the physical interaction between the researcher and citizens is based on the proximity and direct contact between them (*ivi*).

In this sense, the role of the participants in the quasi-experiments is not passive; rather, it is active. Participants are not merely observers; rather, their actions and input are fundamental to shaping the debates and driving the overall project forward. Rather than merely acting as passive recipients of information or outcomes, participants engage in meaningful ways by sharing their views, contributing to discussions, and influencing the direction of the discussions. Their involvement is crucial, as the success and relevance of the quasi-experiments depend on the collective insights and active participation of those involved.

In this context, Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation remains a valid point of departure for evaluating the extent to which citizens are empowered. Arnstein (1969) proposes a conceptual framework which delineates various levels of citizen involvement in the decision-making

process. The lowest level on this ladder is defined as ‘nonparticipation’, which encompasses practices such as manipulation (the dissemination of incomplete, one-sided information about pre-planned interventions) and therapy (the disguise of group therapy as citizen participation, where experts assume that powerlessness equates to mental illness and focus on ‘curing’ citizens rather than addressing the actual issues). The second rung of the ladder of participation refers to the ‘degrees of tokenism’, which encompasses three distinct forms: ‘informing’, ‘consultation’, and ‘placation’. Informing involves disclosing the rationale behind a particular policy decision. Consultation, on the other hand, encompasses a range of activities, from exploratory research employing social research methods, such as surveys and interviews, to ascertain citizens’ needs, to actively listening to opinions and proposals. Finally, placation refers to actions aimed at engaging with the policymaking process as a means of pursuing or improving consensus, although the ultimate decision-making authority remains with the administration. At the pinnacle of this hierarchy are forms of active participation and empowerment, including the ‘degrees of citizen power’ that result from partnerships, the delegation of power, and the exercise of citizen control.

An important contribution to the debate on participatory democracy is that of Fung (2006), who offers a critique of Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation, suggesting that it is too simplistic. In response, Fung (2006) proposes the participation cube as an alternative framework for understanding the multifaceted nature of participation in democratic processes.

However, Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation continues to serve as a foundational reference point for evaluating the actual degree of authority granted to citizens, as there remains the possibility that processes presented as participatory may, in fact, represent a distortion of participation. In such cases, citizens may be included in discussions or consultations, but without being given real decision-making power. Such input may be merely symbolic rather than substantive, thereby creating a situation in which participation is limited to formality, while the actual decisions are made elsewhere by those in positions of authority. This gives rise to concerns regarding the veracity of participatory processes and their capacity to genuinely empower citizens.

1.4. The Methodological Approach: Action-Research

The purpose of this section is to address the following questions:

- 1) How does the chosen theoretical framework inform the research methodology? How could action-research help us advance our fieldwork on climate change issue?

- 2) Is the World Café a way for using action-research method to tackle issues from the local environmental point of view?
- 3) What differences and similarities exist between the living lab approach and our methodological approach?

In order to better understand the action-research method, it is useful to trace its evolution. For Rapoport (1970), who is one of the first theoreticians of the method, «action research aims to contribute *both* to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework» (p. 499).

Thus, action-research is a strategy for using scientific methods to solve practical problems, «[...] to optimise the realization of both the practical affairs of man and the intellectual interest of the social science community» (*ivi*, p. 510).

In the realm of academic inquiry and societal engagement, it is imperative for the researcher/citizen to possess the capability to navigate within a predefined disciplinary or theoretical framework. Such a proficiency ensures a structured approach to the exploration of complex phenomena (e.g. climate change) and facilitates a nuanced understanding of the subject matter. Simultaneously, it is equally essential for the researcher/citizen to articulate real-world problems in accessible, everyday language. By employing a language familiar to the broader public, the researcher can bridge the gap between academic discourse and societal comprehension. This dual competence, operating within a theoretical framework while effectively communicating in lay terms, establishes a symbiotic relationship between scholarly rigor and societal relevance, fostering a more impactful and meaningful engagement with the complex issues such as climate crisis.

As also noted by Moser and Dilling (2011), communication has thereby a crucial role in addressing the climate crisis, and it «can be shaped and carried out to assist in the task of engaging the public more effectively on climate change» (p. 162), considering that

«(1) a lack of information and understanding explains the lack of public engagement, and that therefore more information and explanation is needed to move people to action ('Inspiration with information'); (2) fear and visions of potential catastrophes as a result of inaction would motivate audiences to action ('Motivation by fear'); (3) the scientific framing of the issue would be most persuasive and relevant in moving lay audiences to action ('One size fits all'); and (4) mass communication is the most effective way to reach audiences on this issue ('Mobilization through mass media')» (*ibid.*).

In our case, the action-research method is mainly based on the importance of the conversational aspect, and it is used to have a direct dialogue with/between citizens around questions that matter, i.e. around environmental issues and climate change. Concerning the activities on the ground for the implementation of this research, the World Café has been considered as a good trade-off, combining features of deliberative processes (e.g. dialogical aspect between citizens) and of the living-lab approach, as discussed below²¹.

Therefore, all this is in order to highlight the importance of the World Café in settings that seem often distant and unaffordable to civil society who wants to access dialogues around climate change.

Nonetheless, action-research is strictly linked to the sustainability concept that is at the basis of the climate change discourse. As pointed out by Egmore (2019), action-research from a sustainability perspective is characterized by some elements which are closely associated with one another: 1) «*research as action, action as research*» (Egmore, 2019, p. 12), emphasizing that action-research is capable of transforming more traditional modes of doing research often based on mere observation, analysis, and so forth; this is achievable by understanding and gaining scientific insight through participation and experimentation with such processes of sustainable democratic change; 2) «*radical change transcending present realities*» (*ibid.*) (as the author notes, «by *sustainable* change I understand something which is equally radical and democratic. Acknowledging the unsustainable nature of contemporary modern ways of living,

²¹ It is interesting to note that an informal World Café was also employed within the COP27 context in Sharm El-Sheikh (Nov 6 – Nov 18, 2022), as part of the Global Stocktake (i.e. «**an integral part of the Paris Agreement that assesses the collective progress countries have made to implement the Paris Agreement and achieve the long-term goals on mitigation and adaptation**», <https://napglobalnetwork.org/resource/brief-adaptation-global-stocktake/>), to explore topics around mitigation, adaptation, and means of implementation (see https://www.globalccsinstitute.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/COP-27-OUTCOMES_291122.pdf).

In short, the COP (i.e. Conference of the Parties), known also as the United Nations Climate Change conference, is the Convention's top decision-making body: at the COP, which reviews the implementation of the Convention and any other legal instruments that the COP adopts, all States that are Parties to the Convention are represented (conferences are held in the framework of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change – UNFCCC). The COP also makes decisions regarding institutional and administrative arrangements that are necessary to support the Convention's effective implementation (see <https://unfccc.int/process/bodies/supreme-bodies/conference-of-the-parties-cop>).

Following this brief digression, and returning to the World Café employed within the COP27, as reported by Marine Pouget and Jeffrey Qi, from the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), «[...] the World Café format of discussions during the TD [ed: Technical Dialogue] was a real success. Despite the lack of space and time, many civil society representatives could talk with parties at the same table in an open setting, which ignited frank and constructive exchanges between actors who usually do not have the opportunity to have these conversations. During the closing plenary of the first TD in June 2022, parties and non-state actors underlined how much they appreciated such a format and wished to see it continue in the future. The TD round tables, however, remained formal, and interventions were still largely based on pre-prepared statements. Observers also noted that the speakers at the roundtables were not very diverse in terms of age, gender, and social or cultural background» (<https://www.iisd.org/articles/insight/inclusive-global-stocktake-civil-society>).

any sufficient change will be radical and transcend our present reality. For such change to be in any way democratic, democratic experiments transcending the present reality are needed», *ivi*, pp. 12-13); 3) «*enabling learning for social change*» (*ivi*, p. 13); 4) «*nurturing trans-disciplinary understanding*» (*ibid.*). Although all points are linked by a common thread, the last two points present a more evident leitmotif: the third point specifically refers to the complex interrelations between environmental, political, technological, cultural, and social change; the fourth point pertains to the multidimensional understanding and trans-disciplinary challenge of sustainability and climate change. However, the sustainability concept has not only merely an environmental connotation, but it includes the economic and social dimensions, as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and *Brundtland Report* (1987) recommend.

On the other hand, the Danish action researchers Kurt Aagaard Nielsen and Birger Steen Nielsen provided a conceptualization of sustainability related to everyday life and social learning, not exempt from difficulties, paradoxes, and ambiguities, and implementation challenges (Egmose, 2019). Social learning is not merely defined by its discursive aspect, but «a social process between human beings, rather than a discursive meeting between lay-people and experts» (*ivi*, p. 57). Nielsen and Nielsen argued that social learning is not just about top-down changes, but about everyday people collectively reflecting and driving societal progress. This ‘lifeworld learning’ is crucial for tackling sustainability challenges in a democracy. Additionally, their concept of social learning goes beyond mere knowledge acquisition. It emphasizes lived experiences, connecting past struggles with future hopes. Sharing these experiences, however, can be sensitive, and this is where Critical Utopian Action Research (*ivi*) comes in. Thus, within such a framework, Nielsen and Nielsen introduced the concept of ‘social imagination’ which differs from that of ‘sociological imagination’: while the latter pertains to a crucial intellectual and cognitive aspect, social imagination involves the expression and realization of life aspirations and practical ideas about how one could live (*ivi*). Finally, social learning, rooted in everyday life, is not just about knowledge; it shapes how citizens approach societal issues based on their lived experiences.

Concerning our quasi-experiments, carried out thanks also to the contribution of the Italian organization Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna (for Bologna’s and Gazzola’s fieldworks), the Municipality of Gazzola, ARCI Cosenza (for Cosenza’s fieldwork), and Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo (for Santa Caterina’s fieldwork), such concerns are taken into account: indeed, the World Café initiatives are not merely conceived as dialogues between experts, like scientists, and people, but as constructive processes where (lay) citizens are considered the protagonists

within the process about issues linked to climate change and sustainability, dealing with such challenges, particularly from a bottom-up level of analysis.

To accomplish this, it is important to consider also the following issues proposed by the action researcher Egmosen (2019), which at the same time could constitute an important key to interpreting the work: 1) «Science in the Role of Sustaining Sustainability»; 2) «Expert Reflexivity and the Double Orientation of Research»; 3) «From Knowledge Production towards Knowledge Democracy» (*ivi*, pp. 114-116). The first point brings into play the role and interrelations between both science and sustainability, which present some ambiguities: «if sustainability is in fact an immanent and emergent *ability* of ecological and social life to continuously renew itself without eroding its own basis for existence, sustainability in principle cannot be *invented* but only *supported* by science» (*ivi*, pp. 114-115). Thus, it constitutes an interesting and at once not straightforward point of view for inquiring about the relationship between science and sustainability. Considering point two, the action researcher suggests that a ‘double-orientation’ of science must be built: if science «must develop from being fixated on a particular subject» (*ivi*, p. 116), on the other side, a «democratic openness» (*ibid.*) should be taken into account. Nevertheless, and this is expressed by the third point, science alone is not capable to provide adequate answers about the role of science in society («such questions *are* societal questions, and hence in democracies, *democratic* questions», *ibid.*): in this sense, the role of citizens is crucial to fully understand such relationships and challenges.

Returning to our research, this thesis adopts a qualitative methodology (Corbetta, 2015), following specific planning: as already stated, the relationship between theory and research is open and interactive, and at the same time, concepts are not operationalized as in a quantitative research method, but they are approximate and in progress.

On the flip side, the psychological interaction between the scholar and the studied subject (i.e. individuals and their preferences) is characterized by an empathic identification with the studied subject. In such context, it is again necessary to highlight that the physical interaction between the scholar and the studied subject is defined by an aspect of proximity and concrete connection, where the role of the citizens is active.

Our research design is de-structured, open, and built throughout the research process, following Corbetta’s (2015) analysis of the qualitative research approach. Furthermore, the representativeness is not characterized by the presence of a statistically representative sample, and we consider single cases not representative from a statistical point of view (the study does not tend toward standardization).

The object of analysis is not the variable, but it is the individual (indeed, it deals with analysis through subjects), while the objective is not the description of the variation of variables (i.e. the variance), but a deep understanding of subjects.

The presentation of the outcomes is mainly characterized by a narrative perspective, and the scope of the outcomes is featured by a certain level of idiographic specificity.

Moreover, organizing a real deliberative process is not straightforward in practice: deliberative and participatory democracy has an important cost both from the financial and social points of view. All deliberative processes (e.g. deliberative polls®, citizens' juries, participatory budgeting, and so forth) often require many days or years of interactions and financial resources²²: nonetheless, participants are almost always paid for their time (e.g. for the Bologna citizens' jury in 2006, each juror received a gift voucher – Giannetti *et al.*, 2007; for the Leeds Citizens' Climate Jury, each member of the jury received a £25 gift voucher per session attended – Ross *et al.*, 2021; for a deliberative poll in Zeguo Township, Wenling City, in China, the participants received a fee, albeit a small one, as an incentive to attend – Fishkin *et al.*, 2010).

Nevertheless, as noted by Celaya (2019), experiences of deliberative democracy bring several benefits for the participants, e.g. from the point of view of knowledge, that could act as a driving force for updating policy preferences (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005).

The operational steps followed by the study reflect the 'action cycle' proposed by Walton and Gaffney (1991):

1. Identify problems to solve and other opportunities, causal factors, environmental constraints, and relevant practices.
2. Formulate proposed changes and the implementation plan.
3. Initiate changes in targeted areas.
4. Assess changes and implementation methods.
5. Deepen, institutionalize, and diffuse changes.

As we shall see in our quasi-experiments, certain steps are sometimes omitted, such as creating an implementation plan, etc. primarily for two reasons. First, they deviate from the core objective of the research, which is to assess whether a change in individual preferences occurs. Second, implementing those steps would necessitate significant financial and logistical resources.

²² e.g. A single deliberative poll® can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars (Bulsey & Podestà, 2014)

For instance, the institutionalization and diffusion of changes, which is the fifth step, is undeniably one of the most crucial phases. However, it requires substantial logistical support and financial investment, which were beyond the scope of our current study. Indeed, as demonstrated in our quasi-experiments, steps such as creating an implementation plan, initiating changes in targeted areas, assessing changes and implementation methods, and institutionalizing changes are sometimes omitted to focus more precisely on the primary research objectives and to manage resource constraints effectively.

Nevertheless, the World Café format is strictly linked to an action vision of the conversation, and a concrete relationship between talk and action is included. Conversation, considered as a core process, makes possible reflection and exploration, collective insights, harvesting discoveries, action planning, implementation, and, finally, feedback and assessment (Brown & Isaacs, 2005).

In this way, participatory action research could be intended as learning empowers (Elden & Levin, 1991): «it empowers because of the specific insights, new understandings, and new possibilities that the participants discover in creating better explanations about their social world» (*ivi*, p. 131). At the same time, «participants learn how to learn» (*ibid.*) thanks to the cross-pollination of ideas and the connection of diverse perspectives (in a World Café event, participants rotate from table to table, and they are exposed to new ways of thinking by sharing knowledge), as intended by Brown and Isaacs (2005). This recalls the «binding agreement» (Celaya, 2019), typical of a deliberative process. In addition, the approach encourages a co-generative way of learning mainly characterized by a co-generative dialogue ('dialogue', as emphasized so far, is the key concept and a prerequisite of participatory and deliberative democracy).

Thus, participatory action research could be defined as «a way of generating new knowledge where the participants in the research process function as equals because of their different kinds of expertise and frames of reference» (Elden & Levin, 1991, p. 132). Fig. 3 illustrates the different/equal role of the «*insiders*» (in our case, citizens) and the «*outsiders*» (e.g. researchers, and external experts).

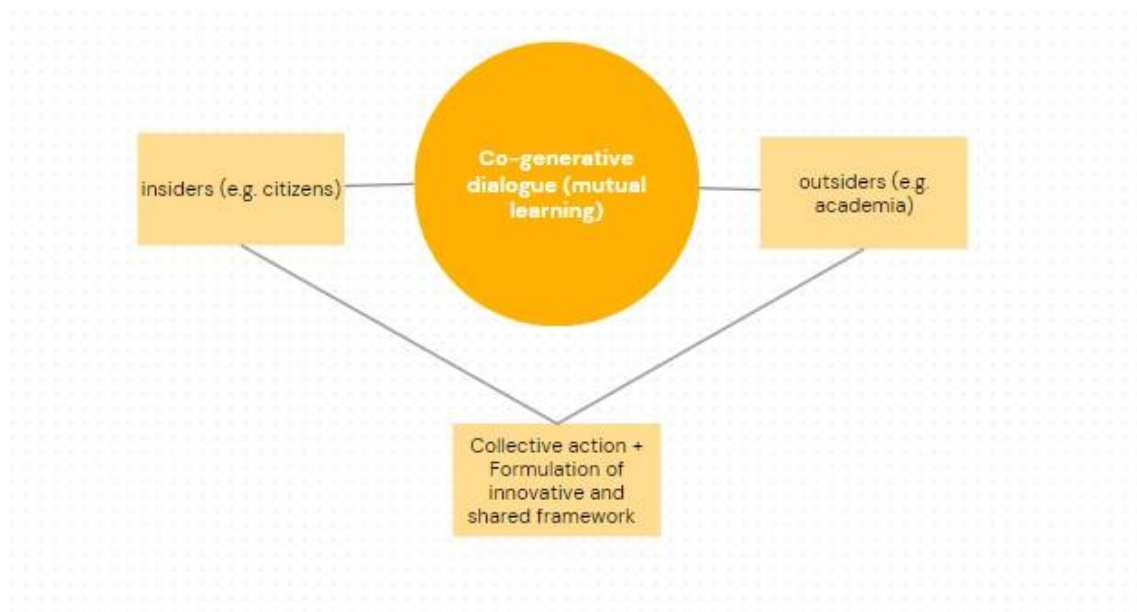


Fig. 3: Participatory Action Research: The Cogenerative Way

Source: authors's elaboration, from Elden and Levin (1991)

As additionally argued by Elden and Levin (1991), «what is needed is a connection between insiders and outsiders that integrates their different forms of expertise and different initial frameworks to generate a third framework or “practical theory” of the local situation» (p. 133). On the other hand, McIntyre's definition of participatory action research highlights some fundamental aspects of it, that reinforce the benefits of using such a method:

«(a) a collective commitment to investigate an issue or problem, (b) a desire to engage in self- and collective reflection to gain clarity about the issue under investigation, (c) a joint decision to engage in individual and/or collective action that leads to a useful solution that benefits the people involved, and (d) the building of alliances between researchers and participants in the planning, implementation, and dissemination of the research process» (McIntyre, 2008, p. 1).

As mentioned above, the action-research method is not a new method, and, as suggested by Ventura and Shahar (2022), the definition from Stringer (2007, p. 1) is eloquent: «Action research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives. Unlike traditional experimental/scientific research that looks for generalizable explanations that might be applied to all contexts, action research focuses on specific situations and localized solutions» (Ventura & Shahar, 2022, p. 3). The focus on daily actions and behaviors, and the focus on a specific situation, are at the same

time two key elements of our study. Although Ventura and Shahar (2022) focus on the relationship between healthcare and action-research, their analysis is coherent with our work. Indeed, as well as for healthcare, action-research is characterized to be «fairly rapid, practice-oriented, cost-efficient, proven as useful» (*ivi*, p. 3), by combining theory and practice, with a multi-disciplinary vision too. Conversely, action-research comprises three fundamental elements, i.e. 1) look (observing and accumulating data in the field); 2) think (reflecting and analyzing the data); 3) act (targeting a specific action) (*ivi*).

However, the best version of action-research that is useful for our study is that of community-based action-research, characterized to be socially-oriented «conducted *with* and sometimes *for* a specific community» (*ivi*, p. 7). Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that while our quasi-experiments prioritize the individual aspect, they also recognize and integrate the collective dimension, thereby ensuring a comprehensive approach that addresses both personal and community needs. Such an approach is deemed most suitable due to its inherent social orientation, as it is conducted in collaboration with and for specific contexts.

Thus, as observed by Ventura and Shahar (2022), community-based action research features the involvement of a specific community, and re-evaluation of the relationship between it, the researcher, and the desired outcomes («the researcher is not an amalgam of authority, scientific or professional knowledge, but rather an interpreter, a mediator, vying to truly understand the various worldviews of the relevant design partners», *ibid.*).

Moreover, as noted by Ventura and Shahar (2022), Bannon and Ehn (2012, p. 57) emphasize the parallels between PAR and participatory design, ultimately suggesting that the primary methodology of the latter could be characterized as «to organise projects with identifiable stakeholders within an organisation, paying attention to power relations and providing resources with a view to the empowerment of weak and marginalised groups» (Ventura & Shahar, 2022, p. 24).

Nevertheless, according to Ventura and Shahar (2022), community-based action research and the so-called social design research are ultimately related in their emphasis on creating a dialogue with the relevant communities. However, at the same time, the two methods present some differences: while classic action-research (i.e. community-based AR) is characterized by the following aspects, i.e. limited communities, democratic, focused on linear change, consensual approach, result-based, social design (action) research is characterized by the following elements, i.e. considering a plethora of design partners, value-oriented design research, spiral and iterative, the designer as a mediator and enabler, theory and practice based

(*ivi*). Finally, while both approaches are democratic in nature, social design research is primarily founded on a set of values and ideals (*ivi*).

The hope is to encourage everyone's contribution to our fieldwork activities, by engaging not only the so-called 'active' citizens, in order to have a broad range of ideas to implement within the specific areas, or at least to understand if the World Café format is able to generate change in individual preferences.

Nevertheless, it is also important to note that Brown and Tandon (1983) identified some ideological, political, and economic differences between action-research and participatory action approaches. Action research aims at gradual problem-solving and knowledge enhancement within a socially accepted framework, fostering reform within the client system (Brown & Tandon, 1983). In contrast, participatory research seeks to mobilize and empower marginalized groups to challenge unfair power and resource distributions, promoting systemic transformations that impact both clients and their adversaries (*ivi*). The differing ideologies and political economies underpinning these traditions necessitate intellectual exchange and collaboration, though inherent differences and communication challenges will persist (*ivi*).

On the other side, it is necessary to specify that action (participatory) research has some distinguishing marks compared to the traditional way of doing research (that, for instance, tends to operate within disciplinary silos, characterized also by rigid methodological boundaries and isolated knowledge production): in our case, the research is guided by action, and it must be able to activate transformative processes of the individual preferences, while the methodology is oriented by the empowerment, through collective learning (Mannarini, 2009). At the same time, the research is characterized by a shared property of the results (citizens/researchers): for this purpose, in order to communicate results and to keep in touch with citizens and territorial stakeholders, official websites of the stakeholders involved will be used.

In a nutshell, in light of the findings, action-research is a flexible research method that would benefit from integrating other research methods (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, etc.), providing a creative research technique that may be used in a variety of practice-based study domains and professions. Conversely, despite being shorter in length, social design research is more intricate and practice-focused, making it extremely useful in healthcare or social design (Ventura & Shahr, 2022).

1.4.1. The World Café: Implementing Action-Research and Participatory Democracy

Since the 1980s, action and participatory research methods have been employed with considerable frequency: basically, if we consider action-research as «a way of knowing rooted

in engagement» (Steier *et al.*, 2015, p. 211), the main feature of action-research is a «participatory worldview» (*ibid.*). In this sense, the World Café approach, in creating conversations around questions that matter to communities, could be considered as «a form of meeting, as collaborative inquiry, that can serve as a rich resource for action research practice» (*ibid.*). Thus, the activities on the ground, structured under the World Café form, will try to verify if the conversations have had a certain effect on participants' preferences: questionnaires before and after each event will help to understand this issue.

Looking at the first World Café experience in 1995, the co-founder Juanita Brown argued that «the Café process had somehow enabled us to become more aware of our 'collective knowing' at increasing levels of scale, as the conversations cross-pollinated through the evolving rounds of conversation» (*ivi*, pp. 212-213).

Historically, several new ideas and social innovations have been born through informal conversations in cafés and salons (e.g. Age of Enlightenment) (Brown & Isaacs, 2005).

Nevertheless, in contrast with the (at least preliminary) elitism of coffee house and salon societies, the World Café is open to everyone beyond social class and provides a foundation for developing a social work research approach that incorporates social work values, knowledge generation, and information exchange through «conversations that matter» (*ivi*, p. 4). This is achieved by consulting several sources that offer creative ways of developing research characterized by a collaborative approach. The World Café constitutes an effective method that emphasizes close communication and exchange between citizens, in creating webs of personal relationships and cross-pollination of ideas and possibility thinking. It is essentially a conversational method that assists groups in fostering interpersonal connections, collaborative learning, and productive discussion of important issues.

Through the example of 'Café Hear and Now', an implementation of the World Café approach in Auckland (New Zealand), Fouché and Light (2011) observe that «the future-focused, enabling process of knowledge-generation encouraged by 'conversations that matter' shows strength as a research tool on different levels. The World Café is powerful in terms of the use of cross-pollination of ideas through evolving rounds of information exchange and the use of a café-style social context allows the sharing of information in an equitable and non-threatening manner» (p. 45). Within such a framework, the World Café, as a collaborative method, is capable to transform participants from being recipients of knowledge developed elsewhere and transferred for 'use' to being involved in knowledge creation processes.

The 'Generation of Peace' project (between 2010 and 2016), in cooperation with UNESCO, that took place in Ceará State (Brazil), demonstrates also how the World Café experience may

play a crucial role in dealing with local knowledge. In that case, the aim was to build a culture of peace between almost 700 high schools and their communities (Mesquita da Silva, 2017). The general objective was to design an environment of articulation between the school, family, and community in order to build a network of the culture of peace, using specific strategic actions: awareness raising, mobilization, and training; interaction between school, family, and community; student protagonism; inter- and trans-disciplinary insertion; information and communication systems. Through the ‘Generation of Peace’ project, the World Café has already proven its usefulness as a research method and methodology for participatory, transformative processes, giving thousands of people the opportunity to self-organize in their schools and communities. Additionally, such a project has produced positive outcomes across the state, as a community initiative that might provide special funding for a public policy that would completely overhaul the state’s educational system (ivi). Furthermore, in that case, the World Café has demonstrated to be an effective action-research technique, with communities open to the changes that resulted from the talks because they have legitimized their abilities and efforts. Within the mentioned Brazilian project, the use of the World Café has provided a model for action-research that may bring together thousands of individuals simultaneously in numerous locations, weaving a very extensive and intricate network of mobilized activists, while the dialogue has assisted the Ceará State Department of Education in defining a clear agenda for other governmental and social sectors to discover their places of participation in the ‘Generation of Peace’ both inside and outside the educational system (ivi).

Against that background, World Café is undoubtedly used as a participatory method in community development, for citizens’ participation and organizational change processes. As observed by Löhr *et al.* (2020), the World Café exhibits some strengths and weaknesses also in comparison to semi-structured interviews and focus groups, both established methods in qualitative research. The scholars highlight «that the differences in method application and data output make WC a method that is well suited to complement other methods in order to either help explore a research topic or verify findings» (p. 11). Nevertheless, they indicate some potential causes of conflicts that may occur within a World Café approach, from different points of view: e.g. stakeholders (difficulties in meeting stakeholders), infrastructural/technical (lack of technology), cultural issues (cultural differences), communication (communication problems among disciplines, or concerning the language differences), interdisciplinarity (interdisciplinarity as a challenge), time frame (smooth and timely delivery of information), finances (budget constraints), and others. These factors underscore the intricate nature of implementing a World Café method. For instance, Marincioni (2020) emphasizes the growing

significance of an interdisciplinary approach in addressing climate change. His research delves into how local communities perceive climate risks and adapt, revealing both shared characteristics and geographical variations tied to their locations.

However, to gain insight into the differences and similarities between individual semi-structured interviews (ISIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), and the World Café (WC) approach, it is essential to compare these methodologies. ISIs allow for in-depth data collection through one-on-one interactions, fostering trust and confidentiality, but can be biased due to limited sample reach (Löhr *et al.*, 2020). FGDs use group dynamics to uncover information not easily obtained in individual interviews, while the World Café approach enhances participation and broad exploration of topics, generating a multitude of ideas (*ivi*).

Broadly speaking, for a successful World Café, as explained by Brown and Isaacs (2005), seven simple rules/design principles must underpin the whole process:

- 1) Set the context («clarify the purpose and broad parameters within which the dialogue will unfold», *ivi*, p. 40).
- 2) Create a hospitable space («ensure the welcoming environment and psychological safety that nurtures personal comfort and mutual respect», *ibid.*).
- 3) Explore questions that matter («focus collective attention on powerful questions that attract collaborative engagement», *ibid.*).
- 4) Encourage everyone's contribution («enliven the relationship between the “me” and the “we” by inviting full participation and mutual giving», *ibid.*), keeping in mind that «the purpose of the Café is not to criticize, but to contribute» (*ivi*, p. 100).
- 5) Cross-pollinate and connect diverse perspectives, as shown by the several arrows within Fig. 3 («use the living-system dynamics of emergence through intentionally increasing the diversity and density of connections among perspectives while retaining a common focus on core questions», *ivi*, p. 40).
- 6) Listen together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions («focus shared attention in ways that nurture coherence of thought without losing individual contributions», *ibid.*).
- 7) Harvest and share collective discoveries («make collective knowledge and insight visible and actionable», *ibid.*).

The 4th point is a principle that leads to the concept of citizens' *empowerment* and, at the same time, to the *inclusivity* of all participants in the process. Encouraging the contribution of everyone is an essential feature of democratic bottom-up participation, aiming to the

empowerment of the citizen. In this respect, we need to take into consideration the IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation²³, designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. Considering its four steps of participation, we believe that to really build a 'green consensus', citizens cannot stop to the first and second step of the public participation goals (i.e. *inform* - «To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions»²⁴ - and *consult* - «To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions»²⁵). Indeed, our work takes into account the following aspects of *involve* («To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered»²⁶), *collaborate* («To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution»²⁷), and *empower* («To place final decision making in the hands of the public»²⁸).

Furthermore, as already recalled, the Café is structured into more rounds of conversation: generally, the first round aims to begin the conversation (though preliminary general questions could help set the stage for encouraging everyone's contribution), while between the different rounds, each participant (except the 'host') moves between tables, encouraging in this way the dissemination of reasonings through networks.

As this is a very versatile approach, each World Café event can be structured and adapted to each specific local situation: to give another example, Gastaldello *et al.* (2019) show an interesting application of the World Café approach within the *biodistretto* of the Euganean Hills (it. *Biodistretto Colli Euganei*), in Veneto region, included by 14 municipalities, with the aim «to understand concerns of local farmers, encourage the exchange of ideas and knowledge among local actors as well as to underline the existing doubts about organic farming techniques, including tools for preventing pests and diseases as well as, on a broader scale, economic and environmental sustainability of organic farms» (p. 7).

As moreover emphasized by the scholars, taking advantage of the local, bottom-up approach (e.g. World Café), the creation of agricultural districts such as organic districts could be a significant force toward the conversion to organic farming, encouraging the development of

²³ Provided by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP)

²⁴ https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/Spectrum_8.5x11_Print.pdf

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

local networks of actors such as farmers, processors, and tourist attractions to support rural development. In other words, in order to overcome the many challenges a farmer may encounter when deciding to convert to organic, the rise of organic farming in Italy should begin at the local level and benefit from the advantages that organic districts offer.

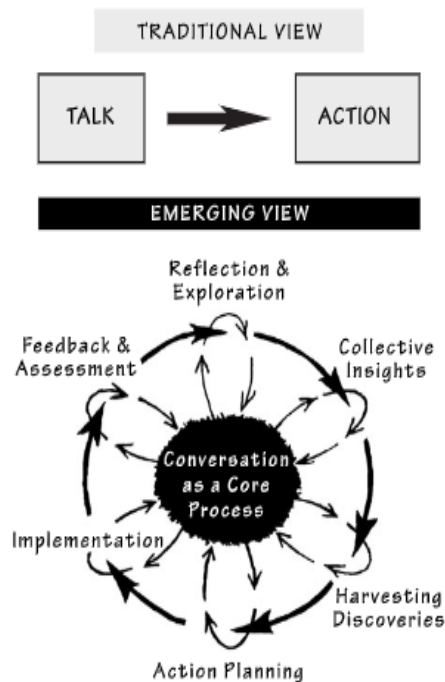


Fig. 4: The relationship between talk and action

Source: Brown and Isaacs (2005), p. 37

The relationship between a Café process, which is primarily characterized by its dialogical aspect, and an active point of view that recalls the research method employed throughout the work is vividly and effectively summarized in Fig. 4. This figure provides the optimal description of this relationship:

« [...] the whole process is part of a single action cycle – reflection/insight/harvesting/action planning/implementation/feedback – in which conversation is a lively core process every step of the way. [...] The World Café is designed primarily to generate collective knowledge-sharing, webs of personal relationships, and new possibilities for action. A Café dialogue sets the stage for more traditional forms of action planning, which often occur during the same session but at a later point in time» (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 38).

Within this framework a question arises: how can we make effective/operational, conversational processes such as a Café, to realize visible effects and impacts on the individual preferences? The effectiveness of the World Café as a deliberative approach is in fact supported by the study conducted by Alunni-Menichini *et al.* (2023) around the issue of homelessness in Montreal (Canada). The purpose of that study was to address two needs, i.e. 1) find tangible ways to enhance emergency response to substance users experiencing homelessness in Montreal, and 2) find ways to improve collaboration among emergency response stakeholders. The study tried to combine the needs analysis and the deliberative democratic evaluation, using a qualitative design, concentrating on the local context, and the inclusion of all emergency-response stakeholders, while also attempting to lessen power inequalities, and the assessment's outcomes thanks to the deliberative democratic evaluation process. Within such a framework, the World Café seemed particularly useful as a data collection activity, crucial in the needs analysis, and strictly related to the principles of deliberative democratic evaluation (i.e. inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation) (*ivi*). The fact that every participant (34 people participated in the World Café) was chosen through expert sampling (i.e. administrators of the organizations involved and members of the committee of experts) is one of the main and evident differences between Alunni-Menichini's *et al.* (2023) experiment and our World Café initiatives within the four Italian areas. That study showed that World Café is fully integrated within the framework of deliberative and participatory democracy.

Thus, we consider participatory experiences, such as the World Café, as crucial opportunities to make significant contributions toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by United Nations member States, with a particular focus on the goals 7 («Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all»²⁹), 11 («Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable»³⁰), 12 («Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns»³¹), and 13 («Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts»³²).

1.4.2. The Living Lab Approach: Constructive Dialogues about Climate Change from a Bottom-up Level

A constructive dialogue around climate change of course requires an implementation of a broad range of knowledge. The 2012 *Planet Under Pressure* conference (London, March 26-29,

²⁹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

³⁰ *ivi*

³¹ *ivi*

³² *ivi*

2012), in the runup to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) that took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on June 20-22, 2012 (i.e. Rio+20), emphasized the need for trans-disciplinary research and broader partnership around climate change³³.

In essence, tackling climate change requires transcending disciplinary boundaries, fostering collaboration among scientists, policymakers, and communities. It encourages an integrative synthesis of knowledge from diverse fields, recognizing that effective solutions must address not only the symptoms but the underlying causes of the environmental crisis.

The complexity of the climate change issue and the difficulty to act against this is well unveiled by Jamieson and Di Paola (2014), noting that if climate change is defined from a political system point of view as a ‘wicked problem’, it means to describe it, but also admit to being not able to solve it:

«One reason why it is difficult to act on climate change is that there are various plausible ways of conceptualizing the problem, each of which finds different resources relevant to its solution, and counts different responses as successes and failures. If the problem is fundamentally one of global governance, then new agreements and institutions are needed. If the problem is market failure, then we need effective carbon taxes or a functional cap and trade system. If the problem primarily reflects a technological failure, then we need a program for clean energy or perhaps geoengineering. If climate change is just the latest way for the global rich to exploit the global poor, then we need to renew the struggle for global justice. The phenomenon of multiple frames, each of which is plausible, is characteristic of what are called ‘wicked problems’ that are notoriously difficult for political systems to address successfully» (*ivi*, p. 105).

Thus, if climate change poses new challenges, from our perspective there is the awareness that a single local community can directly contribute to its well-being, living in harmony with ecosystems. Finally, climate change is the biggest problem of collective action in the world (Jamieson, 2021), but it is reproducing geographical inequalities as well: while Western countries, mainly responsible for emissions, do not want developing countries to emulate them, developing countries want Western countries to make the first move toward emission reduction (*ivi*). This behavior is present also within any Western country, influencing inter-generational collective action too, because each generation wants to take advantage of emissions: anyway, this way of reasoning leads to a continuous increase of GHGs in the atmosphere (*ivi*). According to Jamieson (2021), democratic institutions should be more responsive outside the political community in this regard. This will include protecting future individuals or the environment at the price of current citizens, frequently going against their actual preferences. Ultimately,

³³ See <http://rio20.net/en/iniciativas/planet-under-pressure/>

establishing constructive dialogues with/between citizens and scientists through models of participatory and/or deliberative democracy may be useful to minimize this risk.

Nevertheless, as also observed by Collins (2014), uncertainties, interdependencies, and complexities require «a range of views and perspectives to be engaged in defining the situation and issues and determining an approach which is context relevant» (p. 233). The following image (Fig. 5) reflects how our project places our quasi-experiments.

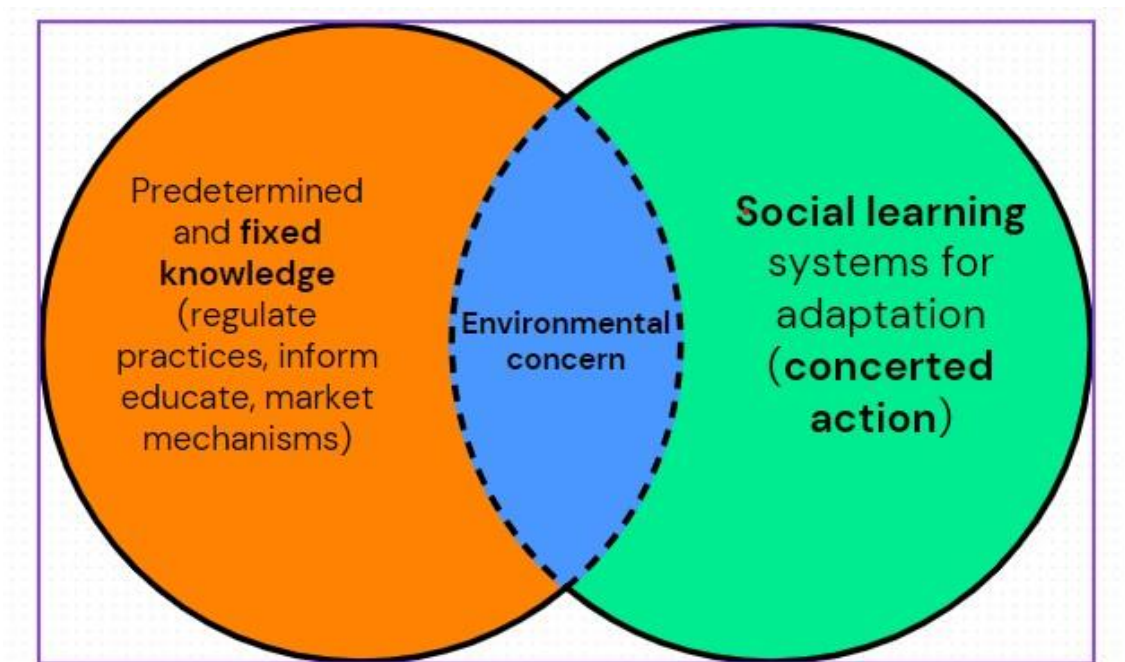


Fig. 5 Social learning and concerted action

Source: author's elaboration, from Collins (2014)

The left handside of Figure 5 refers to a known and agreed environmental problem that can be addressed by stakeholders using predetermined knowledge; instead, the right handside shows how social learning systems could determine specific responses to an environmental issue, through the promotion of concerted action. Looking at the EU-funded project Social Learning for Integrated Management of Water (SLIM), Collins (2014) emphasizes how social learning was intended, i.e. « (i) the process of co-creation of knowledge [...]; (ii) the convergence of goals [...], criteria and knowledge leading to awareness of mutual expectations and the building of relational capital; (iii) the change in behaviours that results from the understanding gained

through doing ('knowing') that leads to concerted action; and (iv) arising from these, social learning is thus an emergent property of the process of transforming a situation» (p. 238).

At this point, it is useful to open a brief parenthesis on an EU-funded project (i.e. ROCK Project) involving, among other things, the city of Bologna, and based on the enhancement of public spaces in the historic area using participatory processes. In this case, as demonstrated by the ROCK Project³⁴ in Bologna, which focused on the sustainable reinterpretation of cultural heritage (from the social, economic, and environmental point of view), the Living Lab approach has constituted a crucial element of considering the climate change issue as a multidisciplinary challenge.

However, while the ROCK Project saw the historic city centers as living laboratories (Boeri *et al.*, 2021), with urban cultural heritage as an engine of regeneration and sustainable development, the objective of our activities within specific territorial contexts is to observe whether changes in individual preferences occur. Additionally, we endeavor to inspire participants to engage actively with climate challenges by addressing them from the bottom-up level, fostering a sense of democratic commitment, and integrating a multidisciplinary approach. Through our work, we encourage participants to collaborate, share knowledge, and build a strong, informed community that can effectively respond to environmental issues.

In general, a living lab is defined by a number of key characteristics. First and foremost, a living lab places an emphasis on co-creation, whereby users and stakeholders engage in a collaborative process to develop solutions. Secondly, a multi-method approach is employed, whereby a variety of research techniques are utilized to gather comprehensive insights.

Furthermore, a living lab is situated within a genuine, operational context, thereby guaranteeing that the solutions it develops are subjected to rigorous testing in authentic settings. Furthermore, it entails the effective coordination of diverse actors and resources, a process known as orchestration. Another central feature is the active involvement of users, who play an essential role in the design and evaluation processes. In conclusion, a living lab encourages the involvement of multiple stakeholders, facilitating the integration of diverse perspectives to drive innovation and inclusivity.

Nevertheless, as argued by Scholl *et al.* (2022) the traditional Living Lab approach could be integrated with a meta-lab approach, considered a «catalyst for local and transurban learning about wider sustainability transformations» (p. 2). Furthermore, the meta-lab approach facilitates accelerated local experimentation and learning by enabling the sharing of lessons

³⁴ Regeneration and Optimization of Cultural Heritage in Creative and Knowledge Cities (grant agreement n. 730280) that took place between 2018 (the European Year of Cultural Heritage) and 2020.

across locations and a focused learning process through a shared agenda, thereby enhancing urban sustainability transformations (*ivi*).

Both approaches share a commitment to an iterative process that involves stakeholders in generating knowledge, fostering a dynamic and adaptive approach to addressing complex challenges. The meta-lab's emphasis on a shared learning agenda and accelerated learning processes aligns well with the principles of action-research, creating a synergy that enhances the potential for effective urban sustainability transformations.

It should be noted that the areas under consideration in this study are not limited to urban settings, but also encompass rural areas, with considerable distances between them. In our work, the continuity of the processes will be guaranteed by dissemination through stakeholders' websites (e.g. Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna), useful to track results and lessons from participants.

However, the meta-lab approach may offer important design elements and implementation conditions, able to replicate it within our areas of interest: in particular, 1) experiments are followed from the beginning till the end, including failures as well as successes; 2) ample attention for local conditions and context factors; 3) de- and re-contextualization of lessons by the joint reflection of scientific experts and local practitioners on completed and planned experiments (*ivi*).

Such concepts are also at the heart of the 'OPEN-air laboRAtories for Nature baseD solUtions to Manage hydro-meteo risks', part of the EU-funded OPERANDUM project, coordinated by the University of Bologna and formed by 26 partner institutions from all over the world, intending to contribute to the implementation of the EU policies for disaster risk prevention and climate change adaptation. Open-Air Laboratories (OALs) are basically Living Labs where Nature Based Solutions (NBS) are co-designed, co-developed, deployed, tested, and demonstrated with local stakeholders³⁵. The main challenges addressed by the OALs concerned water management, natural and climate hazards, green space management, biodiversity, but also knowledge and social capacity building, participatory planning, and governance (European Commission, 2021). Furthermore, the Project, requiring a multiple-level structure of engagement strategy, starting from municipal administrations and citizens to international bodies and policymakers, allowed the creation of the OPERANDUM-GeoIKP platform, designed to reach target users (i.e. stakeholders), including citizens (*ivi*)³⁶.

³⁵ <https://www.operandum-project.eu/>

³⁶ The GeoIKP platform is available at <https://geoikp.operandum-project.eu/>

For instance, concerning Italy, OALs approach has been implemented within the Po Valley (Panaro river, Comacchio valleys, Reno, Emilia-Romagna coastal area). In detail, concerning Panaro river, the OAL had the role to test solutions against floods, while for Volano Beach (located in the Comacchio Municipality) the OAL had the purpose to test solutions against storm surges and coastal erosion. On the other hand, Po di Goro was included with an OAL to test solutions against salt intrusion³⁷.

Within the project, citizens and stakeholders had a key role: for instance, concerning Volano Beach, in order to define technical aspects and manage authorization processes, as well as to foster engagement with citizens and associations to co-design, co-deploy, and co-monitor the NBS, the Operandum OAL relied on territorial efforts, particularly those of the Land Security and Civil Protection Regional Agency (ARSTePC)³⁸. In that case, the process led to the construction of artificial dunes, made up of biodegradable materials (i.e. wood logs and coconut geotextile) and sand, in order to act as barriers between the sea and the land; fibre-optic sensors were used to monitor the dune's inner structure, allowing for the evaluation of the NBS's capacity to withstand storm surges as well as its protective efficiency³⁹.

The above-mentioned features of the living and meta-lab approach, looking also at OALs, are useful to understand the framework in which our quasi-experiments are thought, pointing out the fact that it does not constitute an absolute framework of the research. While our Cafés share numerous characteristics with previous Living Lab features, some of those characteristics (e.g. the involvement of experts, the creation of an online platform, and the effective implementation of innovative solutions) are absent from our quasi-experiments. This is due, at least in part, to a lack of funding, which currently precludes the participation of experts and the implementation of ideas that emerged during the World Café sessions.

1.5. The case selection: Emilia-Romagna and Calabria regions

The choice to consider two different Italian regions, i.e. Emilia-Romagna (in the north) and Calabria (in the south), is predicated on a socio-historical divergence in civic engagement between the two areas. In this regard, as posited by Putnam (1993), in the south of Italy, economic and social conditions cultivated a culture of individual self-interest rather than collective action. This contrasts with other regions (e.g. Emilia-Romagna), where shared adversity led to the formation of cooperative structures.

³⁷ *ivi*

³⁸ https://www.operandum-project.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Operandum_Leaflet_Italy_Volano.pdf

³⁹ *ivi*

Here is not the place to go into full detail about the socio-historical issues between north and south Italy, but this reasoning aims to emphasize that the south was/is not apolitical or asocial. Indeed, it aims to put attention on the presence and the absence of social bonds, and on the distinction between horizontal bonds of mutual solidarity and vertical bonds of dependency and exploitation (*ibid.*).

It is precisely in this regard that the concept of ‘social capital’ assumes particular importance: the term is defined by the *Encyclopedia of Power* (2011) referred to the networks of associations and attitudes these foster, and it is considered a «resource that facilitates solutions to collective action problems» (Dowding, 2011, p. 611). According to social capital theory, societal productivity, as defined broadly, can be affected by the topology of interpersonal interactions, as opposed to anonymous, market-based transactions (*ibid.*). Putnam (1993) first used the term ‘social capital’ to investigate political phenomena, particularly the institutional performance of Italian regions (Almagisti, 2016). However, Putnam’s research starts from the fact that in the 1970s, the same institutional model was introduced in all Italian regions: the scholar emphasizes a strong correlation between institutional performance and the presence of a particular local political culture, the so-called ‘civicness’ (or civic culture), which is characterized by a widespread orientation of citizens toward politics, supported by extensive interpersonal trust and the habit of cooperation (*ivi*). From the empirical point of view, ‘civicness’ is measured considering four indicators, i.e. 1) membership in associations; 2) newspaper readership, basic expression of interest for each citizen in his/her community; 3) referenda turnout; and 4) preference voting, revealer of particularism and perhaps vote trading (Putnam, 1993). However, as also emphasized by Almagisti (2016), according to Putnam, civic culture is such since it is rich in social capital.

Taking up the above-mentioned distinction between vertical and social bonds, this distinction/contraposition is the result of a historical process: indeed, according to Putnam, performance discrepancies favoring north Italian regions are a result of historical occurrences that took place on the Italian Peninsula nearly a millennium ago, when in north-central Italy free municipalities were spread, while the south, during the reign of the Normans, was characterized by a hierarchical centralization (as Byzantine and Islamic institutional heritage) (Almagisti, 2016). It is essentially for this reason that, in the flow of history, the contraposition between diverging institutions and cultures occurred, i.e. ‘vertical’ in the south, and ‘horizontal’ in the north (*ivi*).

On the other hand, organized criminality had/has a crucial role in the southern historical and cultural background: «Organized criminality is an organic element in the pattern of horizontal

mistrust and vertical exploitation/dependence that has characterized southern culture and social structure for at least a millennium» (Putnam, 1993, p. 148).

These observations point to some socio-cultural differences between the Italian southern and northern society: the important concept still needed is that these features do not have a negative connotation, on the contrary, these features could help to understand some socio-political values, unique in their kind, such as the strong community resilience and adaptive strategies seen in southern Italy, which contrast with the more formalized civic engagement prevalent in northern regions. This unique socio-cultural fabric illustrates how different historical and institutional legacies shape distinct approaches to social organization and collective action.

In terms of the environment, from a historical perspective in Italy, during the 1980s, public awareness of environmental problems increased both from the political and institutional fallout (Corona, 2015). Particularly, in 1986 the Italian Ministry for Environment was created, and the Federation of Green Lists emerged, as the result of the 1981 *Arcipelago verde*, created in Bologna as a national coordination of associations, committees, magazines, and radio characterized by the presence of the ecological and non-violent forces (*ivi*). All this underlines how recent the Italian attention on the environment is, and the great impetus to finally take the reins of environmental issues, due also to the international changes and upheavals (e.g. 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster).

However, in the years following the Brundtland Report (1987), *Ambiente Italia* reports (realized by the *Istituto ambiente Italia*), and *Ecomafia* reports (edited by *Osservatorio ambiente e legalità* of Legambiente) began to be published (Corona, 2015). *Ecomafia* reports are still an extremely valuable source of data and information about criminal activities related to organized crime (i.e. mafia) which cause damages (often irreversible) to the environment. On the other hand, in addition to the well-established environmentalist organizations like Legambiente, Italia Nostra, the World Wide Fund for Nature (known as WWF), and so forth, other organizations appeared: for instance, Slow Food was founded in Bra (Piedmont) in 1986 with the intention of preserving agricultural and gastronomic traditions as well as food biodiversity (*ivi*).

However, the selection of the areas examined in this research should not be viewed solely through a political lens, but rather, it should be considered from a comprehensive perspective encompassing sociology, geography, and politics. In fact, participatory and deliberative democracy is inherently intertwined with the concept of territory, where collective actions play a pivotal role in its organization and transformation (De Salvo, 2021).

Conversely, we must also take into account a spatial perspective, as suggested by Bottini (2021). The creation of a distinct and identifiable community fosters the sharing of ideas and

the development of stronger social bonds, thereby increasing the likelihood of success in this regard (*ivi*).

In light of what has been stated so far, and also considering the few Italian cases of participatory/deliberative democratic processes mentioned, the territorial aspect of the areas seems often to be absent or underestimated. Territorial differences are indeed able to shape the interactions between citizens, but also between citizens and places. As Christenson (1984) notes, rural communities are often presented as *Gemeinschaft* places where individuals know each other through the relationship of primary interaction, while urban communities are presented as *Gesellschaft*, i.e. an anonym system characterized by interest, competition, and negotiation adjustments (De Salvo, 2021). These differences also impact participatory and deliberative democratic processes, as rural areas, despite their stronger social cohesion, often face challenges related to lower institutional presence, digital divide, and limited access to decision-making arenas (Trivelli & Morel, 2020). Conversely, urban areas may offer more opportunities for civic engagement; however, they are also characterized by fragmentation and social stratification, which can impede inclusive participation (Vitale, 2024). As highlighted by Vitale (2024), urban inequalities are not inevitable but stem from specific mechanisms that generate and perpetuate disparities within cities. Key issues, including the housing crisis, climate change, intergenerational well-being, and civic engagement, collectively influence urban participation, underscoring the necessity for integrated, participatory policies to address these challenges and foster more inclusive and sustainable urban environments.

Although urban areas represent a special arena of change, since, by 2045, the world's urban population will increase by 1.5 times to 6 billion⁴⁰ (World Bank), the so-called 'inner areas' are increasingly attracting the interest of social scientists, but also citizens looking for a higher quality of life, linked to a better environment and better social relationships (*ivi*). This renewed focus on rural areas prompts inquiries into the adaptability of participatory practices to varied territorial contexts, ensuring that both urban and rural citizens have equitable access to democratic processes.

Our research seeks to explore these relationships from a bottom-up scale, with a territorial perspective, focusing on the interplay between citizens, institutions, and economic actors as well. However, rural areas are able to set off a «sense of community»⁴¹ visible across

⁴⁰ See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/urbandevelopment/overview>

⁴¹ As will be written, concerning our activities on the ground, a question of the post-event survey is dedicated to the "sense of community" («Has the initiative [ed: the World Café], in general, increased your sense of community? »)

«participatory practices, actions of active territoriality with the experimentation of shared cultural and social experiences» (ivi, p. 27, translated by the author)⁴².

Within such a scenario, the dimension of participation may be more encouraged in rural areas rather than in urban ones. Considering this aspect, particularly looking at the Italian inner areas, Rimondi and Manella (2021) state the importance of two processes, i.e. the autonomous civic action of the subjects (e.g. associations, collective organizations providing the active engagement of citizens for the common good), and the practice of participatory democracy (backed by the *Carta della Partecipazione*, in which Cittadinanzattiva was a co-promoter⁴³). Rimondi and Manella, scholars of the University of Bologna, have studied two cases of small villages, i.e. Marzabotto (part of the Metropolitan City of Bologna), and Borbona (a municipality in the Province of Rieti, in the Italian region Latium). For both the villages, the scholars have considered participation at an institutional level (e.g. affiliation of the two municipalities to territorial networks, such as *Unioni dei Comuni* or *Patto dei Sindaci*, etc.), and participation into the world of associations (e.g. associations into the two municipalities, local events, regional/national/international networks such as the *Forum per il Terzo Settore*, *Centro Servizi per il Volontariato*, etc.). Nevertheless, notwithstanding the difficulties linked to the rural (or inner) areas, in these two municipalities, interesting experiences of participation were spread (with an important presence of young citizens too), for both in a relationship between citizens and institutions and a relationship between local associations. However, as noted by the authors, this kind of participatory process requires greater regularity and a better tendency of networking, to compare and share experiences among different territories.

La Rivoluzione delle Seppie, to take another example, is a Calabria's cultural association, active in the municipality of Belmonte Calabro (in the province of Cosenza), characterized by the presence of a dense network between local, regional, national, and international actors: in this case, actors are actually not only residents, but also students from the London Metropolitan University (Bertucci, 2021). It constitutes a concrete model of real territorial development, and it is not a mere form of participation and active citizenship. As noted by Bertucci (2021), the lack of economic resources represents the crucial challenge that the association is now facing. The *Rivoluzione delle Seppie*'s operational approach is defined by some principles that in a certain sense are present within the original idea of our project, i.e. learning-by-doing (closely related to the individual or collective skills, and the local context), conviviality (inclusion, relationship/network, and integration as key concepts), participation (collective processes

⁴² English translation by the author

⁴³ See also https://inu.it/wp-content/uploads/Carta_della_Partecipazione_illustrata.pdf

initiatives that take into account each person's abilities, preferences, and roles), trans-disciplinarity (avoiding the artificial boundaries that frequently divide disciplines and encourages their hybridization), horizontality (contents and actions are developed inside the group in a communal dimension), self-building (a collaborative approach for creating spaces that serves as a material reflection of the community involved and gathers input from the context), experimentation (innovative ways of research in living, self-handling, and collective living), and reuse (conceiving tangible and intangible goods in a circular perspective)⁴⁴.

However, the research done by Antronico *et al.* (2020) is extremely significant if we focus on the relationship between climate change and the Calabria region: taking into account perceptions about climate change, concerns about its impacts, level of information, behavior, and actions, exposure to extreme natural events and trust, the scholars investigate such concerns among two populations of two municipalities located along the Tyrrhenian side of Calabria, i.e. Amantea and Lago, both in the province of Cosenza. The choice of these areas is justified by the authors to be vulnerable from the climate point of view, although the different morphological traits between the two municipalities: following extreme weather events in December 2019, storm surges in the Amantea coastal plain resulted in flooding and coastal erosion, endangering the inhabitants and damaging infrastructure (the Amantea municipality's territory rises 420 meters above sea level from the seashore); on the other hand, the Lago municipal area is primarily distinguished by a mountain morphology and a high frequency of both superficial and deep landslide occurrences of various forms (its elevation ranges from 142 m above sea level to 1155 m). Although such a study does not tend to organize a participatory/deliberative process on an environmental topic, it is important for the method employed that, to some extent, reflects our way of analyzing if a change in policy preferences occurs within our Café sessions. Antronico *et al.* (2020) use a standardized questionnaire consisting of 33 close-ended questions (yes/no, multiple choice, five-point scale), divided into three sections: the participants' socio-demographic information, including their gender, age, and so forth, was included in the first section; the second section contained questions related to the perception of climate change (awareness, level of information, personal actions against climate change, etc.); five questions in the third section of the questionnaire aimed to test participants' resilience to extreme weather events. As nevertheless argued by Antronico and her colleagues, contextual elements, such as media communication, sociodemographic traits of respondents, knowledge, and education, economic, and institutional issues, personal values, and

⁴⁴ <https://larivoluzionedelleseppie.org/about-us/>

lastly psychological factors and experience, affect how people perceive climate change. Regarding this final argument, «scientists often remember how associating individual meteorological events with climate change is imprudent and scientifically incorrect, since, as is well known, climatology refers mainly to the average characteristics of the climate» (*ivi*, p. 20). Furthermore, the knowledge deficit that emerged from the questionnaires demonstrated how such a gap can only be filled by enhancing geographic sciences in school curricula (*ibid.*). Additionally, the scholars state, as emphasized several times in the previous pages, how collective and individual actions are crucial to address climate change.

It is important to acknowledge that well before the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic, territorial crisis, such as those involving Ilva, Tav, and post-earthquake reconstruction in Italy, had already highlighted the complex interconnections between policy outcomes, ecological considerations, economic dynamics, and social factors (Valastro, 2021). Nevertheless, the pandemic has underscored the pressing need for a more comprehensive approach to addressing crisis that impact territories, spanning from local to broader scales. Consequently, territorial conflicts and crisis call for an approach founded on local presence and proximity (*ivi*).

Furthermore, another research conducted in Calabria (within the municipalities of Tropea, Parghelia, and Zambrone, in the province of Vibo Valentia, located along the Tyrrhenian coast) demonstrates how knowledge is often related to the direct experience of an event (Antronico *et al.*, 2017). Indeed, the study pays attention to the rainfall events that caused many shallow landslides and debris flow along the narrow and deep canyons and produced serious damage to the coastal area of the three municipalities, in January 2009, October 2010, and March 2011.

In those contexts, «what emerges in this survey is that the population, although endowed with a high civic sense, does not evaluate the actions of the local institutions positively, both in the fields of territory management and people's education and/or information. For these reasons, the people interviewed, in particular those with high levels of education, consider the anthropic actions as a relevant cause of the geo-hydrological phenomena» (*ivi*, p. 310). Additionally, the submission of the questionnaires, in a face-to-face way, was aimed at raising citizens' awareness of geo-hydrological risks, and many respondents expressed satisfaction and approval for the survey at the end of the interview.

The attitudes of citizens toward local institutions, as described by Antronico *et al.* (2017), may be seen as an indicator of a crisis of democracy. Participatory and deliberative models of democracy are well-suited to addressing such issues. They excel in building stronger networks among citizens. Additionally, while these models may yield varying qualities of decisions,

participatory and deliberative democracy, in and of itself, proves valuable in combatting the previously mentioned ‘threat multiplier’ - in this case, climate change.

In consideration of the aforementioned factors, we have elected to prioritize participation that is closely aligned with territories, with a particular emphasis on the spatial dimension of participation. This emphasis recognizes the strong connection between place and citizens’ participatory actions.

Therefore, the areas chosen for conducting the research are the following:

- 1) Bologna, in Emilia-Romagna.
- 2) Gazzola, in the Province of Piacenza (Emilia-Romagna).
- 3) Cosenza, in Calabria.
- 4) Santa Caterina dello Ionio, in the Province of Catanzaro (Calabria).

Thus, two urban areas (i.e. Bologna and Cosenza), and two rural/inner areas (i.e. Gazzola and Santa Caterina dello Ionio) are considered. Furthermore, the following maps (Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9) serve as a tool for clarifying the spatial orientation and geographic context of the regions under consideration.

The urban area of Bologna, with less than 391.000 inhabitants (ISTAT, 2024) is the regional capital of Emilia-Romagna. Bologna stands out not only for its historical and cultural significance but also for its vibrant, dynamic atmosphere, largely owing to the notable presence of the University of Bologna. The city’s academic institution attracts a substantial influx of students from various corners of Italy and around the world. The students not only contribute to the city’s cosmopolitan character but also play a pivotal role in enriching its cultural and social fabric. Their presence infuses Bologna with fresh perspectives, innovative ideas, and a spirit of intellectual exchange, further enhancing its cultural and social vitality.

Conversely, Cosenza, with about 64.000 inhabitants (*ivi*), is not the regional capital of Calabria. Cosenza’s role in the region is further nuanced by the presence of a university, which is not located within the city itself but rather in a neighboring municipality, specifically Rende. This unique configuration underscores the diversity in the organization and distribution of educational institutions across different regions, which can significantly influence the cultural and social dynamics of the respective areas.

Considering instead rural/inner areas, Gazzola (in the province of Piacenza) is inhabited by little more than 2.000 citizens (*ivi*), while Santa Caterina dello Ionio (in the province of Catanzaro) has approximately 1.900 inhabitants (*ivi*). Despite their geographical separation,

Gazzola and Santa Caterina share this common characteristic, which, in itself, is a basis for exploring potential shared experiences, challenges, and opportunities within such intimate community settings.



Fig. 6 The urban area of Bologna

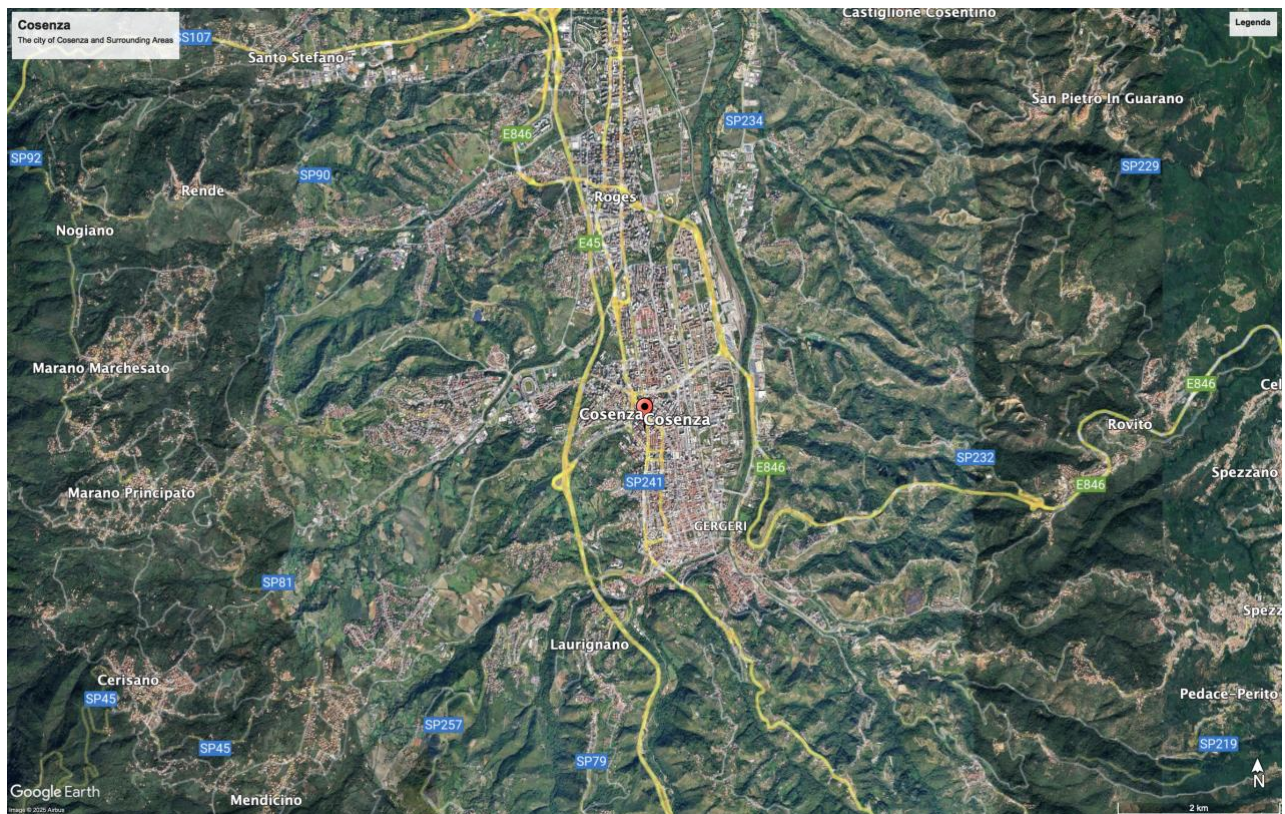


Fig. 7 The urban area of Cosenza

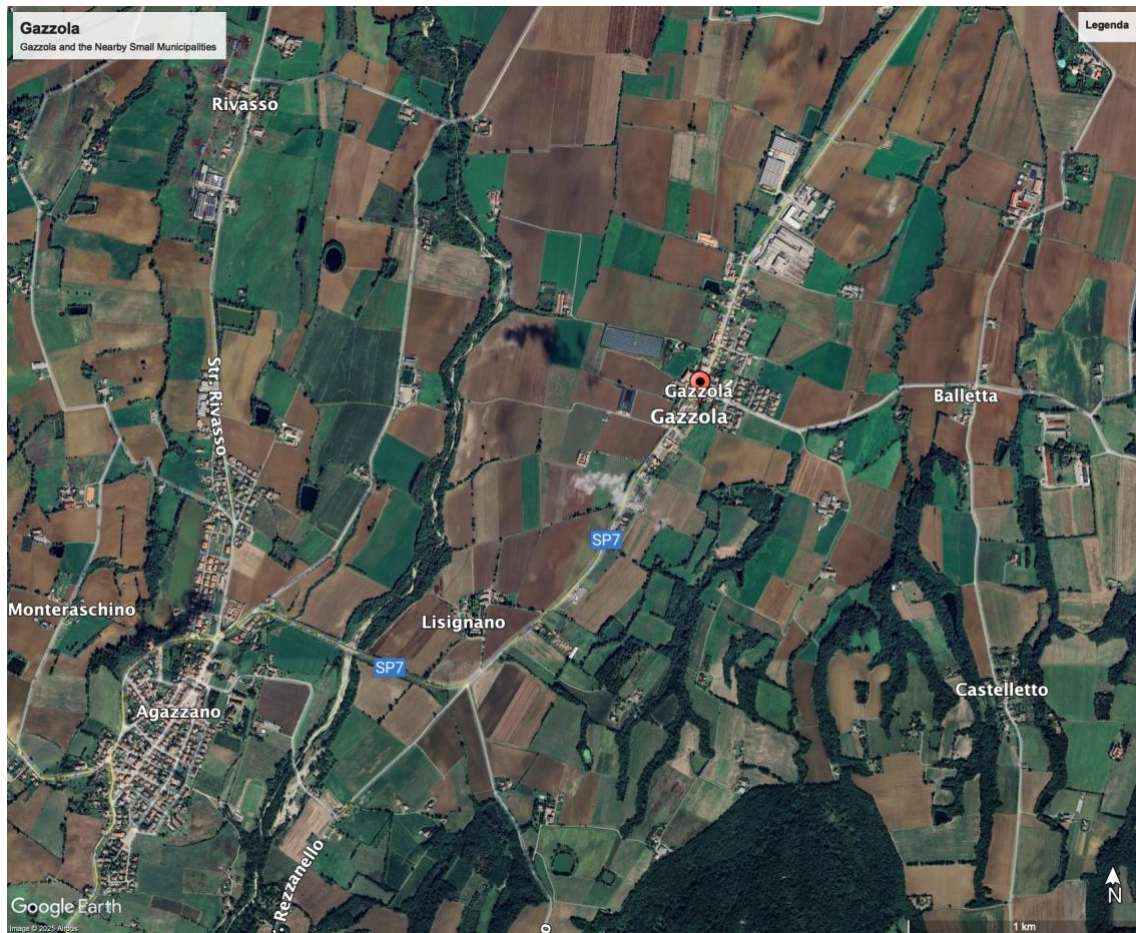


Fig. 8 The small village of Gazzola (Province of Piacenza)



Fig. 9 Santa Caterina dello Ionio (Province of Catanzaro): inner and coastal area

The importance of these maps elucidates the intricate territorial structure and conformation of the areas in question. It is this very spatial context that has significantly informed our case selection, particularly with regard to the choice of rural and inner areas. The maps facilitate comprehension of the geographic layout and spatial relationships of these regions, offering a comprehensive representation of the landscape and the distinctive features that characterize each area. This enhanced understanding of their territorial intricacies has been instrumental in shaping our research, guiding us in our exploration of these diverse contexts and their unique challenges and opportunities. For instance, as shown by Fig. 8, Gazzola is in the context of the Trebbia River Park (it. *Parco Fluviale Regionale del Trebbia*), a protected area where the Piacenza hills meet the lower Po Plain⁴⁵. The Trebbia River Park was established in 2009, with a total area of 4031 hectares composed of eight municipalities, including of course Gazzola⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ See https://emiliaromagnaturismo.it/en/nature-outdoor/natural-parks/trebbia-river-regional-park?utm_source=ERT&utm_medium=menu, and <http://www.parchidelducato.it/parco.trebbia/page.php?id=243>

⁴⁶ <https://ambiente.regione.emilia-romagna.it/it/parchi-natura2000/aree-protette/parchi/treb>

One of the principal tributaries of the Po, the Trebbia River (whose source is in the Ligurian Apennines) maintains excellent natural qualities and high water quality levels from its source to its mouth. The environmental and geomorphological diversity of the valley and its tributary valleys is what gives them their naturalistic and landscape significance. Moreover, the Trebbia River serves as a vital transit route for many migratory birds as well as a resting and nesting area for species that are crucial for conservation. On the other hand, the presence of numerous castles, connected to the medieval events of the Piacenza region and the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza, stands out to distinguish and adorn the territories next to the course of the river (e.g. Castello di Gazzola).

The Municipality of Gazzola was one of the co-founders of the *Unione dei Comuni Bassa Val Trebbia e Val Luretta*, remaining part until 2018⁴⁷, and it is currently among the Covenant signatories, within the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy that is an initiative with the purpose «to engage and support cities and towns to commit to reaching the EU climate mitigation and adaptation targets. Signatory cities pledge action to support implementation of the EU 40% greenhouse gas-reduction target by 2030 and the adoption of a joint approach to tackling mitigation and adaptation to climate change»⁴⁸. Looking instead at Santa Caterina dello Ionio (Fig. 9), it is located in the context of *Parco Naturale Regionale delle Serre*⁴⁹, characterized by the presence of woodlands and forests, and rural fields, with several natural features (e.g. flora and fauna).

But what is (or could be) the relationship between these territories and our deliberative/participatory democracy discourse? Regarding the study's focus areas, it has been confirmed that there are issues within the territories related to the themes selected for our quasi-experiments, with an emphasis on understanding how territorial stakeholders might be involved. In other words, the themes selected for the World Cafés were identified through a comprehensive approach that considered territorial relevance, environmental and social urgency, and the potential involvement of local stakeholders.

For instance, the issue of separate waste collection is a significant social problem in both Bologna and Cosenza. This is evidenced by numerous articles in local and national

⁴⁷ <https://unionecomuni-valtrebbia-valluretta.it/it/page/storia-e-composizione>

⁴⁸ <https://climate-adapt.eea.europa.eu/en/eu-adaptation-policy/covenant-of-mayors#:~:text=The%20Covenant%20of%20Mayors%20for,mitigation%20and%20the%20measures%20needed>

⁴⁹ See <http://www.parks.it/parco.serre/Epar.php>

newspapers⁵⁰, which have highlighted the topic as a key concern related to SDG12. Moreover, it should be noted that Bologna is among the nine Italian cities that participate in the EU mission ‘Climate-Neutral and Smart Cities by 2030’⁵¹: EU missions are an innovative way to address some of our biggest problems (e.g. climate change). They have high expectations and plan to produce tangible outcomes by 2030. By giving research and innovation a new role, combining it with new forms of governance and collaboration, as well as involving citizens, they will produce an impact.

However, the other theme discussed within the urban contexts is that of the urban green areas (particularly linked to the above-mentioned SDG11, actions of the EU mission previously cited focus, among other things, on green urban planning) characterized to have a crucial role in terms of adaptation and mitigation to climate change (Wong *et al.*, 2021): e.g. since Bologna is located in the Po Valley, one of the most polluted Europe’s areas (Khomenko *et al.*, 2021).

Nevertheless, both Bologna and Cosenza municipalities are engaged in the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy⁵². This reflects a broader commitment to fostering environmental sustainability at the urban level, improving the quality of life for their citizens, and contributing to the global efforts in combating climate change.

The importance of cities in mitigation strategies is also emphasized by IPCC (2022), within the *Summary for Policymakers*, in which also the engagement of civil society plays an important role: comprehensive city-level mitigation strategies can reduce greenhouse gas emissions within and beyond city limits, with the effectiveness significantly influenced by the engagement of civil society, along with regulatory frameworks, financial resources, and local governance.

On the other hand, within the two inner areas, the two themes of the dialogue are, 1) separate waste collection (it could be useful to investigate the different points of view between the northern and the southern inner area since there are often gaps⁵³), and 2) energy from renewable sources (clearly related to the SDG 7), addressed from the residents perspective: e.g. local communities, within the *Parco Naturale Regionale delle Serre*, often had a critical attitude toward the construction of wind farms in such areas⁵⁴.

⁵⁰ E.g. see <https://www.dire.it/17-11-2022/833698-zona-centro-di-bologna-bombardata-da-abbandoni-di-rifiuti/> (for Bologna); <https://cosenza.gazzettadelsud.it/articoli/cronaca/2023/08/04/troppe-discariche-nei-quartieri-di-cosenza-i-residenti-sollecitano-interventi-cd533cc1-e5c0-445e-97e8-247bbcaab0de/> (for Cosenza)

⁵¹ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/53-pilot-cities-test-climate-transition-pathways-part-eu-cities-mission-2023-03-01_en

⁵² See the website managed by the Commission for the Environment, Climate Change and Energy, <https://eu-mayors.ec.europa.eu/en/home?tmpl=response&start=160&tmpl=response>

⁵³ See the Report on urban waste published by the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research (ISPRA), available at https://www.isprambiente.gov.it/files2022/pubblicazioni/rapporti/rapportorifiutiurbani_ed-2021-n-355-conappendice_agg18_01_2022.pdf

⁵⁴ See, e.g. <https://www.ilvizzarro.it/apertura/apertura-1/l-ennesimo-parco-eolico-e-la-bilancia-truccata.html>

In other words, for the selection of case studies, we have crosschecked requirements for their socio-political and environmental contexts, looking for the involvement of residents and territorial stakeholders (e.g. local associations, etc.), and also the possibility to involve local policymakers. This multi-faceted approach to case selection allows us to pinpoint locations that not only provide a rich socio-political and environmental backdrop but also present opportunities for a comprehensive examination of participatory and deliberative democracy models. The goal is to identify areas where these dynamics interplay and, by focusing on such areas, we aim to analyze the processes and outcomes of participatory initiatives and their impact on individual preferences.

Furthermore, as already shown, we conducted a thorough assessment of the extent to which the individual municipalities are actively engaged in networks such as the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy and/or the *Unione dei Comuni*. This verification process is integral to our case selection, as it ensures that the chosen areas are not only primed for participatory and deliberative democracy models but are also aligned with broader regional and international initiatives focused on climate action and sustainable energy.

The selection of Santa Caterina dello Ionio as one of our case studies is underscored by some distinct factors. Firstly, it is distinguished by a unique geographical peculiarity, encapsulating an inner area with a captivating juxtaposition of coastal and hilly landscapes. This distinctive topographical blend adds a layer of complexity to its environmental and sociopolitical dynamics.

Furthermore, our choice is intricately linked to the presence of a key-actor in the Calabria's Ionic coast: an ethological donkey farm that has demonstrated a profound commitment to environmental stewardship, product quality, and, notably, the well-being of residents (Vadalà, 2023). This farm's conscientious practices not only mirror the values we aim to explore but also serve as an exemplar of environmentally sustainable agriculture and citizens' participation. Lastly, it is noteworthy that the Municipality of Santa Caterina is among the signatories of the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, highlighting its (at least theoretical) active involvement in regional and European efforts aimed at addressing climate change and promoting sustainable energy solutions. These collective attributes position Santa Caterina dello Ionio as an exemplary case study, offering a rich tapestry of socio-environmental dynamics and participatory potential for our research.

In addition, it is worth noting that the National Strategy for Inner Areas distinguishes between the categorization of these two villages. Gazzola, according to the Strategy, falls within the

classification of a ‘midway area’ with the urban context. On the other hand, Santa Caterina dello Ionio is designated as one of the ‘remote municipalities’⁵⁵.

This differentiation in the official classification of these areas highlights their varying degrees of remoteness and accessibility, further deepening the contrast between the two areas and providing a more nuanced perspective for our research.

Beyond these specific characteristics of the areas involved, it is important to examine, looking at a regional level as well, the interactive map provided by the Observatory on Participation of the Emilia-Romagna Region⁵⁶: the map appears highly detailed, notably indicating the level of participation (i.e. empowerment, participatory design, information, consultation, ‘not calculated’) concerning the specific processes.

Specifically, when considering the ‘type of territorial impact’, it can be observed that the municipal level represents the highest number of participatory processes within the Emilia-Romagna region (1.137 processes out of 1.518⁵⁷); conversely, concerning Calabria region, the level of participation is not calculated, while the total number of mapped participatory processes amounts to only 8⁵⁸. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that in Emilia-Romagna, the municipalities involved in participatory processes total 330, whereas in Calabria, the number is 137⁵⁹ (last update of the Observatory on Participation of the Emilia-Romagna Region’s data on January 31, 2024).

However, it is advisable to investigate whether and how many participatory processes (ongoing or concluded) exist in the specific areas involved in our research, taking into account the Observatory on Participation of the Emilia-Romagna Region’s data:

- Regarding the Municipality of Bologna, the concluded participatory processes amount to 166, while 19 are currently ongoing (the primary thematic areas include welfare, territory, and the environment).
- The Municipality of Gazzola (PC) records 78 participatory processes, of which 68 have concluded, with the environment as the primary thematic area.
- For City of Cosenza, there is no data available concerning regional and local administrations participatory processes.
- Concerning Santa Caterina dello Ionio (CZ), there is also no data available.

⁵⁵ According to the classification of the Inner Areas – 2014 (<https://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/la-selezione-delle-aree/>)

⁵⁶ <https://www.osservatoriopartecipazione.it/italia/mappa>

⁵⁷ *ivi* (data take into account participatory processes promoted by regional and local administrations).

⁵⁸ *ivi*

⁵⁹ *ivi*

From these data, a significant gap emerges between the considered areas: the urban area of Emilia-Romagna, i.e. Bologna, and the inner area, i.e. Gazzola, appear particularly active in terms of participation. In contrast, Calabrian areas exhibit rather concerning data, with few ongoing and/or concluded participatory processes, mostly organized at a top-down level. These data from the Emilia-Romagna and Calabria regions offer a compelling illustration of the socio-historical dynamics described by Putnam (1993). The significant discrepancy in the number and nature of participatory processes between these regions not only aligns with but also reinforces Putnam's findings on civic engagement and social capital. In Emilia-Romagna, the predominance of local municipal control over participatory processes, with a robust number of ongoing and concluded initiatives, seems to underscore a vibrant culture of civic engagement and horizontal social bonds. This high level of participation at the municipal level reflects the region's rich tradition of 'civicness'.

Conversely, the data from Calabria reveal a more centralized and top-down approach to participatory processes, predominantly controlled by State administration. The limited number of participatory processes, combined with the centralization of ownership, suggests a weaker tradition of horizontal civic engagement and a reliance on vertical bonds of dependency and control. In summary, these findings not only confirm but also provide empirical support for Putnam's research, demonstrating how historical and socio-cultural factors continue to influence citizens' participation in different Italian regions.

1.5.1. The four Quasi-Experiments: The Role of Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna Association

Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna was the third sector organization affiliated for the completion of the mandatory internship in a company as outlined in the 2021/2022 Ph.D. program for Innovation and Green topics, funded under the FSE-REACT-EU within the framework of the PON 2014-2020 program⁶⁰.

The organization's physical and virtual spaces have played a central role in formulating the plan for our empirical research. Beginning with a thorough examination of the 'Community PRO' project, these spaces have not only served as a primary source of data and observation but have also influenced the overall direction and methodology of the research. Nevertheless, exploring various projects, including 'Community PRO' and '*Buone Pratiche Sociali*'⁶¹, has enriched the foundation for empirical research.

⁶⁰ D.M. 1061/2021

⁶¹ <https://buonepracticesociali.cittadinanzattiva-er.it/>

The idea of implementing the World Café approach, starting from the center of Bologna, arose from reading the literature on participatory and deliberative democracy. We decided to employ this approach, starting from the offices of Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna. However, as will be seen in the following Chapter, the first fieldwork conducted in Bologna revealed some differences from the other three fieldworks, for instance, regarding the questions posed to the participants and the questionnaires employed.

However, it is worth highlighting that Cittadinanzattiva promptly offered support to facilitate our fieldworks in Emilia-Romagna. Its support encompassed providing their spaces in Bologna and actively sponsoring our initiative through its social media channels on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Furthermore, Cittadinanzattiva played a pivotal role in the project by designing and distributing printed posters in key locations across the city, including study halls and public venues. This multifaceted support from Cittadinanzattiva significantly contributed to the success and visibility of our fieldworks.

Moreover, our World Café sessions were also integrated into the Social Impact Assessment of Activities for 2022, a comprehensive evaluation carried out by the administrative body of Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna, highlighting the significance and influence of our World Café sessions in shaping the organization's broader context of social impact assessment⁶².

Upon completing the Gazzola Café, the representatives took the opportunity to provide a concise overview to the participants regarding the various activities carried out by the association and the youth space. This informative part of the session allowed the participants to gain insights into the organization's mission, initiatives, and the resources available at Bologna's youth space that may be replicated within the Piacenza area.

In promoting fieldwork, it is also important to emphasize that each initiative has been meticulously documented and made readily accessible via the Heroots website⁶³. Such a platform is a comprehensive database for sustainability-themed events throughout Italy, featuring an interactive map for user-friendly navigation. During the event upload process, specific attention has been given to identifying key stakeholders (e.g. Cittadinanzattiva, Arci, Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo), providing a direct link to the event description for reservation convenience, and articulating the alignment of these activities with SDGs.

⁶² Cittadinanzattiva's Social Impact Assessment of Activities (2022) is available at https://www.cittadinanzattiva-er.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Cittadinanzattiva-Emilia-Romagna-APS_Valutazione-dImpatto-Sociale-2022.pdf

⁶³<https://www.heroots.com/>

Ultimately, regarding assessing the proposal's feasibility, it is essential to underscore that Cittadinanzattiva has exhibited an immediate and receptive attitude. Such receptiveness is particularly notable due to the close alignment of our project with the fundamental principles and objectives central to the organization's overarching mission and vision⁶⁴. This compatibility serves as a strong foundation for collaboration and reinforces the mutually beneficial nature of the proposed venture.

1.5.2. The method step by step

At the outset, a methodological note was drafted, primarily addressing the participant recruitment strategy, which involved the 'open door' method, and it should be noted that the choice of this strategy was also influenced by 'Community PRO'.

The methodological note included six steps:

- 1) Define the scope of the challenge the World Cafés should have addressed.
- 2) Map stakeholders, beyond Cittadinanzattiva (e.g. public entities, third sector organizations).
- 3) Develop methodology, looking at the World Café approach guidelines⁶⁵.
- 4) Set up World Café space, by creating an environment that fosters interaction and actively involves stakeholders.
- 5) Engage stakeholders in co-design and co-creation.
- 6) Disseminate the outcomes.

The development of this framework was significantly influenced by the design principles of the Living Lab approach⁶⁶, mentioned above. However, the underlying assumption was that the World Café could serve as an excellent vehicle for practices of deliberative democracy within the considered territories in the near future. Informal and constructive conversations on crucial issues such as climate change at a local level, facilitated through the modus operandi briefly outlined above, might effectively give a tangible voice to local communities, fostering networks of relationships that can open new avenues for action.

⁶⁴ It should also be noted that our project, immediately following the first fieldwork in Bologna, was briefly showcased in a Cittadinanzattiva podcast, elucidating its objectives and the role of young people in addressing climate change issue (<https://www.cittadinanzattiva.it/podcast/15319-puntata-7-cambiamenti-climatici-mobilita-sostenibile-e-protagonismo-civico-dei-giovani.html>, min: 13:25)

⁶⁵ <https://www.theworldcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/WorldCafeGuidaPractica.pdf>

⁶⁶ <https://sshcentre.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Infosheets-6-SSH-CENTRE-Living-Labs.pdf>

Furthermore, news articles from local newspapers and the monthly journal *La Nuova Ecologia* were distributed to the tables for each area involved, as will be seen in more detail in the following Chapter. Local newspaper articles addressed issues and opportunities related to the laboratory's topics, while *La Nuova Ecologia*'s coverage featured more national and/or global concerns.

Although our collaboration with Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna helped us to promote our quasi-experiments, identifying the other local stakeholders required some preliminary insights:

- 1) Concerning Gazzola, given the absence of Cittadinanzattiva in that context, to identify the best location for our fieldwork and to promote and support the initiative among residents, we held several meetings (in Bologna and remotely) with the local city councilor delegated to cultural and educational policies. In addition, the event was also promoted on the official website of Cittadinanzattiva⁶⁷, helping to raise awareness of the event among a wider audience, including potential participants from outside the local community. The event was also shared on the Gazzola's Municipal Library's official pages⁶⁸, which helped reach residents who might not have been aware of the event otherwise.
- 2) Identifying local stakeholders in Cosenza proved challenging⁶⁹. Of the four organizations we contacted, only ARCI Cosenza responded. ARCI Cosenza was immediately receptive to our idea of organizing a participatory laboratory, declaring its willingness to make its offices available. Additionally, the promotion campaign was carried out by ARCI using its own social media channels (e.g. Instagram, Facebook⁷⁰), paper flyers, and newsletter. Moreover, the organization has demonstrated a keen interest in sustaining our partnership for the prospect of a more extensive participatory and deliberative project.
- 3) Regarding Santa Caterina, also in that case, we held several online meetings with Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo's owners⁷¹, in order to identify the better location: in

⁶⁷ <https://www.cittadinanzattiva-er.it/world-cafe-piacenza/>

⁶⁸ Gazzola's Municipal Library's official Facebook page is available at the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100076041513044>

⁶⁹ The search for a stakeholder willing to host our fieldwork should have been relatively straightforward, given that Cosenza was named the 2023 Italian Capital of Volunteering

(<https://www.provincia.cs.it/portale/portaletemplates/newpro/view/view.cfm?9744#:~:text=La%20Presidente%20Succurro%20ha%20infine,istituzioni%20civili%20e%20religiose%20cosentine>).

⁷⁰ See <https://www.facebook.com/arcicosenza>

⁷¹ Sofia De Matteis and Raffaele Dolce, two alumni of the University of Bologna, decided to relocate to Santa Caterina during the COVID-19 pandemic in search of a more sustainable lifestyle in touch with nature and a rich cultural rural landscape. Additionally, Sofia De Matteis was nominated as a Rural Innovator Ambassador of the

the beginning, we had planned to organize an outdoor World Café session in the AAA fields, but due to weather-related reasons, we opted for an alternative location.

In addition to organizing the event, the local stakeholder was also responsible for promoting it to Santa Caterina's residents. To do this, they distributed paper flyers throughout the small village (e.g. in local bars, restaurants, and other public places).

It is worth noting that a booking page was created on the Eventbrite® platform⁷² for each fieldwork, which also contained the primary information about the initiative. It was done, in part, to monitor participation levels through online bookings so that we could verify that the minimum number of participants was reached.

Additionally, potential participants were contacted via email and invited to review the informative material related to the fieldwork's topics, highlighting the academic nature of the World Café: participants' email addresses were used for no other purpose than to send a thank-you email, and the post-event questionnaire. Email addresses were also collected for off-list participants at the beginning of the Cafés. Regarding the pre-event questionnaire, a QR code was distributed among the tables to be scanned with a smartphone. Paper copies of the questionnaire were also available if a participant could not complete it using an electronic device. In this last case, at least two participants were required to complete it manually to ensure anonymity.

It should be noticed that each step was designed and conceived as informal as possible to put participants at ease, as also required by the action-research method and the World Café approach (Brown & Isaacs, 2005).

However, everything was thought out in the smallest detail: a projector was present in every seat (the introductory speech and the questions asked of the participants, as well as the final harvest and sharing collective discoveries, were made using slides as support); all the necessary tools for the Café were purchased (pens, notepads, post-its®, placemats, talking sticks, posters), as well as food for the buffet and drinks, all thought out in a sustainable manner (preferring local foods, trying to avoid the use of disposable plastics, using café and tea fairtrade certified).

South Italy, within the framework of the European Union Project 'FLIARA Community of Practice' (Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas), <https://fliara.eu/>

⁷² <https://www.eventbrite.it/>

Conclusions

The research delves into the implementation of a participatory model for citizen engagement, specifically leveraging the strengths of the World Café format to foster in-depth discussions and collaborative problem-solving. Indeed, the main research question revolves around the impact of informal and constructive conversations on fostering a deliberate transformation in individual preferences, specifically regarding climate change at a local level, exploring how these dialogues can establish connections between actors and the environment, fostering a ‘green consensus’ among participants.

Action-research contributes to show its potential by combining the typical features of the qualitative research with a strong emphasis on bottom-up participation. Nevertheless, beyond theoretical and empirical differences between action-research and other methods for doing research, the call for a new era of collaboration to tackle climate change and contemporary challenges is urgent: for instance, community-based action research (Ventura & Shahar, 2022), which is socially oriented, and social design research (*ivi*) are moving in such a direction.

Precisely concerning the action-research method, we emphasize the need for a balance between theoretical rigor and practical action, which should be characterized by an objective sustainability perspective, entailing transformative change, social learning, inter- and trans-disciplinary understanding.

Furthermore, the World Café is a tool that links conversation with concrete action, fostering learning empowerment, and co-generative dialogues: within such a framework, communication is considered an essential means to establish a symbiotic relationship between science and society, recalling the Living Lab functioning.

However, democracy and climate change (with the issue of energy conversion) produce an intricate relationship in which deliberative democracy and democratic engagement (Olsson, 2022) could have a crucial role.

Last but not least, concerning the case selection, some conclusions can be drawn:

- Primarily, the choice to take Emilia-Romagna and Calabria into account stems from socio-historical disparities in civic engagement. The southern region, historically characterized by hierarchical centralization and amoral familism, contrasts the northern tradition of voluntary cooperation and a civic culture (Putnam, 1993).
- Beyond political aspects (e.g. the four municipalities are engaged in the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy), the research considers sociological, geographical, and environmental perspectives (e.g. for instance, Gazzola and Santa Caterina are part of natural parks; Santa Caterina presents both coastal and hilly landscapes). Deliberative

and participatory democracy are deemed crucial tools in addressing environmental challenges at a local level.

The selection of the four case studies is also driven by the desire to draw comparisons regarding citizens' participation between urban and rural areas in the two considered regions. The examination is undertaken in light of the data on the Participation Observatory platform managed by the Emilia-Romagna Region, bearing in mind that our endeavors are conceived as academic quasi-experiments with minimal economic and temporal resources or otherwise not sufficient to organize a genuinely participatory and/or deliberative process.

On the other hand, as already argued, in order to avoid or at least limit the impression of the 'outsider researcher' (Kerstetter, 2012), the Cafés were arranged in collaboration with some local stakeholders. The instrumental role played by Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna has been pivotal in supporting and elevating the success of our World Cafés. As a third sector organization affiliated with our doctoral program, Cittadinanzattiva provided essential physical and virtual spaces and became an invaluable partner in shaping the trajectory and methodology of our research. The alignment between Cittadinanzattiva's mission and our project's objectives has been a critical factor contributing to the feasibility and success of our venture. The organization's prompt and multifaceted support, ranging from offering spaces to actively promoting our initiative through various channels, significantly bolstered the visibility and impact of our fieldworks. Furthermore, integrating our World Café sessions into the Social Impact Assessment of Activities for 2022 underscored the broader influence of our activities within the organizational context of Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna. The collaboration extended the organization's reach into new territories, exemplified by the fieldwork in Gazzola, where participants gained valuable insights into Cittadinanzattiva's mission and initiatives, emphasizing the mutually beneficial nature of our collaboration.

Despite the fieldworks in Calabria being conducted independently, acknowledging Cittadinanzattiva's role after each Café underscores the lasting impact and appreciation for their support throughout our research endeavors.

In other words, despite the 'open door' method chosen for participants' recruitment, influenced also by the 'Community PRO' project, the World Café was strategically envisioned as a seed for future practices of deliberative democracy within those specific territorial areas.

In particular, concerning the participants' recruitment method, advantages and challenges are present in both the 'open door' and random selection: specifically, the 'open door' method allows for a broader range of perspectives and experiences to be represented in participatory

and/or deliberative processes. However, as already emphasized, ‘open door’ may often lead to self-selection biases, which can limit the representativeness of the participants group: social biases, time availability (Bobbio, 2019), and intensity of preferences (Fabrino Mendonça & Schettini M. Cunha, 2014) are among the factors influencing self-selection, as participation is driven by those who are strongly motivated or personally affected by the issue under discussion. The debate surrounding the remuneration of participants introduces an additional layer of complexity to the research process. On the one hand, financial incentives have the potential to encourage broader participation and improve the representation of diverse groups, particularly those who might otherwise be excluded due to economic barriers. Conversely, such incentives may introduce biases, as participants may join primarily for monetary compensation rather than genuine interest in the process. This gives rise to concerns regarding the credibility and authenticity of the outcomes (Giannetti *et al.*, 2007).

Ultimately, if random selection can ensure representativeness, it may limit participation; conversely, if the ‘open door’ method can promote participation, it may lack representativeness. The absence of a representative sample from the population hinders generalizability of our results.

To be sure, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and the best approach will vary depending on the specific situation. Additionally, as stated by Elster (2016), prioritizing the transformation of preferences over their mere aggregation is crucial. While institutional changes play a crucial role, they alone are insufficient. It is of the utmost importance to concentrate on the micro-level dynamics of individual citizens if one is to successfully influence their preferences in favor of a more sustainable way of life.

Chapter 2. Unveiling Insights from Conversations and Questionnaires: A Comprehensive Analysis of Fieldwork Results

Introduction

This chapter delves into the results of the World Cafés, analyzing each conversation within its specific timeframe. Additionally, it explores the outcomes of the pre- and post-event questionnaires administered to participants.

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 2.1. provides a detailed overview of the four fieldworks, describing the topics chosen for each session, the related reference literature, the stakeholders involved, and participants' booking process. Sections 2.1.1. to 2.1.4. describe the World Café conversations, encompassing the two rounds of conversation, rotations, and initial questions. Section 2.2. illustrates the results from pre- and post-event questionnaires, exploring participants' perceptions, satisfaction levels, knowledge acquisition, and the impacts of the quasi-experiments. The concluding section synthesizes the findings from both the conversations and questionnaires, highlighting the key effects generated by our quasi-experiments.

2.1. Creating Spaces for Democratic Participation: The World Café Quasi-Experiments

The four initiatives employed the World Café format, drawing on both theoretical foundations and empirical examples (e.g. Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Alunni-Menichini *et al.*, 2023). This approach proved to be particularly fruitful, yielding a plethora of ideas and insights pertaining to the matters under discussion. The World Café approach, which encourages open dialogue and collective reflection, facilitated a dynamic exchange of perspectives, enabling participants to address complex issues collaboratively. The outcomes demonstrate the value of this format in facilitating the development of innovative solutions and enhancing comprehension of the subjects under discussion.

For each table of conversation, the researcher/coordinator of the Cafés has appointed a 'host', the same for each round of conversation, intending to ensure the discursive continuity between the participants. On the other hand, each notebook filled out by the host allowed the implementation of the seventh principle/design rule of the World Café, i.e. harvest and share collective discoveries («make collective knowledge and insight visible and actionable» - Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 40). The participants were invited to join the table of their choice when they arrived onsite, while the researcher randomly chose hosts.

It is important to emphasize that the host was not 'neutral' in the conversations, as for instance in the already-mentioned World Café studied by Alunni-Menichini *et al.* (2023), but he/she

interacted with others in a meaningful way⁷³. The added value of our quasi-experiments can be observed in the fact that hosts were randomly chosen among participants, ensuring the informality of the initiative. Such an informality was further accentuated by the choice of locations.

It is also important to note that the objective of our Cafés was not to engage in a scientific analysis of concepts or issues. Rather, the intention was to create a conducive environment for a democratic dialogue about climate change. This was done with the aim of fostering the emergence of innovative solutions around the proposed themes and attempting to influence a change in participants' preferences. In this respect, another element needs to be pointed out: before the World Café, each participant received by email⁷⁴ some informative material and easily readable brochures about the specific topics.

The material was related to the themes tackled by every event, and selected verifying accessibility, reliability, and the user-friendliness of the source:

- 1) For the Bologna laboratory, concerning separate waste collection, four links/websites were shared (i.e. Bologna's waste collection map⁷⁵; first results of the activities carried out by the *Spazzino di quartiere*, provided by Emilia-Romagna region⁷⁶; the *Rifiutologo*⁷⁷, a digital tool provided by Hera Group to help citizens make a proper collection of waste; the focus on SDG 12 provided by ISTAT⁷⁸); concerning green urban areas, a report on urban forestation provided by ISTAT (2020)⁷⁹ was sent, and multimedia content on green urban areas and infrastructures (by the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development – ASviS)⁸⁰ was shared with the people booked.

⁷³ The primary distinction between our quasi-experiments and Alunni-Menichini's Café lies in the themes selected for the session (i.e. environmental concerns in our case, and substance users experiencing homelessness in Montreal, Canada, in Alunni-Menichini's research): the host within Alunni-Menichini's Café was defined 'neutral', with a crucial role for engaging vulnerable people in the conversation process. Nevertheless, within the Café organized in Canada, hosts were part of the research team with experience in heading focus groups.

⁷⁴ Each participant indicated his/her email address in the registration for the event, through the platform Eventbrite®

⁷⁵ <https://www.comune.bologna.it/servizi-informazioni/mappa-raccolta-rifiuti-bologna>

⁷⁶ <https://ambiente.regione.emilia-romagna.it/it/notizie/notizie/2022/settembre/spazzino-di-quartiere-eccolo-anche-a-navile-e-savena-a-bologna>

⁷⁷ https://www.ilrifiutologo.it/casa_rifiutologo/

⁷⁸ <https://www.istat.it/storage/rapporti-tematici/sdgs/2020/goal12.pdf>

⁷⁹ https://www.istat.it/it/files//2022/03/Cambiamenti-climatici_2020.pdf

⁸⁰ <https://asvis.it/notizie-sull-alleanza/19-19143/il-position-paper-dellasvis-a-dieci-anni-dalla-legge-sul-verde-urbano>

- 2) For Gazzola's fieldwork, three links/websites were shared with people who booked: concerning separate waste collection, the focus on SDG 12 provided by ISTAT⁸¹ was shared, suggesting paying attention to p. 200, a framework on the Italian situation that takes into account, among other things, the north-south divide. Concerning renewables, some information about collective self-consumption and renewable energy communities⁸² was shared; furthermore, (potential) participants were invited to read some pages (i.e. 4-6; 73-77; 105-107; 113-116) of the *Plan of Action for Sustainable Energy and Climate* (May 2021)⁸³, provided by the Municipality of Gazzola within the framework of the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy.

- 3) Concerning Calabria's fieldworks, particularly within the rural area of Santa Caterina dello Ionio (hereinafter called Santa Caterina), in the province of Catanzaro, problems occurred with digital promotion and online booking.
Specifically, no Santa Caterina participants have registered online, while within the urban area of Cosenza, which we will return later, 8 participants booked online.
In the case of Santa Caterina, the support and collaboration of Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo (AAA) was crucial, both for the local participants' recruitment, and to avoid, or at least limit the impression of the outsider researcher (Kerstetter, 2012): AAA is managed by two alumni of the University of Bologna, and it is a space devoted to the natural management of donkeys and other animals (e.g. goats, and pigs), in full respect of rural peasant practices, local community, and environment⁸⁴. It is important to say that AAA is part of the 'We're South' network, founded by local young people, that entails six Calabrian villages (i.e. Bivongi, Stilo, Monasterace, Santa Caterina, Guardavalle, and Badolato), aiming at offering a form of experiential and sustainable tourism⁸⁵. Within such a framework, sociality and sharing are two concepts at the core of rurality, as understood by AAA (De Matteis & Dolce, 2021).
Thanks precisely to this collaboration, the World Café was carried out with the presence of 13 participants, on a private terrace, picking up the typical informal aspect of the

⁸¹ <https://www.istat.it/storage/rapporti-tematici/sdgs/2020/goal12.pdf>

⁸² <https://energia.regione.emilia-romagna.it/comunita-energetiche/autoconsumo-collettivo-e-comunita-energetiche-rinnovabili-cosa-sono-e-quali-sono-i-benefici>

⁸³ https://www.halleyweb.com/c033022/images/documenti/File_20210528000000_PAESCComunedigazzola.pdf

⁸⁴ <https://weresouth.com/avvicinamento-allasino-introduzione-al-mondo-asinino/>

⁸⁵ <https://weresouth.com/esperienze-2/>

World Café format (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). Furthermore, at least one week before the event, poster, and paper promotional material was spread within the village.

Given that online platforms were not utilized for the recruitment of participants, we placed particular emphasis on the introductory discourse prior to the commencement of the Café. This step was pivotal for establishing the tone, elucidating the objectives of the discussions, and ensuring that all participants possessed a unified understanding of the process. To accomplish this, we persistently employed slides as a visual aid to reinforce the introductory explanations. These slides furnished a structured overview of the pivotal themes, facilitated comprehension, and helped create a more inclusive and engaging environment for participants from diverse backgrounds. By prioritizing this preparatory phase, we aimed to foster a productive dialogue and minimize any initial uncertainties among participants.

Concerning separate waste collection, we focused on SDG 12 provided by ISTAT, summarizing the Italian context, taking into account the north-south divide: in particular, as within the previous Cafés, it was shown and discussed a graph on urban waste, subject to the separate collection between 2009 and 2018 (ISTAT, 2020), and a map of Italy showing the differences between northern and southern regions, taking into account the fact that the more virtuous regions were in the north of Italy (e.g. Lombardy and Veneto) (*ivi*).

Our general introduction to the climate crisis was also based on Armaroli (2020; 2022), focusing on the Italian «decrepit» energy system (Armaroli, 2020, p. 9), and on the «diseased» capitalist economic system (*ibid.*) that considers the Earth as a place with unlimited resources and as an endless waste disposal site, taking into account, as already stated, the essential role of communication in addressing climate crisis (Moser & Dilling, 2011).

Within this framework, it was argued that May 15, 2023, for Italy, was the Overshoot Day⁸⁶, emphasizing that the date on which human demand for ecological resources and services in a given year exceeds what the planet can replenish in that year is known as Earth Overshoot Day. By depleting ecological resource stocks and accumulating waste, primarily carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, we (as humans) keep this deficit going (IPCC, 2023).

⁸⁶ <https://www.overshootday.org/newsroom/country-overshoot-days/>

Concerning the second theme of discussion, i.e. renewable energy, we have referred to the advantages (e.g. compared to fossil fuels, in increasing employment and reducing emissions) of renewable energy sources such as solar energy, wind energy, geothermal energy, hydropower, ocean energy, and bioenergy⁸⁷.

Both in Gazzola and Santa Caterina, the political line, that we have initiated in European Union about climate issues, was mentioned: by 2050, the EU wants to have a climate-neutral economy, with zero net emissions of greenhouse gases. This goal lies at the core of the European Green Deal and is consistent with the Paris Agreement's commitment by the EU to take global climate action. Moreover, the European Commission has adopted a set of proposals in order to make the EU's climate, energy, transportation, and taxation policies suitable for reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 (*Fit for 55*), compared to 1990 levels⁸⁸.

- 4) As mentioned above, for Cosenza's fieldwork online booking was not particularly effective. Indeed, only 8 (potential) participants booked online, in the face of 17 effective participants. Within the case of Cosenza, the collaboration with the local committee of ARCI (*Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana*) had an essential role, by making available physical spaces within its offices, but also by making a digital promotion of the event through social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram)⁸⁹.

However, our fieldwork within the urban area of Cosenza was particularly appreciated by ARCI Cosenza, because the association was carrying out a project (i.e. CoGreen Community-Based Action for a Green Transition), co-funded by the European Commission, and related to local environmental issues, at the neighborhood level⁹⁰.

The contextual setting in which our quasi-experiment was conducted in Cosenza provides valuable insights into citizens' participation, allowing us to glean important information about the dynamics of community engagement. However, for a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of our fieldwork on citizens' participation, we will delve into the analysis through the results of pre- and post-event questionnaires, designed to capture a nuanced view of

⁸⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/what-is-renewable-energy>

⁸⁸ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en; see also https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/delivering-european-green-deal/fit-55-delivering-proposals_en

⁸⁹ Facebook event is available at the following link: <https://www.facebook.com/events/3577705352501975/>

⁹⁰ <https://www.forumterzosettore.it/progetto-co-green/>

participants' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences before and after the Café, thus enabling us to assess the effectiveness and implications of our initiative within the specific socio-cultural context of Cosenza.

Nonetheless, as with Santa Caterina's fieldwork, in Cosenza, given the almost non-use of online platforms for the participants' recruitment (e.g. Eventbrite®), we paid special attention to the introductory discourse, before starting the Café, using slides. Like the previous fieldworks, concerning separate waste collection, we focused on SDG 12 provided by ISTAT (2020), while the general discourse on climate crisis took into account Armaroli (2020; 2022), emphasizing also in that case that May 15, 2023, for Italy, was the Overshoot Day.

On the other hand, concerning the second theme of discussion, i.e. green urban areas, we put our attention on three aspects of the issue:

- 1) The issue of green urban areas and infrastructure in Italy, and the contrast between NRRP (National Recovery and Resilience Plan, It. PNRR) and the real necessity of planting trees in Italy to reach the 2030 objectives, according to the Italian Alliance for Sustainable Development – ASviS (Bologna's participants received by email the multimedia content). If on one side, the NRRP is expected to plant 6,6 million new trees by 2024 («actions mainly aimed at the 14 metropolitan cities» - NRRP, p. 151⁹¹), according to ASviS, 227 million trees are required by 2030 within the whole Italian territory⁹².
- 2) The six reasons why we must take care of trees and planting new trees within urban areas, identified by PEFC (i.e. Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification schemes): 1) reducing air pollution (one hectare of urban forest absorbs up to 30 kg of PM10); 2) reducing CO2 and carbon sequestration (only one plant located within an urban context may absorb between 10 and 30 kg of CO2/year); 3) reducing temperatures (trees may contribute to a reduction of the temperature by an average of 3,5 °C); 4) increasing real estate values (houses near green areas may increase its economic value also of 20%); 5) hydraulic risk regulation (it was mentioned the case of floods in Emilia-

⁹¹Translated by the author from the Italian version of PNRR, available at <https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf>

⁹²https://asvis.it/public/asvis2/files/Comunicati_stampati/CS_ASviS_Position_Paper_Infrastrutture_verdi_urbane_e_periurbane_24_3_2022.pdf

Romagna region, occurred about a month before our Café⁹³); 6) creating huddle and recreational spaces (for mental and physical health)⁹⁴.

- 3) The picture taken from Google Earth of Cosenza's urban area focuses on the presence of green spaces near ARCI's offices (Fig. 10). The picture was showed to provide an overview of the extent of green areas in the vicinity of ARCI's offices (e.g. Corrado Alvaro's Garden), serving as a starting point for discussing green areas within the city.

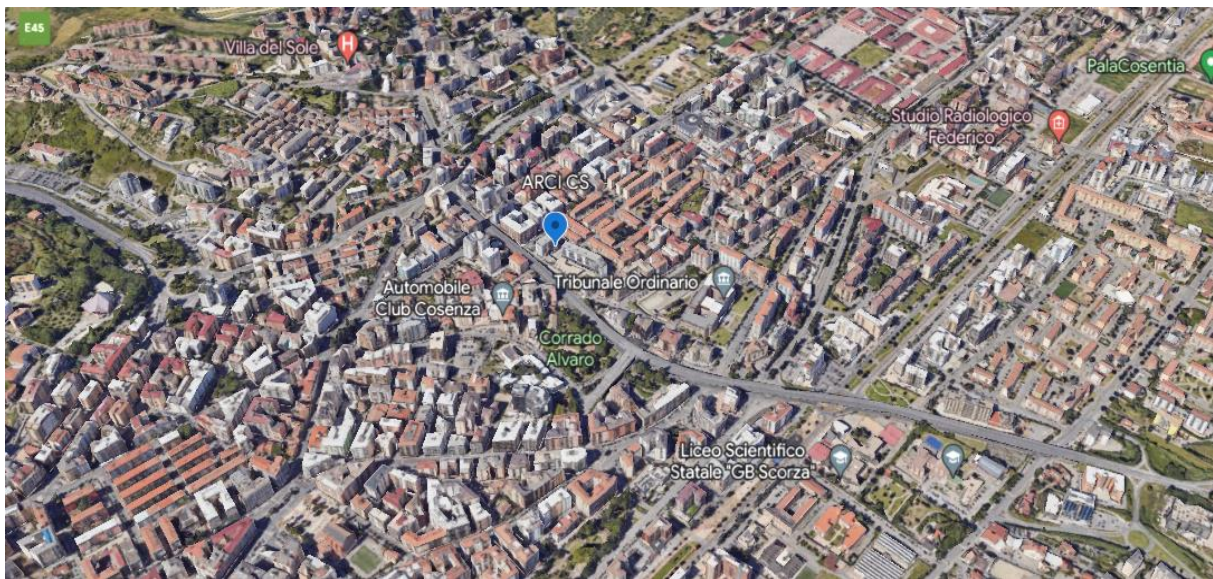


Fig. 10 Cosenza and the area around ARCI's offices

Source: Google Earth (Accessed on June 15, 2023)

The effectiveness of the laboratory on participants, concerning the change in individual preferences, has been tested through questionnaires administered before and after each event, recalling, to some extent, the Deliberative Poll® (Fishkin, 2018).

The four Cafés provide a small picture of the current situation in the field of citizens' participation around environmental issues and concerns, obviously limited to the participants involved in the research.

Nevertheless, the results of the dialogues may be taken into account by some stakeholders (e.g. either organizations such as Cittadinanzattiva and ARCI, or local municipalities) in order to implement some innovative ideas from such conversations. Additionally, some specific local

⁹³ <https://www.regione.emilia-romagna.it/alluvione>

⁹⁴ <https://pefc.it/news/il-21-novembre-si-festeggia-lundicesima-giornata-nazionale-degli-alberi>

issues may be addressed in the future through real deliberative processes (e.g. the construction of an offshore wind farm in the Ionian sea, as mentioned by Santa Caterina's participants). However, the results will be presented in the following sections according to the regional and temporal organization of each initiative. We start by presenting the results of the Bologna and Gazzola's Cafés, in the Emilia-Romagna region, and then we focus on the two Calabrian areas. All participatory quasi-experiments under the World Café format have been carried out in Italian.

2.1.1. Bologna: Results of the World Café

Bologna's laboratory took place on October 27, 2022, at the premises of Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna, in the Bologna city center. It was composed of 14 participants (divided into three tables), in the face of 21 persons booked, not including the researcher/coordinator and the regional secretary of Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna.

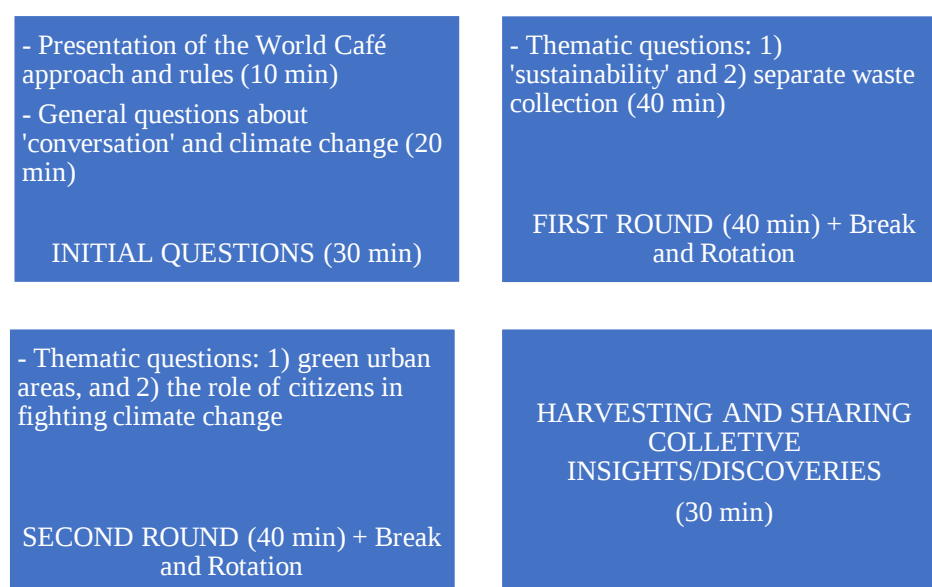


Fig. 11 Bologna's World Café structure

Source: elaborated by the author

The following question had the role of a conversation starter:

- **What makes a good/interesting conversation for you?**

Answers to this question, as well as the following, were written both on post-it® by participants and pinned by hosts, as well as directly written by participants on the personal placemats. Here is a list of thoughts that offers an overview of the responses, recalling the division into three groups (tables) of conversation:

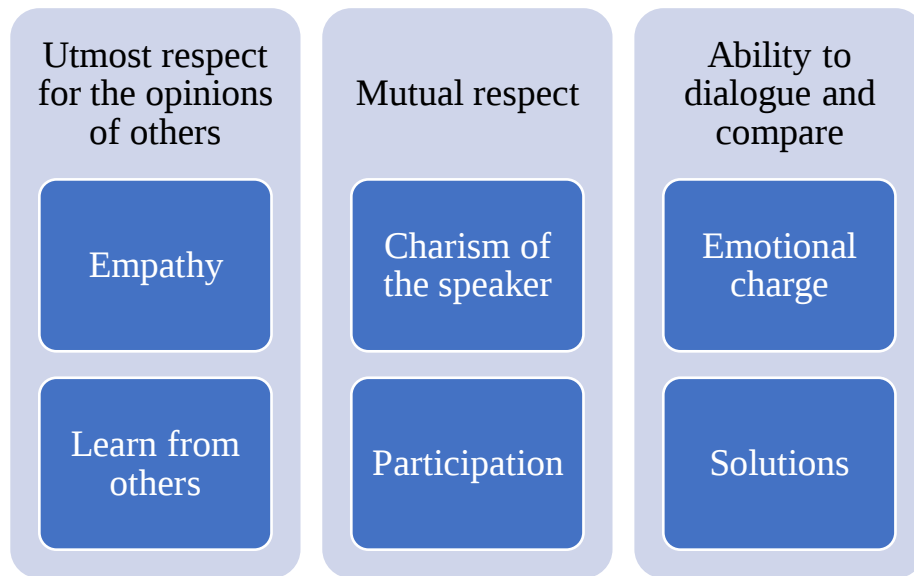


Fig. 12: Concepts emphasized by participants, related to the question «What makes a good/interesting conversation for you? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected

Crucial concepts such as ‘mutual respect’, and ‘participation’ (Fig. 12), immediately drew attention to other important notions, e.g. relationship building, creativity, and organization, that were already expressed and shared by all participants in the first instance.

As already pointed out, the term ‘participation’ was intended as a driving force behind sustainable development, allowing individuals to have an impact on decision-making in defining appropriate, good, and specific projects and ideas (e.g. in the Bologna’s laboratory, concerning issues related to separate waste collection and green urban areas). In this way, participants unintentionally stressed the importance of deliberative democracy: encouraging inclusive and participatory decision-making by involving groups of citizens in well-informed and structured discussions (e.g. World Café). The primary goal and challenge was not only to arrive at a widely accepted decision but also to minimize conflicts among participants through peaceful discussions, striving to achieve consensus on specific themes such as separate waste collection and green urban areas.

The following questions were moreover useful to kick off the conversation, allowing to introduce climate change issues, and the role of individual action on climate change (such as consumption of goods and services and waste production):

- **If we talk about climate change, what are we seeing/facing as members of this local community? What will happen if immediate action is not taken?**

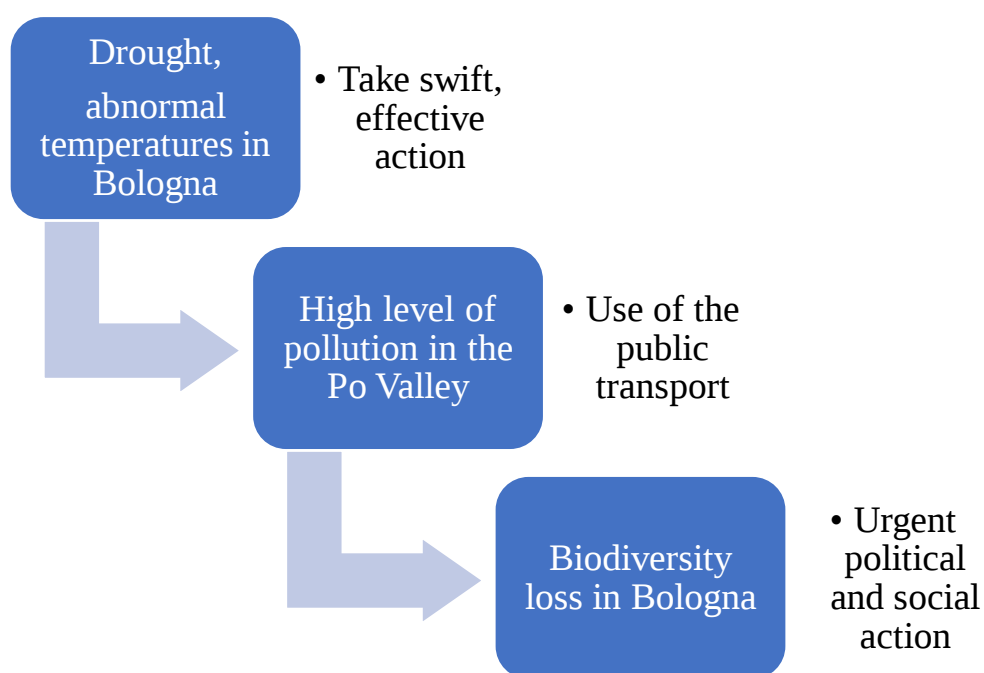


Fig. 13: Issues emphasized by participants, related to the question «If we talk about climate change, what are we seeing/facing as members of this local community? What will happen if immediate action is not taken? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected

Fig. 13 shows that the focus was more on local environmental issues (as required by the question). Furthermore, the focus on biodiversity loss in the Bologna urban area was probably linked to a title of an article («Climate crisis in Bologna: an increase in tree mortality is evident», translated by the author)⁹⁵, placed on the tables, which could have contributed to bringing interest and curiosity to the topic.

⁹⁵ The article is available at <https://www.bolognatoday.it/cronaca/clima-alberi-siccita-bologna.html>

On the other hand, several considerations were related to a more global point of view: - environmental disasters and extreme weather events (e.g. floods, hurricanes, drought, but also sea level rise), and relationships with food availability; - alteration of human life as a result of shifting environmental balance (putting us all in clear danger of extinction); - landscape changes and ecosystem alteration; - desertification; - climate migrations (e.g. Bangladesh and Pakistan cases); - political delay to deal with the global climate change; - demographic aspect (e.g. the world's population is projected to reach 8 billion people very soon); - the imbalance between developed and developing countries; - deforestation and the linkage with Covid-19 pandemic; - the importance of future generations; - exclusion of vulnerable people from decision-making processes. Such considerations provoked a spate of questioning of the climate change issues, as also demonstrated by the event recordings.

However, it is essential to note that not everyone was fully versed in the intricacies of climate change. Nevertheless, a common understanding existed among participants, albeit not from a strictly scientific, technical, and detailed perspective, regarding a risk or issue associated with climate change.

Considering the number of issues related to climate change, the World Café demonstrated how participants were informed, and capable of making their opinion in a spirit of interaction, following the seven rules/design principles of the World Café elaborated by Brown and Isaacs (2005).

After that initial discussion about climate change, the first round of discussion consisted of the following two questions:

- 1. Sustainability, what does it mean for you? Say it in few words.**
- 2. Do you believe that separate waste collection makes sense? We creatively explore the possibility of developing a better separate collection system, also based on the neighborhood of residence/domicile.**

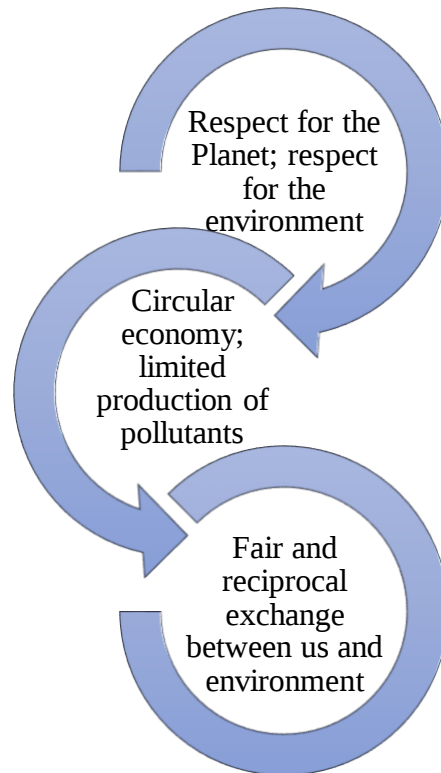


Fig. 14 What is ‘sustainability’ according to the participants (question 1 of the first round)

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected

Fig. 14 shows that participants outlined some of the most important key points (as highlighted by *Brundtland Report* and SDGs) related to the concept of ‘sustainability’ that is often considered, as noted also by participants, as a buzzword.

They drew the conclusions that they deemed appropriate: sustainability is necessary for the future, and strictly connected to the resources’ availability (without negative impacts from the environmental point of view).

Ultimately, according to the participants, the concept of ‘sustainability’ (intended as the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, as stated by *Brundtland Report*) must be put at the center of the political agenda and public debate, not only at an international level but also at a local level.

The second question entailed the main theme of the laboratory, i.e. separate waste collection. In that case, articles from local newspapers⁹⁶, placed on the tables, contributed also to launching

⁹⁶ The two selected articles are available at the following links: <https://www.bolognatoday.it/cronaca/rifiuti-hera-cassonetto.html>; <https://www.ilrestodelcarlino.it/bologna/cronaca/rifiuti-spazzino-quartiere-1.8187567>

the debate: the two articles selected were about the dumpster with a compartment for unsorted waste, openable with a card (i.e. *Carta Smeraldo*) or through a dedicated app for mobile phone (such dumpsters are now present almost everywhere in Bologna), while the other article was about the ‘garbage man of the neighborhood’ (it. *Spazzino di quartiere*), a new figure introduced in 2022, working on micro-areas, with the aim of developing a more precise knowledge of all critical issues and more effective management of the waste collection service.

Nevertheless, a comment on the contrast between virtuous behavior (e.g. of European citizens) and anachronistic attitude (e.g. of Asian countries) was hotly debated, losing sight of our objective, at least at the beginning: it was maybe caused by the initial question on climate change or by the presence on the table of the magazine *La nuova ecologia* (October 2022, n. 9) which cover title tended to use alarmist language, emphasizing the urgent climatic nature of the threat in Italy. It is not a critique of this cover title, which on the contrary highlighted how Italy has been affected by over 200 extreme weather events since the beginning of the year 2022, but it caused a sort of ‘egoistic’ response among such a table, stating that not only should Italy take action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but also major emitters such as USA, India, China, etc. should do so. The response could be considered ‘egoistic’ because the individuals at the table shifted the focus from the global nature of climate change to a more self-centered concern about Italy’s challenges, demanding that other major emitters like the USA, India, and China also take action. Instead of focusing on the collective effort needed to combat climate change, the conversation veered toward ensuring that others are equally accountable, which can be seen as putting self-interest ahead of a broader, more cooperative approach.

Thus, thanks to the presence of the facilitator, the debate was brought back to the original track, while in the last part of the session we emphasized how the EU27 was among the major emitters of greenhouse gases⁹⁷.

Every participant considered separate collection of waste as fundamental to contribute to the sustainability of the local community: since the beginning, the focus was, however, more on ‘reuse’, rather than on ‘recycling’.

Most notably, in the first part of the dialogue, participants particularly focused on the 3 ‘Rs’, i.e. Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle, arguing that this approach was useful to reduce the amount of waste generated by the community.

At the end of the Café, a convergence had been found about this first issue, which can be summarized as follows:

⁹⁷https://edgar.jrc.ec.europa.eu/report_2023#:~:text=China%2C%20the%20United%20States%2C%20India,largest%20GHG%20emitters%20in%202022.

- 1) Institutions must talk about ‘reuse’ rather than ‘recycle’, avoiding greenwashing; door-to-door waste collection in the Bologna city center should be combined with the spread presence of recycling bins⁹⁸; environmental education on how to best differentiate is needed.
- 2) Appliance repair services (also in an informal way) must be increased, preventing illegal dumping (e.g. along the Porticoes), emphasizing also the necessity for understanding the difference between scraps and waste; a more efficient plastic collection is highly required and needed; best advertisement for apps, such as Junker and Too Good To Go⁹⁹, may also be important.
- 3) Waste reduction is necessary; wet/organic waste has a crucial importance and may be used at a more local scale (e.g. in the urban garden).

Thus, at the end of the first round of conversation, all participants agreed on two concepts that need greater attention at a local scale: 1) restore value to waste, e.g. through reuse and repair, and 2) organic waste is crucial, and its reuse at a local level may play a pivotal role.

At the same time, there was greater attention to the individual behavior of the citizen, emphasizing how human behavior plays a crucial role in achieving holistic sustainability: indeed, as SDG 12 reminds us, the transition/conversion toward sustainable consumption and production requires public engagement and support.

Participants agreed on the importance of reducing food waste (e.g. through the use of apps like Too Good To Go, or experiences of shared objects such as Leila – La Biblioteca degli Oggetti¹⁰⁰, mentioned by some participants), focusing also on the preference, where possible, for second-hand/thrift/charity store clothes, as a reaction to fast consumption.

The second round of conversation focused on green urban areas in Bologna. The first question took into account a more specific aspect of the issue, while the second question aimed at drawing conclusions:

1. What role does a green area play in an urban context? How can we make the historic center of Bologna greener?

⁹⁸ It should be noted that, about 9 months after our fieldwork, the door-to-door collection of paper and plastic in the historic center of Bologna has ceased, in favor of street bins (<https://ambiente.regione.emilia-romagna.it/it/notizie/notizie/2023/giugno/bologna-fine-del-porta-a-porta-per-carta-e-plastica-in-centro-storico>)

⁹⁹ See <https://www.toogoodtogo.com/en-gb>

¹⁰⁰ <https://leila-bologna.it/>

2. What can we do as citizens to reduce the local and global effects of climate change, taking into account the elements that emerged during this World Café?

Participants mentioned the different roles played by green urban areas, from different points of view: e.g. a green urban area brings benefit not only to inhabitants (for instance, through the reduction of noise and air pollution), but also to other living beings (i.e. flora and fauna); green urban areas play a role in social aggregation, with positive impacts on psychological health.

However, the historic center of Bologna is characterized by the widespread presence of medieval buildings, squares, and churches, although some participants emphasized how green areas outside of the center compensate for the center's lack (e.g. Colli Bolognesi).

According to the participants, some solutions may be implemented to make Bologna's historic center green:

- To plant climbing plants at an individual level (e.g. on balconies and other private areas); due narrow streets, larger spaces (e.g. Piazza San Domenico, Piazza Otto Agosto) could be exploited to plant trees; one participant humorously and provocatively proposed to «make Piazza Maggiore like Piazza Rossini» (Piazza Rossini is a square, at the core of the Bologna's university area, covered with a 300 m² grass carpet¹⁰¹, and it was developed within the ROCK project context, mentioned in the first chapter); limit traffic may be a good measure in greening the city center.
- Promote the realization of urban gardens in the center, but also outside, juxtaposed with the diffusion of vertical gardens. The green requalification of abandoned buildings may be also of vital importance. Furthermore, promoting green spaces could help address the ongoing reduction of public gathering areas. For instance, in the city center, panels have been installed on the entrances of many buildings to prevent people from loitering and gathering in groups.

Concerning the second question, participants agreed on the following elements, useful to reduce the effects of climate change:

- Reduce the waste of precious resources such as water, energy, and food.

¹⁰¹ <https://rockproject.eu/news-details/262>

- Reduce the use of private means of transport, using apps for carpooling, car-sharing, and also ridesharing.
- Promote local farmers' markets, favoring local, ethical, and sustainable products (putting pressure also on school canteens in this sense).
- Great action of awareness, using also the World Café approach at a larger local scale.

2.1.2. Gazzola: Results of the World Café

The fieldwork conducted in Gazzola took place on April 18, 2023, at the municipal library of the village. It involved 14 participants, organized into three tables, in contrast to the 18 individuals who had initially registered, not including the researcher/coordinator, Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna's regional secretary, and the young assembly coordinator of the same association. Furthermore, a ten-year-old was present with his father, making an important and interesting contribution to the debate, actively participating in the conversation by expressing his thoughts and ideas on the topics. Despite his young age, he demonstrated a keen understanding of the subject matter and contributed fresh perspectives that added value to the discussion. His presence also served to diversify the viewpoints within the debate, fostering a collaborative atmosphere, and encouraging others to express their thoughts openly.

The laboratory was held in the presence of a city councilor, delegated to cultural and educational policies: she was included in the tables to demonstrate the support and proximity (Denters & Klausen, 2018) of local institutions in defining and tackling environmental issues and concerns, also from a cultural and educational perspective.

Fig. 15 illustrates the two themes chosen for Gazzola's fieldwork, i.e. 1) separate waste collection (common to all four quasi-experiments), and 2) renewable energy (common to the quasi-experiments implemented within the two inner/rural areas).

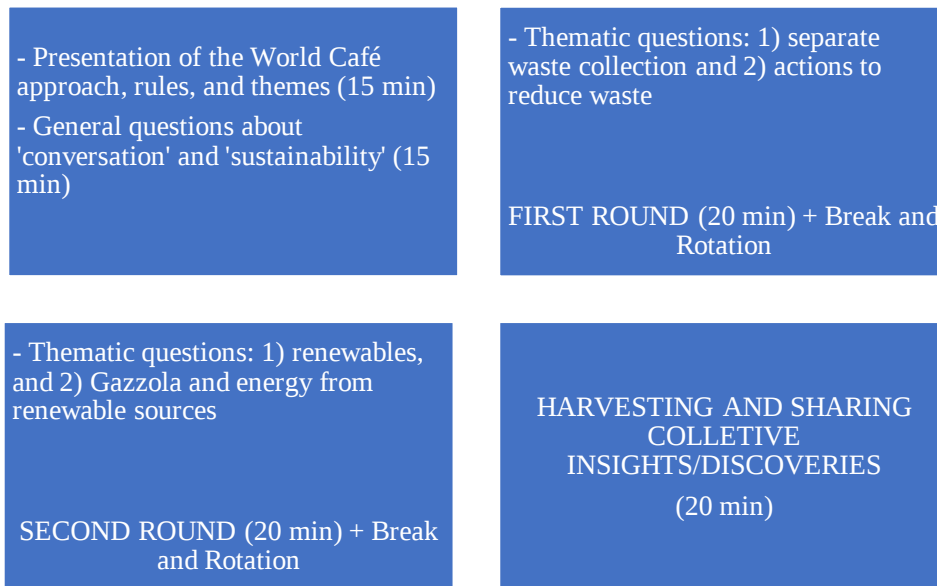


Fig. 15 Gazzola's World Café structure

Source: elaborated by the author

As for Bologna's fieldwork, the following question had the role of a conversation starter:

- **What makes a good/interesting conversation for you?**

Answers to this question were written by participants on post-it® and then pinned up on a poster. Fig. 16 shows an overview of the responses, emphasizing some key concepts of conversation, e.g. mutual respect, and exchange of ideas.

Participants were invited to indicate one or two words to answer the question, presented and discussed in the last phase of the World Café (i.e. harvesting and sharing collective insights/discoveries).

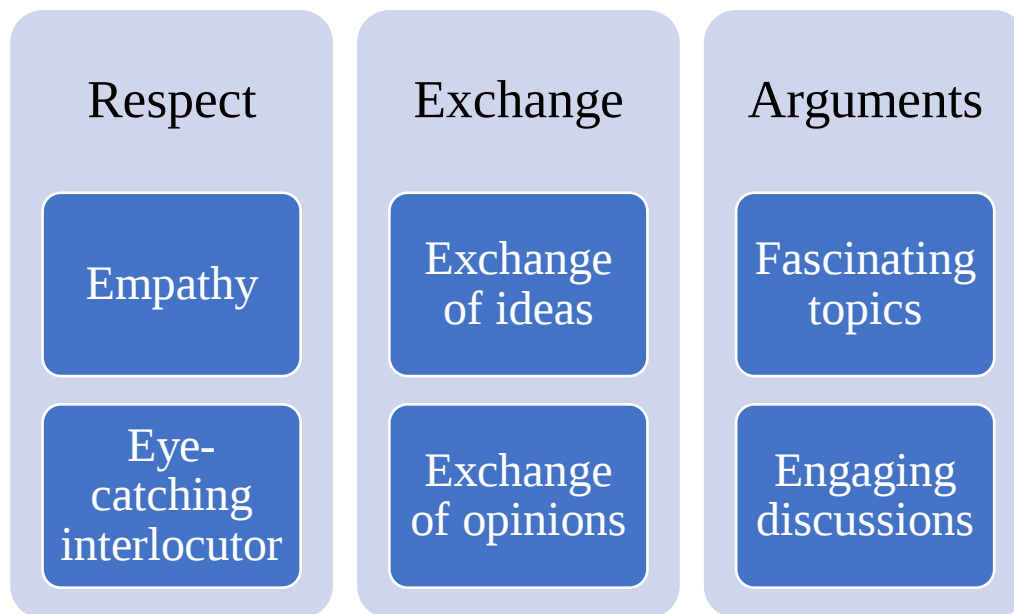


Fig. 16 Concepts emphasized by participants related to the question «What makes a good/interesting conversation for you? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected

Similar to Bologna's fieldwork, participants referred to the main features of the World Café approach, highlighting the active and crucial role of conversation within a local context¹⁰².

As we have already seen within Bologna's laboratory, enthusiasm and attitude of action are unavoidable aspects of our quasi-experiments, directly visible within participants' considerations, and Gazzola sets a good example.

While the question concerning 'sustainability' was part of the first round in Bologna's Café, the same question had the role of bringing people together around the key topic of climate change issues.

Answers to the following question were also written by participants on post-it® and then pinned up on a poster (Fig. 17):

- **Sustainability, what does it mean for you? Say it in few words.**

¹⁰² Brown and Isaacs (2005) argued that «conversation is the core process by which we humans think and coordinate our actions together. The living process of conversation lies at the heart of collective learning and co-evolution in human affairs. Conversation is our human way of creating and sustaining- or transforming- the realities in which we live» (p. 19).

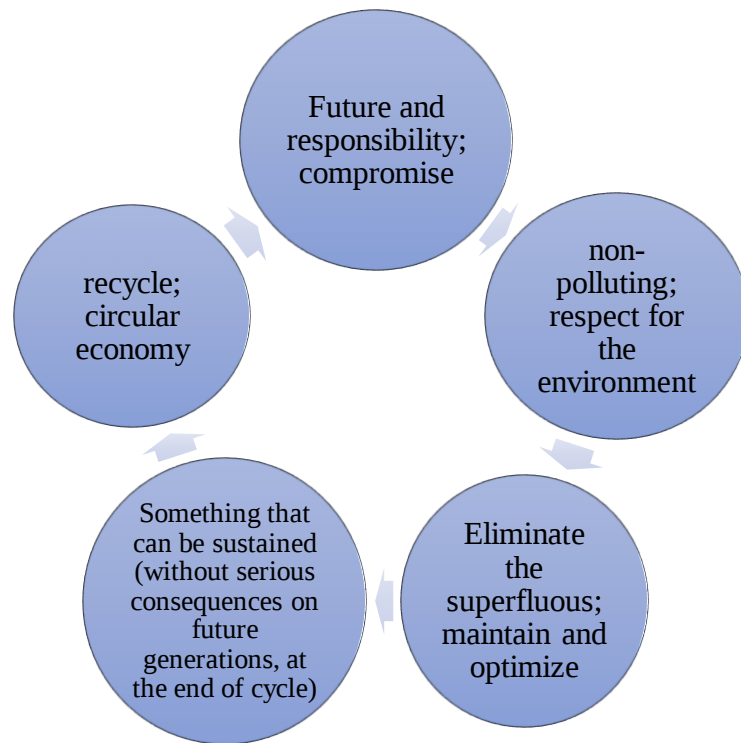


Fig. 17 What is ‘sustainability’ according to Gazzola’s participants

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected

Fig. 17 shows participants’ points of view about ‘sustainability’: as we have already argued, sustainability could mean anything and nothing, due, for instance, to the misuse of the term within the media (Weder *et al.*, 2019). Nonetheless, participants gave a relevant contribution to reflections, by including the environmental element, and striving also for a socially responsible approach, focusing even more on the younger and future generations.

At the same time, such points seemed to anticipate the first theme of the fieldwork (i.e. separate waste collection), with words such as ‘maintain’ and ‘optimize’, ‘superfluous’, ‘recycle’, and ‘circular economy’.

Compared to Bologna’s fieldwork, within Gazzola’s fieldwork, the question «If we talk about climate change, what are we seeing/facing as members of this local community? What will happen if immediate action is not taken? » was included in the slides, but for an eventual third round of conversation, in order to help the deepening and exploration of climate change aspects. But in Gazzola’s Café, because of the late hour (it was an after-dinner World Café), the third round based on such question was avoided.

After the two general questions on ‘conversation’ and ‘sustainability’, the first round of conversation was structured on the following two questions:

- 1. Do you separate your waste? We creatively explore the possibility of developing a better separate collection system, also based on the neighborhood of residence/domicile.**
- 2. To reduce/avoid the wastage of products (and thus waste production), which actions would you propose, and to what extent?**

As can be noted, the first round was based on the separate waste collection theme, while in Bologna's fieldwork the first question of the first round concerned 'sustainability'. The emphasis on the separate waste collection theme during the entire first round is indicative of a deliberate focus on participants' environmental responsibility and waste management practices at a bottom-up level. The implication of steering participants' attention in this manner is that it creates a shared foundation and vocabulary for the discourse, ensuring a more focused and productive exploration of the chosen theme. By concentrating efforts on a specific topic, the aim was to stimulate a depth of analysis, foster meaningful dialogue, and encourage collaborative problem-solving within the defined thematic boundaries.

However, also in Gazzola fieldwork, several issues of the magazine *La Nuova Ecologia*¹⁰³ were present among tables, whose covers took into account specific topics concerning environment and climate change: e.g. the absence of a national adaptation plan, closed since 2018; the underestimation of sustainability in Italian school curricula; the relationships between the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and environmental issues; the role of renewables in providing independence, peace, and new jobs; the importance of hill and mountainous areas in addressing challenges to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

The discussion thus demonstrated that each participant was concerned about recycling properly. Answers to the first question of the first round encouraged participants to take it as an opportunity to have fun and to take their experience, as required by the World Café's rules/design principles (Brown & Isaacs, 2005).

Indeed, some participants emphasized the presence of two compost bins per family, foraging for organic waste (e.g. fruit and vegetable peelings), placed in a part of the garden. All

¹⁰³ September 2022 (n. 8); October 2022 (n. 9); December 2022 (n. 11); January 2023 (n. 1); February 2023 (n. 2)

participants paid particular attention likewise to individual actions, putting forward proposals to improve separate waste collection within the local community:

- Increase the number of recycling bins throughout the village. Moreover, collection bins of used food oils are almost absent in Gazzola.
- Encourage disposable plastic and glass bottles, to also have a little monetary reward (e.g. in the form of discounts on purchases).
- Promote the door-to-door collection, particularly for garden waste (e.g. weeds).
- Separate waste collection in the workplace (recycling bins are often lacking, for instance in the offices).
- Because of the variety in the types of plastics and other materials, the further subdivision of waste may be an important step forward for the circular economy (although a strong information and awareness campaign may be necessary).

According to some participants, more investment into biodegradable packaging may be useful, as a remedy for non-compliance with the Municipal provisions of the waste collection protocol. A comprehensive examination of the existing municipal provisions governing waste management would have allowed for a more informed assessment of the potential efficacy of increased investments in biodegradable packaging.

Although the discussion highlighted important elements of waste collection, such consideration showed how constant work on knowledge and awareness, from a bottom-up level, is essential to fight present and future challenges linked to environmental issues. Actually, as pointed out by the European Environment Agency (EEA), to ensure proper disposal and treatment of biodegradable, compostable, and bio-based plastics, clearer labeling, and ongoing user awareness campaigns are required (EEA, 2023)¹⁰⁴. Meanwhile, European standards for compostability and biodegradability of plastics in different environments (i.e. industrial composting, well-managed home composting conditions, soil, freshwater, marine water), with the different logos and certifications are not easy to understand (*ivi*). Such information, provided by EEA, serves to emphasize that organic waste treatment is a complex system that requires a certain knowledge from the consumer behavior's point of view, and the improper delivery of organic waste is itself a product/resource loss.

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/biodegradable-and-compostable-plastics>

Concerning the second question of the first round of conversation (i.e. «To reduce/avoid the wastage of products (and thus waste production), which actions would you propose, and to what extent? »), also in this case, according to participants, individual actions played an essential role:

- Avoid/reduce (big) plastic packaging, encouraging glass bottles and containers.
- Buy products in bulk and/or on tap: from food (e.g. pasta, rice, cereals, legumes) to detergents (e.g. floor cleaner, dishwashing liquid) and cosmetics.
- Adopt a different approach to wastage: second-hand objects circulation (particular attention to reuse).
- Consume less, by purchasing only a few items.
- Valorize organic waste, for instance, cultivating vegetable gardens for self-consumption, and using organic waste as 'km0 fertilizer'.
- Encourage the use of apps such as Too Good To Go, as a concrete solution to tackle with food waste problem.

We can notice that Gazzola's discussion presented some analogies with Bologna's participants' points of view: for instance, the importance to restrict the use of throwaway plastic products, and the use of Too Good To Go as a way of reducing food waste.

Furthermore, during the fieldwork, the «Bologna example» was mentioned by some participants, referring to the *Carta Smeraldo*, as a way for a better organic waste collection. On the other hand, it must be said that Gazzola's waste management is not under Hera, as in Bologna, but under Iren which is encouraging, as argued by participants too, domestic composting with a discount on utility bills¹⁰⁵.

The points presented for both the questions of the first round were presented in the last part of the Café (i.e. harvesting and sharing collective insights/discoveries), in which all participants agreed on both individual and collective actions for a better separate collection system, reducing and avoiding waste of products, particularly starting from an individual level.

¹⁰⁵<https://www.gruppoiren.it/content/dam/iren/documents/it/i-nostri-servizi/ambiente/info-tari/province/reggio-emilia/baiso/regolamenti-e-tariffe/I35003%20-%202021%20-%20Sconti%20regolamento%20-%20Allegato%20-%202013.pdf>
(see also <https://www.gruppoiren.it/en/our-services/waste-management.html>)

The second round of conversation took into account the other theme chosen for inner/rural areas, i.e. renewable energy, and it was structured on the following two questions:

- 1. Beyond technical aspects, why should we (or we should not) support renewables development? What we can do about this together, as a local community?**
- 2. The Municipality of Gazzola is among the signatories of the EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy. Since 2019, the year of the second membership, have you perceived, as citizens, any improvement in terms of attention to the environment (e.g. investments in renewable energy)? Propose solutions to fight climate change at a local level, starting with energy.**

Concerning the first question, participants' discourse basically took into account two issues related to renewables, i.e. 1) education, and 2) affordability.

According to participants, youth education from a technical and professional point of view may be a good way to support renewables and clean energy. It may be particularly useful to encourage a higher way of thinking and a fact-based view, supported by modern scientific literature, to act without suffering any political influence and prejudice.

Regarding affordability, some participants mentioned the cost-effectiveness aspects related to renewables (concerning, for instance, photovoltaic), rather than the environmental advantages that such technologies may activate.

Therefore, the issue of 'energy communities' came up, probably due to the researcher's introductory discourse and informative material shared via e-mail with persons who booked: the Emilia-Romagna's regional law n. 5/2022 of 27 May 2022 was mentioned, presenting its main features¹⁰⁶. The law outlined the systemic actions and measures to support and promote collective self-consumption and energy communities, allowing for the distribution of contributions and financial instruments that support the communities from their formation and planning to the acquisition and installation of production and storage facilities. In addition to

¹⁰⁶ <https://energia.regione.emilia-romagna.it/comunita-energetiche/comunita-energetiche>

being funded by the financial resources planned in the budget, the vital initiatives of communication, information, and citizens' participation in renewable energy, self-consumption, and energy sharing were not disregarded.

Conversely, looking at the second question, participants gave special attention to one of the key topics related to ecological conversion and climate change, i.e. mobility.

Nevertheless, it was argued that at a municipal level, projects have been carried out to modernize municipal buildings (e.g. LED streetlights), bearing in mind the theme of ecological conversion. Within the *Plan of Action for Sustainable Energy and Climate* (PAESC), the reference to public lighting is a very important element, taking into account that consumption in the public lighting sector registered an increase of 18% between 2008 and 2019 (PAESC, 2021).

Nevertheless, the Plan presented in detail the total CO₂ emissions, sector by sector, in 2019, within the Municipality of Gazzola (Fig. 18).

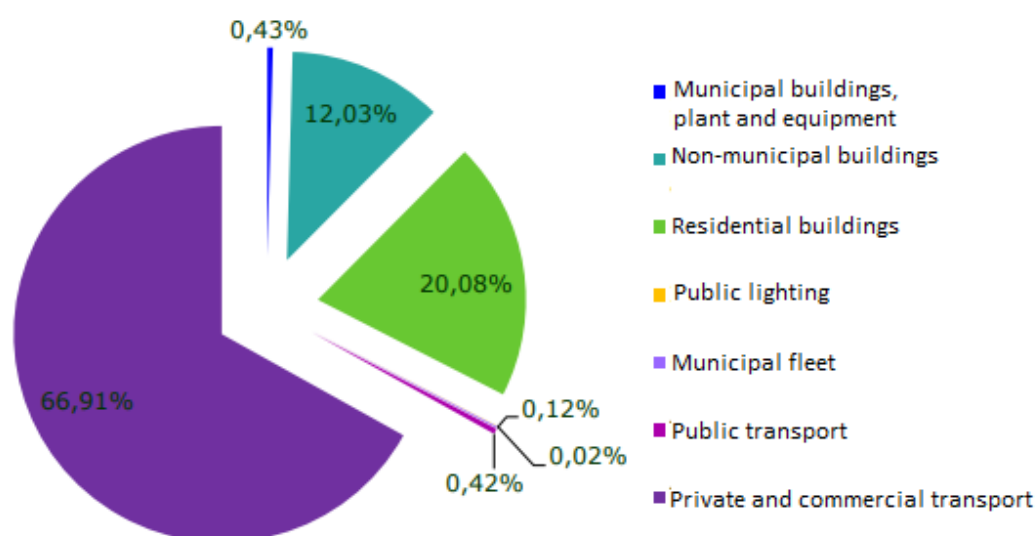


Fig. 18 Total CO₂ emissions by sector within the Municipality of Gazzola (Year 2019)

Source: PAESC (2021), p. 64; translated by the author

As shown in Fig. 18, public lighting was a very small source of CO₂ emissions (i.e. 0,12% compared to the total CO₂ emissions) within the community. Actions linked to the issue of public lighting were put in evidence by participants: as also written within the PAESC, although between 2008 and 2019, an increase in consumption was registered of 15,62%, action for the efficiency of public lighting, realized and concluded in 2021, led to a saving of energy. In

particular, the interventions concerned the replacement of lamps and luminaires with LED lamps for public lighting municipal, and the installation of flow regulators for public lighting systems (*ivi*). Concerning the public lighting sector, the goal to be achieved by 2030 is the replacement of votive lamps with LED lamps (*ivi*). Such pieces of information are useful to understand the active role and interest of the Municipality of Gazzola in these subjects, but also to have feedback, at an official level, on what the participants have stated regarding that. Indeed, the fact that participants noticed such renovation works on public lighting may be considered proof that as residents were attentive to these local environmental dynamics.

Returning to the issue of mobility, participants stressed the importance of investment in other energy sources: one of the major options in regard to alternative fuel for powering things like cars is a hydrogen fuel cell. Salt batteries were also mentioned by some participants. The focus on hydrogen may be influenced by the fact that our fieldwork coincided with the second edition of ‘HydrogenExpo’, which took place in Piacenza between May 17-19, 2023¹⁰⁷.

However, talking about hydrogen related to private transport is misleading: hydrogen is not an energy source, but an energy carrier (Armaroli, 2022). While grey and brown hydrogen is unsustainable and linked to fossil fuels, green hydrogen may be sustainable because it is extracted from the water, using renewable energy (*ivi*). The problem is since the production of green hydrogen requires a lot of energy: to produce a kilogram of green hydrogen, that may heat a house for one day, the energy that a family consumes within one week (i.e. 55 KWh) is required (*ivi*). At the end of the World Café, we highlighted that hydrogen is a very expensive carrier, and, as also stated by Armaroli (2022), it could be used without better alternatives (i.e. wind and solar power).

As emphasized by PAESC (2021), 66,91% of Gazzola’s CO₂ emissions were caused by private and commercial transport. It is important to note that the estimated emissions for the Municipality of Gazzola (year 2019) were equal to about 16.818,36 tCO₂, which corresponded to 8,11 tCO₂/year per inhabitant (PAESC, 2021). Beyond technical aspects, the Plan is a concrete policy instrument to achieve the 2030 objective (i.e. reduction of at least 40% of emissions), particularly in terms of energy, and citizens’ awareness and engagement are included among adaptation actions to climate change by 2030, with a particular focus on communication and education (*ivi*).

The PAESC stated that the objectives to be pursued were:

¹⁰⁷ <https://hydrogen-expo.it/en/>

- 1) Promote the Covenant of Mayors instrument and the commitment made by the Municipality of Gazzola.
- 2) Disseminate and share PAESC's actions, in particular those characterized by the citizens' engagement.
- 3) Spread the culture of energy efficiency, sustainable mobility, and in general environmental sustainability.
- 4) Make understandable environmental and economic advantages of actions aimed at improving energy efficiency.
- 5) Spread the knowledge of available tools to achieve high-impact actions.

Against this background, it should be noted that all participants of the World Café were not aware of this policy instrument, to show that a real distance between citizens and institutions exists, also within a small community.

Nevertheless, all participants showed interest in the following points related to sustainable transport:

- More links between the surrounding villages (e.g. bike paths between Gazzola and Agazzano, around 8 km distant from each other).
- Stimulate the use and purchase of the bicycle as a means of sustainable mobility.
- Increase the number of bus rides, buying also new and innovative/sustainable buses, to benefit the local community and to encourage other citizens to take an active part in changing, for instance, how to get to work.
- Add charging columns (currently, it is not easy to find a charging station in the village).
- Activate the 'Pedibus' project¹⁰⁸, where children and adults who participate by walking to school together on a predetermined route with specific stops and times are likened to a bus that moves thanks to the feet of its passengers.

Participants claimed that investments in research are essential to developing a single type of carbon-neutral public transport, in order to encourage the EU's ambitious goals for sustainable development and climate neutrality by 2050.

Although participants seemed to be informed about environmental issues, nevertheless complex issues related to hydrogen that arose during the Café, did require an expert's point of view.

¹⁰⁸ Already available in some (especially urban) contexts, such as Piacenza (<https://www.comune.piacenza.it/it/services/287>)

Moreover, in the second round of conversation, two participants (as also demonstrated by the pre-event questionnaire) brought up the nuclear issue, stating that «we (Italians) are surrounded, and technology has moved on». Also in this case, an expert point of view would have been required, although such a statement was not shared by the majority of participants.

2.1.3. Santa Caterina dello Ionio: Results of the World Café

Santa Caterina's fieldwork took place on May 27, 2023, in the afternoon, on a private terrace in the historic center of the village. The World Café was composed of 13 participants, divided into three groups.

Santa Caterina's Café followed the same course as Gazzola's fieldwork, although in Santa Caterina it lasted longer (i.e. three hours), including breaks and rotations, as shown in Fig. 19. The disparity in the duration of the two quasi-experiments can be attributed to the starting time of each: in the case of Gazzola, the decision was made to organize the Café after dinner due to logistical and organizational considerations of the library staff hosting our fieldwork; whereas in the case of Santa Caterina, there was more flexibility in both timing and the weekend day available (Gazzola's fieldwork took place on Tuesday, while Santa Caterina's Café took place on Friday).

Furthermore, the presence/absence of citizens at our fieldwork may have been influenced by a protest against the construction of an offshore wind farm¹⁰⁹, not far from Santa Caterina, that took place on the same date and time slot.

Before moving on, it is important to notice that the questions «If we talk about climate change, what are we seeing/facing as members of this local community? What will happen if immediate action is not taken? » were included in the slides, but for an eventual third round of conversation, or even to re-focus the debate in case of conflicts, or in case of failure to reach the minimum number of participants, in order to eventually transform the World Café into a focus group: the same reasoning was made within Gazzola's and Cosenza's fieldworks.

¹⁰⁹<https://www.lanuovacalabria.it/parco-eolico-offshore-il-dissenso-di-potere-al-popolo-fonti-rinnovabili-ma-speculative>

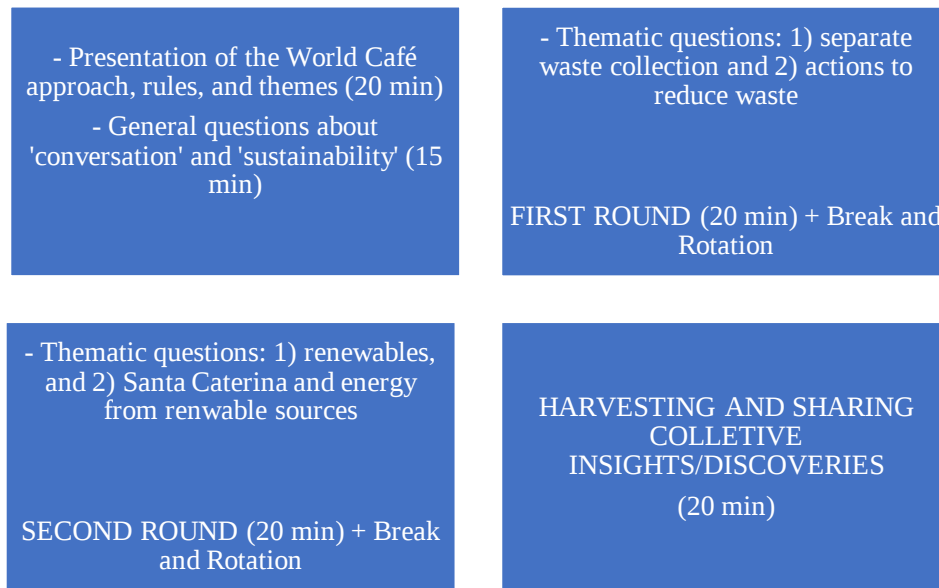


Fig. 19 Santa Caterina's World Café structure

Source: elaborated by the author

Like Gazzola's experience, the two questions on 'conversation' and 'sustainability' had the role of a conversation starter, mentioning the two themes that acted as key concepts of the whole work on participation (clearly based on the conversation) and sustainability: 1) «What makes a good/interesting conversation for you? », and 2) «Sustainability, what does it mean for you? Say it in few words».

In both cases, answers were written by participants on post-it® and then pinned up on a poster. Concerning the first question, Fig. 20 shows the concepts that participants emphasized in a few words.

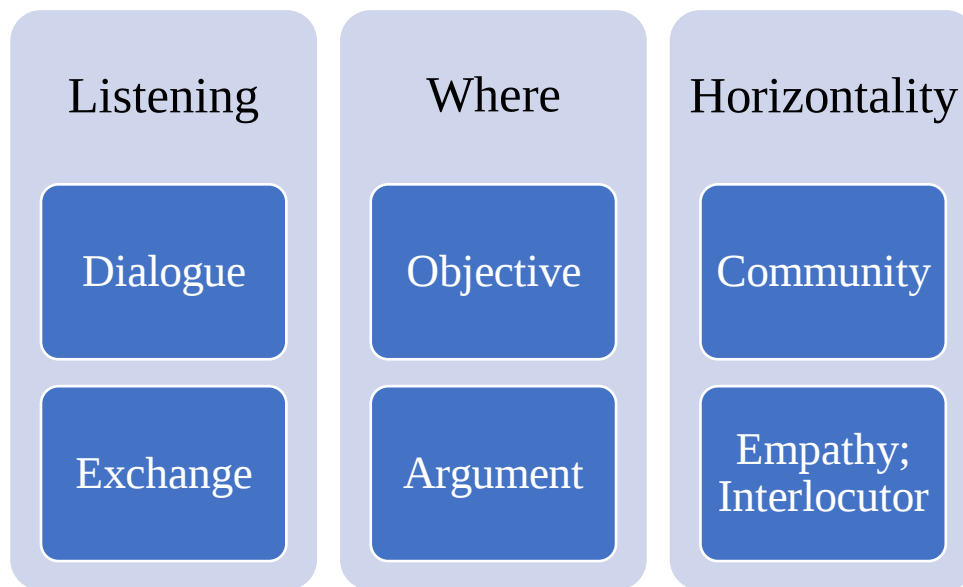


Fig. 20 Concepts emphasized by participants related to the question «What makes a good/interesting conversation for you? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected

Such answers presented some similarities with the previous Cafés (e.g. ‘exchange’, ‘empathy’; ‘listening’ was repeated by three participants), but also new concepts that are filled with meaning (e.g. the place, horizontality).

The issue of ‘horizontality’ holds special significance, and it will be mentioned in the post-event questionnaire by a participant looking at the non-hierarchical approach of the World Café.

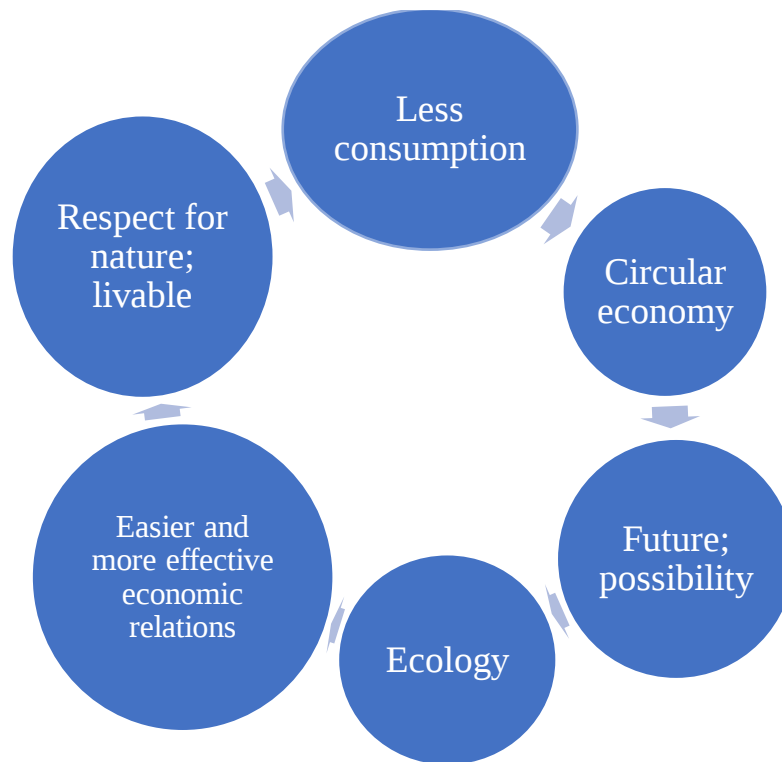


Fig. 21 What is ‘sustainability’ according to Santa Caterina’s participants

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected

Fig. 21 shows some common points between our previous fieldworks, proving that the idea of sustainability is spread among participants, although some concepts are taken into account by more of them: e.g. words such as ‘future’, and ‘ecology’ were repeated by four participants. Also in this case, participants included more aspects of sustainability, bearing in mind the centrality of individual action in ensuring a good environment (e.g. ‘less consumption’), while the non-human aspect seemed hidden or absent within the discourse. At the same time, participants who cited the word ‘ecology’ obviously took into account the non-human sphere¹¹⁰. Although the term ‘ecology’ was implicitly present among Bologna’s participants, in Santa Caterina, as we will see, it carried a certain weight throughout the entire conversation.

However, after the two general questions on ‘conversation’ and ‘sustainability’, the first round of discussion was structured on the following two questions, by repurposing the same questions used in the previous Cafés:

¹¹⁰ As Porteous and Nesaratnum (2008) suggest, « [Ecology is] The study of the relationships between living organisms and between organisms and their environment, especially animal and plant communities, their energy flows and their interactions with their surroundings » (p. 216).

1. Do you separate your waste? We creatively explore the possibility of developing a better separate collection system, also based on the neighborhood of residence/domicile.

2. To reduce/avoid the wastage of products (and thus waste production), which actions would you propose, and to what extent?

Concerning the first question, it was highlighted that Santa Caterina practiced the door-to-door separate collection of waste. Between participants emerged critical thinking based upon concrete proposals for a better separate collection system at a local level, as described below (e.g. the waste traceability control system, the local reuse of organic waste, etc.). Before analyzing the results of the conversation, it must be emphasized that some city councilmen were present too, although in a non-formal way.

For convenience, clarity, and ease in reading, the results of the conversation on the topic are divided into three groups, even though the cross-pollination of ideas (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) took place within both rounds:

- 1) The first group proposed solutions for the improvement of separate collection of waste, suggesting a «personalized collection», using the waste traceability control system, through a code associated with a single citizen. An incentive for a more detailed collection may be useful, through a bonus related to the quantity of waste: in such a way, the effect would manifest itself with the reduction of waste tax.

According to participants, the installation of ‘reverse vending machines’ (RVMs) (called by participants «eat-plastic/glass machines») for plastics and glass may incentivize separate collection within the local community. It must be said that RVMs are particularly spread across the globe and in Europe: in short, a reverse vending machine (RVM) is a device that enables a user to exchange a reward for a glass, plastic, or aluminum can that be either empty or used. The recyclable item is compacted, sorted, and evaluated based on the number of ounces, components, and brand using the universal product code on the bottle. After being scanned and authorized, the item is crushed and sorted into the appropriate storage area for classified material. The machine

processes the item and then rewards the users with cash or coupons¹¹¹. As usual, the economic return was mentioned also by Santa Caterina's participants.

On the other hand, participants argued that it is important to enhance the 'ecological island' for the «pre-processing» of separate waste, but also for assignment within consortia (e.g. CONAI¹¹²).

As a policy matter, and considering the second question of the first round, the first group of participants brought out several issues:

- Local institutions should be committed to realizing local composting plants for organic waste, and the use of compost in local agriculture.
- Environmental education at school has a fundamental role.
- Institutions must work on policies for public drinking water (to also limit the use of PET bottles), associated with policies for returnable containers.
- Plastic-free campaigns should be mandatory, particularly during the high tourist season (noting that Santa Caterina is a coastal municipality on the Ionic Sea, our fieldwork was carried out in the inner village, about 9 kilometers from the coast).
- Local businesses should receive incentives for completely recyclable packaging, including school canteens (also considering the 'farm-to-table' criteria).

- 2) The second group of participants focused primarily on solutions for a better separation of waste, by identifying also some current criticisms (e.g. from the aesthetic point of view, and the calendar collection). Among criticisms, the current system for organic waste (i.e. door-to-door) is connected with the problem of stray dogs, and with the presence of wild animals: generally, it is not the case in developed countries, but the presence of waste is strictly linked with the spread of diseases. Within a One Health framework, this is an essential point: concerning rabies, for instance, Wright *et al.* (2021) state that inadequate waste collection and management causes a significant increase in the amount of waste on the streets and in open dumps, where it is a source of food for free-roaming dogs. Nevertheless, addressing such an issue is not straightforward work: the lack of access to food (i.e. waste) for dogs may generate a

¹¹¹ <https://www.acorecycling.com/blog/benefits-of-reverse-vending-machines-in-supermarket/>

¹¹² <https://www.conai.org/en/about-conai/>

human-animal conflict due to the increased aggression of hungry dogs searching for food (*ivi*).

However, the second group of participants focused on two possible solutions, each with different pros and cons:

- The first solution may be that of an ‘ecological island’ (or ‘single collection center’), characterized by pros from the aesthetic point of view, to solve the problems around animals and the calendar. The cons may be related to a disincentive because of citizens’ displacement, but also to the construction costs.
- The second solution may be the underground bins. The pros of such a solution may be aesthetic, solving the problem of animals, and problems linked to displacement/accessibility and calendar. Among the cons, realization, and implementation costs were mentioned.
- Furthermore, a solution only for organic waste may be a local use of the organic waste, e.g. for worm farming.

Also, the second group talked about a bonus/incentive, as a result of rotation (i.e. cross-pollination of ideas), in the form of point accumulation on a card in exchange for reduced bills. As emphasized by participants, in this way, waste may be seen as a «creative industry», according to the logic of circular economy. Moreover, they highlighted the «immediacy» in the transformation of waste, leading to a real «value» of the waste.

Concerning the second question of the first round, it was presented the issue of awareness and education within schools. Moreover, they focused on the fact of fighting upstream the production of waste, through reuse and barter. Considering food waste, also within Santa Caterina’s participants the Too Good To Go app was mentioned, but priority may be given to compost and the use of food surplus for local cattle.

- 3) The third group started the conversation with a critical and skeptical point of view about the separate waste collection, talking about the probable uselessness of separating domestic waste, particularly mentioning a specific community not far from Santa Caterina (i.e. Davoli). They commented on the fact that within that community, only paper and unsorted waste were collected.

The skepticism of the group was that participants were wondering why no one has ever understood where such waste (separated or not) was destined (e.g. some participants testified that they saw refuse collectors who mixed all kinds of waste). Obviously, such

information should be verified, but also considering our research question and sub-question, it is important to analyze residents' points of view on the topic.

However, the attention was primarily given to organic waste and its management, but also to the disposal of bulk and building materials. As also confirmed by a walk around the village with participants, at the end of the World Café, building materials constituted a problem linked also to uncontrolled development: some foreigners decided to build extravagant houses that clashed with the local urban planning, and nearby, building materials were scattered throughout the surrounding vegetation. As noted by the researcher and participants at the fieldwork, those foreigners seemed to reproduce a «Calabrian Santorini», with reference to inappropriate use of land, and the unbalanced consideration of the local community.

Nevertheless, the third group agreed on managing waste at a local level to the full advantage of the residents, also with a measurable and concrete economic return: in this regard, participants mentioned the «Riace model». In Riace (Province of Reggio Calabria), the separate waste collection is carried out by donkeys: each day, two refuse collectors run through the village animals in order to collect waste in a very sustainable way¹¹³.

Regarding the second question of the first round, this group drew particular attention to individual actions to address the issue of waste production:

- Employ reusable carrier bags.
- Drink only tap water, also given the proximity to the source.
- Buy vegetables and fruits from local peasants, avoiding plastic wrap.
- Use alternative cleaning products (e.g. on tap).
- Enhance self-production (e.g. fruits and vegetables), by replacing large distribution (e.g. supermarkets).

As we can notice, the first round of conversation encouraged participants to speak on separate waste collection, offering their own personal contributions and visions. At the same time, at the end of the Café, within the harvesting of all contributions, all participants agreed on such thoughts and solutions.

The general implication of the discussions within the three groups underscores a robust engagement and keen interest among participants in tackling waste management issues within

¹¹³ <https://www.riacecittafutura.org/progetto/raccolta-differenziata-con-gli-asini/>

their community. The findings reveal a multifaceted perspective, with participants putting forth a variety of solutions and voicing concerns related to waste collection, disposal, and environmental impact. However, the strength of participatory democracy is manifest in the proactive involvement of participants who contribute actively to discussions, offering potential solutions to address local concerns and challenges.

In other words, the diversity of ideas and the agreement reached at the end of the Café demonstrate a collaborative and democratic approach to problem-solving. The willingness of participants to actively participate in discussions about waste management seems to reflect a healthy democratic process where community members are involved in shaping policies and solutions that affect them directly. Such an engagement contributes to a more informed and inclusive decision-making process, enhancing the overall strength and resilience of participatory democracy in the local context.

The second round of conversation was structured on the following two questions, focused on renewable energy:

- 1. Beyond technical aspects, why should we (or we should not) support renewables development? What we can do about this together, as a local community?**
- 2. The Municipality of Santa Caterina is among the signatories of the EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy. Since 2014, the year of the membership, have you perceived, as citizens, any improvement in terms of attention to the environment (e.g. investments in renewable energy)? Propose solutions to fight climate change at a local level, starting with energy.**

We can summarize participants' points of view by dividing them into three groups:

- 1) The first group was fully aware that an increase in renewable energy is needed in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, mainly caused by fossil fuels.

The way forward, at once, must consider and implement the real meaning of the term ‘sustainability’, looking not only at the environment but also at local populations.

Concerning the second question, nobody knew about the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, stating that there were no concrete findings or knowledge on it. Instead, over the years, as stated by some participants, energy-efficiency policies for public lighting were implemented, thanks to structural funding from the Italian Ministry of the Interior.

It is notable that, in contrast to the Gazzola case (where the PAESC was fully accessible online), no documentation could be found online regarding a PAESC for Santa Caterina (e.g. on search engines).

- 2) According to the second group, we (as citizens) should support renewable development for the Planet, also through the example of ‘energy communities’. In their opinion, ‘energy communities’ are characterized by important pros, such as immediate impact on citizens, reduced environmental and landscape impact, ‘km0’ energy, and autonomy of the local community (taking into consideration the great theme of ‘energy democracy’ of which we have spoken within the first chapter).

This group, rather than talking about improvements, focused on worsening the relationship between energy and the local environment: according to participants, since 2014, it was implemented «the largest deforestation» of the local mountain, contracted to companies making profits from biomass. Furthermore, participants wondered how biomass can be considered renewable.

Moreover, as stated by participants, ecological activities boil down to simple and sporadic demonstration days, without foreseeing an «ecological planning» linked to some concrete «vision of territory». Again, within such a framework, the «strong» building speculation, and the urbanization of rural areas (mentioning soil consumption and related issue like landslides) constituted a source of debate. Furthermore, some participants highlighted that the term «ecology» is easily confused with the term «environmentalism». On the other hand, it was emphasized that the word «landscape» was introduced for the first time within the municipal delegations and the 2023 electoral program, demonstrating how environmental issues constituted an essential issue of the Municipal newly elected administration.

- 3) The third group critically addressed renewables and other forms of energy (e.g. nuclear), mentioning also the hydroelectric with its «unstable regime».

Specifically, participants were against the planning of photovoltaic fields, in support of a photovoltaic on the roofs of the houses (also in urban areas), both on old and new buildings. Concerning wind power, they considered it a great source of deforestation, contributing to the destruction of the landscape, configured as a source of profit reserved for a few.

However, if on the one hand large sites (devoted to energy production from wind or sun, for instance) constituted a problem, on the other hand, a real energy assessment for the local community should be the top priority for strategic planning of renewables.

Concerning the second question of the second round, the group mentioned also the energy-efficiency policies of public lighting. Likewise, the attacks on forest heritage, through the «uncontrolled cut» of trees, was a real problem to address the climate change issue at a local level.

Moreover, it was considered also the issue of sustainable mobility, making a twin proposal: 1) a more sustainable and public transport (the paradox was that ‘public transport’ occurred only with ‘private’ buses, with the last run at 5:00 PM); 2) train transport may be implemented (here another paradox, the train station was present, but the train bypassed the stop altogether in Santa Caterina).

Within the last phase of the Café (i.e. harvesting and sharing collective insights), all participants agreed on the fact that the role of the local community should be placed at the center of actions to fight climate change, through face-to-face consultation with policy and decision-makers, and other stakeholders, in a real participatory, and possibly deliberative, perspective.

The present councilmen stated that our Café was an experience to be treasured, also due to the «concrete nature, applicability, and repeatability of the approach», based on innovative impacts from a bottom-up level, which may be replicated in the form of a «permanent» participatory laboratory¹¹⁴. The approach, grounded in bottom-up innovation, was perceived as a promising method for addressing local needs, as evidenced by its tangible impacts. This positive evaluation suggests that the World Café approach has significant potential for replication, not only as a one-time initiative but also as a permanent participatory laboratory. Such a structure

¹¹⁴ Such an idea may be seen in relationship with the ‘living lab’ approach mentioned in the first chapter.

could foster continuous dialogue between institutions and communities, promoting long-term citizen engagement and co-creation of solutions to local challenges.

However, participants were against a top-down perspective to invest in renewables, as well as other issues linked to the environment. Indeed, participants' negative attitude concerning above all wind-power was particularly strong. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Santa Caterina is part of the *Parco Naturale Regionale delle Serre*¹¹⁵, a context strongly marked by the presence of wind turbines.

In this regard, several Calabrian stakeholders (e.g. LIPU, the Italian League for Bird Protection, WWF, Italia Nostra, also Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo), in February 2023, signed a document for land conservation. In particular, they contested the fact that Calabria is currently considered a «colony» for Italian energy production from renewables, already with an important surplus of energy¹¹⁶, whereas Calabria is a region battered by hydrogeological risk¹¹⁷.

In other words, participants were not against renewables, but from their perspective, as also emerged in our fieldwork, climate change should be addressed bearing in mind the holistic vision entailed within the definition of 'sustainability', in the knowledge that renewable energy is not necessarily 'sustainable'.

2.1.4. Cosenza: Results of the World Café

Cosenza's fieldwork took place on June 16, 2023, at 5:00 PM, inside the ARCI local committee's office. The 17 citizens who participated to the World Café were divided into three groups. We were not able to predict the number of attendees through online booking, because only 8 individuals pre-booked, and without a minimum number of 12 participants, we would have had to turn the fieldwork into a focus group.

Cosenza's Café followed the same course as the previous fieldwork in Santa Caterina, lasting almost three hours, including breaks and rotations (Fig. 22).

¹¹⁵ <https://parcodelleserre.it/en/municipalities/>

¹¹⁶ Data on energy and Calabria (year 2018), pp. 228-229:

https://download.terna.it/terna/Annuario%20Statistico%202018_8d7595e944c2546.pdf

¹¹⁷ <http://www.salviamoilpaesaggio.it/blog/2023/02/calabria-lenergia-sporca-le-ragioni-della-nostra-opposizione-alleolico-selvaggio/>

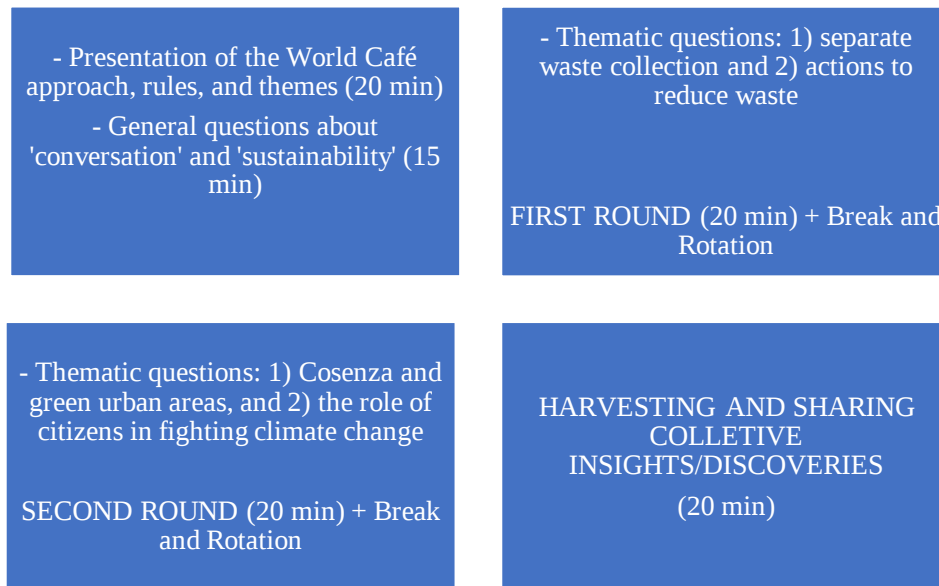


Fig. 22 Cosenza's World Café structure

Source: elaborated by the author

As within the two rural/inner areas, the question «If we talk about climate change, what are we seeing/facing as members of this local community? What will happen if immediate action is not taken? » was included in the slides: in the absence of a minimum number of 12 participants, the quasi-experiment would have had to be conducted as a focus group.

Nevertheless, also in Cosenza, the two questions on 'conversation' and 'sustainability' had the role of a conversation starter: 1) «What makes a good/interesting conversation for you? », and 2) «Sustainability, what does it mean for you? Say it in few words».

Answers were written by participants on post-it® and then pinned up on a poster.

Fig. 23 shows participants' answers to the question concerning 'conversation', emphasizing some key points of our activities on the ground.

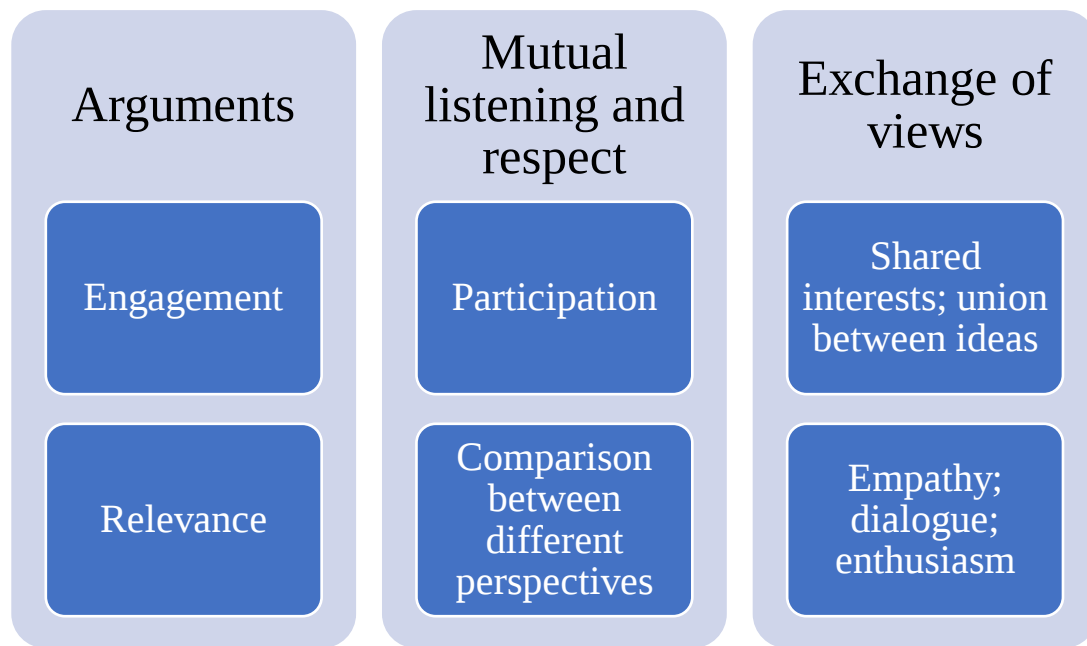


Fig. 23 Concepts emphasized by participants related to the question «What makes a good/interesting conversation for you? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected

Beyond similarities with previous fieldworks, participants highlighted the importance of «engagement» and «participation», by also emphasizing the mutuality that should characterize a conversation. In addition, the term «relevance» seemed to be associated with the topicality of conversation about current issues such as climate change.

We can notice that the reference to mutual learning was supported by concepts such as «exchange of views», «union between ideas», and «comparison between different perspectives».

On the other hand, the question about ‘sustainability’ revealed intriguing points of view (Fig. 24). This is particularly noteworthy when considering discussions pertaining to ecological compatibility, recycling practices, regeneration efforts, support mechanisms, responsibilities, future considerations, and overall conscientious care. The multifaceted discourse encompassed a range of interconnected themes, providing a comprehensive examination of the diverse facets associated with sustainability.

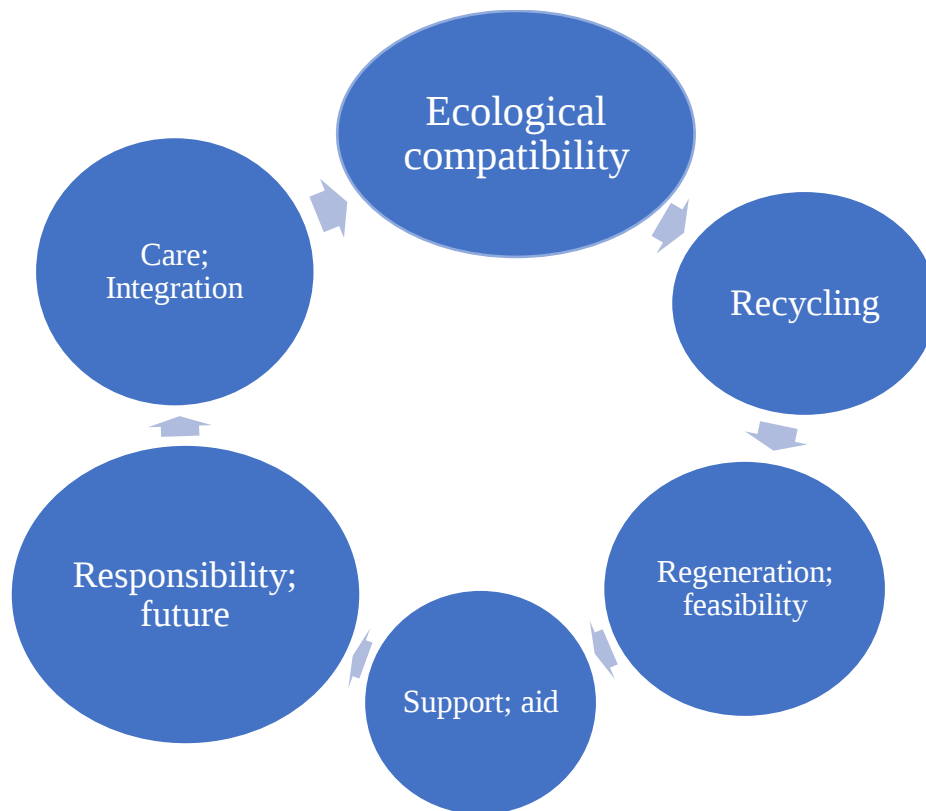


Fig. 24 What is ‘sustainability’ according to Cosenza’s participants

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected

Like in the previous Cafés, following the question about ‘conversation’ and ‘sustainability’, the first round of discussion addressed two questions concerning the topic of separate waste collection:

- 1. Do you separate your waste? We creatively explore the possibility of developing a better separate collection system, also based on the neighborhood of residence/domicile.**
- 2. To reduce/avoid the wastage of products (and thus waste production), which actions would you propose, and to what extent?**

To facilitate comprehension, the conversation results are organized into three distinct groups, with clear segmentation maintained for ease of understanding:

- 1) Within the first group, all participants stated that they separated their waste, considering the neighborhood of residence/domicile. As written by the first-group host, there were people not only from Cosenza but also city users, such as students or workers, from different municipalities (e.g. Rende, Casali del Manco, Aprigliano). Moreover, all members of the first group, including those from other municipalities, practiced door-to-door collection of waste.

They proposed common bins for separate collection, for buildings and large condominiums.

According to some participants, regulations on waste separation are not always obeyed to the letter, e.g. by mixing paper and plastics.

Furthermore, the issue of ‘ecological islands’ has been pointed out: on the one hand, ‘ecological islands’ should be intensified for every neighborhood; on the other hand, ‘ecological islands’ should be open to all citizens, and not only to residents but also to every city user (e.g. students, workers, tourists, etc.).

Concerning the second question of the first round, the first group focused on individual actions to reduce/avoid waste production: 1) we should make choices related to the idea of ‘critical buying tasks’, using our purchasing power for ethical consumerism, and also taking into account the well-established ‘reduce, reuse, and recycle’ (e.g. reducing packaged products, promoting the reuse of products if possible); 2) choose biodegradable packaging anyway; 3) avoid disposable products; 4) choose glass to plastic, and try to re-introduce returnable bottles.

- 2) Participants included in the second group stated that everyone separated his/her waste. Nevertheless, the important issue of awareness was emphasized by this group: according to participants, in many cases, there is an unwillingness to separate waste (e.g. many older persons have trouble exhibiting bins on the street every day, above all in case of absence of an elevator). Within this framework, the separate collection system should be redesigned (one participant argued that «to perceive it as a problem, it may be a creative start»).

Indeed, the second group particularly focused on issues linked to the current Cosenza’s separate collection system that should be redesigned according to the current local

demography, considering also the social needs of each neighborhood. On the other hand, they stated that current environmental controls, related to waste disposal, are insufficient or almost non-existent.

Concerning the second question of the first round of conversation, participants focused on the role of local businesses: they should provide alternative packaging, or avoid packaging because the current system is obviously unsustainable (e.g. «a courgette, a plastic wrap»). Local institutions should collaborate with local businesses to promote a «smart spending» program, seeking to achieve this through the promotion of sustainable practices (e.g. buying local food products).

Additionally, the concept of «recovery» was brought up. Participants claimed that instead of viewing waste as «weight», we should view it as a «resource», through re-use.

- 3) The third group of participants stated everyone should separate their waste. According to them, the first fundamental step to developing a better separate collection system was to aware residents of the topic. Conversely, the necessity of a better diffusion of individual bins is indispensable, because the number of bins currently available is insufficient and unrelated to the actual number of residents.

Answers to the second question of the first round revealed that participants presented different insights: 1) the products of multinational companies are mainly characterized by unsustainable packaging (and ingredients), identifying the problem upstream may be crucial; 2) it might be necessary to launch an advertising campaign to persuade people to drink water straight from the faucet rather than from plastic bottles, and if necessary, to advertise the installation of water purifiers (also considering the ‘water bonus’¹¹⁸); 3) minimize the use of disposable bags, particularly for small purchases (e.g. in pharmacies); 4) at a top-down level, the Italian Ministry of Environment and Energy Security should invest more in promoting possible concrete actions against climate change by all citizens; 5) environmental education should be introduced within schools as a core subject.

Regarding the green urban areas, the second round of conversation was organized around the following two questions:

¹¹⁸<https://www.agenziaentrate.gov.it/portale/web/guest/bonus-risparmio-idrico/infogen-bonus-risparmio-idrico>

- 1. What role does a green area play in an urban context? How can we make the city of Cosenza greener?**
- 2. What can we do as citizens to reduce the local and global effects of climate change, taking into account the elements that emerged during this World Café?**

Participants' perspectives for this second round can be summarized in three groups as follows:

- 1) According to group 1, a green urban area plays a crucial role from the point of view of mitigation and adaptation to climate change effects. Nevertheless, as stated by participants, every infrastructural intervention subtracts land to green spaces, putting the problem upstream.

Territorial modifications, also with new buildings, should foresee a new mechanism for the realization of the lost green urban areas (e.g. shopping malls well-integrated with green, conceived as green infrastructures).

Concerning the second question, participants concentrated on education as a key area to act in order to get tangible results. Additionally, they identified the following actions to reduce the local and global effects of climate change:

- Use sustainable transport (e.g. public transport, bicycle, on foot).
 - Reduce the use of polluting products, generating less waste.
 - Use a *tout court* respectful environmental vision.
 - Use energy responsibly and conscientiously.
 - Create networks between citizens and associations to raise awareness, stimulating actions among citizens and institutions toward a real discourse of environmental sustainability.
- 2) Group 2 stated that a green urban area is a special space for social relations, meetings, and ideas at the basis of society.

It was mentioned the example of the Parco del Benessere¹¹⁹, a linear urban park of length of 2km and 35 meters wide which, through thematic and sensory gardens outfitted with street fields, links the historic center with the more modern area of Cosenza; inside the park, a cycle path of about 2 km in length has already been built entirely on its own site, with two-way traffic that connects two other sections of cycle paths located to its north and south¹²⁰.

According to participants, it currently is a park «immersed in the smog», contributing to losing the same idea of the park or green area. Furthermore, an issue of security is lacking, related to the interruption of the cycle path or maintenance of the equipment. According to such visions, even for new green urban areas, the idea of «care» should guide all policies and initiatives; however, citizens, especially in the local context, believe that this lack is due to a cultural problem.

Regarding the second question, the members of group 2 mentioned the following actions in order to address climate change from a bottom-up level:

- Reducing the use of private transport, particularly within the urban area.
- Avoiding unnecessary use of energy and water.
- Fighting the fast fashion industry, as much as possible.
- Reducing meat consumption.
- From a global perspective, more investments in digitalization may be useful to address climate change innovatively, by taking into account the digital divide issue.

- 3) According to the members of group 3, a green urban area is crucial for citizens' physical and psychological well-being. Within this framework, each neighborhood should create a green area and/or strengthen it, if already existing; on the other hand, local stakeholders (e.g. associations) should be more present by encouraging citizens' protagonism, by effectively engaging them within such local green areas (for instance, caring for the areas and/or organizing citizens' meeting in order to discuss public issues concerning the neighborhood).

¹¹⁹ Approximately one year after our fieldwork in Cosenza, the park has been returned to the citizens (<https://www.quicosenza.it/news/area-urbana/cosenza-ecco-il-parco-del-benessere-gia-vivo-e-polmone-verde-della-citta>). However, there are still numerous issues that require attention, including the fact that the entire park is bordered by major roadways.

¹²⁰<https://comune.cosenza.it/it/sezione/canali-tematici/page/ciclopolitana>

Looking at the second question, participants emphasized the need for local institutions to provide more assistance with public transportation, pushing toward renewables and the reduction of waste.

As within Santa Caterina's fieldwork, the division into groups is made by the author to facilitate the reading of the conversations' results. In such cases, it is implied that rotations of participants (i.e. cross-pollination) around the different groups occurred.

Furthermore, it must be emphasized that some journal articles related to local environmental issues (about waste issues¹²¹, and green local areas¹²²) were placed on the tables, aiming at bringing interest and curiosity to the subject paying particular attention to the local context.

However, also in Cosenza's Café, all participants agreed that local communities should be at the center of efforts to combat climate change through direct interaction with policy and decision-makers as well as other stakeholders, in a genuinely participatory and potentially deliberative perspective. This consensus was reached during the Café's final phase, i.e. harvesting and sharing collective insights, but the results of the questionnaires provide us with a broad overview of participants' perceptions and potential directions for future development.

2.2. Exploring Participants' Views in Bologna: Questionnaires as a Key Tool in the World Café Setting

Testing the effects of a laboratory open to citizens is not a straightforward procedure, due, for example, to the different biases (e.g. knowledge gaps among participants and facilitators, the almost complete absence of stakeholders, absence of random selection of participants, absence of experts).

However, the participants filled out a first questionnaire immediately before the Café, and a second questionnaire approximately one week after the event: both types of questionnaires were only available in digital format (using Microsoft Forms). Concerning the first questionnaire, a

¹²¹<https://www.cosenzaduepuntozero.it/lettere-2-0-a-cosenza-inaugurato-un-nuovo-cassonetto-della-spazzatura-macchina-rubata-abbandonata-al-vostro-servizio/>;

<https://www.quicosenza.it/news/area-urbana/cosenza-nuova-derattizzazione-e-bonifica-delle-microdiscariche-incontro-con-ecologia-oggi>;

https://www.lacnews24.it/cronaca/batterie-per-auto-da-smaltire-cosi-la--ndrangheta-di-cosenza-vuole-trasformare-il-piombo-in-oro_164934/;

<https://www.quicosenza.it/news/area-urbana/cosenza-fiamme-in-unabitazione-del-centro-storico-forse-generate-dai-rifiuti>

¹²²<https://ildispaccio.it/calabria/cosenza/2022/12/06/cosenza-citta-green-viaggio-nelle-viscere-di-un-catastrofico-ecosistema-urbano-fotogallery/>;

<https://www.quicosenza.it/news/area-urbana/486207-rende-ok-al-parco-inclusivo-piu-grande-deuropa-rende-e-green-uniti-da-un-ponte-ciclopodone>

QR code was positioned at each table of discussion, while for the second questionnaire, participants were directly contacted by email. As previously stated, paper copies of the pre-event questionnaire were made available to participants who were unable to complete it using an electronic device. In such instances, at least two participants were required to complete the questionnaire manually to ensure anonymity.

As already emphasized, the purpose of such questionnaires was to assess if a change in individual preferences occurred among participants.

The introduction to the pre-event questionnaire reminded the participant that he/she was taking part in an academic participatory fieldwork, trying to understand their initial impressions concerning the initiative.

The pre-event questionnaire was divided into two sections: 1) the sociodemographic section (gender, age group, education, employment, political/associative affiliation); 2) the expectations and motivations section.

Concerning the Bologna's pre-event questionnaire, all participants responded to the questionnaire (n=14/14), 8 out of 14 were men, had a university degree (n=11/14), and 26-33 years old was the most frequent age group (n=8).

The employment of participants was heterogenous, with 12 out of 14 providing this information: three students; one lawyer; one medical doctor; one responsible for communications; two employees; two volunteers; two Cittadinanzattiva's employees.

Interestingly, regarding the question «Are you an active member of political parties/associations? », 7 participants (n=7/14) responded «yes», and the other 7 (n=7/14) responded «no». This is important because, as already highlighted in Chapter 1, 'open door' methodologies, used for our World Café, often run the risk to involve the 'already-active' citizens (Bobbio, 2019). Our work shows that it was not only 'already active' citizens who participated, which may indicate that interest in participatory democracy is increasing.

Within the second section, multiple answers were possible: according to the participants, the World Café aimed to encourage citizens' participation in democratic life, promoting active citizenship (n=11/14), and raising public awareness of the importance of participation and the promotion of discussion and collaboration spaces for citizens (n=9/14).

Furthermore, participants believed that the initiative would be capable to strengthen the sense of engagement and commitment to the community and the Planet (n=10/14), by encouraging positive and constructive relationships within groups (n=9/14).

Participants argued that they were pushed to participate for their interest in the topics addressed (n=9/14), for the curiosity to listen to other points of view (n=7/14), for the possibility/opportunity to have a debate among citizens (n=6/14), and for the desire to improve their knowledge/skills (n=5/14).

10 open-ended responses were registered concerning participants' expectations, as shown in Fig. 25:

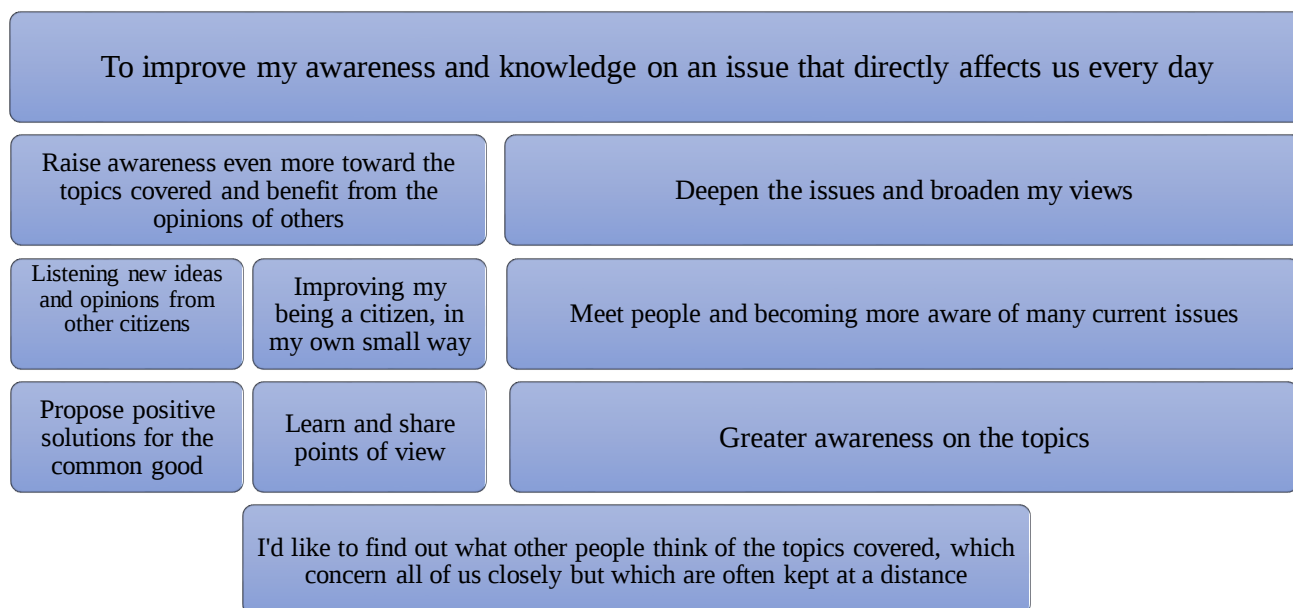


Fig. 25 Responses to the question «What are your expectations? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Moreover, some participants had already taken part in participatory/deliberative processes such as deliberative polls (n=3/14), and participatory budgeting (n=3/14), with some participants who had already participated in community meetings (e.g. citizens' assemblies), focused on environmental issues (n=6/14).

Although most participants (n=12/14) knew the organization Cittadinanzattiva, 7 out of 14 participated thanks to word of mouth. Cittadinanzattiva had nevertheless contributed to spreading the initiative through its social networks (e.g. Facebook, Instagram), newsletters, website, and flyers.

One week after the World Café, each participant received by email a second questionnaire aimed to evaluate:

- 1) Satisfaction levels (overall rating of the activity, using a Likert scale from 1 – strongly negative attitude - to 5 – strongly positive attitude), through also open-ended questions such as «What did/didn't you like in this laboratory? », and «You have any suggestions for the next World Cafés? ».
- 2) Knowledge acquisition («The event represented a learning opportunity for you? » – «yes/no/I don't know»).
- 3) (Potential) impacts of the laboratory: «In your opinion, the World Café was able to...»; «You believe that the World Café has positively contributed to...»; «Considering the debate, do you think you will have to change/will you change anything in your lifestyle? If yes, what? » (open-ended question); «Does the effectiveness of mitigation strategies (to reduce the levels of pollution in the atmosphere) and adaptation (to implement strategies to limit the effects) to climate change also depend on the involvement of citizens (as in the World Café format)?», using Likert scale (from 1 – strongly disagree – to 5 – strongly agree); «Has the initiative, in general, increased your sense of community?»; «Considering the aspects of awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action, obviously related to climate change, you believe that your point of view has changed?», using Likert scale (from 1 – not at all – to 5 – extremely).

Thus, concerning the satisfaction section of the questionnaire, half of the participants (n=7) indicated «4», and 6 participants indicated «5», while only one participant indicated «3»: so, in general, the World Café has been a positive experience for all citizens involved (Fig. 26).

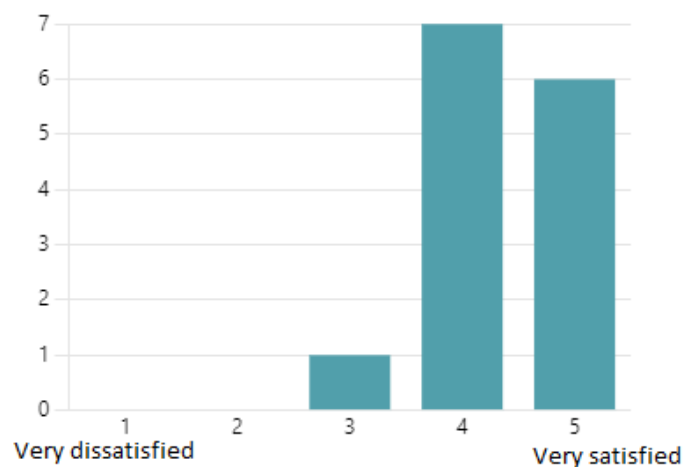


Fig. 26 Satisfaction with Bologna's World Café, according to participants

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Looking at the question «What did/didn't you like in this laboratory? », nine answers were given:

- 1) «Some participants try to force their opinions on everyone else as if they were the only ones deserving of attention or actually workable solutions. Such participants are unwilling to debate the other participants in a polite and constructive manner. This, in my opinion, goes against the World Café's goal to advance democratic decision-making on specific issues».
- 2) «I really enjoyed discussing with unknown people about common issues that concern all of us. Mutual respect was very nice, speaking in rounds, which allowed the exchange of ideas, opinions, debate, but without creating misunderstanding».
- 3) «I appreciated the possibility of discussing with individuals who, in terms of perception of the city in which we live and environmental awareness, have different ideas than me».
- 4) «I'm pleased with how well the meeting went».
- 5) «I liked everything».
- 6) «I really enjoyed the host and the chance to discuss ideas with every participant».
- 7) «I liked the possibility of exchanging ideas in small groups where everyone was able to express their idea with the possibility of discussing it».
- 8) «I enjoyed hearing other points of view on the subject».
- 9) «I liked the direct debate between small groups of people».

Such answers incorporate some key elements of the World Café such as 'opinions,' 'debate', 'ideas', 'mutual respect', and 'decision-making process', in line with the overall setting founded on participatory/deliberative democracy.

The question «You have any suggestions for the next World Cafés? » seemed to be a repetition of the previous question, with some further suggestions:

- 1) «I extend an invitation to all participants to engage in a more civil and democratic debate based on increased receptivity to the opinions and needs of others», which recalls the first answer to the previously mentioned question.
- 2) «Have more time»: this is a crucial point, at the basis of each participatory/deliberative process. Nevertheless, our laboratory was structured under the World Café format also to fulfill the time issue: according to the World Café Guide, a World Café, to be

considered as such, should last at least an hour and a half¹²³ (our World Café lasted a little more than three hours, including breaks and rotations).

- 3) «Instead of offering large-scale retail biscuits packaged in plastic, I would suggest offering products from a local bakery or producer to be consistent with the topics covered». In this respect, all products offered during the process (e.g. pizza, tea, coffee) were characterized by having such a feature: pizza was bought at a local bakery, in the Bologna center; coffee and tea were fairtrade certified and served in paper cups. The biscuits in question were bought at the supermarket near the Cittadinanzattiva's office, and the participant was right to emphasize the point.
- 4) «Sustainable diet», as an issue to deal with in another laboratory.
- 5) «Health, well-being, and territorial welfare», as other issues for other World Cafés.
- 6) «More specific issues».

The sixth consideration is essential to elaborate a better laboratory: as emphasized, some questions (e.g. «If we talk about climate change, what are we seeing/facing as members of this local community? What will happen if immediate action is not taken? », or «Sustainability, what does it mean for you? Say it in few words») have proven its generality and vagueness within our context. Such questions were obviously linked to the themes addressed in Bologna, but they seemed to cause a dispersion of energies, paying scant attention to the specific urban topics (i.e. separate waste collection and green areas).

Against this background, the next activities will be structured by asking more specific territorial questions, without digressing too much into general issues.

Concerning the knowledge acquisition section in the second questionnaire, according to 12 participants, the World Café represented a learning opportunity, while 2 participants responded «I don't know»; the same data, as will be seen below, for the question concerning the 'sense of community'. Thus, a majority of participants affirmed that the initiative offered a valuable learning opportunity. Additionally, the Café proved advantageous from a research standpoint, aligning with the main research question and sub-question.

Several responses shed light on the complexity of a participatory and/or deliberative process. For some respondents, the World Café was able to encourage citizens' participation in

¹²³ <https://www.theworldcafe.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/WorldCafeGuidaPractica.pdf>

democratic life (n=11), raising public awareness of the importance of participation and the promotion of discussion and collaboration spaces for citizens (n=8), but also enhancing territorial experiences and practices (n=6), by conveying the work of organizations like Cittadinanzattiva (n=5). Furthermore, the initiative has positively contributed to promoting active citizenship (n=8).

The open-ended question «Considering the debate, do you think you will have to change/will you change anything in your lifestyle? If yes, what? » gathered seven answers:

- 1) «I should make an effort to reuse the items more frequently and inform the appropriate institutions of the issues and solutions».
- 2) «The meeting would be even more beneficial for the participants if a subject-matter expert were also present».
- 3) «Increased focus on resource conservation and more attention in recycling».
- 4) «Lower fuel consumption and greater attention to recycling and reuse».
- 5) «Pay more attention to the waste of resources».
- 6) «Close attention to the waste of resources».
- 7) «Yes».

Such responses point to important role a bottom-up laboratory may play in a specific territorial context. Indeed, the responses showed how participants were willing to make lifestyle changes to protect the environment, noting that the presence of expert figures (e.g. environmental engineers, biologists, physicists) may be crucial.

As shown by Fig. 27, considering the question «Does the effectiveness of mitigation strategies (to reduce the levels of pollution in the atmosphere) and adaptation (to implement strategies to limit the effects) to climate change also depend on the involvement of citizens (as in the World Café format)? », 10 participants scored 5 (strongly agree), 2 participants scored 4, while only one participant scored 3.

Therefore, for the most part, citizens' participation in initiatives like World Café laboratories may be helpful to address important issues related to strategies for climate change mitigation and adaptation.

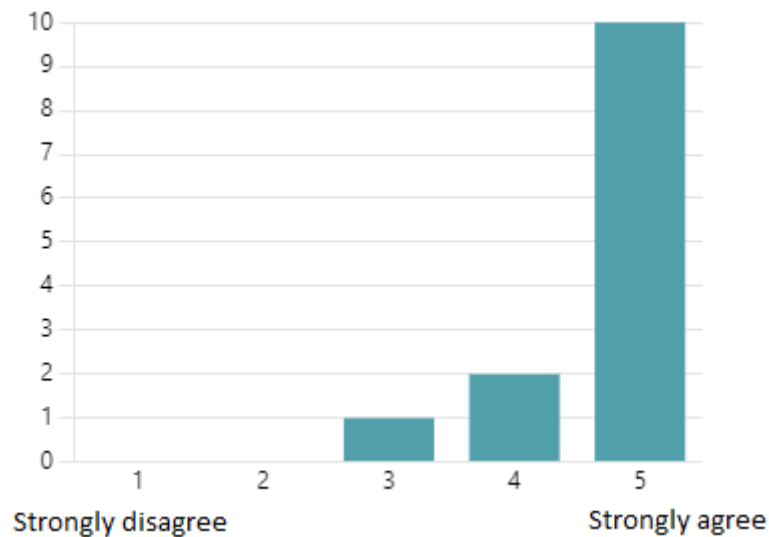


Fig. 27 Responses to the question «Does the effectiveness of mitigation strategies (to reduce the levels of pollution in the atmosphere) and adaptation (to implement strategies to limit the effects) to climate change also depend on the involvement of citizens (as in the World Café format)? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

It is noteworthy that 12 participants adamantly affirmed that their ‘sense of community’ experienced a discernible enhancement following their involvement in the World Café, underscoring the substantive impact of the participatory approach on community cohesion. On the other hand, two individuals expressed uncertainty, by answering «I don’t know», underscoring the diverse array of perspectives within the Café’s participants.

Conversely, evoking the Climate Perception Index (CPI) of Meta’s Data for Good platform¹²⁴, the question «Considering the aspects of awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action, obviously related to climate change, you believe that your point of view has changed? » showed important replies: considering ‘awareness’ (Fig. 28), 2 participants replied with 1 point (i.e. not at all), one participant with 2 points, 4 participants with 3 points, 5 participants with 4 points, and the other (n=2) with 5 points (i.e. extremely changed).

The results from the question, which asked participants whether their perspectives on climate change had shifted in terms of awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action, strongly suggest that participatory and/or deliberative processes can play a crucial role in influencing individual preferences. Specifically, the distribution of responses - ranging from minimal to

¹²⁴ <https://dataforgood.facebook.com/dfg/docs/climate-perceptions-index-2022>

substantial changes in awareness - highlights the effectiveness of such processes in fostering critical reflection and deeper engagement with complex issues like climate change. This outcome underscores the potential of participatory frameworks not only to inform participants but also to drive meaningful shifts in attitudes and behaviors, ultimately contributing to more informed and committed actions toward addressing climate challenge.

On the other hand, considering ‘risk perception’ (Fig. 29), 2 participants replied with 1 point, one participant with 2 points, 4 participants with 3 points, 4 participants with 4 points, and the other (n=3) with 5 points.

The last aspect taken into account by the question was that of ‘commitment to action’ (Fig. 30): one participant replied with 1 point, one participant replied with 2 points, 4 participants with 3 points, 4 participants with 4 points, and other 4 with 5 points.

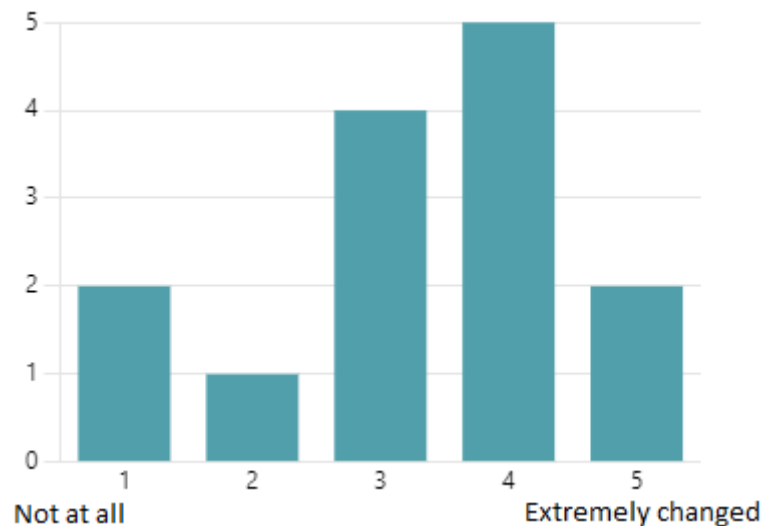


Fig. 28 World Café and changes in ‘awareness’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

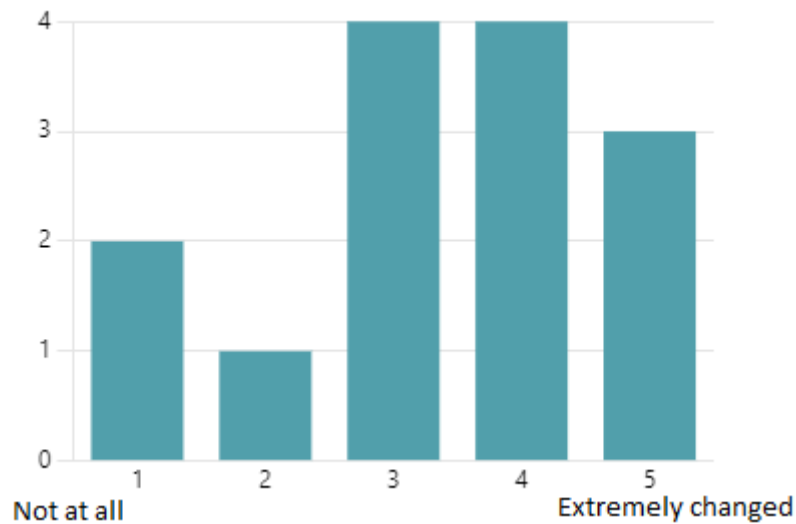


Fig. 29 World Café and changes in ‘risk perception’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

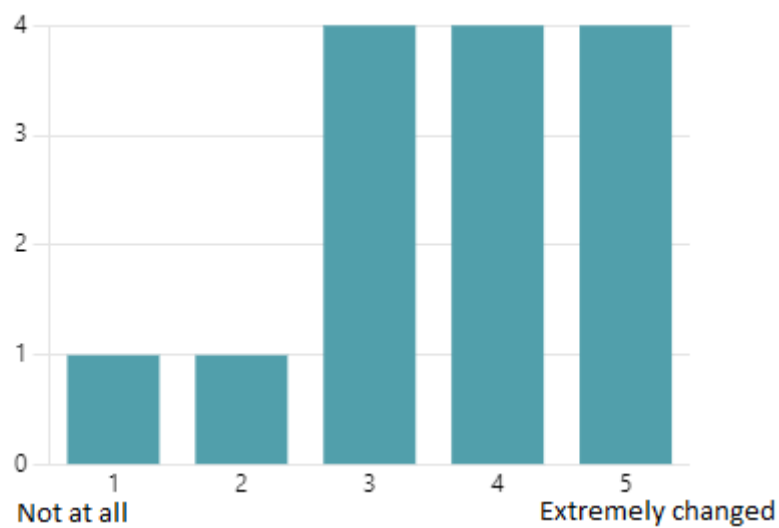


Fig. 30 World Café and changes in ‘commitment to action’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Our results suggest that the adoption of the World Café format is effective for fostering a participatory democracy context, yielding results congruent with the research question and sub-question.

The increased interaction and cooperation between participants and Cittadinanzattiva further demonstrate the method's capacity to support the co-creation of solutions and collective decision-making, aligning with the broader objectives of participatory democracy.

2.2.1 Results of Gazzola's Questionnaires

Concerning the Gazzola's pre-event questionnaire, 13 out of 14 participants responded, excluding the child. Most were women (n=8/13), the highest level of education attained was high school (n=7/13), and participants were from different age groups (18-25, n=3/13; 26-33, n=2/13; 34-41, n=2/13; 42-49, n=1/13; 50-57, n=1/13; 58-67, n=1/13; 68/76, n=3/13).

The employment of respondents (n=13/13) was diversified: one concrete technologist; two students; one coachbuilder; one housewife; one business consultant; one university professor; one metalworker; three retired persons; two employees.

At the question «Are you an active member of political parties/associations? », 6 participants (n=6/13) responded «yes», while the remaining 7 participants (n=7/13) responded «no».

Concerning the question «Have you ever taken part, even in the past, in participatory-deliberative processes? », some participants (n=3/13) indicated «other», rather than «citizens' juries», «deliberative polls», or «participatory budgeting». To the question «Specifically, have you already participated, even in the past, in community meetings (e.g. citizens' assemblies) on local and/or global environmental issues? », 7 participants (n=7/13) responded affirmatively, while 6 participants (n=6/13) provided a negative answer.

It must be noted that in Gazzola's questionnaires, two questions were added to further test a change in individual preferences:

- 1) «Which of the following actions do you believe is required to enhance the standard of the environment in which you live? ». The three options of answer were: «more landfill sites»; «more incinerators»; «more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) ».
- 2) «What is necessary in order to take action against climate change, also valorizing the territory? ». The three options of answer were: «Invest more in renewable energy sources»; «Invest in energy from fossil fuels»; «Invest in nuclear energy».

Concerning our first question, all respondents (n=13/13) shared the view that more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) constitute a fundamental action to enhance the standard of the local environment. As for the second question, 11 out of 13 participants replied that more investments in renewable energy sources are required to take

action against climate change, while 2 participants (n=2/13) replied that it is important to invest in nuclear energy.

Within the other section of the questionnaire, multiple answers were allowed: according to participants, the Café aimed to encourage citizens' participation in democratic life (n=6/13), raising public awareness and among institutions about the importance of participation and promotion of opportunities to exchange ideas and citizens' collaboration (n=6/13). 2 participants believed that our Café had the role to make known the work and the mission of organizations such as Cittadinanzattiva. Moreover, the aim of the Café was not clear to 5 out of 13, although our research purposes were repeatedly stressed by summarizing also our research topic.

Participants argued that they were pushed to participate for their interest in the topics addressed (n=7/13), for the curiosity to listen to other points of view (n=5/13), for the desire to improve their knowledge/skills (n=4/13), for the possibility/opportunity to have a debate among citizens (n=1/13); two participants stated that they participated for other reasons, without further information.

Furthermore, according to the participants, such an initiative would be capable to foster citizens' active participation (n=6/13), assessing the state of democratic participation at a local level (n=5/13), clarifying the individual actions-respect for the environment nexus (n=3/13), to clarify the concept of participation (n=2/13), to bring citizens closer to the institutions (n=1/13). Participants believed that the World Café would be capable to strengthen the sense of engagement and commitment to the community and the Planet (n=7/13), by encouraging positive and constructive relationships within groups (n=4/13), also reinforcing their collaborative behavior (n=3/13).

7 open-ended responses were registered concerning participants' expectations (Fig. 31). The Figure 31 demonstrates how participants were eager to build new relationships between them, in order to build a resilient local community against climate change, thanks to democratic participation, cooperation, knowledge, and innovative ideas. From such participants' answers came out the desire to make an active contribution as a community, from a bottom-up perspective.

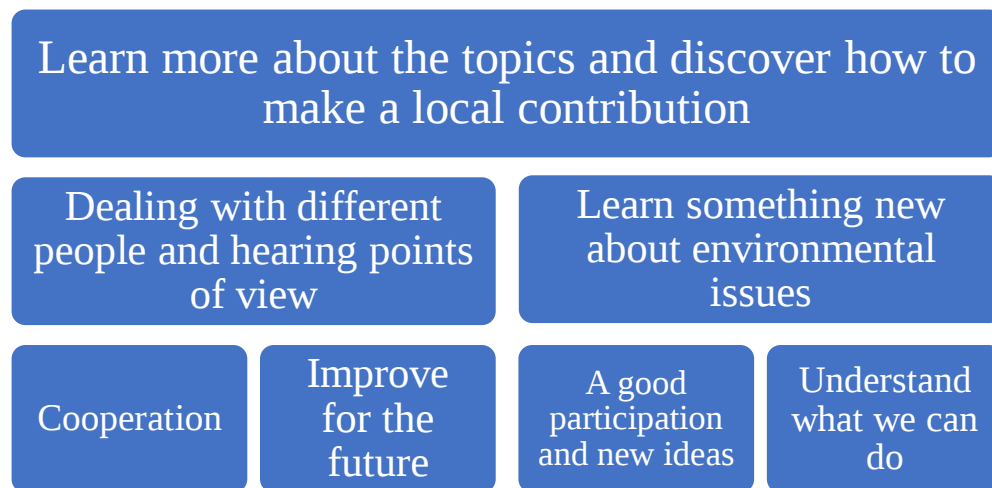


Fig. 31 Answers to the question «What are your expectations? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Finally, most of Gazzola's participants ($n=11/12$)¹²⁵ did not yet know Cittadinanzattiva. 6 participants ($n=6/13$) participated thanks to word of mouth, and 6 participants ($n=6/13$) read about the initiative on the library social network (i.e. Facebook, and Instagram), while one participant checked the box «other». Also in this case, the recruitment campaign was indirectly promoted by Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna, and an article presenting the fieldwork on Cittadinanzattiva's website was shared on the library's social network.

One week after the World Café, each Gazzola participant received by email a second questionnaire aimed to evaluate the satisfaction levels, the knowledge acquisition, and the (potential) impacts of the laboratory, adding furthermore two questions, i.e. 1) «Based on what was discussed during the World Café, in your opinion, what is required to enhance the standard of the environment in which you live?»; 2) «After the laboratory, do you believe that reacting to climate change requires [:]».

After two reminders, only 10 out of 14 participants responded to the questionnaire. For this reason, it might be interesting to consider who were the post-event questionnaire respondents: they were 7 women and 3 men, with a variety of age groups (16-17, $n=1/10$; 18-25, $n=1/10$; 26-33, $n=2/10$; 34-41, $n=1/10$; 42-49, $n=2/10$; 50-57, $n=1/10$; 58-67, $n=0/10$; 68/76, $n=2/10$). Considering the first questionnaire's data, we can note that the age group 16-17 was absent in

¹²⁵ In this case, one participant ($n=1/13$) did not reply

the pre-event questionnaire¹²⁶, while in the age groups 18-25, 34-41, 58-67, and 68-76, there was a decline in the replies to the questionnaires.

The unequal distribution across age groups could introduce bias in the analysis, warranting caution in drawing broad conclusions from the obtained data. Despite these limitations, it is essential to proceed with a meticulous examination of the available responses. Through a detailed analysis, we aim to extract valuable insights and identify potential trends or patterns within the subset of participants who engaged with the post-event questionnaire. By acknowledging the constraints imposed by the response rate and demographic distribution, we can contextualize the findings within the quasi-experiment's limitations and contribute to a nuanced interpretation of the data.

Nevertheless, the two added questions highlight a crucial aspect: we are not able to effectively argue that a change in individual preferences occurred, but all post-event respondents answered that 1) to enhance the standard of the environment in which they live more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) are required (n=10/10), and that 2) reacting to climate change requires more investment in renewable energy (n=10/10).

Perhaps nuclear energy supporters were non-respondents in the post-event questionnaire. Nonetheless, if this were not the case, it is reasonable to posit that such quasi-experiments have the potential to foster a genuine 'green consensus' among participants. However, determining these effects with certainty remains challenging.

The question «Are you an active member of political parties/associations? », was repeated within the post-event questionnaire: 6 participants (n=6/10) responded «yes», reconfirming the previous questionnaire replies, while 4 participants (n=4/10) responded «no». The 6 already-active citizens confirmed somehow their 'engagement', while it is necessary to work better for catching up with the 'non-engaged' people, although within the post-event questionnaire, three answers were lacking.

Concerning the general satisfaction section of the questionnaire, 6 participants (n=6/10) indicated «4», 3 participants (n=3/10) indicated «5», and one participant (n=1/10) indicated «3» (Fig. 32).

¹²⁶ This discrepancy indicates the potential for an error in data collection or recording, which may have occurred during either the pre- or post-event phase, or possibly during the questionnaire completion process.

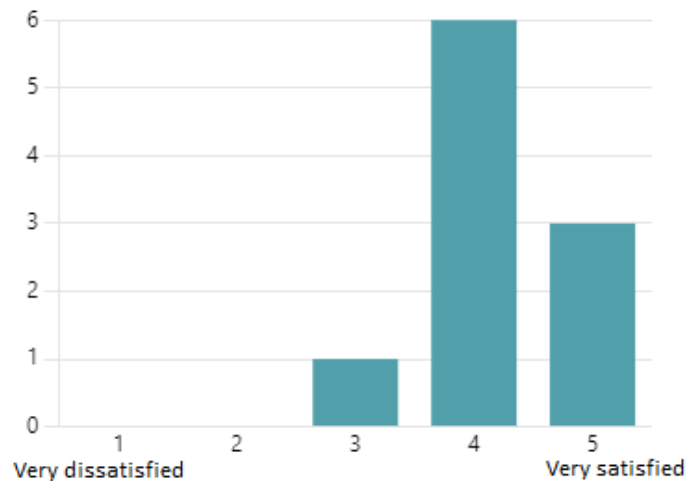


Fig. 32 Satisfaction with Gazzola's World Café, according to participants (n=10/14)

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Also within Gazzola's fieldwork, the World Café has been a positive experience for all respondents (n=10/10).

Concerning the question «What did/didn't you like in this laboratory? », nine answers were given:

- 1) « [I appreciated] The exchange with the participants».
- 2) «I very much appreciated the exchange of views/opinions; it was a bit 'slow', but overall pleasant».
- 3) « [I appreciated] Meeting the neighbors with whom you never interact».
- 4) « [I appreciated] The positive exchange between all participants».
- 5) « [I appreciated] The exchange».
- 6) « [I appreciated] The free exchange of views/opinions, and the newly learned knowledge».
- 7) « [It was] Interesting».
- 8) « [I appreciated] The exchange of views/opinions».
- 9) « [I appreciated] The possibility of discussion with other citizens».

Such answers point out that participatory/deliberative processes are capable of building social capital and new social bonds, although it was argued that our Café was conceived as an academic fieldwork: e.g. answer 3, i.e. « [I appreciated] Meeting the neighbors with whom you

never interact», highlighting the importance that such participatory experience may entail within a local, and also inner/rural, community.

The question «You have any suggestions for the next World Cafés? » yielded seven short replies:

- 1) «Maybe take more time to discuss with ‘speakers’ [ed: World Café’s coordinator, and Cittadinanzattiva’s representatives] ».
- 2) «More movement».
- 3) «A technical suggestion: an expert or a person who may present a specific experience in detail».
- 4) «It looks great as it is».
- 5) «No».
- 6) «No».
- 7) «More meetings».

Concerning point 3, the presence of experts would of course be required in a true nonexperimental participatory/deliberative process. In our case, the fact that the fieldwork had a research purpose was emphasized also within our call for participation.

Furthermore, the time issue was also mentioned here, looking at points 2 and 7: more movement or rotation around tables could not be done because of the late hour (our fieldwork started at 8:00 PM, and it has been designed to last no more than 2 hours). Indeed, there had been no time to continue the conversation around the question «If we talk about climate change, what are we seeing/facing as members of this local community? What will happen if immediate action is not taken? ».

The fact of having more meetings (point 7) was probably not shared by all participants, because it must be taken into account participants’ availability in terms of time.

However, as answered by the 10 participants (n=10/10), the World Café represented a learning opportunity. According to participants, the World Café was able to encourage citizens’ participation in democratic life (n=5/10), raising public awareness of the importance of participation and the promotion of discussion and collaboration spaces for citizens (n=6/10), conveying the work of organizations like Cittadinanzattiva (n=2/10), supporting local realities (n=2/10), and also enhancing territorial experiences and practices (n=1/10).

Moreover, the initiative has positively contributed to promoting active citizenship (n=5/10), clarifying the individual actions-respect for the environment nexus (n=3/10), and assessing the state of democratic participation at a local level (n=2/10).

The World Café has contributed to encouraging positive and constructive relationships within groups (n=4/10), strengthening the sense of engagement and commitment to the community and the Planet (n=4/10), and reinforcing collaborative behavior (n=2/10).

The open-ended question «Considering the debate, do you think you will have to change/will you change anything in your lifestyle? If yes, what? » gathered eight answers:

- 1) «I will continue my commitment to the preservation of the environment».
- 2) «I will try to pay more attention to separate waste collection».
- 3) «I seek more alternative solutions, by evaluating the experiences of others».
- 4) «Pay more attention to waste and consumption».
- 5) «Yes, by installing photovoltaic at home».
- 6) «I will find out organic waste, trying to recycle waste even better».
- 7) «Less pollution of course».
- 8) «Less consumption».

We can observe that each response highlights the crucial role of individuals in taking action against climate change. These participatory laboratories have the potential to activate a virtuous cycle among citizens and the community. For instance, answer 5 («Yes, by installing photovoltaic at home») demonstrates a concrete action likely influenced by our quasi-experiments. However, other responses should not be underestimated; for example, «I seek more alternative solutions by evaluating the experiences of others» implies an openness to collective and individual action.

Concerning the question «Does the effectiveness of mitigation strategies (to reduce the levels of pollution in the atmosphere) and adaptation (to implement strategies to limit the effects) to climate change also depend on the involvement of citizens (as in the World Café format)?», as shown by Fig. 33, 9 participants replied (n=9/10): 5 participants scored 5 (strongly agree), 2 participants scored 4, and 2 participants scored 3.

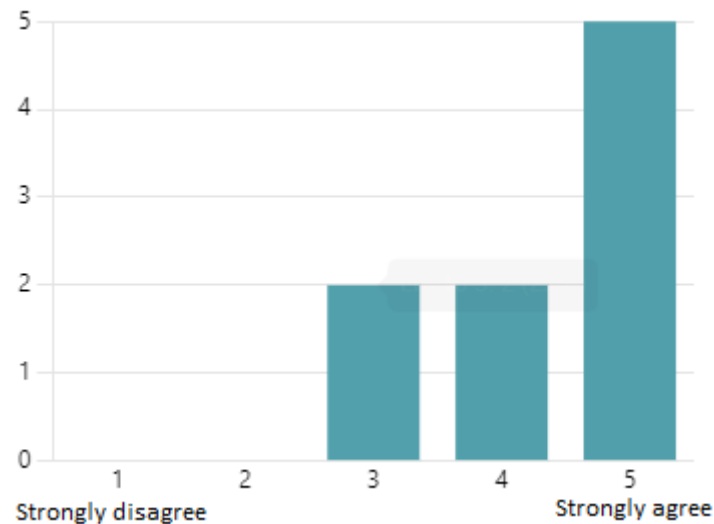


Fig. 33 Responses to the question «Does the effectiveness of mitigation strategies (to reduce the levels of pollution in the atmosphere) and adaptation (to implement strategies to limit the effects) to climate change also depend on the involvement of citizens (as in the World Café format)? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

9 participants (n=9/10) stated that the World Café has increased his/her ‘sense of community’, while one participant responded «I don’t know».

Within Gazzola’s laboratory, the question «Considering the aspects of awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action, obviously related to climate change, you believe that your point of view has changed? » showed interesting replies too, particularly characterized by respondents’ focus on ‘commitment to action’.

But let us see in more detail: considering ‘awareness’ (Fig. 34), one participant replied with 2 points, 4 participants replied with 3 points, 3 participants replied with 4 points, and 2 participants replied with 5 points (i.e. extremely changed).

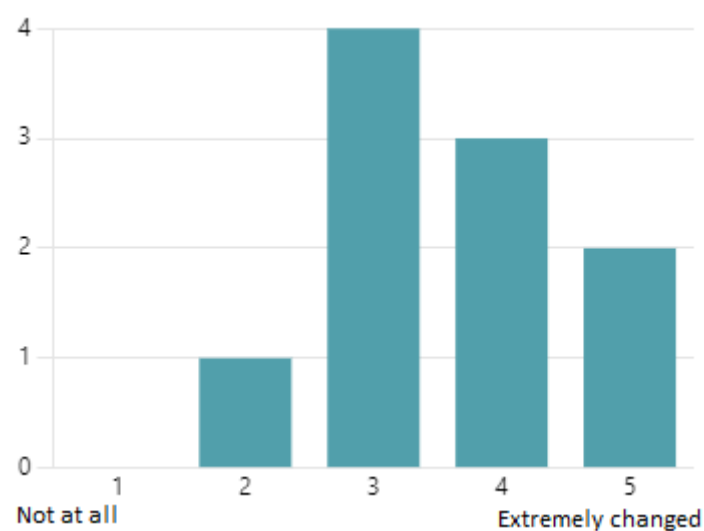


Fig. 34 World Café and changes in ‘awareness’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

On the other side, looking at ‘risk perception’ (Fig. 35), one participant replied with 2 points, 4 participants replied with 3 points, 4 participants replied with 4 points, and one participant replied with 5 points.

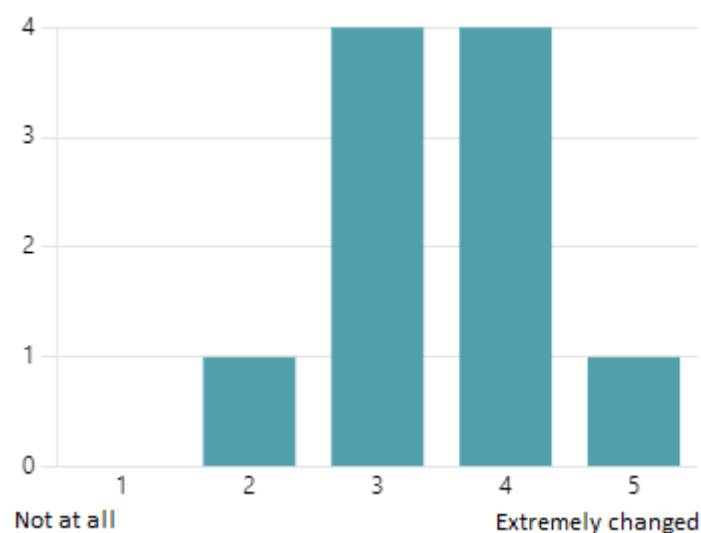


Fig. 35 World Café and changes in ‘risk perception’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Concerning the third aspect considered, i.e. ‘commitment to action’ (Fig. 36), participants replied from three points upwards: in particular, 3 participants replied with three points, 3 participants with four points, and 4 participants with 5 points.

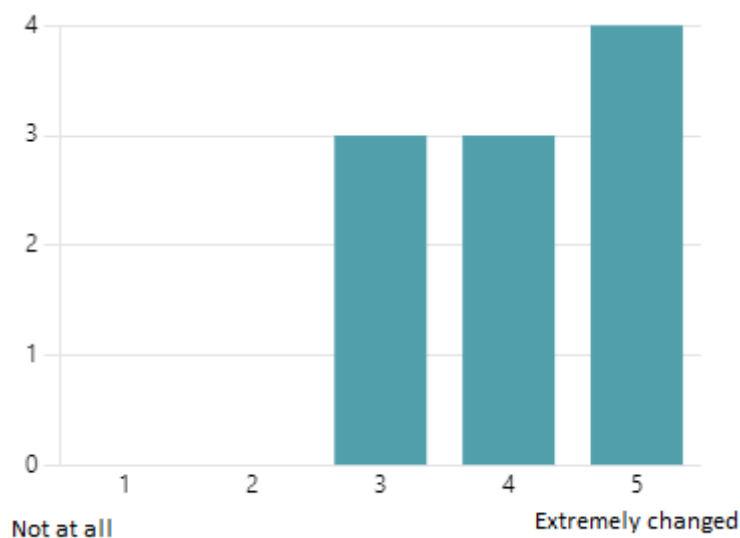


Fig. 36 World Café and changes in ‘commitment to action’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

The ‘commitment to action’ represents one of the most important elements of our work, which is strictly related to our method, i.e. action-research. Such an aspect tells us so much about the potential role of our quasi-experiment at once, from a citizens’ perspective. This aligns with McIntyre’s (2008) emphasis on collective reflection and action, as discussed earlier, underscoring the crucial role of commitment in action-research.

2.2.2. Results of Santa Caterina’s Questionnaires

All participants in Santa Caterina responded to the pre- and post-event questionnaires (n=13/13). Participants were mostly men (n=8/13), with five women (n=5/13). The highest level of education attained was university (n=9/13), and participants were from different age groups (16-17, n=2/13; 26-33, n=6/13; 34-41, n=2/13; 50-57, n=3/13).

12 participants answered the question on employment (n=12/13): there was an unemployed person, one steelworker, one farmer, one head of artisan laboratory for vegetable preserves, one massage therapist, one artist/illustrator, one biologist/chemist, three students, two architects (one of which was official in the Ministry of Culture).

Concerning the question «Are you an active member of political parties/associations? », 9 participants (n=9/13) responded «yes», and 4 participants (n=4/13) answered «no».

The six answers registered for the question «Have you ever taken part, even in the past, in participatory-deliberative processes? » seemed a compelling aspect: one participant took part in a citizens' jury, two participants participated in deliberative polls, one participant took part in participatory budgeting, and two participants indicated the option «other». It is compelling for several reasons: firstly, such a variety suggests a rich and multifaceted experience among the respondents, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of participatory and deliberative models of democracy in that specific local context; secondly, the fact that two participants selected the «other» option indicates that these individuals had been involved in other kinds of grassroots democracy experiences. The compelling nature of the responses lies in the breadth of participatory experiences represented, the acknowledgment of alternative approaches, and the indication of enduring civic engagement, demonstrated by the fact that 6 out of 13 participants took part in participatory and/or deliberative processes in the past, and also by their presence to the Café.

Answers to the question «Specifically, have you already participated, even in the past, in community meetings (e.g. citizens' assemblies) on local and/or global environmental issues? » registered 8 «yes» (n=8/13), and 5 «no» (n=5/13).

In order to see if a change in individual preferences occurred, it is crucial to pay attention to the following questions (proposed again as for Gazzola's questionnaires), as we will see also within the post-event questionnaires:

- 3) «Which of the following actions do you believe is required to enhance the standard of the environment in which you live? ». The four options of answer were: «more landfill sites»; «more incinerators»; «more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) »; «other».
- 4) «What is necessary in order to take action against climate change, also valorizing the territory? ». The four options of answer were: «Invest more in renewable energy sources»; «Invest in energy from fossil fuels»; «Invest in nuclear energy»; «other».

Concerning the first question, according to 10 participants (n=10/13), «more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) » are required to enhance the standard of the local environment; on the other hand, three participants (n=3/13) checked the box «other».

Regarding the second question, according to 8 participants (n=8/13), it is necessary to «invest more in renewable energy sources», while 5 participants (n=5/13) checked the box «other».

As within our previous fieldworks, in the following section of the questionnaire, multiple answers were allowed: according to participants, the Café aimed at raising public awareness among institutions about the importance of participation and promotion of opportunities to exchange ideas and citizens' collaboration (n=9/13); the Café aimed to encourage citizens' participation in democratic life (n=4/13), supporting local communities (n=2/13), and valorizing experiences and local practices (n=2/13). To some participants, the aim of the Café was not clear (n=2/13): such an answer may have been given by two participants who missed the introductory speech.

Participants argued that they were pushed to participate for their interest in the topics addressed (n=7/13), for the desire to improve their knowledge/skills (n=6/13), for the possibility/opportunity to have a debate among citizens (n=4/13), for the curiosity to listen to other points of view (n=2/13); one participant stated that he/she participated for other reasons, without further information.

Moreover, according to the participants, such an initiative would be capable to foster citizens' active participation (n=6/13), assessing the state of democratic participation at a local level (n=2/13), clarifying the individual actions-respect for the environment nexus (n=5/13), to clarify the concept of participation (n=2/13), to bring citizens closer to the institutions (n=3/13). Participants believed that the World Café would be capable to strengthen the sense of engagement and commitment to the community and the Planet (n=5/13), by encouraging positive and constructive relationships within groups (n=9/13), and also reinforcing their collaborative behavior (n=2/13).

12 open-ended responses were registered concerning participants' expectations (Fig. 37), demonstrating how our approach may be considered an innovative way to create a 'green consensus' and empowered citizens within the local context.



Fig. 37 Answers to the question «What are your expectations? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Fig. 37 offers an overview of the participants, through keywords like ‘awareness’, but also by mentioning terms evoking how a single citizen may generate a change within a community: e.g. responsibility, new ideas, participation, territorial bonds. Words like ‘pessimistic’ or ‘moderated’ were due probably to the misunderstanding caused by the word ‘expectations’ within the question: these two participants probably thought about the current political and environmental situation, rather than the expectations associated with our fieldwork.

Such responses may be seen as indicative of another aspect, associated with the idea that Santa Caterina’s participants had about participation and empowerment: in this sense, the statement «forge territorial bonds» was very meaningful, as it encapsulates the shared intention to act as a community.

However, participants became aware of the event through word of mouth (n=10/13), and 3 participants (n=3/13) checked the box «other».

Following the method of the previous fieldworks, one week after the World Café, each Santa Caterina participant received by email a second questionnaire aimed to evaluate the satisfaction levels, the knowledge acquisition, and the (potential) impacts of the laboratory.

After three reminders by email, all of Santa Caterina's participants (n=13/13) completed the post-event questionnaire.

Within the satisfaction section of the questionnaire, participants generally appreciated the World Café experience: 9 participants (n=9/13) indicated «5» (i.e. very satisfied), and 4 participants (n=4/13) indicated «4» (Fig. 38).

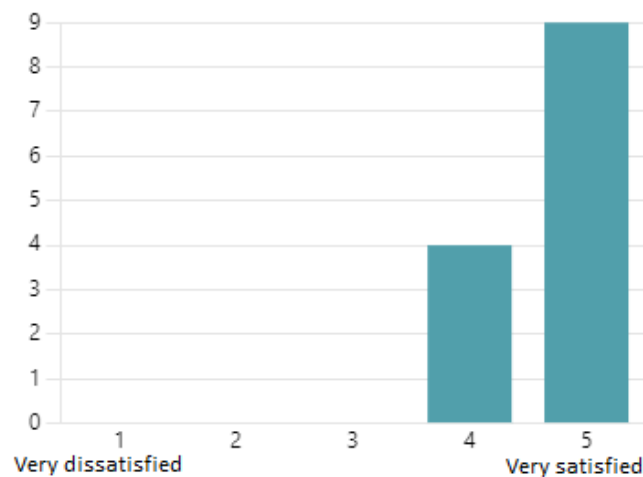


Fig. 38 Satisfaction with Santa Caterina's World Café, according to participants (n=13/13)
Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Aligned with our previous fieldworks, the World Café was particularly appreciated by participants.

Concerning the question «What did/didn't you like in this laboratory? », nine answers were given:

- 1) «I especially liked the atmosphere that was created, how important topics like these were addressed, and how it is crucial the exchange of information and knowledge».
- 2) «I liked the direct discussion».
- 3) « [I liked] the discussion with other participants».
- 4) «I liked discussing frontally and familiarly with different persons».
- 5) «I liked everything».
- 6) « [I liked] the possibility of discussing/reasoning together among participants, according to a non-hierarchical method».
- 7) « [I liked] to discuss the topics in an engaging and fun way».
- 8) «It was a beautiful experience».

9) «It was a worthwhile event. Opportunity to exchange ideas, and future perspectives». Santa Caterina's participants appeared to be particularly sensitive to climate change issues, and the related topics of our fieldwork (i.e. separate waste collection and renewable energy), demonstrating an active attitude among participants and local councilmen. As highlighted by one participant, the World Café approach is indeed a «non-hierarchical» method that may encourage new possibilities for action with and for residents in the not-too-distant future.

The question «You have any suggestions for the next World Cafés? » yielded seven short replies as follows:

- 1) «Everything was perfect. I would participate again very willingly».
- 2) «No».
- 3) «No».
- 4) «No. That's fine».
- 5) «No».
- 6) « Based on our World Café experience, I believe it was a wise decision to host the event in a private home. Even if it wasn't prepared, I believe it improved the quality of interaction compared to a public setting (which is typically, though not always, characterized as being a cold and institutional space) ».
- 7) «More meetings would be required».

There were no negative comments. However, the seventh response suggests that more meetings may be needed to implement the discussed ideas, a concern also raised in previous Cafés. While our World Café was presented as an academic fieldwork, it was noted, as in the previous ones, that it could potentially evolve into a concrete participatory and/or deliberative process.

Referring to the sixth answer, the participant appears to have perceived that the Café was not meticulously planned in advance, due to the last-minute decision regarding the place. It implies that, for instance, the arrangement of tables and chairs, including details concerning the buffet for breaks, occurred shortly before the commencement of the event.

The two questions 1) «Based on what was discussed during the World Café, in your opinion, what is required to enhance the standard of the environment in which you live? », and 2) «After the laboratory, do you believe that reacting to climate change requires [:] », elicited the following replies:

- Concerning the first, 10 participants (n=10/13) responded that to enhance the standard of the environment in which they live more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) are required, while 3 participants (n=3/13) checked the box «other», specifying: 1) «It is crucial to encourage environmental education activities, and limit the production of waste upstream »; 2) «It should be implemented creative ways of virtuous recycling»; 3) «Social services and ‘soft’ infrastructures based on collaborative practices between public and private are needed».
- Considering the second question, 6 participants (n=6/13) believed that reacting to climate change requires more investment in renewable energy, while one participant (n=1/13) believed that investing in fossil fuels is the solution. On the other hand, 6 participants (n=6/13) checked the box «other», specifying: 1) «It is important to re-evaluate and re-use the already generated power»; 2) «We should invest in energy communities»; 3) «Energy should be saved»; 4) «It is necessary to consume less»; 5) «Responsibilization is necessary »; 6) «Specific attention should be required not only to the production of primary energy but also to the circular recovery of energy, to improve the quality of life, starting from food resources ».

Responses to the first question confirmed those within the pre-event questionnaire, while answers to the second question pointed out a slight change (within the pre-event questionnaire, 8 participants believed that reacting to climate change requires more investment in renewable energy, and 5 participants checked the box «other»).

These responses provide a broad overview of the issues discussed during the Café. They also offer more in-depth analytical perspectives focused on specific collective actions to address climate change at a local level. By tackling issues ‘upstream’ and considering citizens’ specific needs, these actions could provide effective solutions.

As replied by all participants (n=13/13), the World Café represented a learning opportunity. Concurrently, the World Café was able to encourage citizens’ participation in democratic life (n=7/13), raising public awareness of the importance of participation and the promotion of discussion and collaboration spaces for citizens (n=6/13), enhancing territorial experiences and practices (n=4/13), supporting local realities (n=2/13), and moreover conveying the work of organizations like Cittadinanzattiva (n=1/13). In the introductory remarks, the organization Cittadinanzattiva was referenced as the entity that had provided assistance in the establishment of the Emilia-Romagna Cafés, and it was not known by the participants.

Furthermore, the initiative seems to have positively contributed to promoting active citizenship (n=5/13), bringing citizens closer to the institutions (n=2/13), clarifying the individual actions-respect for the environment nexus (n=2/13), assessing the state of democratic participation at a local level (n=3/13), and clarifying the concept of participation (n=1/13).

At the same time, the World Café seems to have positively contributed to strengthening the sense of engagement and commitment to the community and the Planet (n=7/13), encouraging positive and constructive relationships within groups (n=4/13), and reinforcing collaborative behavior (n=2/13).

The open-ended question «Considering the debate, do you think you will have to change/will you change anything in your lifestyle? If yes, what? » gathered seven answers:

- 1) «I will propose to more people to come and compost at my earthworm farm in the countryside».
- 2) «Yes, I will try to consume even less».
- 3) «[Yes,] my participation in sustainable activities».
- 4) «I will give my full attention to separate waste collection».
- 5) «A single meeting, despite the highly positive impact, seems to be insufficient to catalyze a tangible change that it has to come from consequent actions at a collective level, going beyond the will of the individual».
- 6) «No».
- 7) «I think so, in seeing things from another perspective».

Although the question took into account the individual level, participants demonstrated how the collective level was necessary to generate a concrete action: the first answer refers to the collective use of a private earthworm farm to dispose of organic waste, while the third answer probably refers to the importance of individual participation in activities related to socio-environmental well-being. Conversely, the fifth answer emphasizes how a single World Café is not able to generate concrete actions.

The issue of citizens' engagement and climate change, specifically related to the effectiveness of our World Café format, was taken into account by the question «Does the effectiveness of mitigation strategies (to reduce the levels of pollution in the atmosphere) and adaptation (to implement strategies to limit the effects) to climate change also depend on the involvement of citizens (as in the World Café format)? »: 7 participants (n=7/13) replied with 5 (i.e. strongly agree), 3 participants scored 4, and 3 participants scored 3, as shown by Fig. 39.

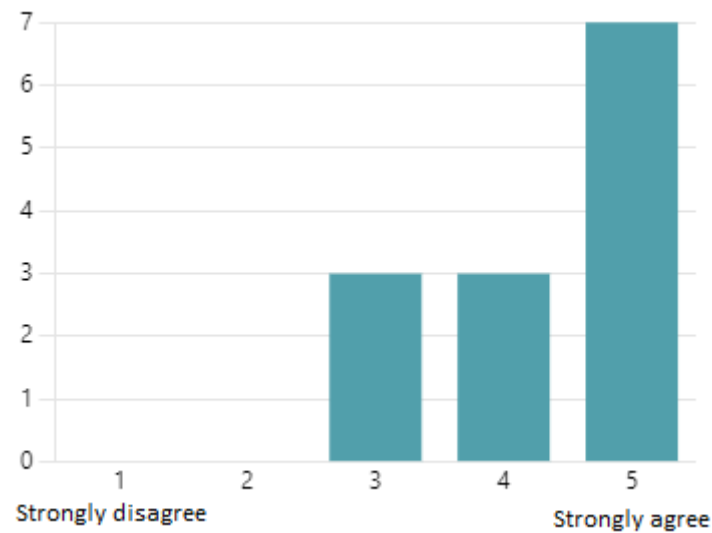


Fig. 39 Responses to the question «Does the effectiveness of mitigation strategies (to reduce the levels of pollution in the atmosphere) and adaptation (to implement strategies to limit the effects) to climate change also depend on the involvement of citizens (as in the World Café format)? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

However, 10 participants ($n=10/13$) argued that the Café has increased his/her ‘sense of community’, 2 participants ($n=2/13$) answered «no», and one participant ($n=1/13$) answered «I don’t know».

As within the previous fieldwork in Gazzola, Santa Caterina’s participants about the question «Considering the aspects of awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action, obviously related to climate change, you believe that your point of view has changed? » recorded interesting points of view as well, with respondents focusing on ‘commitment to action’ in particular.

Concerning ‘awareness’ (Fig. 40), 3 participants indicated 2 points, 4 participants 3 points, 2 participants 4 points, and 4 participants gave 5 points (i.e. extremely changed point of view).

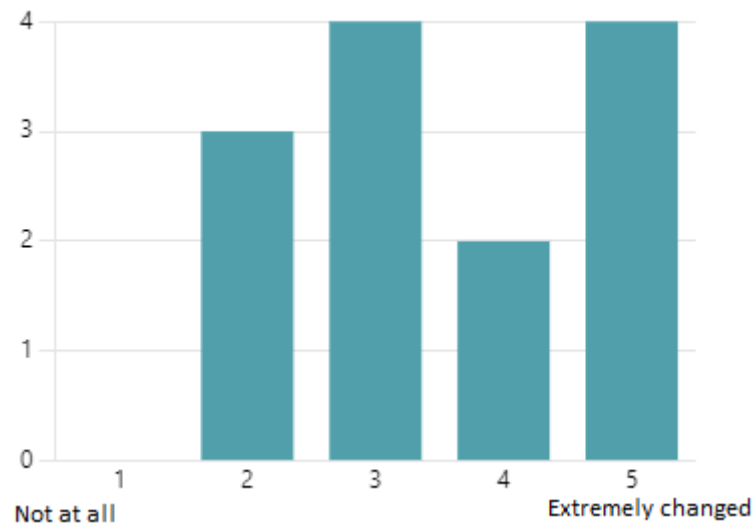


Fig. 40 World Café and changes in ‘awareness’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

On the other hand, concerning ‘risk perception’ (Fig. 41), one participant indicated 2 points, 3 participants 3 points, 3 participants 4 points, and 6 participants gave 5 points (i.e. extremely changed point of view).

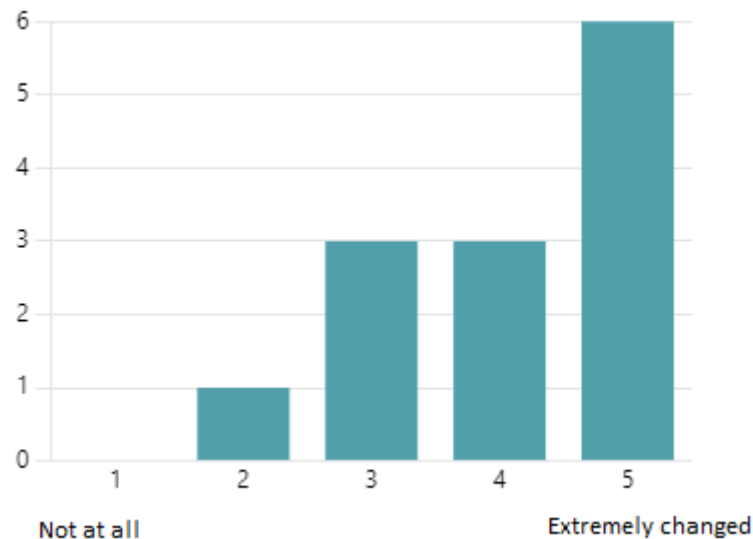


Fig. 41 World Café and changes in ‘risk perception’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

And lastly, ‘commitment to action’ (Fig. 42) recorded an interesting trend: one participant indicated 2 points, 2 participants 3 points, 2 participants indicated 4, and 8 participants responded with 5 points (i.e. extremely changed point of view). The observed trend in the ‘commitment to action’ (Fig. 42) is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, there is a notable variability in the assigned scores, with one participant indicating only 2 points, 2 participants assigning 3 points, 2 participants indicating 4 points, and a significant portion, i.e. 8 participants, responding with the maximum score of 5 points. This range of responses suggests a diverse spectrum of perspectives among the participants. Furthermore, the fact that a considerable number of participants (i.e. 8) responded with the highest score implies a consensus among this subgroup regarding an extremely changed point of view. In essence, the interest lies not only in the numerical trends but also in the potential underlying factors influencing participants’ perceptions of commitment to action.

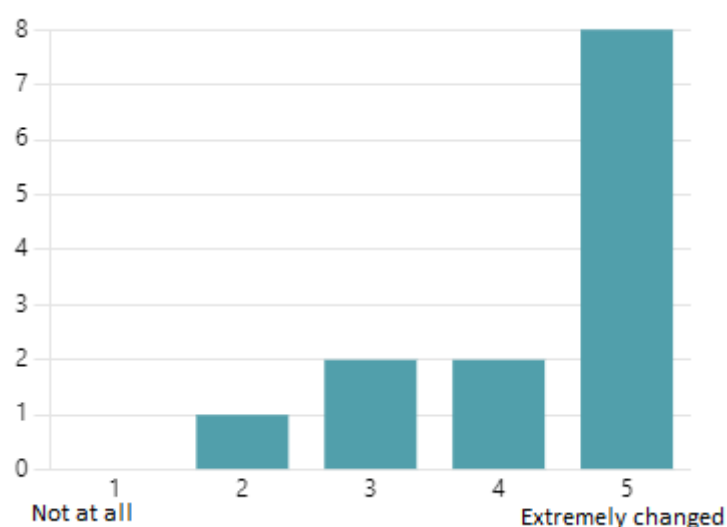


Fig. 42 World Café and changes in ‘commitment to action’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Concerning the first aspect, i.e. awareness (Fig. 40), responses may be linked with the fact that almost all participants (i.e. $n=9/13$) were active members of political parties and/or associations (maybe environmental associations), also considering that 7 participants ($n=7/13$), within the pre-event questionnaire, stated that they were pushed to participate for their interest in the topics addressed.

On the other hand, ‘risk perception’ (Fig. 41) was critical to understanding how participants assessed the potential threats posed by climate change or other environmental issues, while ‘commitment to action’ (Fig. 42) indicates that the quasi-experiment succeeded in fostering a deeper sense of responsibility and commitment among participants, leading to more meaningful community involvement.

2.2.3. Results of Cosenza’s Questionnaires

While the participants in Cosenza were 17, those who responded to the pre- and post-event questionnaires were 16 (n=16/17).

According to the results of the pre-event questionnaires, men made up the majority of participants (n=10/16). The participants spanned across diverse age groups (16-17, n=1/16; 18-25, n=3/16; 26-33, n=5/16; 42-49, n=3/16; 50-57, n=3/16; 68-76, n=1/16).

14 participants (n=14/16) filled the professional-specific space: there were three teachers, one biologist, one journalist, one geologist, an unemployed person, a retired person, one engineer/teacher, one project owner, and four students.

It is worth noting that concerning the question «Are you an active member of political parties/associations? », 9 participants (n=9/16) responded «no», and 7 participants (n=7/16) responded «yes». Hence, these findings may shed light on the dynamic nature of citizens’ engagement in a southern Italian urban area, revealing that among these participants, individuals identified as ‘active’ not only exist but also express a keen willingness to contribute to the socio-political landscape. The disparity between those who responded affirmatively and negatively to the question about their affiliation with political parties and/or associations suggests a diverse spectrum of civic participation within the urban participants.

With regards to the question «Have you ever taken part, even in the past, in participatory-deliberative processes? », 4 participants (n=4/16) indicated the option «other», without further information.

On the other side, answers to the question «Specifically, have you already participated, even in the past, in community meetings (e.g. citizens’ assemblies) on local and/or global environmental issues? » logged 7 «yes» votes (n=7/16), and 9 «no» votes (n=9/16).

After this first section, as for the previous fieldworks within the inner/rural areas, the following questions were present in both the pre- and post-event questionnaires, recalling the two topics of discussion (i.e. separate waste collection, and green urban areas):

- 1) «Which of the following actions do you believe is required to enhance the standard of the environment in which you live? ». The four options of answer were: «more landfill sites»; «more incinerators»; «more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) »; «other».
- 2) «What is necessary in order to take action against climate change, also valorizing the territory? ». The four options of answer were: «create more green areas»; «create more infrastructures, also at the expense of green areas»; «create more infrastructures, well-integrated with urban green»; «other».

Concerning the first question, according to 11 participants (n=11/16), «more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) » are required to enhance the standard of the local environment; 4 participants (n=4/16) checked the box «other», without specifying, and one participant (n=1/16) checked the box «more landfill sites».

Considering the second question, according to 11 participants (n=11/16), in order to take action against climate change, also valorizing the territory, it is important to «create more green areas»; 4 participants (n=4/16) checked the box «create more infrastructures, well-integrated with urban green», and one participant (n=1/16) checked the box «other», without specifying.

Multiple responses were permitted in the next section of the questionnaire, mirroring our previous fieldworks: according to participants, the Café aimed to encourage citizens' participation in democratic life (n=9/16); the Café aimed at raising public awareness among institutions about the importance of participation and promotion of opportunities to exchange ideas and citizens' collaboration (n=7/16); valorizing experiences and local practices (n=4/16). In addition, also in Cosenza's fieldwork, someone (n=2/16) claimed that the Café's purpose was unclear: two participants who did not hear the introductory speech may have provided this response.

Participants argued that they were pushed to participate for their interest in the topics addressed (n=13/16), for the desire to improve their knowledge/skills (n=3/16), for the curiosity to listen to other points of view (n=3/16), and for the possibility/opportunity to have a debate among citizens (n=1/16).

Therefore, according to the participants, such an initiative would be capable to foster citizens' active participation (n=9/16), clarifying the individual actions-respect for the environment nexus (n=7/16), assessing the state of democratic participation at a local level (n=2/16), to bring citizens closer to the institutions (n=3/16), and to clarify the concept of participation (n=1/16).

Further, participants believed that the World Café would be capable to strengthen the sense of engagement and commitment to the community and the Planet (n=10/16), by encouraging positive and constructive relationships within groups (n=4/16), and by encouraging other aspects linked to the topics (n=2/16).

11 open-ended responses about the participants' expectations were recorded (Fig. 43).

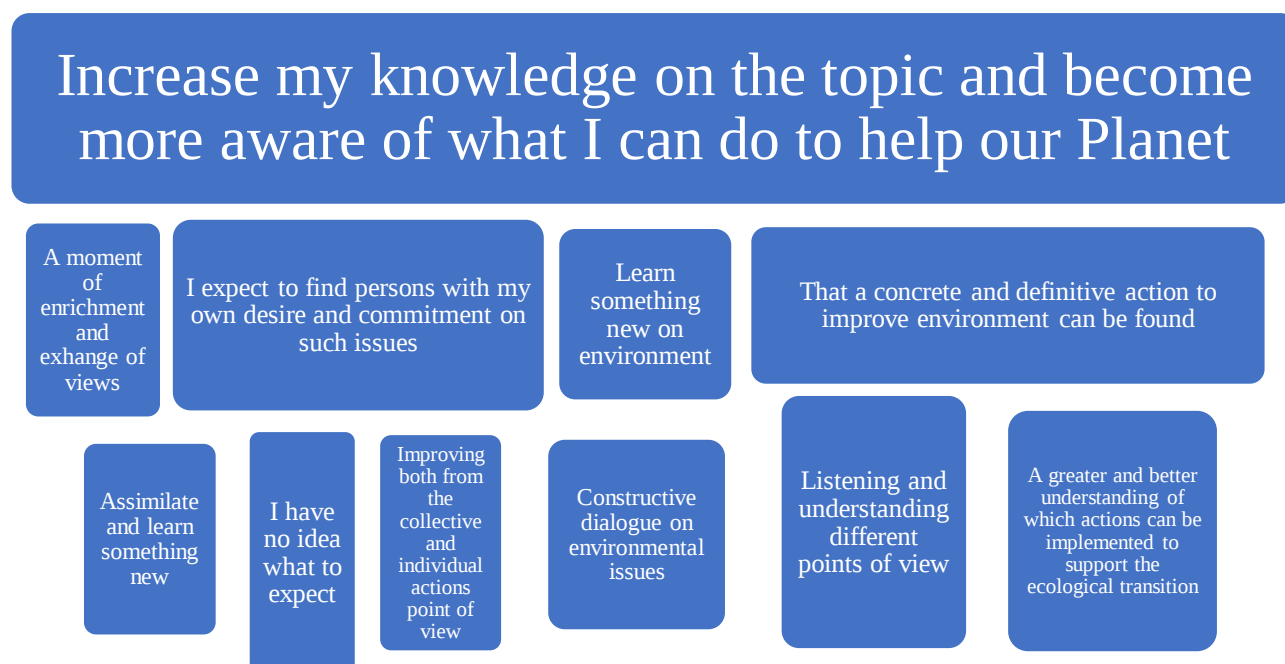


Fig. 43 Answers to the question «What are your expectations? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Fig. 43 provides an overview of the participants by using words like 'learn' and 'exchange', and by mentioning concepts related to individual actions in order to remark the role of citizens in fighting climate change. On the other hand, such an overview reveals participants' desires and commitment to learning and absorbing new information to carry out the necessary local actions.

As mentioned above, participants became aware of Cosenza's World Café through word of mouth (n=10/16), and 2 participants (n=2/16) thanks to ARCI's social networks (e.g. Facebook, Instagram), while 4 participants (n=4/16) checked the box «other».

Like in previous fieldworks, one week after the World Café, each Cosenza participant received by email a second questionnaire aimed to evaluate the satisfaction levels, the knowledge acquisition, and the (potential) impacts of the laboratory.

After two reminders by email, all respondents to the pre-event questionnaire (n=16/16) completed the post-event questionnaire.

Participants appreciated the World Café experience (Fig. 44): of 15 respondents (n=15/16), 9 participants indicated «5» (i.e. very satisfied), and 6 participants indicated «4».

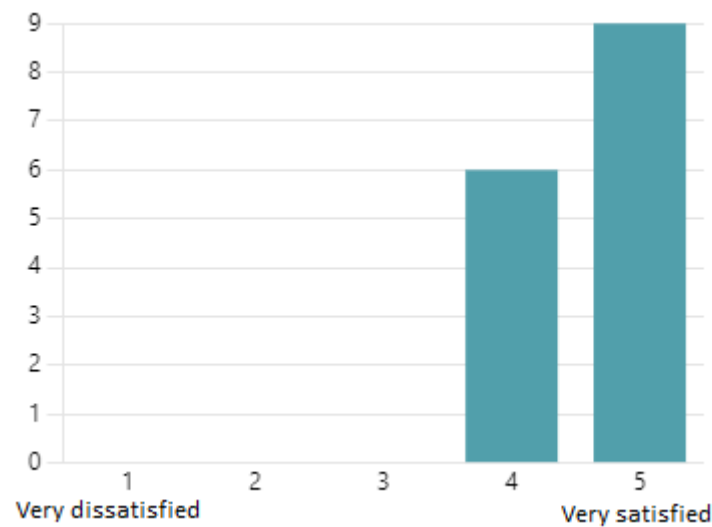


Fig. 44 Satisfaction with Cosenza's World Café, according to participants (n=15/17)¹²⁷

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Thirteen answers were given in response to the question, «What did/didn't you like in this laboratory? »:

- 1) « [I liked] The built relationships».
- 2) «I appreciated the possibility of exchange/dialogue on several topics».
- 3) «I liked the perception of community that emerged looking at common issues».
- 4) « [I liked that] we were put at ease».
- 5) «I appreciated the dialogue and the mutual exchange of ideas. Perhaps having a representative of the institutions respond to some queries would have been nice but utopian».
- 6) « [I liked] the possibility of dialogue, acquiring new information».

¹²⁷ The effective number of participants was 17.

- 7) « [I appreciated] the topic covered, the engagement, being a participant, and having learned useful notions for our planet».
- 8) «I don't know».
- 9) « [I liked] discussions with other participants».
- 10) «I appreciated the methods of interaction among participants, facilitating the exchange of ideas and different points of view».
- 11) « [I appreciated] listening to other points of view».
- 12) «I liked the methods of interaction with all participants».
- 13) «I appreciated the fact of getting in touch with different points of view, now in the post-Covid19 eras».

Although the purpose of our fieldworks was not to deliberate, some key aspects of deliberation were present, e.g. dialogue, exchange, and willingness to change preferences. Therefore, our findings underscore the integral role of deliberative elements in shaping the dynamics of our quasi-experiments. The presence of key components such as dialogue, exchange of ideas, and a demonstrated willingness to reconsider preferences highlights the deliberative nature inherent in our research. Consequently, it becomes imperative to acknowledge and further explore these deliberative features, as they may yield valuable insights into the broader implications of our research.

The question «You have any suggestions for the next (eventual) World Cafés? » yielded twelve answers:

- 1) «No one».
- 2) «Invite important political figures in order to activate or at least start a kind of intervention capable of modifying in practice this situation».
- 3) «In my opinion, the adopted methodology was the best one so far to deal with issues of this kind ».
- 4) «Increase the exchange between groups».
- 5) «No».
- 6) «Increase even more knowledge and share it».
- 7) «I don't know».
- 8) «No».
- 9) «Any suggestion».
- 10) «No».

11) «No».

12) «Focus on a specific area and a specific problem».

Answers 2 and 12 can be read in relation to one another because, in both instances, participants thought about the World Café's potential future growth, most likely into a deliberative process. In a deliberative process, local institutions would be encouraged to participate, and the process would be focused on a particular area or problem.

In Cosenza, the two questions 1) «Based on what was discussed during the World Café, in your opinion, what is required to enhance the standard of the environment in which you live? », and 2) «After the laboratory, do you believe that reacting to climate change requires [:] », registered the following replies:

- Concerning the first, 13 participants (n=13/16) responded that to enhance the standard of the environment in which they live more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) are required, while 3 participants (n=3/16) checked the box «other», specifying: 1) «More respect for the environment by citizens, more controls by the administrations, more efficiency of services»; 2) «More green spaces and a better waste management»; 3) «Generalized consciousness-raising».
- Concerning the second question, 9 participants (n=9/16) believed that reacting to climate change requires the creation of more green areas, while 5 participants (n=5/16) thought that it is necessary to create more infrastructures, well-integrated with urban green. On the other side, 2 participants (n=2/16) checked the box «other», specifying: 1) «Even more than green areas, the marine ecosystem deserves to be respected, being a crucial oxygen source for the planet»; 2) «Working together on activities focused on awareness/information».

The findings illuminate the impact of the World Café on participant perspectives, offering insights into the evolution of individual preferences. Specifically, the results underscore a discernible shift. In response to the pre-event questionnaire, a predominant theme emerged regarding separate waste collection, where 11 out of 16 respondents advocated for the necessity of 'more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.)' to enhance the local environmental standards. 4 participants expressed alternative viewpoints without explicit specification, while one respondent suggested the need for 'more landfill sites'. By contrast, the inquiry into preferences related to green urban areas revealed a distinct pattern. Initially, 11 participants emphasized the importance of 'creating more green areas', while 4 respondents

avored the option to ‘create more infrastructures, well-integrated with urban green’. Additionally, one participant provided an unspecified alternative perspective.

Upon closer examination of the post-event questionnaire, a noteworthy transformation unfolded. In response to the posed questions, 13 out of 16 participants contended that bolstering the environmental quality necessitated ‘more materials recovery facilities’. Notably, 3 respondents opted for the ‘other’ category, elucidating their perspectives as a call for «More respect for the environment by citizens, more controls by the administrations, more efficiency of services», «More green spaces and better waste management», and «Generalized consciousness-raising».

Similarly, looking at the post-event questionnaire, concerning the question pertaining to climate change response and green urban areas, the answers witnessed a shift: 9 out of 16 participants believed that combating climate change required the ‘creation of more green areas’, whereas 5 respondents leaned toward the necessity of ‘creating more infrastructures, well-integrated with urban green’. Intriguingly, 2 participants chose the ‘other’ category, articulating unique viewpoints emphasizing the significance of «respecting the marine ecosystem as a crucial oxygen source for the planet», and «collaborative efforts on activities focused on awareness/information».

In essence, such a framework sheds light on the transformation in individual preferences within the context of the two selected topics, encapsulating the nuanced responses garnered through our quasi-experiment.

However, the World Café provided a learning opportunity, as indicated by the responses of most participants (n=15/16). It likewise was able to encourage citizens’ participation in democratic life (n=12/16), raising public awareness of the importance of participation and the promotion of discussion and collaboration spaces for citizens (n=4/16) enhancing territorial experiences and practices (n=2/16). According to one participant (n=1/16), the purpose of the Café was not clear: perhaps because this participant missed the introductory section. Conversely, 2 participants (n=2/16), considering the purpose of the Café, checked the box «other», specifying having acquired more knowledge on important issues (n=1/16), and that a single initiative is insufficient to have concrete effects (n=1/16).

Furthermore, the Café seems to have positively contributed to promoting active citizenship (n=5/16), bringing citizens closer to the institutions (n=3/16), clarifying the individual actions-respect for the environment nexus (n=4/16), and assessing the state of democratic participation

at a local level (n=3/16). One participant (n=1/16) checked the box «other», writing that a single event is insufficient to build real changes.

In the same manner, the World Café seems to have positively contributed to strengthening the sense of engagement and commitment to the community and the Planet (n=7/16), encouraging positive and constructive relationships within groups (n=5/16), and reinforcing collaborative behavior (n=3/16). Also in this case, one participant (n=1/16) emphasized the fact that a single meeting like our Café is insufficient to create effective results.

Within the same section, the open-ended question «Considering the debate, do you think you will have to change/will you change anything in your lifestyle? If yes, what? » gathered nine answers:

- 1) «Undoubtedly, taking better care of waste separate collection».
- 2) «Probably, being a more active citizen».
- 3) «I will use the car less».
- 4) «I am already attentive to the environment, so I will continue my commitment, encouraging the change».
- 5) «I will increase my knowledge on waste disposal about specific waste».
- 6) «I will try to pay more attention to the health of the environment».
- 7) «I will separate waste».
- 8) «Yes, I will take part in the activities promoted by local associations (e.g. plastic-free events), in order to protect local territory and environment».
- 9) «I will pay more attention to separate waste collection; concerning meeting places with friends, I will prefer green areas, organizing, where necessary, waste collection days (together with the people I met at the World Café) ».

These nine answers provide a comprehensive framework, concerning not only actions from an individual point of view but also collective actions which may have direct impacts on local areas and residents (e.g. answers 8 and 9). Answer 7, instead, makes us understand immediately how a meeting between citizens may be useful to change personal behavior concerning important issues: although recycling would be an established practice, some citizens need to be informed about it, also in order to bridge the gap between regions and between municipalities too¹²⁸.

¹²⁸ For more details, see <https://www.legambiente.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/comuni-ricicloni-2023.pdf>

Despite some skeptical views on the approach, concerning the question «Does the effectiveness of mitigation strategies (to reduce the levels of pollution in the atmosphere) and adaptation (to implement strategies to limit the effects) to climate change also depend on the involvement of citizens (as in the World Café format)? », 13 participants (n=13/16) replied with 5 (i.e. strongly agree), and 3 participants (n=3/16) replied with 4 (Fig. 45).

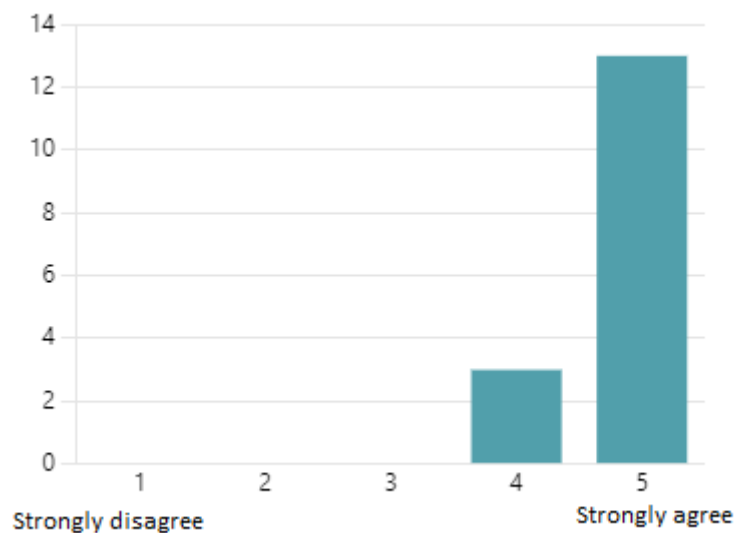


Fig. 45 Responses to the question «Does the effectiveness of mitigation strategies (to reduce the levels of pollution in the atmosphere) and adaptation (to implement strategies to limit the effects) to climate change also depend on the involvement of citizens (as in the World Café format)? »

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Within the post-event questionnaire, 14 participants (n=14/16) claimed that the Café enhanced his/her ‘sense of community’, while only 2 participants (n=2/16) gave a negative reply.

Similar to our previous fieldworks, the question «Considering the aspects of awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action, obviously related to climate change, you believe that your point of view has changed? » elicited diverse viewpoints: concerning ‘awareness’ (Fig. 46), giving back a multifaceted image, 7 participants (n=7/16) indicated 5 points (i.e. extremely changed point of view), 4 participants (n=4/16) indicated 4, 2 participants (n=2/16) replied with 3 points, one participant (n=1/16) with 2, and 2 participants (n=2/16) replied with 1 point (i.e. not at all changed point of view).

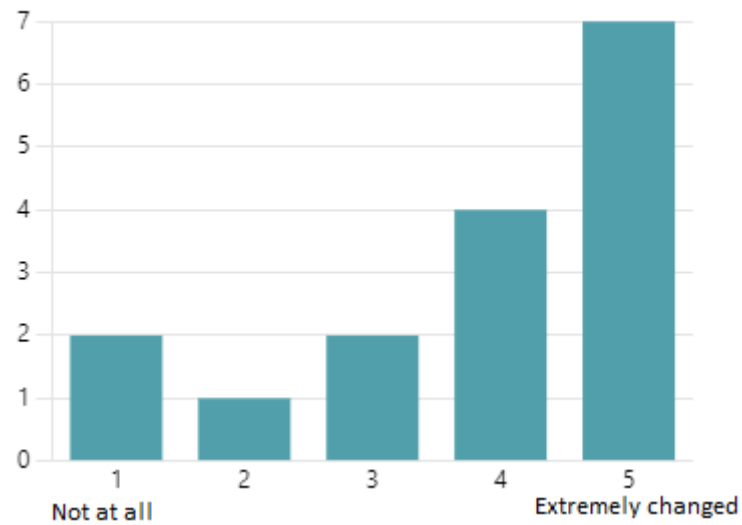


Fig. 46 World Café and changes in ‘awareness’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

However, in relation to ‘risk perception’ (Fig. 47), 7 participants ($n=7/16$) replied with 5 points (i.e. extremely changed point of view), 5 participants ($n=5/16$) replied with 4, one participant ($n=1/16$) with 3 points, another one ($n=1/16$) with 2, and another one ($n=1/16$) with 1 (i.e. not at all changed point of view).

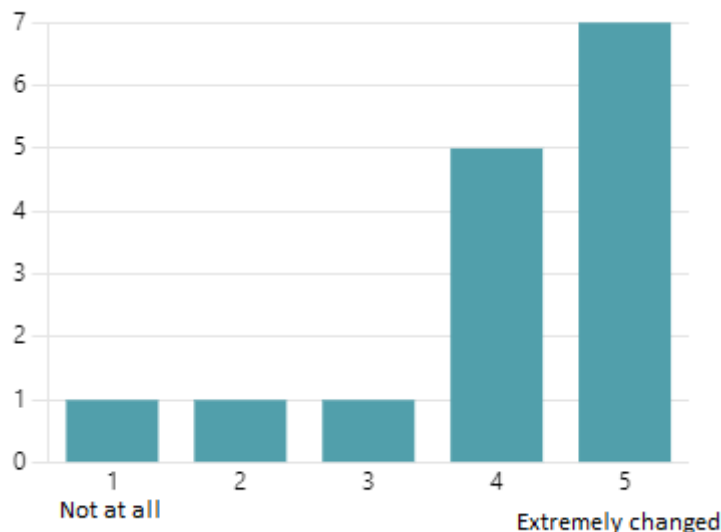


Fig. 47 World Café and changes in ‘risk perception’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Last but not least, ‘commitment to action’ (Fig. 48) revealed the following findings: 12 participants (n=12/16) replied with 5 points (i.e. extremely changed point of view), 2 participants (n=2/16) indicated 4 points, one participant (n=1/16) replied with 3 points, and another one (n=1/16) indicated 2 points.

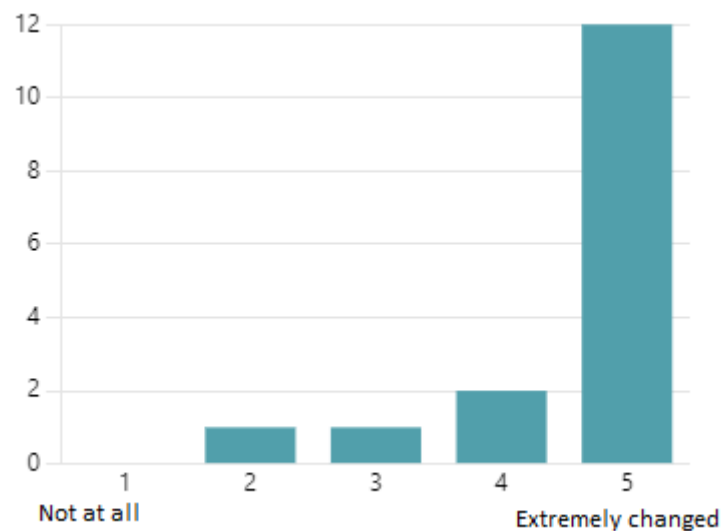


Fig. 48 World Café and changes in ‘commitment to action’

Source: elaborated by the author, based on the information collected through Microsoft Forms

Results concerning these three elements (i.e. awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action) confirmed how the World Café may generate awareness on climate change issues, and how a simple meeting between citizens may influence actions.

Overall, these results indicate that the World Café may activate virtuous circles among participants, as a means to address complex issues related to the local/global environment, starting from their neighborhood.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the research provides a picture of citizens’ participation at a micro-level across the four quasi-experiments, i.e. Bologna and the small municipality of Gazzola, in Emilia-Romagna, and Cosenza and the rural area of Santa Caterina dello Ionio, in Calabria.

In order to have a comprehensive overview of the findings, encompassing both the World Café discussions and questionnaires, it is essential to synthesize the results:

- 1) The Bologna's 14 participants demonstrated a keen awareness of environmental, social, and political interconnectedness. During the Café, which took place at the premises of Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna, the concept of 'participation' emerged as a crucial element (concerning, for instance, the question about 'conversation'), emphasizing the role of communities in decision-making toward a sustainable future.

Looking at the specific topics of the Café, i.e. 1) separate waste collection and 2) green urban areas, participants recognized the importance of 'reuse' over 'recycle' and outlined three critical points for waste management: emphasizing reuse, promoting appliance repair services, and reducing waste at the source. The discussions converged on the significance of restoring value to waste and the crucial role of organic waste at the local level. Participants, however, considered the issue of separate waste collection as fundamental to contributing to the sustainability of the local community.

Concerning green urban areas, participants acknowledged the benefits of green spaces for inhabitants and flora, fauna, and social aggregation. Suggestions for making the historic center greener included planting climbing plants, utilizing larger spaces for trees, limiting traffic, and promoting the realization of urban gardens. The role of the citizen, and thus bottom-up actions, was acknowledged as fundamental by all participants in the fieldwork.

The pre-event questionnaire demonstrates that it was not only 'already-active' citizens who participated (half of the participants, $n=7/14$, responded that they were 'active' members in political parties and/or associations), which may indicate that interest in participatory democracy is increasing. Most participants joined the fieldwork with enthusiasm and interest in the topics addressed, believing that the World Café aimed to encourage citizens' participation in democratic life, promoting active citizenship.

The post-event questionnaires yielded overwhelmingly positive participant feedback, indicating a strong consensus that the World Café provided a valuable learning opportunity. The format was identified by participants as a means of fostering meaningful discussions, collaborative problem-solving, and the exchange of diverse perspectives. The overall rating reflected a high level of satisfaction, with many respondents indicating that the experience had enhanced their comprehension of the issues under discussion.

According to almost all participants (i.e. 11 out of 14), the World Café was effectively able to encourage citizens' participation in democratic life, raising public awareness of

the importance of participation and the promotion of discussion and collaboration spaces for citizens (n=8/14).

Furthermore, 7 out of 14 participants expressed a willingness to make lifestyle changes, while 10 participants strongly agreed with the importance of citizens' engagement (as in the World Café format) for climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. According to 12 participants, the World Café enhanced their 'sense of community'.

Considering the three aspects of awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action, the responses appeared quite diverse: considering 'awareness', 2 participants replied with 1 point (i.e. not at all changed point of view), one participant with 2 points, 4 participants with 3 points, 5 participants with 4 points, and the other (n=2) with 5 points (i.e. extremely changed point of view); considering 'risk perception', 2 participants replied with 1 point, one participant with 2 points, 4 participants with 3 points, 4 participants with 4 points, and the other (n=3) with 5 points; looking at 'commitment to action', one participant replied with 1 point, one participant replied with 2 points, 4 participants with 3 points, 4 participants with 4 points, and other 4 with 5 points.

The results reveal a variegated picture across the three dimensions of awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action. Participants demonstrated varying levels of awareness, with a spectrum of responses ranging from minimal to substantial changes. Similarly, diverse attitudes were observed in risk perception and commitment to action, highlighting the nuanced nature of participants' perspectives.

- 2) Gazzola's fieldwork at the municipal library involved 14 participants. The presence of diverse voices, including that of a city councilor, highlighted the local government's commitment to addressing environmental issues related to the Café's topics, i.e. separate waste collection and renewable energy. Gazzola's enthusiasm and proactive approach set a positive example for participants, highlighting the active role of conversation in shaping perspectives on sustainability and climate change. Overall, the fieldwork underscored the vital role of libraries and participatory dialogue in promoting democracy at a local level.

In the first round of conversation, which focused on separate waste collection, participants proposed individual actions such as consume less, and collective actions (e.g. separate waste collection in the workplace). The active engagement of participants in offering practical solutions (e.g. increasing the number of recycling bins, promoting door-to-door collection) highlighted their commitment to environmental responsibility.

Concerning the second round of discussion on renewable energy, participants discussed the role of education and affordability in supporting renewables. The participants also highlighted the significance of sustainable mobility, recognizing its central role in reducing CO₂ emissions. While public lighting renovations were acknowledged, participants emphasized the need for increased investment in alternative energy sources for transportation.

Nevertheless, despite participants' demonstrated interest and engagement, there was a notable lack of awareness about policies, such as the presence of Gazzola's Municipality within the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, indicating a communication gap between citizens and institutions. In summary, Gazzola's fieldwork highlighted the importance of involving local communities in environmental discourse, fostering informed decision-making, and encouraging citizen-driven initiatives for sustainable living. The discussions showcased both the active involvement of participants and the necessity for ongoing education and communication to bridge the gap between citizens and policies, ultimately contributing to a more environmentally conscious and resilient community.

Concerning the pre-event questionnaires, 6 out of 13 participants were 'already-active' members of political parties and/or associations. Two additional questions in Gazzola's questionnaire explored individual preferences for environmental actions and responses to climate change. All respondents unanimously favored more materials recovery facilities for environmental enhancement, and 11 out of 13 emphasized investing in renewable energy to combat climate change, with only 2 suggesting nuclear energy. The World Café's objectives were perceived differently by participants, with some emphasizing citizens' participation in democratic life (n=6/13), public awareness, and collaboration opportunities (n=6/13). Motivations for participation included interests in the topics (n=7/13), curiosity (n=5/13), knowledge improvement (n=4/13). Participants believed that the initiative could foster active citizenship (n=6/13) and assess the state of local democratic participation (n=5/13).

Concerning the post-event questionnaires, 10 out of 14 participants responded: the majority indicated positive satisfaction levels with the World Café experience, expressing appreciation for the exchange of views, positive interactions, and the opportunity to meet neighbors. Notably, all post-event respondents (10 out of 10) reiterated the importance of materials recovery facilities for environmental improvement and advocated increased investment in renewable energy to address

climate change. The satisfaction questionnaire also reflected participants' commitment to environmental actions in their daily lives (e.g. one participant stated that considering the debate, he/she will install photovoltaic at home), such as enhanced waste separation and reduced consumption.

5 out of 9 participants strongly agreed with the importance of citizens' engagement (as in the World Café format) for climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. Additionally, 9 participants (n=9/10) said the World Café enhanced their 'sense of community'.

Considering the three aspects of awareness, risk perception, and commitment to action, the responses appeared as follows: considering 'awareness', one participant replied with 2 points, 4 participants with 3 points, 3 participants with 4 points, and 2 participants with 5 points (i.e. extremely changed point of view); considering 'risk perception', one participant replied with 2 points, 4 participants with 3 points, 4 participants with 4 points, and one participant with 5 points; looking at 'commitment to action', 3 participants replied with 3 points, 3 participants with 4 points, and other 4 with 5 points. Despite the limitations of the response rate, the positive outcomes suggest that the World Café successfully influenced participants' perspectives on environmental issues, community engagement, and commitment to action.

- 3) Santa Caterina's fieldwork took place on a private terrace with 13 participants. In light of the aforementioned circumstances, it is plausible that the attendance of participants at the Café may have been influenced by a protest against an offshore wind farm in the vicinity of Santa Caterina on the same date.

Noteworthy findings concerning the questions about 'conversation' and 'sustainability' included the concept of 'horizontality', reflecting the 'non-hierarchical' approach of the World Café. Conversely, 'ecology' held significance, with participants linking it to the non-human sphere.

The first round of discussions focused on separate waste collection, with participants proposing solutions for better separate collection, emphasizing the local reuse of organic waste (as in Bologna's fieldwork), advocating for plastic-free campaigns, and proposing issues and possible actions that should be addressed through specific policies (e.g. public drinking water, to limit the use of PET bottles).

In the second round, discussions shifted to renewable energy. Groups expressed diverse views on supporting renewables, with considerations of environmental impact, local

autonomy, and skepticism toward certain forms of energy, such as wind power and its effects on the landscape.

No participants knew about the EU Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, as with Gazzola's participants. Nevertheless, in contrast to the case of Gazzola (where the PAESC was fully accessible online), no documentation was identified online pertaining to a PAESC for Santa Caterina.

The Santa Caterina fieldwork showcased a collaborative and democratic problem-solving approach, involving participants in separate waste collection and renewable energy discussions. The findings highlighted the need for a comprehensive understanding of sustainability, encompassing environmental, social, and economic aspects. Participants underscored the significance of community engagement in addressing local challenges, thereby facilitating informed and inclusive decision-making processes.

However, all participants (n=13/13) completed the pre- and post-event questionnaire. 9 participants were 'already-active' members of political parties and/or associations. Concerning the questions about individual preferences on the topics, 10 out of 13 participants in the pre-event questionnaire emphasized the need for more materials recovery facilities (3 participants checked the option 'other'). In contrast, for the question about renewables, 8 out of 13 participants advocated for investing more in renewable energy sources (5 participants checked the box 'other'). The World Café, as perceived by the participants, aimed to raise awareness among institutions about the importance of participation, promotion of opportunities to exchange ideas, and citizens' collaboration (n=9/13).

The post-event questionnaire indicated overall satisfaction, with 9 participants expressing high satisfaction (rating 5) and 4 participants rating it 4. The participants appreciated the non-hierarchical discussion format and the opportunity for direct engagement.

Most participants (10 out of 13) confirmed the need for more materials recovery facilities. At the same time, a minority (3 out of 13) suggested alternative measures, such as promoting environmental education, implementing creative recycling methods, and fostering collaborative practices between public and private sectors. Concerning the question about renewables, preferences varied: while 6 participants advocated for increased investment in renewable energy, one participant expressed a belief in investing in fossil fuels as a solution; additionally, 6 participants proposed alternative

strategies, including re-evaluating and reusing generated power, investing in energy communities, saving energy, consuming less, promoting responsibility, and emphasizing circular recovery of energy, particularly from food resources.

According to all participants (n=13/13), the World Café represented a learning opportunity, while according to 7 respondents, the Café encouraged citizens' participation in democratic life.

7 participants strongly agreed that the efficacy of mitigation strategies and adaptation to climate change is contingent upon the involvement of citizens, as exemplified by the World Café format.

Participants acknowledged changes in their perspectives, especially in terms of commitment to action: concerning 'awareness', 3 participants replied with 2 points, 4 with 3 points, 2 with 4 points, and 4 with 5 points (i.e. extremely changed point of view). In terms of 'risk perception', one participant replied with 2 points, 3 participants with 3 points, 3 with 4 points, and 6 with 5 points. The majority (8 out of 13) indicated an extremely changed point of view regarding commitment to action.

- 4) Cosenza's World Café fieldwork took place within the ARCI local committee's office, with 17 participants. Despite similarities with previous fieldworks, the emphasis on 'engagement' and 'participation' emerged in participants' discussions, highlighting the importance of 'mutual learning', which surfaced as crucial for the World Café's potential impact beyond academic quasi-experimentation.

Concerning separate waste collection, proposed solutions by participants included common bins for separate collection, reinforcing ecological islands, and individual actions such as critical buying tasks and minimizing disposable products. The discussions also addressed redesigning the separate collection system based on local demographics and social needs.

In the second round on green urban areas, participants focused on actions to reduce local and global climate change effects, emphasizing the role of green areas in terms of mitigation and adaptation to climate change. It also stresses the importance of green urban areas as unique arenas for physical and psychological well-being, considering the example of the Parco del Benessere, which is currently engulfed in smog and lacks proper maintenance, falling short of the standards expected of a genuine green area.

Concerning the actions to reduce local and global effects of climate change, participants suggested employing sustainable transportation, minimizing the use of polluting

products, adopting responsible energy practices, and establishing networks for environmental sustainability.

The participants agreed that local communities should be central to combating climate change, interacting directly with policymakers and stakeholders from a participatory perspective.

However, the participants who responded to both pre- and post-event questionnaires were 16 out of 17. Notably, 9 out of 16 participants identified themselves as ‘non-active’ members of political parties and/or associations.

In the pre-event questionnaire, concerning the two questions on individual preferences, participants revealed preferences for more materials recovery facilities (11 out of 16), while 4 participants checked the option ‘other’, and one believed that more landfill sites are necessary. On the other hand, according to 11 out of 16 participants, it was essential to create more green areas, while 4 participants believed it was important to create more infrastructures well-integrated with urban green, and one participant checked the box ‘other’.

The World Café was seen as encouraging citizens’ participation in democratic life (n=9/16), raising public awareness among institutions about the importance of participation and promotion of opportunities to exchange ideas and citizens’ collaboration (n=7/16). 13 out of 16 participants were pushed to participate for their interest in the topics addressed by the Café.

Post-event evaluations indicated high satisfaction, with most participants rating the World Café positively, with responses highlighting appreciation for relationship-building. The participants’ emphasis on relationship-building underscores a principal strength of the World Café: its capacity to foster a collaborative and inclusive environment where participants can exchange perspectives, establish trust, and develop networks that extend beyond the event itself.

Post-event preferences leaned toward creating more materials recovery facilities (13 out of 16). At the same time, 3 respondents opted for the ‘other’ category, elucidating their perspectives as a call for «More respect for the environment by citizens, more controls by the administrations, more efficiency of services», «More green spaces and better waste management», and «Generalized consciousness-raising». Concerning the topic of green urban areas, the answers witnessed a shift: 9 out of 16 participants believed that combating climate change required the creation of more green areas, whereas 5 respondents leaned toward the necessity of creating more infrastructures, well-

integrated with urban green, and 2 participants chose the ‘other’ category, recalling marine ecosystem as a crucial oxygen source for the planet, and collaborative efforts on activities focused on awareness/information. This evolution may suggest the Café’s potential influence on individual perspectives and choices regarding local environmental issues.

Nevertheless, 13 out of 16 participants strongly agreed that the effectiveness of mitigation and adaptation strategies to climate change also depends on the involvement of citizens, as in the World Café format, while 14 out of 16 participants claimed that the Café enhanced their ‘sense of community’.

In terms of ‘awareness’, 7 out of 16 participants replied that they extremely changed their point of view (i.e. 5 points), and 4 participants replied with 4 points; concerning ‘risk perception’, 7 participants replied with 5 points, and 5 participants with 4 points; regarding ‘commitment to action’, 12 out of 16 participants responded with 5 points, and 2 participants with 4 points.

The Cosenza lab demonstrated the World Café’s capacity to engage citizens, prompt attitudinal shifts, and contribute to community-building. The findings suggest that such initiatives hold promise in addressing local and global environmental challenges by mobilizing citizen participation and fostering peculiar attitudes of deliberative democracy.

The research’s primary aim was to analyze if individual preferences changed through informal conversations using the World Café approach. Furthermore, we wanted to test if these dialogues, centered around critical issues such as climate change, can establish connections, fostering a ‘green consensus’ among individuals, thereby paving the way for innovative courses of action.

The results provide insight into the extent to which the findings align with the initial research objectives: the change in individual preferences is typical of deliberative processes (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2010; Fishkin & Luskin, 2005) and specific practices such as Deliberative Poll®, in which the transformation or persistence of initial preferences is verified through a pre- and post-event questionnaire (Floridia, 2017).

The findings demonstrate the effectiveness of the World Café as a participatory tool in fostering relationships among participants and stakeholders, leading to changes in individual preferences and perspectives on individual lifestyle changes.

If we now look to the possible future development of our laboratories, not limiting ourselves to considering them as academic quasi-experiments, mutual understanding of the local environmental issues may facilitate the formation of a shared understanding of the issues, and this is entailed within the idea of the World Café format: «This idea of conversation – talking together, reaching mutual understanding, and making meaning together across hierarchies – that’s the work that needs to be done. That’s where the potential is. The World Café is bringing that in practical ways to our journey forward as a nation» (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 201).

Chapter 3. Discussion, Lessons Learned, and Avenues for Future Research

Introduction

This chapter aims to discuss the findings of the study, reflecting on the broader implications within the realm of participatory and deliberative democracy. It is structured to provide a comprehensive exploration of the research outcomes, highlighting key insights and methodological considerations.

The initial section (3.1) explores the principal insights derived from the conducted quasi-experiments. Here, the emphasis is on the change in individual preferences observed throughout the process. Furthermore, this section presents a critical assessment of both the robustness of the methodology employed and the limitations that emerged during the research. Section 3.1.1 explores the recruitment strategies and civic engagement across the four case studies, highlighting similarities in participant numbers but key differences in how participants were recruited and prepared. Section 3.1.2 builds upon this analysis by examining the regional nuances in civic engagement and environmental issues in Bologna, Gazzola, Cosenza, and Santa Caterina. The study demonstrates that local environmental issues and socio-economic factors have shaped participation in distinct ways, with the Calabrian areas facing more complex and urgent challenges in comparison to those of Emilia-Romagna. These findings underscore the necessity of context-sensitive methodologies in participatory processes.

Section 3.2 shifts the focus of the discussion to some normative aspects of deliberative democracy and justice in environmental contexts. It emphasizes the importance of including all affected stakeholders, especially disadvantaged groups and women, in order to address climate inequalities. Furthermore, it discusses the role of experts and the necessity for inclusive participatory models to promote a fair and sustainable transition.

Section 3.3 delineates the research's contributions to the academic discourse on bottom-up democratic practices. This section underscores the innovative aspects of the research, particularly with regard to methodology and the incorporation of participatory and deliberative processes. The section elucidates the potential of the World Café to bridge democratic participation gaps and stimulate civic engagement on sustainability issues at the micro-level.

In summary, this chapter presents a comprehensive analysis of the research findings, offering a critical assessment of their significance and limitations. Furthermore, it establishes a foundation for additional investigation, contributing to the ongoing discourse on participatory and deliberative democracy, particularly in the context of climate change, as will be discussed in the conclusions.

3.1. Key Findings and the Change in Individual Preferences: Limits and Strengths of the Quasi-Experiments

As highlighted in the previous chapters, the principal aim of the research was to assess if a change in individual preferences would occur using the World Café approach (Alunni-Menichini *et al.*, 2023; Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Steier *et al.*, 2015), taking into account that it constitutes a typical feature of deliberative processes, such as Deliberative Poll® (Bobbio, 2019; Fishkin, 2018; Floridia, 2017; Fung, 2007; Sintomer, 2018).

Furthermore, the research was designed with the objective of establishing a conducive environment for democratic discourse on climate change. In line with the core tenets of action-research (Egmore, 2019; Elden & Levin, 1991; Ventura & Shahar, 2022; Waardenburg *et al.*, 2020), the research was characterized by an iterative and cyclical approach, allowing for continuous reflection and refinement throughout the process (Corbetta, 2015).

However, concerning the specific questions in both the pre- and post-event questionnaires¹²⁹, those questions were not present within Bologna's questionnaires, since the first fieldwork can be considered as a trial run.

The interviewee's answers to the questions aimed at verifying whether a change in individual preferences occurred between the before and after totaled 42 (pre-event), since the 14 Bologna's participants are missing, and 39 (post-event), since 3 out of 13 Gazzola's participants did not reply to the post-event questionnaire¹³⁰.

Considering the three fieldworks (i.e. Gazzola, Santa Caterina, and Cosenza) in which the specific questions were administered to assess whether there was a change in individual preferences or not, we can state that:

- In the pre-event phase, 34 out of 42 participants (81%) expressed the opinion that establishing more materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) is a fundamental measure for improving the local environment. In the post-event phase, 33 out of 39 participants (85%) shared the same perspective.

¹²⁹ Pre-event: 1) «Which of the following actions do you believe is required to enhance the standard of the environment in which you live? »; 2) «What is necessary in order to take action against climate change, also valorizing the territory? ». Post-event: 1) «Based on what was discussed during the World Café, in your opinion, what is required to enhance the standard of the environment in which you live? », and 2) «After the laboratory, do you believe that reacting to climate change requires [:] ».

¹³⁰ The participants who responded to the pre-event questionnaire were 56, while those who responded to the post-event were 53. The total of effective participants was 58.

Nevertheless, preferences remained consistent, mirroring those of the initial phase. Initially, in Cosenza, 11 out of 16 participants held the same perspective, whereas, in the post-event phase, 13 out of 16 shared this view. Thus, there was a slight shift in preferences.

- The framework changes when we consider questions related to the other topics of discussion, i.e. renewable energy, and green urban areas.

A significant transformation occurred in the case of Santa Caterina, where initially 8 out of 13 participants asserted the importance of investing in renewables, and 5 out of 13 participants held alternative views to those presented in the questionnaires.

Looking at the post-event questionnaire, the situation changed: 6 participants out of 13 now believed that increased investment in renewables was essential, one person favored fossil fuels, and 6 participants articulated an alternative perspective. This result indicates that the World Café had an impact, stimulating the emergence of alternative viewpoints, all within the sustainability framework (regardless of the preference for fossil fuels).

Concerning the discussion on green urban areas in Cosenza, preferences have changed. Before the event, 11 out of 16 participants believed it was necessary to create more green areas, whereas in the post-event, this number decreased to 9 out of 16. The change in the number of participants advocating for more green urban areas from 11 to 9 does not imply a decreased sensitivity toward green spaces. Notably, no participant, either before or after the event, supported the idea of creating more infrastructure at the expense of green areas. Rather, the discussion appears to have facilitated the emergence of alternative perspectives. For example, the increase from 4 to 5 participants who advocated for infrastructure that is well-integrated with urban green spaces and the rise in participants with alternative viewpoints (from 1 to 2) indicate that the event helped broaden the range of perspectives rather than reduce concern for green urban areas.

Regarding renewable energy, in the case of Gazzola, preferences did not undergo meaningful changes. However, those who supported nuclear energy (n=2/13) were absent in the post-event findings. Due to the absence of 3 responses, it cannot be definitively stated whether those supporters have altered their preferences; if they have, the World Café may have acted as a natural catalyst for change.

Topic	Location	Pre-Event Preferences	Post-Event Preferences	Change Observed
Separate Waste Collection	Santa Caterina, Gazzola, Cosenza	34 out of 42 participants believe establishing more facilities is essential.	33 out of 39 participants still believe this is essential.	Slight increase in agreement in Cosenza from 11 out of 16 to 13 out of 16.
Renewable Energy	Santa Caterina	8 out of 13 participants favor investing in renewables; 5 have alternative views.	6 out of 13 favor renewables; 1 favors fossil fuels; 6 have alternative views.	Shift toward diverse viewpoints; event encouraged more varied perspectives.
Green Urban Areas	Cosenza	11 out of 16 participants support more green areas.	9 out of 16 support more green areas.	Decrease in support for more green areas (from 11 to 9); increase in participants favoring integrated infrastructure with green spaces and alternative views.
Renewable Energy	Gazzola	11 out of 13 participants support investing in renewable energy; 2 suggest nuclear energy.	10 out of 10 support renewable energy.	No support for nuclear energy post-event; all participants favor renewable energy, indicating a complete shift in focus.

Tab. 2 Changes in participants' preferences

Source: author's elaboration, based on the collected data

Tab. 2 presents an overview of the results obtained from the three quasi-experiments (in Gazzola, Santa Caterina, and Cosenza) indicating that the World Café has prompted a change in individual preferences.

As Celaya (2019) observed with regard to the experiences of deliberative democracy, such experiences offer a number of advantages for those involved. From a knowledge perspective, for example, they have the potential to inform and update policy preferences (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005).

The positive outcomes of the quasi-experiments and their potential impacts on participants cannot be confined to an analysis of the aspects hitherto examined. Indeed, concerning the satisfaction section of the post-event questionnaire, the majority of participants, specifically 27 out of 53 respondents (51%) were «very satisfied», accompanied by numerous other positive responses.

Moreover, according to a sizable majority of participants (35 out of 53 respondents, 66%), the quasi-experiment was able to encourage citizens' participation in democratic life, while for almost all participants (50 out of 53 respondents, 94%), the World Café represented a learning opportunity. Our findings confirm the value of the action-research method, used to address sustainability and environmental concerns at a local level (Collins, 2014; Egmore, 2019; Ventura & Shahr, 2022), with a collective learning orientation (Mannarini, 2009). The World Café proved effective as a tool to bridge dialogue with tangible action, facilitating learning empowerment and co-generative dialogues (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Steier *et al.*, 2015). It also contributed to the fulfillment of the additional research aim which was to create a favorable context for democratic dialogue about climate change.

Furthermore, the quasi-experiments appear to have influenced participants' intentions and attitudes, both from the collective (e.g. «I will propose to more people to come and compost at my earthworm farm in the countryside») and the individual point of view (e.g. «I will use the car less»; « [I will install] photovoltaic at home»). The design of our quasi-experiments is aligned with Barry's view that «behavioural changes motivated by the internalisation of particular normative orientations is more effective and longer lasting than behavioural changes based on external or coercive imposition» (Barry, 1996, p. 122).

Nevertheless, one of the limits of the quasi-experiments could be the absence of experts' points of view during the World Café sessions. The presence of experts is crucial in deliberative settings, especially in the context of deliberative environmental politics (Baber & Bartlett, 2007). In this instance, however, the input of lay perspectives (Egmore, 2019) represents a valuable foundation for initiating a genuine deliberative process that encompasses the scale proposed by Arnstein (1969). If our quasi-experiments were to be situated on Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation, they would currently be situated between the levels of 'informing' and 'consultation'. At these levels, citizens may indeed be afforded the opportunity to voice their opinions and have them heard. However, in the absence of the requisite power, it is unlikely that their views will be heeded by those in possession of the relevant authority. When participation is confined to these levels, there is no follow-through, no 'muscle', and thus no guarantee of effecting change in the status quo (Arnstein, 1969). Nevertheless, this is justified by the fact that our primary objective was to conduct research on individual preferences.

Thus, in the context of our quasi-experiments, as outlined above, at least two immediate limitations emerge: 1) the absence of a random participant selection process impedes the attainment of a representative sample from the engaged population. Without a representative sample from the population, statistical discussions about our findings are precluded; 2) the

World Café method, which does not align closely with the principles of deliberative democracy, although in some studies the World Café was used for deliberative democratic evaluation (e.g. Alunni-Menichini *et al.*, 2023). Considering the first aspect, scholarly work indicates that random selection has merely resulted in incremental gains in citizen participation in decision-making processes (Talpin, 2020). Indeed, sortition mechanisms have frequently proven to be relatively constrained from a political standpoint. While they have frequently illuminated the deliberative capacities of ordinary citizens, they have not necessarily enhanced their decision-making authority.

Nevertheless, while these two aspects may be regarded as constraints, they also constitute a key strength of the quasi-experiments. The absence of a specific policy issue permitted the examination of a more expansive array of perspectives, which may have resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of the matters under consideration. Furthermore, the flexibility of the World Café approach and the ‘open door’ enabled the engagement of a diverse range of participants, including those who may not have traditionally been involved in community discussions. This was particularly evident in settings such as Italian rural and inner areas, where such experiences are uncommon¹³¹.

Building on the key insights gleaned from both the discussions and the questionnaires, it is evident that one of the key concepts is ‘resilience’ (IPCC, 2018; Van Zandt, 2020) and how it is linked to citizens’ participation in democratic and community life. Additionally, 35 out of 53 participants (66%) «strongly agreed» with the assertion that the efficacy of mitigation and adaptation strategies to climate change is contingent upon the involvement of citizens, as exemplified by the World Café format.

On the other hand, ‘awareness’, ‘risk perception’, and ‘commitment to action’ have underscored the effectiveness of the approach, particularly concerning ‘commitment to action’, closely tied to the action-research method: 28 participants (53% of respondents) replied that their point of view concerning ‘commitment to action’ was changed radically after the Café.

Finally, crucial elements of deliberative democracy were present, i.e. dialogue, exchange, and willingness to change preferences (Dryzek, 2009). Our fieldworks confirm the central role that a conversation plays within a context of participatory (and deliberative) democracy: particularly concerning the World Café, Brown and Isaacs (2005) argued that «conversation is the core

¹³¹ The already-mentioned Emilia-Romagna Observatory on Participation serves as a valuable benchmark for assessing the participatory landscape in Italy. Its data highlights a significant gap between the levels of participation in the two regions, Calabria and Emilia-Romagna, and also between urban and inner areas.

process by which we humans think and coordinate our actions together. The living process of conversation lies at the heart of collective learning and co-evolution in human affairs. *Conversation is our human way of creating and sustaining- or transforming- the realities in which we live»* (p. 19).

Another strength of our fieldworks may be seen in who the participants were. Both the conversation results and questionnaires show how our quasi-experiments yielded important outcomes among participants, who were not only ‘already-active’ from the political and/or associative points of view. For instance, Bobbio (2019) argued that «self-selection is preferable when one wants to underline the openness of a process and the fact that nobody is excluded, but it runs the risk of setting up a biased arena» (p. 49). Indeed, considering the totality of the participants who completed the pre-event questionnaires (i.e. 56 participants), 27 participants (48%) did not declare themselves active members of political parties and/or associations. As stated by Bobbio (2019), biases may be related to time availability (e.g. retired persons may represent the majority of participants): findings of our fieldworks indicate that participants included not only retirees and students, but also individuals holding a variety of occupational positions (e.g. teachers, employees, architects, one geologist, one medical doctor, etc.). Furthermore, 36 out of 56 participants (64%) argued that they were pushed to participate for their interest in the topics addressed. Although this may appear to be a potential source of bias, it actually serves to reinforce our findings by indicating that the participants were highly engaged and invested in the subject matter, which enhances the quality and relevance of their contributions. As Bobbio (2019) rightly pointed out, the bias upon the intensity of preferences (participatory processes tend to attract those who are most interested in the issue at stake) «may have a positive effect because it tends to raise information, attention and concern within the arena. Moreover, it may counterbalance the social bias when the issue at stake is mainly perceived by the worse-off» (Bobbio, 2019, p. 49).

The results of our quasi-experiments support the idea that «each participant arrives at the dialogic forum with his or her own judgment on the issue that is under discussion [...] The point is that the nature of these initial positions may vary greatly across different situations. [...] Not all participants enter the deliberative process with equally well structured or equally firm convictions. And this initial aspect is likely to influence the following process» (Bobbio, 2010, pp. 2-3). The findings of the questionnaires illustrate this point, as the responses of several participants differed from their initial positions prior to the event. This is further substantiated by the outcomes of the conversations, which demonstrated that participants’ perspectives

underwent a process of alteration and evolution as a result of their interactions and engagement in a ‘cross-pollinated’ environment (Brown & Isaacs, 2005).

3.1.1. Participants’ Recruitment Strategies and Civic Engagement Across the Four Case Studies

The fieldworks conducted in Bologna, Gazzola, Cosenza, and Santa Caterina exhibit some similarities and differences across several dimensions. First the number of participants is almost the same: 14 participants in Bologna, 17 in Cosenza, 14 in Gazzola, and 13 in Santa Caterina. Thus, despite the different local contexts, the quasi-experiment solicited a similar number of participants.

However, a key difference emerges in the recruitment strategies employed to engage participants: while in Bologna and Gazzola (potential) participants utilized the dedicated online page for registration, in Cosenza and Santa Caterina participants witnessed minimal engagement with the online platform for booking. It is important to note that this issue stems not from the research design itself, but rather from the differential responses of individuals to the recruitment process. While all four fieldworks commenced with a session dedicated to presenting the specific topics, the prior dissemination of informational materials via email meant that not all participants were equally equipped with this background knowledge. Probably because some participants joined the session at the last minute, having not preregistered online and others may have been unable to read the materials provided in advance of the session due to time constraints.

The arrangement of the World Café fieldworks unfolded as a meticulously planned and thoughtfully executed series of participatory events shaped by both theoretical considerations and practical insights. Rooted in thoroughly exploring deliberative and participatory democracy theories, the World Café approach emerged as a dynamic and adaptable methodology, further informed by the experiential learnings from the ‘Community PRO’ project.

The World Café’s informal and participatory nature encouraged active participation from all attendees, regardless of their prior knowledge or experience. Such an inclusive atmosphere created a safe space for individuals to share their thoughts and engage with others, even those less familiar with the topic. The dynamic movement of participants between tables facilitated the cross-pollination of ideas and the exposure to a broader range of perspectives. This ‘cross-fertilization’ of knowledge facilitated the expansion of individual comprehension and the generation of novel insights, particularly given that the World Café initiatives were not merely dialogues between experts and participants, but rather constructive processes where participants

played a pivotal role in addressing climate change and sustainability from a bottom-up perspective. In this context, as already mentioned in the first chapter, Egmosé (2019) identifies three critical elements that further illuminate the significance of our quasi-experiments: «Science in the Role of Sustaining Sustainability», «Expert Reflexivity and the Double Orientation of Research», and «From Knowledge Production towards Knowledge Democracy». As a result, 94% of participants (50 out of 53 post-event respondents) perceived the World Café as an enriching learning opportunity.

Within this framework, the findings about whether participants had ever engaged in participatory and/or deliberative processes, even those unrelated to environmental issues, can be examined: in Bologna, half of the participants answered affirmatively (7 out of 14); in Cosenza, only 4 out of 16 participants responded affirmatively. Regarding the inner/rural areas, in Gazzola, only 3 out of 13 participants answered in the affirmative, while in Santa Caterina, 5 out of 13 responded affirmatively. The picture changes when considering the results related to whether participants had participated in community meetings on environmental issues: in Bologna, 6 out of 14 participants answered affirmatively; in Cosenza, 7 out of 16 participants; in Gazzola, 7 out of 13, and Santa Caterina, 8 out of 13. These disparities in prior environmental engagement suggest varying levels of participation and awareness across these areas and regions.

The findings present a nuanced picture that challenges the civic engagement model proposed by Putnam (1993). Putnam's framework categorizes Italian social capital along a north-south divide, with the north characterized by a 'horizontal' civic culture, marked by active participation in voluntary associations and a strong sense of community. Conversely, the south is described as having a 'vertical' culture, with a hierarchical social structure and lower levels of civic engagement. However, by examining environmental engagement, the research reveals a more layered understanding of citizens' participation across these Italian regions.

In the 1970s, a uniform institutional model was implemented across all Italian regions. Yet, within a short period, these new institutions exhibited significant disparities in performance. As Almagisti (2016) noted, this situation offered a unique research opportunity for political science, allowing for the comparison of institutionally similar models introduced simultaneously, but with markedly different outcomes. Putnam's extensive research underscores a strong correlation between institutional performance and what he terms 'civicness' or 'civic culture'. He identifies participation in associations as the most effective antidote against opportunistic behaviors (*ivi*). The institutional performance of Italian regions was assessed using various criteria, including aspects of the political process (e.g. stability of

the regional government) and the substance of political decisions (e.g. the innovativeness of legislation and the responsiveness of the bureaucratic apparatus to citizens' demands). Such complexity suggests that while Putnam's model is valuable, it may require further refinement to fully capture the spectrum of civic engagement in Italy and possibly other regions, necessitating further investigation.

3.1.2. Exploring Differences Between the Four Case Studies

Therefore, although Bologna may exhibit a higher baseline for citizen participation in comparison to other areas, the data on prior environmental engagement indicate a more complex reality. While a definitive north-south divide cannot be established based on this quasi-experiment alone, the observed dissimilarities may suggest contextual differences within the four areas, taking into account the extensive literature on regional differences in Italy.

There are at least three potential explanations:

- 1) **Local environmental issues:** the prevalence of specific environmental issues or challenges in each local context could influence citizens' participation. Communities facing pressing environmental issues might be more likely to foster active participation in related discussions.
- 2) **Social Mobilization Efforts:** the presence or absence of local environmental groups or NGOs actively mobilizing citizens could contribute to the observed differences.
- 3) **Socio-Economic Factors:** socio-economic factors like income levels, educational attainment, and access to information might also play a role in shaping climate change perception (Antronico *et al.*, 2020) and participation.

Regarding environmental issues, our findings indicate the prominence of location-specific environmental issues in the Calabrian region (Cosenza and Santa Caterina). This finding underscores the necessity of considering contextual nuances when addressing environmental issues and highlights the importance of developing tailored solutions that address the specific challenges faced by a particular local community. These results clearly reflect Stringer's (2007) definition of the action-research method. As posited by Stringer (2007), action-research represents a systematic methodology for inquiry that facilitates the identification of efficacious solutions to the challenges encountered in everyday life. In contrast to traditional experimental or scientific research, which aims to identify generalizable explanations applicable to all contexts, action-research is focused on specific situations and localized solutions. The findings

underscore the imperative of devising solutions tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of a given group of community members, aligning with the tenets of action-research as elucidated by Stringer and further developed by Ventura and Shahar (2022).

The Calabrian areas emerged as hotspots for environmental issues that demand participatory and deliberative approaches to resolution. These issues, deeply embedded in the local context, highlight the need for inclusive decision-making processes that empower communities to shape their environmental future. For instance, the Parco del Benessere in Cosenza, a green urban area (mentioned in the second chapter), serves as a microcosm of the challenges faced by local communities in managing their green spaces. Participants in the Cosenza fieldwork highlighted the park's evident structural deficiencies, including inadequate maintenance, lack of amenities, and limited accessibility. The World Café could serve as a social mobilization effort in this regard.

On the other hand, as already pointed out, Santa Caterina's fieldwork coincided with a protest against the construction of an offshore wind farm. Such a case highlights the complexities surrounding renewable energy development and the need for deliberative approaches that balance environmental concerns with community well-being. Furthermore, it is of great importance to establish a connection between the energy transition and broader societal developments, as well as to facilitate the involvement of citizens in local and regional governance arrangements (Hofman *et al.*, 2023).

However, the World Café discussions revealed both common threads of environmental concerns and local nuances in how participants approached the specific themes:

- Concerning separate waste collection within urban areas (i.e. Bologna and Cosenza), in both fieldworks, participants acknowledged the importance of waste hierarchy (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) in achieving sustainable waste management, and both groups highlighted the crucial role of individual behavior in reducing waste production and promoting responsible consumption.

Among divergences, Bologna's participants placed a stronger emphasis on reuse as a strategy for waste reduction, prioritizing activities like repair services and shared object platforms. A certain importance was placed on localized management of organic waste, suggesting its potential use in urban gardens. Additionally, participants advocated for educational campaigns on proper waste collection and responsible consumption habits. Cosenza's discussion focused heavily on issues related to the current separate collection system (even though also in Bologna it was one of the central topics). Cosenza's

participants felt the existing system was inefficient and needed redesigning to address local demographics and social needs. Concerns were raised about the difficulties faced by some citizens, particularly elderly residents, in accessing and using the current system. Participants highlighted the need for collaboration with local businesses to promote sustainable practices, such as reducing packaging and offering alternative packaging options. Moreover, Cosenza's participants emphasized the importance of addressing waste issues at the source, such as influencing the packaging practices of multinational companies.

Ultimately, while in both fieldworks participants valued responsible waste management, the specific challenges and priorities differed. The Bologna's group favored a reuse-based approach with strong public education efforts. Cosenza's participants prioritized redesigning the existing system for improved accessibility and efficiency, while emphasizing the need for upstream solutions and business involvement. These findings suggest that tailored waste management policies are necessary to address the specific needs and contexts of different situations.

On the other hand, also inner areas present some points of convergence and divergence: in both cases, participants emphasized the importance of proper recycling practices and reducing waste production. Participants in both contexts acknowledged the role of individual actions in minimizing waste and promoting responsible consumption.

Gazzola's discussions centered on improving the existing recycling infrastructure (e.g. increased number of recycling bins, collection bins for used cooking oils, separate waste collection in workplaces). Additionally, participants stressed the need for public awareness campaigns to promote separate waste collection.

Santa Caterina's participants focused on a «personalized collection» system using waste traceability and economic incentives linked to the quantity of waste recycled. They suggested installing RVMs for plastic and glass to encourage separate collection, highlighting the importance of local composting plants and using compost in local agriculture. Participants advocated for policies promoting reusable containers and reducing plastic use, particularly during peak tourist seasons. A crucial aspect of this fieldwork is the focus on 'ecology', frequently mentioned in discussions, with an indirect reference to Haraway's concept of 'Chthulucene' which emphasizes living responsibly on a damaged earth (Haraway, 2016). In this regard, concerns were raised about stray animals accessing door-to-door organic waste bins, while potential solutions included 'ecological islands' or underground bins. Furthermore, participants from Santa

Caterina appeared to consider the six new frontiers of future energy justice research (Sovacool *et al.*, 2017) outlined in the first chapter, especially the frontier valuing the non-human world through non-anthropocentric theories, such as animal-centrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism.

Both fieldworks highlighted the importance of individual responsibility and addressing waste production upstream. These findings suggest that tailored waste management policies that consider local contexts and priorities are crucial for effective implementation.

- The topic of green urban areas was the second theme addressed in Bologna and Cosenza, where discussions revealed both shared perspectives and distinct priorities for each group. Both groups acknowledged the multifaceted benefits of green urban areas, including the environmental benefits (e.g. pollution reduction, climate change mitigation), as well as social benefits (e.g. mental health, community building). Nevertheless, the discussions in Bologna highlighted the challenges of creating green areas in the city's historic center. Approaches were suggested, such as planting climbing plants on balconies and private areas, utilizing larger squares for tree planting, and associating these efforts with bottom-up sustainable practices like resource conservation and sustainable transportation. Moreover, the participants underscored the diminishing availability of social gathering spaces in the city center. One example of this is the installation of panels in front of building entrances to prevent people from sitting, which serves as a manifestation of Bauman's (2011) observations. As Bauman notes, many contemporary cities contain numerous areas designated as 'public spaces'. However, these spaces often fall short of being genuine 'civic spaces' due to their inherent emptiness and their alignment with the logic of consumption. Accordingly, as Bologna's participants have observed, the promotion of green urban areas may prove an effective means of addressing this issue.

In contrast, participants in Cosenza emphasized the tension between urban development and green spaces. In particular, Cosenza's participants suggested integrating green spaces into new infrastructure projects and replacing lost green spaces through compensatory mechanisms. Furthermore, they emphasized the social significance of parks, expressing concerns about the following issue related to existing green areas: lack of maintenance and security; air pollution hindering the park's purpose. Additionally, they highlighted the importance of individual actions for change (e.g. sustainable

transportation, reduced meat consumption, supporting digitalization), and the importance of local engagement (Cosenza's participants stressed the crucial role of local stakeholders in creating and maintaining green areas, encouraging citizens' participation in neighborhood green areas). Moreover, they called for local institutions to support tackling climate change at a local level through improved public transportation, investment in renewable energy, and waste reduction initiatives.

The World Café discussions revealed that participants in both the Bologna and Cosenza fieldworks held a positive view of green urban areas. While the Bologna approach prioritizes the integration of green urban areas into the historic center and the promotion of sustainable practices, the Cosenza strategy is focused on the mitigation of infrastructure impacts on green spaces and the revitalization of existing parks. It is noteworthy that both groups acknowledged the necessity of individual and institutional action to combat climate change.

- The World Café discussions on renewable energy in Gazzola and Santa Caterina revealed contrasting approaches and priorities among participants. In Gazzola, participants focused on five issues: 1) Education and affordability, they emphasized the importance of technical and professional education to promote renewable energy adoption. They also highlighted the economic benefits of renewables, particularly photovoltaic systems, recalling the «idealized citizen of energy democracy» (Szulecki, 2018, p. 32), i.e. the prosumer; 2) Energy communities (the discussion shifted toward 'energy communities' as a way to share renewable energy production and financial benefits among citizens. Participants were familiar with the regional law supporting such initiatives, also mentioned in the fieldwork's introductory speech); 3) Mobility, participants discussed about transport between Gazzola and the surrounding municipalities, mentioning also alternative fuels like hydrogen fuel cells as options for sustainable mobility. During the Café, 'Hydrogen Expo' in the near city of Piacenza took place. However, limitations and costs associated with hydrogen (Armaroli, 2022) were mentioned by the Café coordinator/researcher; 4) Need for public awareness, public awareness campaigns on energy efficiency and sustainable transportation were seen as crucial; 5) Gap between citizens and institutions, despite the active role of the Municipality in renewable energy, almost all of participants were unaware of the PAESC plan, indicating a need for better communication channels.

Instead, perspectives from Santa Caterina's participants could be synthesized in the following key elements: 1) Environmental and social concerns as participants prioritized 'sustainability' as a core principle, considering environmental and social impacts of renewable energy projects; 2) Mixed views on renewables, as some participants questioned the use of biomass and wind power due to deforestation and visual landscape concerns. They advocated for rooftop solar panels on existing buildings and a local energy assessment before large-scale projects; 3) Critical view of top-down approaches, as participants generally opposed top-down investment in renewables, emphasizing the need for citizen consultation and a bottom-up approach, in line with the concept of 'local energy autonomy' (Puttilli, 2014). This sentiment aligns with the concerns raised by Calabrian stakeholders regarding wind farms in the region; 4) Sustainable mobility proposals where participants discussed the need for improved public transportation and the potential of utilizing the existing, underutilized train station; 5) Emphasis on community participation, since participants agreed on the importance of local community involvement in decision-making processes related to initiatives addressing climate change. In such a framework, the role of citizens shifts from that of mere consumers to that of co-entrepreneurs, who participate in the sustainable development of the local community (Bernardoni, 2021).

Furthermore, our findings in the fieldwork conducted in Santa Caterina support Puttilli's remarks (2014) that the pursuit of renewable energy transitions is not without its challenges. Social and environmental conflicts can arise during the development and implementation of renewable energy projects. Wind power, for instance, can raise concerns about noise pollution and visual impact on landscapes, contributing to the spread of the NIMBY syndrome (Hager, 2022).

Thus, the World Café discussions highlight the diverse perspectives on renewable energy in Gazzola and Santa Caterina. While Gazzola focuses on education, affordability, and energy communities, Santa Caterina prioritizes social and environmental sustainability alongside citizens' engagement. Both fieldworks demonstrate an awareness of the need to transition to renewable energy sources, albeit with differing priorities and concerns.

Our findings show that participants perceive the engagement of civil society as a crucial factor in addressing climate change at the local and global levels. This conclusion aligns with the observations made by the IPCC (2022).

Interdisciplinarity (Marincioni, 2020; Martinez *et al.*, 2018) could potentially cause conflicts within a World Café setting (Löhr *et al.*, 2020). This was evident to some extent in Bologna, as shown by the issues raised by participants. These issues were related to the question, «If we talk about climate change, what are we seeing/facing as members of this local community? What will happen if immediate action is not taken? ». This question likely prompted a somewhat ‘egocentric’ response from some participants, who asserted that not only should Italy take action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but also major emitters such as the USA, India, China, and so forth should do so. The response could be considered ‘egocentric’ because the participants at the table shifted the focus from the global sphere of climate change to a more self-centered concern about Italy’s challenges, demanding that other major emitters like the USA, India, and China also take action. Instead of focusing on the collective effort needed to combat climate change, the conversation veered toward ensuring that others are equally accountable, which can be seen as putting self-interest ahead of a broader, more cooperative approach. This discourse appears to align with the arguments put forth by Jamieson (2021) regarding the impact of climate change on global collective action. Jamieson (2021) posits that climate change represents a significant challenge to collective action on a global scale, with the potential to exacerbate existing geographical inequalities. Western countries, which are primarily responsible for emissions, are reluctant to have developing countries follow their example with regard to climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies. Conversely, developing countries are urging Western countries to assume a leadership role in reducing emissions (*ivi*). This issue also manifests within Western countries, affecting intergenerational collective action. Each generation tends to prioritize short-term benefits from emissions, which contributes to the rise of greenhouse gases (*ivi*). Jamieson (2021) posits that democratic institutions must become more proactive in addressing these concerns beyond the immediate political sphere. This may entail safeguarding future generations or the environment, even if it runs counter to the preferences of current citizens. One potential solution is to engage in meaningful dialogue between citizens and scientists through participatory and deliberative democracy, which could help mitigate this risk.

For this purpose, it is essential to mention another concept, i.e. ‘active listening’ (Paul, 2017), that is crucial for the whole discourse concerning both ‘Community PRO’ (see Appendix) and our quasi-experiments about environmental issues: such a concept refers to an ‘inclusive’ context¹³², in which diversity from conflict becomes richness.

¹³² In this regard, see Parker (2006)

‘Passive listening’ (*ivi*), characterized by a static, judgmental approach with limited perspectives, reflects a specific trait of contemporary society (with limited interpretations and responses, such as true/false, friend and foe, rational/irrational). By contrast, ‘active listening’ (*ivi*) is dynamic and explorative, fostering constructive dialogue, building deep community relationships, and helping restore dignity to individuals within the local context.

As noted by Topornycky and Golparian (2016), «active listening can be used to hear accurately, understand, draw out ideas and information, empathize, gather information, show respect, build self-esteem, find answers, show appreciation, buy time, connect, question assumptions and ideas, weigh options, change perspectives, soothe or heal, set the stage for something else, and build relationships» (p. 176).

Thus, the contrast between the two ways of ‘listening’ is strictly linked to the above-mentioned ‘collective intelligence’, which can be able to produce an ‘eco-centrist’ and nature-centered vision (as opposed to an ego-centrist vision) (Walton *et al.*, 2023) vital to tackling contemporary challenges such as climate change.

In Santa Caterina, participants discussed about renewable energy and the autonomy of the local community regarding locally produced energy, pointing out the concept of ‘energy democracy’ (Burke & Stephens 2017; Szulecki, 2018). From the point of view of Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo, for instance, the term ‘collectivization’ should be placed on the basis of action within rural areas: indeed, according to De Matteis and Dolce (2021), the collectivization of experiences and practices is able to keep alive the rurality which in turn is able to «rebuilding relationships and coexistences even among different species» (p. 194, translated by the author). Our findings suggest that in the two areas of Calabria, more intricate and pressing issues surfaced, which require attention from a significant standpoint of citizens’ participation (such as the Parco del Benessere in the city of Cosenza, and the offshore wind farm in the Ionian Sea), in contrast to the issues raised in Bologna and Gazzola. Despite the shared aspects among the four areas (e.g. sustainable mobility in the two inner areas), the issues in Calabria appear to be more nuanced and demanding (concerning all issues addressed by the World Café sessions, i.e. separate waste collection, green urban areas, and renewables).

The issues in Calabria appear to be more nuanced and demanding due to a combination of socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors unique to the region. As highlighted by the data from the Observatory on Participation of the Emilia-Romagna Region (January 2024), there is a significant disparity in citizens’ participation between the two regions. As already mentioned, the map provides detailed insights into the level of participation - ranging from empowerment to consultation - and shows that Emilia-Romagna has a much higher number of participatory

processes, particularly at the municipal level, with 1.137 out of 1.518 processes. By contrast, Calabria has only 8 mapped processes, with participation levels often not calculated. This disparity indicates that in Emilia-Romagna, participatory processes are more ingrained at the local level, largely managed by municipalities, while in Calabria, these processes are often controlled by the State administration, which may contribute to the lower level of civic engagement observed. Although Calabria has 137 municipalities involved in participatory processes compared to Emilia-Romagna's 330, the depth and quality of participation appear to be lacking, especially in areas critical to sustainable development. For instance, there is no available data on regional and local administrations' participatory processes for the City of Cosenza and Santa Caterina dello Ionio, highlighting a gap in local engagement. Moreover, the complexity of the issues emerging in Calabria adds to the challenge. For example, the offshore wind farm in the Ionian Sea represents a highly significant infrastructure project that involves multiple stakeholders and actors (Hofman *et al.*, 2023), environmental considerations, and long-term impacts on both the local economy and marine ecosystems. Such a project necessitates not only technical and economic assessments but also extensive public consultation and participation to address concerns related to environmental protection, community benefits, and sustainable development. In this regard, the framework provided by Sovacool *et al.* (2017) is particularly relevant, with a focus on the second and third 'new frontiers' of future energy justice, namely the valuation of the non-human world through non-anthropocentric theories (e.g. animal-centrism, biocentrism, and ecocentrism), and that focus on cross-scalar issues of justice, such as embodied emissions (e.g. with 42% of the nation's electricity coming from wind turbines in 2015, Denmark has a low carbon footprint and may serve as a model for other nations). Indeed, when one considers solely the impact on the Danish electrical grid, the statistics appear favorable. However, a national focus on this issue fails to acknowledge the externalities associated with the development and production of these wind turbines. These externalities not only offset the environmental credentials of the wind turbines but also resulted in considerable emissions being outsourced to China and South Korea. The complexity of these issues, combined with the lower levels of civic participation, makes it even more challenging to navigate and resolve the concerns raised by participants at our fieldwork.

In Emilia-Romagna, both urban and inner areas, such as Bologna and Gazzola, show high levels of participation, with numerous ongoing and past processes under local municipal control, reflecting a strong tradition of civic engagement. Conversely, Calabria's areas exhibit significantly fewer participatory processes, which are mostly organized in a top-down manner by State administration. This discrepancy not only aligns with but also reinforces Putnam's

findings on civic engagement and social capital, demonstrating how historical and socio-cultural factors continue to shape citizens' participation in different Italian regions.

In general, considering the motivations that led to the selection of the case studies (see Section 1.5), there are imbalances in access to information. For instance, none of the participants were aware that the municipality in which the fieldwork was conducted was among the signatories of the Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy. Furthermore, there is a lack of available documentation in Calabria's areas, such as the PAESC, which could provide evidence of the objectives achieved and those yet to be achieved.

Furthermore, while the data collected from the quasi-experiments do not directly address this issue, the Calabria region and southern Italy in general appear to be largely unaffected by some of the challenges emanating from the supranational level (i.e. the European Union). Among the European cities that have been designated as 'Climate-neutral and smart cities', the southernmost Italian city to receive this designation is Rome.

The small group of Calabrian participants who participated in our fieldworks expressed a desire to be more engaged in decision-making processes in relation to environmental issues and concerns. From the perspective of the institutions involved (in this case, supranational), there is a lack of recognition of the concept of 'environmental justice' (Bullard, 2001). Furthermore, even the 'Rawlsian' notion of resilience (Van Zandt, 2020) may be at risk.

3.2. An Examination of Normative Aspects of Deliberation in the Context of Environmental Issues

It is precisely within this context that the theme of democracy assumes even greater significance. As Dryzek (2013) aptly demonstrates, the link between deliberative democracy and justice is well described by recalling Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice*. Dryzek (2013) acknowledges the centrality of Sen's conception of democracy in reconciling pluralistic claims of justice. However, he critiques Sen's discussion as being overly general and lacking in depth (Dryzek, 2013). Dryzek, however, emphasizes a key point: «democracy does not guarantee justice, but in a world of plural justice claims democracy is necessary to the pursuit of justice» (ivi, p. 342). In such contexts, the primary requirement is a deliberative framework that includes all significantly impacted stakeholders (or their representatives) (ivi). Dryzek (2013) further argues that democratic deliberation within a framework of plural justice claims should not be confined to a single forum or solely rely on elected representatives. Collective decisions needn't be based on simple majority rule, but achieving complete consensus isn't always necessary either (ivi). The process should not be constrained by overly restrictive or singular notions of

public reason, nor should it be limited to purely rational arguments or dominated by adversarial debate or positional negotiation. These principles allow for significant flexibility in both institutional design and specific practices. The appropriate response to global climate justice issues will differ substantially from that required for more localized concerns (*ivi*). These principles, however, can be applied across various contexts, from local to global, to analyze, evaluate, and potentially design forums and, more importantly, deliberative systems where justice can be deliberated and achieved, taking into account the Bali Principles of Climate Justice (2002).

Moreover, within the discourse on climate justice, the centrality of women's role emerges forcefully. Sultana (2022) introduces the concept of 'critical climate justice', which is closely linked to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) for gender equality and women's empowerment: women's inclusion in climate participatory and/or deliberative processes could foster more equitable and sustainable solutions, because their gender perspective helps identify and address gender inequalities and ensure that the benefits of climate action are shared fairly. The involvement of Sofia from Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo as a stakeholder and her nomination as a Rural Innovator Ambassador for Southern Italy within the European Union Project 'FLIARA Community of Practice' (Female-Led Innovation in Agriculture and Rural Areas) is indicative of this aspect.

On the other hand, Olsson's (2022) framework of democratic engagement styles offers valuable insights into how citizens' participation can contribute to addressing environmental injustices. As mentioned in the first chapter, he identifies four key styles, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Notably, Olsson (2022) emphasizes the importance of 'closure-oriented engagement centered on practices' which ensures that disadvantaged groups are included in deliberations to challenge systems producing unjust practices. This aligns with the findings from Di Chiro's study (Olsson, 2022) which demonstrates the effectiveness of collaboration between academics and marginalized communities in promoting 'just sustainabilities'.

As observed by Ross *et al.* (2021), urban areas are of paramount importance in climate action and equitable participation. The authors underscore the necessity for 'participatory parity' among diverse social groups and 'scalar parity' between political authorities and civil society. These concepts are fundamental to ensuring fairness and equality in addressing climate change. The Leeds Citizens' Climate Jury provides an illustrative example of how justice theory and inclusive deliberative processes can effectively contribute to low-carbon transitions. The study underscores the necessity of addressing socio-economic inequalities as a prerequisite to adequately tackling climate change at the urban level. Consequently, it advocates for the

expansion of citizen jury models like that of Leeds to other areas, as these models foster trust, strengthen place identity, and generate hope, thereby aligning with the broader goals of a just transition.

Incorporating experts' perspectives into future developments of our quasi-experiments could address the identified limitation and potentially contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to achieve behavior change that promotes environmental justice, starting from local communities. At the same time, it is imperative that experts recognize the limitations of their contributions to the decision-making process, particularly in the absence of political approval (Baber & Bartlett, 2007). In the absence of such approval, it is unlikely that their recommendations will have the desired impact. Consequently, when engaging in collective decision-making, experts must adopt the perspective of the general public in order to ensure the legitimacy and accountability of their recommendations. It is recommended that they employ a straightforward style of language in order to align with the pragmatic, problem-solving nature of public discourse. Moreover, experts must provide transparent and accessible justifications for their recommendations that are comprehensible to all citizens. Therefore, any additional influence experts may exert in deliberative contexts is justified by their capacity to facilitate discussions, rather than by any inherent authority (*ivi*).

In terms of future developments of our fieldworks, it would be advantageous to consider the potential establishment of a 'permanent participatory laboratory'. Such an initiative, for example in the two areas of Calabria (Cosenza and Santa Caterina), could provide a distinctive framework for investigating and measuring levels of deliberative capacity (Felicetti, 2016) across diverse contexts. Such an investigation could encompass an analysis of the manner in which local communities engage in decision-making processes, the dynamics of dialogue and consensus-building, and the factors that enhance or hinder effective participation. Moreover, a comprehensive investigation of this nature could facilitate the enhancement of participatory governance methodologies and provide invaluable insights into the practical applications of deliberative democracy in addressing local and regional challenges. By promoting a long-term, structured approach, this participatory and deliberative laboratory could also serve as a model for analogous initiatives in other regions, thereby expanding the scope and impact of the research.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge that the outcomes of participatory processes possess the capacity to be formalized into concrete «agreements» (Stapper, 2021). These instruments elucidate the ramifications of residents' contributions on their conceptualizations of

neighborhood development through participatory processes. Moreover, such agreements can function as efficacious accountability mechanisms.

Overall, the green transition has sparked, and continues to spark, conflicts across local, national, and supranational levels. In this context, participatory and deliberative democracy holds the potential to strengthen contemporary democratic systems (Cini & Felicetti, 2018). Drawing on the concept of «democratic resourcefulness», Cini and Felicetti (2018) suggest that «participatory deliberative theory and the idea of ‘democratic resourcefulness’ might offer a more comprehensive and straightforward way to assess the quality of existing democracies». However, as Cini and Felicetti (2018) observe, the most significant impediment to meaningful democratization in Italy appears to be the absence of established institutionalized forms of deliberative participation at the national level, coupled with the inadequate integration of such practices at the local and regional levels. This gap presents a significant challenge in addressing the growing disconnect between the democratic aspirations of engaged citizens and the democratic quality of state institutions. Without effective mechanisms to channel public demands for greater democracy into participatory and deliberative processes within institutions, there is a risk of exacerbating public skepticism and disillusionment with politics (*ivi*). Additionally, in light of these circumstances, the appeal of radical and deliberative principles to the general public may wane, as may the democratic advantages they could offer. This could result in a growing skepticism of the liberal democratic norms and institutions that these principles are meant to uphold (*ivi*).

3.3. Contribution to the field of participatory and deliberative democracy: added value of the research

The World Café’s discussions yielded a multifaceted array of perspectives, priorities, and challenges encountered by participants across the four local contexts under consideration. Although common themes did emerge, each Café demonstrated a distinct approach to addressing environmental issues and concerns.

Therefore, it can be posited that the contribution of our quasi-experiments to the field of participatory and deliberative democracy is as follows:

- 1) The World Café has successfully influenced individual preferences (see Tab. 2). While we cannot specify exactly how many participants changed their preferences, we can note that there were 13 responses that differed from the answers given in the pre-event

questionnaire about the specific topics¹³³. The reason we cannot specify how many participants changed their preferences is that the questionnaire included two separated questions. This means a participant might have changed his/her preference to one or both topics.

The discussions aimed to facilitate a reconfiguration of individual preferences by exposing participants to diverse perspectives (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) and fostering critical thinking on environmental issues. Such an engagement is crucial for informed participation in democratic processes.

- 2) The quasi-experiments resulted in a high level of satisfaction chiefly because they fostered an environment conducive to open dialogue and learning. Notably, 51% of respondents (27 out of 53) declared they were «very satisfied», along with numerous other positive responses. This strong satisfaction rate indicates that the method is effective in creating a welcoming and inclusive space for democratic discourse.
- 3) The Cafés went beyond raising awareness, with possible concrete proposals for action, both from the institutional and individual points of view. Such a focus on actionable outcomes aligns with the core principles of participatory democracy, where citizens actively contribute to shaping sustainable solutions (Trencher *et al.*, 2014).
- 4) Each fieldwork applied action-research method, promoting group learning and a commitment to action on sustainability issues, by fostering continuous improvement and adaptation based on participant's experiences. This is consistent with the position put forth by Nielsen and Nielsen, who argued that social learning is not limited to top-down changes but also encompasses the role of everyday individuals in driving societal progress (Egmose, 2019). This concept of 'lifeworld learning' is of paramount importance for addressing sustainability challenges in a democratic society (*ivi*). Their concept of social learning extends beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge, instead emphasizing the examination of lived experiences and the interconnection between past struggles and future aspirations. The sharing of these experiences can be a sensitive matter, which is where Critical Utopian Action Research becomes relevant (*ivi*). In this

¹³³ As mentioned above, the respondents to the questions aimed at verifying whether a change in individual preferences occurred between the before and after totaled 42 (pre-event), and 39 (post-event), since 3 out of 13 Gazzola's participants did not reply to the post-event questionnaire.

context, they introduced the concept of ‘social imagination’, which differs from the concept of ‘sociological imagination’: while the sociological imagination is an intellectual and cognitive tool, the social imagination is about expressing and achieving life goals and practical ideas for living (*ivi*). Ultimately, social learning, which is rooted in daily life, influences how people approach societal issues based on their personal experiences (*ivi*).

- 5) The Cafés served as a springboard for deliberations by fostering dialogues and bridging the gap between talk and action. In light of the results of these conversations, the quasi-experiments offer a valuable tool for stakeholders to utilize in organizing a more expansive participatory and deliberative democratic process, with the initial focus on the issues that emerged from our fieldworks.

Our quasi-experiments suggest that the ‘open door’ method can be an effective tool for attracting citizens and promoting engagement, thus challenging the assumption that the ‘open door’ approach should be dismissed in participatory or deliberative contexts. This aligns with the example of Portugal (Allegretti, 2021), where the ‘open door’ approach has diminished the influence of preorganized groups in forums that prioritize individuals as the central participants in dialogue with institutions. At the same time, this approach has facilitated the legitimization of processes based on the direct expression of will, such as co-decision, rather than those emphasizing inclusion at various stages of the deliberative process (*ivi*).

In particular, the ‘open door’ ensures that a broader spectrum of perspectives is present within the discussion, while demonstrating the contextual sensitivity in designing participatory and/or deliberative processes: for instance, within Italian inner/rural areas, participants’ random selection may not be the most effective and reasonable approach for a participatory and/or deliberative process. Random selection might not be ideal in such contexts due to several factors unique to these areas. Italian inner or rural areas often have distinct social and cultural dynamics, where residents might be tightly knit and possess a deep understanding of local issues. Random selection could result in participants who are not sufficiently representative or informed about these specific local contexts, potentially leading to a lack of relevant perspectives in the discussion. Moreover, these areas might have limited population sizes, making random selection less effective in ensuring a diverse and comprehensive representation. Instead, ‘open door’ can help increase participation rates, particularly in areas where other methods of engagement may not reach a broad audience. By lowering barriers to entry, the

‘open door’ method encourages individuals who might not otherwise participate to engage in the discussion. Indeed, our findings indicate that a considerable number of participants lacked prior experience in participatory activities. These Cafés were designed to facilitate participation beyond «entrepreneurial residents» (Stapper & Duyvendak, 2020), seeking to engage individuals who had not previously taken part in participatory and/or deliberative processes and were not exclusively focused on the specific issues being addressed.

Furthermore, our Cafés demonstrate that the ‘open door’ presents additional strengths:

- **Community outreach.** Effective outreach strategies are crucial to inform potential participants about the ‘open door’ event and encourage them to attend. This may involve utilizing local media, stakeholders’ channels, collaborating with local organizations, or distributing flyers and posters.
- **Accessibility.** The venue for the ‘open door’ event should be accessible to all participants, including those with physical disabilities. This may involve ensuring wheelchair ramps, accessible restrooms, and adequate signage.
- **Childcare.** If the event is expected to attract parents with young children, providing childcare services can encourage participation and ensure that everyone feels comfortable engaging in the discussion (La Placa & Corlyon, 2014).
- **Follow-up and feedback.** Following the ‘open door’ event, it is essential to gather feedback from participants to assess the method’s effectiveness and identify improvement areas. The input can inform future participatory and deliberative processes (for this purpose, a specific question was present in the post-event questionnaires, i.e. «You have any suggestions for the next World Cafés? »).

By addressing contextual needs, and employing flexible implementation strategies, the ‘open door’ method can contribute to more effective and meaningful citizens’ participation in addressing pressing local challenges. Our research aligns with the burgeoning recognition of the need for open participatory and deliberative processes, particularly at the micro-level. In a climate-conscious era where fostering public engagement is crucial (Brulle *et al.*, 2012), limiting participatory and/or deliberative processes to randomly selected citizens may not always be the best choice.

However, our work offers several distinctive features that enhance the ‘open door’ contribution to the field:

1. **Active host engagement, selection, and expertise.** Our World Café discussions featured active host involvement, in contrast to Alunni-Menichini *et al.* (2023). The hosts facilitated interactions among participants, guided the conversation, and ensured a balanced exchange of perspectives. Such an active role fostered a more dynamic and engaging environment for participants.
Moreover, while Alunni-Menichini *et al.* (2023) employed hosts with focus group experience (they were also part of the research group), the hosts in our World Cafés were chosen from among the participants themselves. This selection strategy aimed to promote a sense of ownership and informality, encouraging participants to feel comfortable sharing their ideas and engaging in open dialogue.
2. **Diverse settings.** Our World Cafés were conducted in a variety of settings, including a municipal library, associations’ offices, a private terrace. The choice of venues aimed to create a welcoming and accessible atmosphere, breaking down potential barriers to participation and attracting a broader range of individuals. Conversely, the Café was held inside the university in the research conducted by Alunni-Menichini *et al.* (2023). Furthermore, libraries play an indispensable role in the functioning of democratic societies, serving as vital hubs for deliberative democracy (Kranich, 2010). They offer indispensable access to information, empowering citizens to engage in meaningful democratic processes and drive community innovation (Kranich, 2020).
3. **Comparative research.** By conducting World Café discussions within two distinct Italian regions (i.e. Emilia-Romagna and Calabria), we were able to draw comparative insights into the approach’s effectiveness across different contexts, further enriching our understanding of the method’s adaptability and potential for broader application. Such comparative research allowed us to identify similarities and differences in citizens’ participation, discussion dynamics, and outcomes.

Nevertheless, one novelty of our research lies in applying the World Café approach in underserved areas, specifically inner areas and Calabria, where participatory and deliberative experiences are scarce, as confirmed by the Observatory on Participation of the Emilia-

Romagna Region (see Section 1.5, Chapter 1). It is important to note that the term ‘underserved areas’ should not be interpreted in a negative manner. Indeed, as Rimondi and Manella (2021) assert, citing the cases of Marzabotto and Borbona, noteworthy instances of civic engagement were observed (with notable involvement of younger citizens), both in terms of the relationship between citizens and institutions and the relationship between local associations. However, as the authors note, this form of participatory process necessitates greater regularity and a stronger inclination toward networking, with a view to comparing and sharing experiences across different territories.

The selection of local contexts evinces the capacity of the World Café to engage citizens in areas that have historically been excluded from participatory and/or deliberative processes. It is of the utmost importance to engage citizens within inner/rural areas, in order to ensure that their voices and perspectives are represented in decision-making processes that affect their lives. This engagement helps to bridge the gap between citizens and decision-makers, thereby fostering more inclusive and equitable outcomes, as outlined in EU COM (2021) 345 final. Involving citizens from Italy’s inner areas enables the creation of context-specific solutions that address the unique challenges and opportunities of these areas, resulting in more effective and sustainable policies tailored to their specific needs. Such a framework also aligns with the notion of the «urban-rural continuum» (UN-Habitat, 2019), as introduced in Chapter 1: by fostering collaboration among residents of Italy’s inner areas, it ensures policy tailoring to specific local needs, recognizing the importance of «participatory dialogue to identify and map potential conflicts and culturally appropriate solutions» (*ivi*, p. 26).

In light of the aforementioned framework concerning inner areas, as posited by Carrosio (2010), the energy issue is rekindling a divide between urban centers and peripheries, between cities and rural areas. Furthermore, the risk of marginal territories being colonized for renewable energy production is considerable (*ivi*). Consequently, the discussion of participation and sustainability in these contexts becomes a challenging endeavor (*ivi*). There is a risk that participation will be understood in a very limited sense, as merely involving local populations to create consent for projects that have already been predetermined by higher authorities (*ivi*). In contrast, the concept of autonomy appears to bring genuine innovation to these territories by promoting participation and sustainability (*ivi*). Therefore, participatory democracy in small municipalities must be accompanied by the self-determination of their own choices, free from the imposition of external projects (*ivi*). This does not imply isolation but rather local sovereignty and a reclamation of self-determination in internal-external relations, as well as the

capacity of local communities to engage on an equal footing with higher levels of government (*ivi*).

The novel aspect of our research is to evaluate whether the World Café method influenced individual preferences. The findings suggest that the World Café can facilitate a re-evaluation of participants' viewpoints and engagement in constructive dialogue by introducing them to a multiplicity of perspectives through the processes of 'cross-pollination' and critical thinking. Moreover, our quasi-experiments, built upon the concepts of 'participation' and 'deliberation' conceived as a countermeasure to the 'fast democracy' style of problem-solving (Haas, 2014), were able to bring out the potential of the World Café format to encourage the co-creation of an alternative solution, rather than simply choosing between two options (*ivi*). As demonstrated by discussions' findings and by the added questions in the questionnaires about the specific topics addressed. Unlike conventional surveys that limit respondents to binary choices, the questionnaires allowed participants to express a wider range of preferences beyond predetermined options, enabling the capture of diverse perspectives on the issues, as evidenced by the variety of responses recorded under the 'other' option.

The World Café has the potential to bridge the participatory gap that exists between northern and southern Italy and/or between urban and non-urban areas, thereby facilitating the transformation of individual preferences.

As already highlighted, the decision to conduct all four fieldworks in collaboration with local stakeholders has underscored the significance of avoiding the perception or, at the very least, attempting to mitigate the impression of being an 'outsider researcher' (Kerstetter, 2012): for this purpose, the selection of the fieldwork locations was made in consultation with the local stakeholders involved (i.e. Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna, the Municipality of Gazzola and library staff, Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo, and ARCI Cosenza). Our research addresses a significant challenge identified by Löhr *et al.* (2020) concerning the World Café and qualitative data collection: the difficulty in meeting and involving stakeholders. By successfully implementing the World Café approach within the four Italian areas, we demonstrate strategies for overcoming these engagement barriers and enhancing the effectiveness of this participatory approach.

In general, identifying and reaching a diverse range of stakeholders may prove challenging, and budgetary constraints could be another potential source of conflict (Löhr *et al.*, 2020). Nonetheless, we employed a multifaceted approach to stakeholder engagement, utilizing local partnerships, community outreach, and targeted communication strategies to reach a broad spectrum of individuals. Indeed, our initial collaboration with Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-

Romagna informed our approach to stakeholder engagement and underscored the importance of establishing partnerships to successfully implement the World Café fieldworks.

The establishment of connections with local stakeholders in different contexts presents a range of challenges. However, the World Cafés have demonstrated that forging a solid relationship with a local stakeholder is an indispensable element for organizing a successful participatory experience. This is because local stakeholders possess invaluable knowledge and insights into the specific context and needs of the community. Initiating engagement at the outset and maintaining it throughout the participatory process is essential for ensuring that the initiative is firmly anchored in local realities and addresses the issues that are of greatest consequence to the community. Moreover, collaborating with trusted local stakeholders enhances the credibility and legitimacy of the participatory initiative (Hansson & Polk, 2018). Such a trust can encourage broader participation, even among those who may be hesitant to engage in formal and/or informal processes.

Within such a framework, we learned that partnerships with civil society organizations and institutional actors can significantly enhance the effectiveness of participatory initiatives like the World Café discussions. These partnerships can provide access to networks, resources, and otherwise unavailable expertise.

Nevertheless, Cini and Felicetti (2018) posit that deliberative and participatory democracy is a crucial means of strengthening democratic institutions, as it facilitates the alignment of citizens' democratic aspirations with the caliber of state institutions. In the absence of efficacious institutional mechanisms for participatory and deliberative democracy at both the national and local levels, an increase in public disillusionment and resentment toward liberal democratic values and institutions may result in a weakening of their legitimacy (Cini & Felicetti, 2018).

However, our experience in establishing collaborative relationships for the implementation of World Café sessions has highlighted the significance of both collaboration and contextual sensitivity in the context of participatory research and practice. By recognizing the strengths and contributions of diverse stakeholders (not only third-sector organizations, but also actors such as Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo and the Municipality of Gazzola), we can assert that we have successfully incorporated diverse opinions and viewpoints into the conversations, thereby introducing participants to the primary promoters of participation (indeed, many were unfamiliar with Cittadinanzattiva and ARCI). For instance, ARCI Cosenza, as previously mentioned, was actively engaged in a neighborhood-level ecological transition project (i.e. CoGreen) during the period of our fieldwork, and notably, after our World Café, some participants expressed their interest in joining ARCI's ongoing project.

The framework developed by Löhr *et al.* (2020) offers insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. Our findings confirm the importance of several elements, including planning (e.g. concerning the duration and the number of questions to be administered per hour), implementation (e.g. the exploration of new topics), and results (e.g. the difficulty in differentiating individual responses). Furthermore, the level of researcher-participant interaction (Corbetta, 2015), while absent in Löhr's *et al.* (2020) project, in our case was present, even though at the end of the World Café sessions.

However, a particularly noteworthy value emerges from the analysis of conversation transcripts and/or questionnaire responses, where participants consistently referenced specific and actionable steps that could be implemented on both individual and institutional levels. Such an outcome serves as a robust validation of the World Café approach's effectiveness as a catalyst for transforming dialogue into concrete action (Brown & Isaacs, 2005). The approach demonstrates its capacity to transcend mere discussion and knowledge sharing, prompting a transition toward a more action-oriented methodology for problem-solving. This shift was evidenced by a heightened awareness and engagement among participants, as observed in various ways. For instance, one participant articulated his/her intention to install solar panels at his/her residence, citing insights gained during the Café session as a motivating factor. Additionally, several participants expressed a desire to play a more active role in shaping local strategies and actions to address environmental concerns.

As some participants observed, the single meeting served to establish social connections between local stakeholders and participants. For instance, those from Gazzola highlighted how the fieldwork facilitated interactions that would not otherwise occur among their fellow countrymen, while those from Santa Caterina noted that discussions on current and environmental issues had already taken place prior to the fieldwork's inception. However, it is important to note that a single meeting is insufficient to effect meaningful change. Moreover, the four quasi-experiments provide only a limited perspective on the current state of citizens' engagement on environmental issues and concerns.

The research is innovative in three fundamental respects. Firstly, the research employs the World Café approach as a participatory tool to catalyze deliberative processes on locally specific issues arising during the Café sessions. Secondly, the research organizes participatory laboratories in remote areas, such as Italy's inner and rural contexts, which offer a promising avenue for sustainable territorial development aligned with the National Strategy for Inner Areas. Furthermore, the research demonstrates that inner areas are indeed eager hotbeds for driving tangible change in sustainability.

Conclusions

The research investigated the efficacy of the World Café approach in stimulating dialogue on climate change and potentially inducing modifications in individual preferences. Our findings suggest that the World Café can serve as a valuable tool to facilitate constructive discourse and potentially influence viewpoints on climate change, even for those participants lacking prior political or associational activism/affiliation.

Participants reported enhanced satisfaction, a desire for continued participation, and a sense of increased knowledge acquisition. The ‘open door’ method has been demonstrated to be an effective approach for encouraging participant engagement in quasi-experimental activities, facilitating the elicitation of a multifaceted array of perspectives on sustainability and climate change in alignment with the principles of action-research.

Furthermore, the World Cafés have also been instrumental in uncovering both similarities and differences across the four areas, highlighting some significant socio-territorial aspects in reference to Putnam’s work (1993). For instance, similarities include the nearly identical number of participants in each area and the shared use of the World Café, which fostered active participation and idea exchange regardless of prior knowledge. Additionally, all four fieldworks addressed themes of separate waste collection, green urban areas, and renewable energy, with participants in each location emphasizing the importance of individual responsibility and community involvement. Key differences emerged in recruitment strategies, participant engagement with prior information, and the focus of discussions. Bologna and Gazzola successfully utilized the online platform for participant registration, whereas Cosenza and Santa Caterina saw minimal online engagement. Moreover, while the participants from Bologna placed an emphasis on the reuse of resources and the implementation of educational initiatives within the context of waste management, those from Cosenza prioritized the redesign of the collection system with the objective of enhancing accessibility. In the discussions pertaining to the development of green urban areas, the participants from Bologna focused on the integration of green spaces within the historic center, whereas those from Cosenza highlighted the inherent tensions between urban development and the creation of green spaces. With regard to the topic of renewable energy, the participants from Gazzola placed an emphasis on the importance of education and the formation of energy communities, whereas those from Santa Caterina placed a greater emphasis on the necessity of environmental sustainability and the involvement of the local community.

Although not a strict deliberative practice, the World Cafés facilitated a reconfiguration of individual preferences concerning the specific topics in a small portion of participants, stimulated citizens' participation, and fostered an environment conducive to open dialogue.

Although this study employed the 'action cycle' proposed by Walton and Gaffney (1991) as a framework, certain steps were intentionally excluded, including the creation of an implementation plan and the institutionalization of changes. These exclusions were primarily due to the study's primary objective of evaluating alterations in individual preferences and the associated resource limitations. However, these very omissions provide avenues for future research. Further research could investigate the complete implementation of the 'action cycle', with a particular focus on the steps that were not included in this study. For example, a comprehensive examination of the creation and execution of an implementation plan could provide valuable insights into the influence of systematic planning on change outcomes. Moreover, a more thorough examination of the process of institutionalizing and diffusing changes could provide valuable insights into the sustainability and effectiveness of changes within different contexts. Moreover, future research could address the logistical and financial challenges identified in our research by exploring alternative methods or models that could be employed to mitigate these constraints. By overcoming these limitations, future studies can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of each step in the 'action cycle' and contribute to a more comprehensive framework for applying these strategies in varied scenarios beyond academic quasi-experimentation.

However, our research represents a novel application of the World Café method as a catalyst for deliberation on locally-emerging issues, facilitating context-specific discussions. Furthermore, conducting quasi-experiments in Italy's inner and rural areas demonstrates the approach's potential for fostering sustainable development in local contexts.

Finally, future research should take into account the integration of the World Café with deliberative frameworks, utilizing a multi-stakeholder approach that includes experts and marginalized groups, providing an in-depth exploration of behavior change strategies that promote environmental justice. Additionally, the approach may be considered a valuable instrument for advancing the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), not only in urban environments but also in rural/inner contexts. By integrating sustainable development with grassroots democracy, it facilitates inclusive participation and ensures that local communities are actively engaged in shaping their own futures. Such a dual focus on sustainability and citizens' participation can lead to more resilient and equitable outcomes, addressing the unique challenges and opportunities present in diverse geographical settings.

Conclusions: Rethinking Participatory and Deliberative Democracy at the Micro-level through the Lens of the World Cafés

1. Theoretical framework

This thesis has investigated the potential of the World Café approach (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Löhr *et al.*, 2020; Steier *et al.*, 2015) to address the urgent global challenge of climate change, and its ability to induce a change in preferences. The fieldwork was conducted in specific territorial areas in the Emilia-Romagna and Calabria regions. Scholarly work in Italy has primarily concentrated on theoretical frameworks or case studies in urban contexts (e.g. Giannetti *et al.*, 2007), although other scholars (e.g. Felicetti, 2016) have directed their attention to diverse socio-political contexts.

The research was guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 7, 11, 12, and 13, which underscore the necessity for access to affordable, reliable, and sustainable energy, sustainable cities and communities, responsible consumption and production, and immediate action to combat climate change and its impacts. The research considered the European Union's ambitious climate goals, enshrined in the *Fit for 55* package, which aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and reduce EU emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. This is despite the assertion by Landemore (2022) that «no decarbonization without democratization» is necessary.

To comprehend the complex interrelationship between climate change and democracy, it is essential to integrate pivotal concepts such as environmental justice (Bullard, 2001), sustainability (Jarvie, 2016), and resilience (IPCC, 2018; Van Zandt, 2020). Each of these concepts plays a pivotal role in the formulation of effective climate strategies at the local and global levels, and in the assurance of equitable outcomes. Moreover, the interconnection between environmental justice and democratic theory is of paramount importance. Baber and Bartlett (2007) delve into this subject matter through the lens of deliberative democracy, examining how the tenets espoused by Rawls, Habermas, and Bohman shape responses to ecological challenges. These theories underscore the significance of public reasoning, civic engagement, and the harmonization of individual and collective interests in decision-making processes. Additionally, Olsson (2022) presents a framework for analyzing democratic engagement in climate justice, delineating the constraints and possibilities inherent to diverse

engagement strategies. This multi-perspective approach is crucial for developing effective strategies for community mobilization and ensuring the implementation of just and inclusive climate adaptation measures.

In this context, the issue of energy assumes a pivotal role. The framework proposed by Sovacool and Dworkin (2014) provides a comprehensive basis for evaluating energy systems through the lens of six core principles: availability, affordability, due process, transparency, sustainability, and equity. This framework emphasizes the importance of addressing the distribution of benefits and burdens across current and future generations, advocating for a system that respects human rights and minimizes environmental harm. The expanded framework by Sovacool *et al.* (2017) introduces additional concepts such as resistance and intersectionality, thereby broadening the scope of energy justice to encompass novel dimensions of social and environmental fairness. Additionally, the concept of ‘energy democracy’, as delineated by Burke and Stephens (2017), represents a transformative transition toward inclusive and participatory energy governance. Furthermore, Burke and Stephens (2017) delineate the intended outcomes for each goal within the framework of energy democracy. In order to achieve the objective of ‘resisting’ the prevailing energy agenda, it is necessary to implement measures that will prevent the continued extraction of fossil fuels, terminate the practice of providing financial incentives to the fossil fuel industry, and facilitate the formation of new collaborative partnerships between labor unions, environmental organizations, and local governments. In order to achieve the goal of ‘reclaiming’ the energy sector, it is necessary to democratize and localize energy corporations and to normalize social and public control of energy production and consumption. Ultimately, the objective of ‘restructuring’ the energy sector entails a transition away from profit-driven motives, the empowerment of communities to oversee energy systems, and the promotion of solidarity, inclusion, and democratic participation. The incorporation of energy democracy into policy underscores the significance of citizen involvement and the reallocation of authority within the energy sector. Energy democracy underscores the necessity for democratic governance of energy resources and the part played by ‘prosumers’ in driving energy transitions (Szulecki, 2018).

Nevertheless, as was also demonstrated by the fieldwork in Santa Caterina, while renewable energy can facilitate local empowerment (Hofman *et al.*, 2023), it does not necessarily guarantee democratization or address all social conflicts. In this regard, the concept of ‘local energy autonomy’ (Juntunen & Martiskainen, 2021; Puttilli, 2014) is proposed as a potential solution.

The ‘slow democracy’ approach, exemplified by the Portsmouth ‘study circles’, illustrates that a deliberate and methodical process can result in more innovative and consensus-driven solutions than rapid, superficial decision-making (Clark & Teachout, 2013). This approach not only supports more inclusive and deliberative participation but also facilitates a shift toward sustainable and equitable practices by leveraging collective action and citizens’ engagement. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge the role of grassroots initiatives and niche innovations in promoting ecological sustainability. Bottom-up approaches, which prioritize local context and community action, have the potential to drive significant change. However, for these approaches to effectively scale and integrate into mainstream practices, they require support from institutions (Seyfang & Smith, 2007; Landi, 2015). The success of these innovations is contingent upon the creation of opportunities for them to exert influence over broader democratic systems (Cini & Felicetti, 2018). However, the constraints of participatory processes in Southern Europe, where efforts have frequently been confined to minor issues rather than propelling substantial societal transformation, highlight the necessity for sustained and rigorous engagement to address these challenges (Sintomer & del Pino, 2014). This reinforces the imperative for a more impactful and sustained approach to participatory democracy that can address significant issues and drive meaningful change.

Moreover, our research advocated for an objective sustainability perspective that emphasized transformative change, learning and concerted action (Collins, 2014; Egmore, 2019), interdisciplinary understanding, and social transformation (Maton, 2000). In addition to these elements, we also placed significant emphasis on theoretical rigor and practical action.

In order to investigate whether informal and constructive conversations could potentially lead to changes in individual preferences and foster a ‘green consensus’ among participants, our research employed the World Café format as a participatory approach. This was done in order to address the primary research question «How do informal and constructive conversations, using the World Café format, purposefully aim to foster a deliberate transformation in individual preferences regarding climate change, fostering a ‘green consensus’? ». Indeed, as Elster (2016) asserts, « [...] the central concern of politics should be the transformation of preferences rather than their aggregation. [...] » (p. 34).

The variability in initial positions among participants, influenced by personal beliefs and experiences, has the potential to significantly impact the deliberative processes and their outcomes (Bobbio, 2010). Such variability has the potential to impact the efficacy with which participants engage in deliberation and undergo a shift in their views. This transformation is of critical importance for achieving consensus and fostering a more profound comprehension

among participants. Indeed, as Dryzek (2009) has observed, deliberation entails reflective communication that encourages the consideration of preferences, beliefs, and values without the use of coercion. Its strength lies in the principle of reciprocity, which ensures that ideas are expressed in a way that is acceptable to those with different perspectives. In contrast to adversarial debate, deliberation places a premium on comprehension over victory and permits a degree of receptivity to the possibility of modifying one's position.

The World Café approach has been identified as a crucial method in the process of linking dialogue to tangible action, fostering learning and empowerment, and facilitating generative dialogues that align with the principles of Living Labs. Such a framework underscores the importance of communication in establishing symbiotic relationships between science and society (Scholl *et al.*, 2022), which is critical for effectively addressing environmental challenges.

Our activities on the ground took account of such aspects, by incorporating mechanisms that facilitated the co-creation of knowledge among participants and stakeholders, aligning goals and expectations, and fostering changes in individual preferences and behaviors through experiential learning.

In this sense, the World Cafés organized within the different territorial areas may be moreover regarded as a tangible manifestation of the Living Lab approach.

Furthermore, it is imperative to position the World Café as a tool for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the objective of bridging urban and rural divides in order to ensure inclusive participation in sustainable development initiatives. By integrating sustainability objectives into the fabric of grassroots democracy, the approach cultivates resilient and equitable outcomes that are tailored to the unique characteristics of diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts. This aligns with the concept of «urban-rural linkages», as outlined by UN-Habitat (2019), and the EU COM (2021) 345 final.

As Putnam (1993) observed, the North of Italy is distinguished by the prevalence of 'horizontal' bonds, whereas the South is typified by 'vertical' bonds, which are characterized by dependency and exploitation. Rather than viewing this description as inherently negative, it can be understood to refer to the notion of 'participation'. As highlighted by Bulsei and Podestà (2014), this concept can be defined as the act of taking part in, collaborating in, or contributing to an activity or decision. Participatory practices have the potential to enhance both 'horizontal' relationships among citizens and traditional 'vertical' relationships with institutions (Bulsei & Podestà, 2014).

2. Methodological overview

The fieldwork was successful also because it was facilitated by collaborations with local stakeholders, most notably Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna. These partnerships provided invaluable support and enhanced residents' engagement, playing a pivotal role in the research's success. Such partnerships facilitated impactful World Café sessions, which were integrated into the Cittadinanzattiva's Social Impact Assessment of Activities for 2022 and extended its organizational reach into new territories (e.g. Province of Piacenza).

The collaboration with Cittadinanzattiva, ARCI Cosenza, the Municipality of Gazzola, and Avamposto Agricolo Autonomo proved to be fundamental in reducing the impression of the 'outsider researcher' (Kerstetter, 2012) within the areas involved. Furthermore, their organizational and logistical contributions were essential to the fieldworks' success.

In Gazzola, the meetings with the city councilor responsible for cultural and educational policies proved to be of great importance in the selection of the location and the promotion of the event. Moreover, the dissemination of information on the official pages of Cittadinanzattiva and the Municipal Library contributed to the expansion of the event's reach.

Identifying relevant stakeholders proved to be a challenging aspect of the project in Cosenza. However, the involvement of ARCI was crucial because they provided a location and utilized their channels (social media, flyers, newsletters) to promote the event, thereby ensuring its visibility and success.

As Griffis and Johnson (2014) have demonstrated, rural public libraries, like that in Gazzola's fieldwork, are effective in promoting social cohesion and community engagement. Libraries serve as focal points for democratic processes and lifelong learning (Kranich, 2020), rendering them optimal settings for participatory activities.

With regard to the recruitment of participants, we employed an 'open door' method. While self-selection biases (Bobbio, 2019) are a hallmark of the 'open door', as Talpin (2020) has observed, random selection does not inherently align with the democratization of democracy. It does not necessarily enhance citizens' influence in decision-making processes. Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that the potential risks associated with self-selection may also be prevalent in other recruitment methods (Isernia *et al.*, 2013; Sintomer, 2018).

In terms of methodology, the research highlighted the difficulties inherent in the recruitment of participants, and put forward the view that a balance should be struck between openness and

representativeness in participatory processes. The ‘open door’ method used to recruit participants proved effective, facilitating a diverse array of perspectives on sustainability and climate change that align with the principles of the action-research method.

In this context, the World Café method emerges as a particularly efficacious tool within the domain of action-research, enabling direct and meaningful dialogue among participants on environmental issues and concerns. Action-research reflects deliberative processes and integrates aspects of the living lab approach, thereby providing a practical framework for local environmental action.

Egmose (2019) underscores the transformative potential of action-research, particularly when situated within a sustainability framework. This approach is designed to engender radical change and facilitate social learning through participatory, trans-disciplinary strategies. Moreover, this thesis underscores the significance of community-based action research (Ventura & Shahar, 2022), which is particularly well-suited to addressing the specific needs of our research context. As Ventura and Shahar (2022) propose, this approach is socially oriented, engaging individuals in the research process and underscoring the interconnection between the researcher and the participants in the experimental setting. The World Café format, employed in this study, exemplifies the participatory nature of action-research, whereby participants are empowered through dialogue and learning.

In essence, the action-research method is distinguished by its adaptability, inclusivity, and emphasis on tangible outcomes, while aligning with the hallmarks of qualitative research (Corbetta, 2015). The methodology’s focus on citizen participation and collaborative problem-solving illustrates the thesis’s dedication to making a significant and enduring impact on both academic inquiry and individual action.

Furthermore, we considered transparency and inclusivity to be essential for enhancing the quality of the research. Transparency is an essential element of research, enhancing credibility and trust by ensuring that the research process is clear and understandable (Elman & Kapiszewski, 2014). Furthermore, it enhances the validity of findings by documenting rigor and relevance (Elman *et al.*, 2018).

However, it is incumbent upon researchers to ensure equal participation, protect confidentiality, and maintain transparency throughout the process. The World Café method is aligned with the principles of transformative learning and social change (Groulx *et al.*, 2017; Lorenzetti *et al.*, 2016), which are crucial for addressing complex issues such as climate change beyond expert-led approaches.

3. Empirical results and limits

The research provides an exploration of citizens' participation across four distinct areas: Bologna and Gazzola in Emilia-Romagna, and Cosenza and Santa Caterina dello Ionio in Calabria. It is noteworthy that the results indicate a significant eagerness among participants in Calabria, a southern region, to engage and actively participate in democratic life. This enthusiasm illustrates a pervasive aspiration among participants to play a role in enhancing the well-being of their local communities and to influence the decision-making processes that affect them.

The data gathered through pre- and post-event questionnaires revealed a discernible change in the preferences of some participants, indicating that well-structured participatory processes can indeed influence participants' viewpoints and generate a willingness to address climate change and specific environmental issues. The World Café format proved to be an efficacious instrument for cultivating democratic engagement, bolstering resilience, and promoting sustainable development practices. For example, one participant from Gazzola subsequently expressed a desire to install photovoltaic panels at his/her residence, while numerous other participants indicated their intention to prioritize better separate collection of waste.

The research findings are consistent with the initial research question and sub-question (Tab. 1, p. 49), offering valuable insights into the dynamics of informal conversations and their impact on individuals' preferences:

- The central question of our research is how informal and constructive conversations, particularly those facilitated through the World Café format, can intentionally foster a transformation in individual preferences regarding climate change, ultimately contributing to the emergence of a 'green consensus'. This question is based on the premise that everyday dialogues among citizens can serve as potent catalysts for change when structured in a manner that fosters meaningful engagement.

With regard to the explanandum, dialogues among citizens in informal settings, which reflect everyday life, are of great importance for understanding how societal changes originate at the individual level. These informal spaces are conducive to the expression of thoughts and openness to new ideas, thereby facilitating the germination of transformative ideas.

With regard to the explanans, the World Café format is identified as an efficacious instrument for engendering these kinds of conversations. By offering a structured yet informal environment, the World Café prompts participants to engage in profound and constructive discussions. This approach is pivotal in enabling individuals to reflect on their perspectives, contemplate alternative viewpoints, and potentially alter their preferences in a manner that fosters collective action on climate change.

- In light of the aforementioned sub-question, a pivotal element of the research is the manner in which both urban and rural inhabitants can be engaged in these discourses, thereby facilitating the collective intelligence essential for effectively addressing climate change. Our research posits that a mutual exchange of ideas between these groups has the potential to drive innovation and create new pathways for addressing environmental challenges.

In examining the explanandum, it is evident that the mutual exchange between urban and rural inhabitants serves as a catalyst for change. This exchange is essential because it facilitates the integration of diverse perspectives, knowledge, and resources, which can lead to more comprehensive and effective solutions to climate-related issues.

With regard to the explanans, the successful involvement of both urban and rural individuals necessitates the recognition of the distinctive contributions that each group can provide. Urban areas may offer technological advancements and insights into policy, while rural areas provide traditional knowledge and a proximate connection to the natural environment. By integrating these disparate perspectives, the conversations can become more robust and capable of generating innovative solutions to climate change.

The research offers a theoretical contribution to the field by elucidating the interplay between informal conversations, the transformation of individual preferences, and the development of a consensus on critical issues such as climate change. This understanding provides a more profound comprehension of the dynamics of preferences' transformation and the processes that drive decision-making among individuals who engage in a participatory and/or deliberative process. This underscores the importance of establishing forums where informal, yet structured conversations can take place, as these are vital to fostering the consensus needed to address pressing global challenges.

However, a review of the results from the three fieldworks (Gazzola, Santa Caterina, and Cosenza), in which specific questions were posed to determine any shifts in individual preferences, reveals the following:

- 1) With regard to separate waste collection, in the pre-event questionnaire, 81% of participants across all fieldworks indicated that an increase in material recovery facilities was crucial for enhancing the local environment. In the post-event phase, this conviction remained largely unaltered, with slight fluctuations observed in the Cosenza data, indicating a minor shift in preferences but overall stability.

In particular, 34 out of 42 participants (81%) indicated that the establishment of additional materials recovery facilities (e.g. for organic waste, plastics, etc.) is a crucial measure for enhancing the local environmental quality. In the post-event phase, 33 out of 39 participants (85%) expressed a similar viewpoint.

Nevertheless, the preferences expressed remained consistent with those observed in the initial phase. In the initial phase, 11 out of 16 participants in Cosenza expressed the same perspective. In the subsequent post-event phase, 13 out of 16 participants held this view. Thus, there was a slight shift in preferences.

- 2) The discussions on renewable energy and green urban areas yielded more pronounced shifts in preferences. In Santa Caterina, for instance, there was a notable shift in preferences regarding investment in renewable energy, with the emergence of a more diverse range of perspectives, including a preference for fossil fuels. Similarly, preferences about green urban areas in Cosenza resulted in a more varied range of viewpoints, although the overall commitment to sustainability remained consistent.

In Gazzola, preferences on renewable energy demonstrated minimal change, with the exception of the absence of initial supporters of nuclear energy in the post-event responses. This indicates that either a change in preference has occurred or that 3 respondents did not answer the post-event questionnaire.

In particular, a significant transformation was observed in the case of Santa Caterina, where initially, 8 out of the 13 participants indicated the importance of investing in renewable energy sources, while 5 out of the 13 participants expressed alternative views that differed from those presented in the questionnaires. An analysis of the post-event questionnaire revealed a notable shift in preferences. 6 participants out of 13 now asserted the necessity of increased investment in renewables, one participant favored fossil fuels, and 6 participants articulated an alternative perspective. These findings

suggest that the World Café had a discernible impact, prompting the emergence of alternative viewpoints within the sustainability framework, irrespective of the preference for fossil fuels.

With regard to the discussion on green urban areas in Cosenza, there was a notable shift in preferences. Prior to the event, 11 out of 16 participants indicated that the creation of additional green areas was necessary. Following the event, this number decreased to 9 out of 16. The shift in the number of participants advocating for more green urban areas, from 11 to 9, does not indicate a diminished sensitivity toward green spaces. It is noteworthy that none of the participants, either before or after the event, expressed support for the creation of additional infrastructure at the expense of green areas. Instead, it seems that the discussion has allowed for the emergence of alternative perspectives. For instance, the increase from 4 to 5 participants who advocated for infrastructures that are well-integrated with urban green spaces, coupled with the rise in participants with alternative viewpoints (from one to 2), suggests that the event facilitated the expansion of perspective rather than a reduction in concern for green urban areas.

With regard to renewable energy, there was no significant shift in preferences among the participants in the Gazzola case. However, the post-event findings revealed the absence of those who had expressed support for nuclear energy ($n=2/13$). In the absence of three responses, it is not possible to state with certainty whether those supporters have altered their preferences. However, if they have, it may be posited that the World Café has acted as a catalyst for change in a natural manner.

Our research effectively demonstrates the potential of the World Café approach to influence individual preferences. The quasi-experiments demonstrated a subtle yet notable shift in participants' views, particularly on topics such as renewable energy and green urban areas, which underscores the impact of structured, democratic dialogue at the micro-level.

Notwithstanding the positive results, the study also revealed a number of limits. For example, resource limitations and a lack of political backing constituted substantial obstacles to the effective implementation of participatory practices (e.g. the involvement of institutional actors, such as municipal councilors, was feasible and considerably more straightforward in smaller contexts, but not in urban areas).

Moreover, the absence of expert input during the sessions represents a potential limitation. Additionally, the lack of random selection of participants and the non-representative nature of

the sample limits the generalizability of the results. Moreover, although the World Café method fosters open and inclusive dialogue, it does not fully align with the principles of deliberative democracy, which could be seen as a constraint in the broader context of deliberative processes. Notwithstanding these limitations, the research underscores the efficacy of employing the World Café approach in engaging a heterogeneous cohort of participants, particularly in contexts where such democratic dialogues are scarce, such as in Italian inner areas. The flexibility of the method permitted a context-based exploration of perspectives, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the issues under discussion.

4. Avenues for future research

The findings of our study indicate that the World Café, employing the ‘open door’, has the potential to be an efficacious instrument for fostering dialogue and deliberation on intricate matters at the micro-level. This is particularly relevant since climate change serves as a ‘threat multiplier’, as postulated by King and Goodman (2011), thereby intensifying pre-existing social and environmental disparities.

However, further investigation is required to evaluate this methodology in greater detail, taking into account the constraints of our study, including the brief duration of the Cafés and the lack of a representative sample of the community in both rural and urban areas, as well as the absence of experts.

Future research should investigate the adaptability of the World Café format across diverse contexts and cultural settings (e.g. rural and urban areas), with the aim of providing insights into its broader applicability and potential for catalyzing positive ecological practices on a larger scale. This may be achieved through the use of comparative case studies. Moreover, longitudinal studies tracking the long-term effects of World Café interventions could elucidate the durability and lasting impact of the dialogues and collaborative actions initiated through this participatory method.

By addressing these research gaps, we can further elucidate the role of the World Café as a dynamic tool for advancing sustainability, fostering democratic dialogue, and empowering local communities (Maton, 2000) to create, or at least propose, meaningful change.

In other words, future research could focus on the following areas:

- **Investigating the impact of the World Café approach on different types of participants.** For instance, future studies could compare the effects of the World Café on participants with varying levels of knowledge about climate change, taking into account also their different political/associative affiliations.
- **Examining the long-term effects of the World Café approach.** Future studies could track participants over time to see if their attitudes and behavior change as a result of their presence in a participatory and/or deliberative Café, in order to verify if they are able to establish a veritable «community of practice» (Boffi *et al.*, 2016).
- **Developing and testing new World Café formats.** Future studies could experiment with different World Café formats, such as hybrid sessions (combining online and in-presence participation), using different types of technology.
- **Adapting the World Café format to the deliberative model of democracy, while still utilizing the ‘open door’ method, particularly in the smallest contexts such as inner/rural areas.** Our findings highlight the potential of combining such elements to enhance citizens’ participation and address specific local challenges effectively «*with people*», as Egmoose (2019) suggests.

One of the key takeaways from our quasi-experiments is the critical importance of tailoring participatory and/or deliberative processes to the specific territorial contexts in which they are conducted (De Salvo, 2021). It is particularly salient when considering the unique challenges and opportunities presented by inner/rural areas. Despite the recent increase in scholarly attention to these areas (e.g. Bulsei & Podestà, 2014; Rimondi & Manella, 2021), a knowledge gap persists regarding the most effective methods for engaging citizens in rural contexts within participatory and deliberative processes. Our research contributes to addressing this gap by highlighting the potential of the World Café approach. The results suggest that the World Café, with its emphasis on open dialogue and collaborative knowledge building (Brown & Isaacs, 2005), can offer promising avenues for fostering participation in rural areas. Furthermore, the World Café serves as a valid instrument for advancing the principle of «From Knowledge Production towards Knowledge Democracy» (Egmoose, 2019, p. 116), which underscores the transition from conventional, frequently hierarchical knowledge creation processes to more

inclusive, democratic practices that acknowledge and integrate local and experiential knowledge.

However, further exploration is necessary to determine how the World Café can be effectively adapted and transformed into a genuine deliberative practice within these contexts. This adaptation likely involves addressing issues specific to rural settings, such as:

- **Limited access to technology and resources:** rural communities may have limited access to the technology and resources often assumed in urban-oriented participatory exercises. The design of the World Café experience in these contexts may need to be adjusted to accommodate these limitations. Such a limit could be seen in Santa Caterina's fieldwork, where the online platform for booking was not used. As posited by Löhr *et al.* (2020), infrastructural and technical issues (e.g. a dearth of technology) have the potential to cause conflict in a World Café setting.
- **Social cohesion and pre-existing social dynamics:** rural communities are often characterized by strong social cohesion (Griffis & Johnson, 2014) and pre-existing social dynamics. The World Café format may need to be adapted to ensure inclusive participation and mitigate the influence of dominant voices, although such risks may also be present in more populous areas, such as urban contexts. Since Gazzola's fieldwork was conducted in the Municipal Library, it is relevant to note that rural public libraries are often able to create mechanisms in order to increase social cohesion and inclusion (Griffis & Johnson, 2014).
- **Building trust and overcoming social isolation:** building trust and overcoming social isolation can be particularly challenging in rural settings. The World Café process may need to incorporate strategies to foster a sense of community and belonging among participants. Specifically, rural communities are typically depicted as *Gemeinschaft* places, where people are connected through primary interactions, while urban communities are described as *Gesellschaft*, characterized by anonymity, interest-driven relationships, competition, and negotiation (De Salvo, 2021).

By addressing these potential challenges and adapting the World Café to the particular characteristics of rural contexts, future research can investigate how this approach can be utilized to foster more inclusive and effective deliberative practices in these under-represented

areas and regions. Our findings may represent a steppingstone for wider research designs regarding deliberative processes about conflictual environmental issues and concerns that emerged from the Café conversations. For instance, in the case of the offshore wind farm construction in the Ionian Sea, a deliberative process informed by the principles of energy justice (Sovacool & Dworkin, 2014) and energy democracy (Burke & Stephens, 2017; Szulecki, 2018) could prove highly beneficial. As Sovacool and Dworkin (2014, p. 5) aptly point out, «energy justice ensures [...] that communities are meaningfully informed and represented in energy decisions». By organizing a participatory and deliberative process, all stakeholders – from residents and policymakers to industry representatives and environmental groups – could engage in a reasoned and inclusive discussion. This would allow for a comprehensive exploration of the potential impacts (both positive and negative) of the wind farm project, ensuring that all voices are heard, and that decision-making reflects a balanced consideration of economic, social, and environmental factors, within the framework provided by Sovacool *et al.* (2017) which includes ‘availability’, ‘affordability’, ‘due process’, ‘transparency and accountability’, ‘sustainability’, ‘intergenerational equity’, ‘intragenerational equity’, ‘responsibility’, ‘resistance’, and ‘intersectionality’. Furthermore, the results of such participatory processes could be formalized into concrete agreements (Stapper, 2021), which can act as mechanisms for accountability and transparency. These agreements would explicate how stakeholder inputs are integrated into the decision-making process and ensure that commitments are upheld. In other words, they hold the potential to be revisited and expanded upon within a broader participatory process, fostering continuity and enabling the adaptation of decisions as new insights, stakeholder perspectives, or contextual changes emerge.

In future research on participation and climate change, it is important to consider that there is «no decarbonization without democratization» (Landemore, 2022). In discussing climate change, it is crucial to recognize that the phenomenon is experienced by individuals in ways that extend beyond mere technical and statistical predictions. In many cases, individuals perceive climate change as a direct impact on their local living contexts, which often manifest as water and air pollution. Consequently, placing the local context at the center of participatory and deliberative processes is of paramount importance.

Thus, as we think about the future trajectory of our Cafés, transcending their academic origins, nurturing a shared understanding of local environmental challenges may foster a collective grasp of these issues, «reaching mutual understanding, and making meaning together across hierarchies» (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 201).

Furthermore, the results of these dialogues may prove invaluable to a number of stakeholders, including organizations such as Cittadinanzattiva, ARCI, and local municipalities, in terms of implementing innovative ideas generated from our participatory quasi-experiments. These dialogues serve as a conduit for translating grassroots insights into actionable strategies, thus bridging the gap between theoretical discourse and practical implementation. Therefore, integrating local perspectives within the participatory framework is not merely beneficial but crucial for achieving sustainable and equitable climate solutions.

Concluding our discussion, it is noteworthy that at the end of the fieldwork conducted in Santa Caterina, explicit reference was made to the significance of this participatory approach. Indeed, the councilmen emphasized that our Café represented an experience to be treasured, mainly due to its «concrete nature, applicability, and repeatability of the approach», which was grounded in innovative impacts emerging from a bottom-up level. Such a model has the potential for replication, with the possibility of evolving into a «permanent» participatory laboratory. This would serve to reinforce the value and sustainability of the model in addressing local environmental challenges through democratic engagement.

Thus, the conclusion of the Santa Caterina fieldwork highlighted the transformative potential of such participatory approaches. Council members praised the initiative for its pragmatic and feasible approach, underscoring the substantial and innovative impacts of grassroots participation. They noted that the approach's strength lies not only in its immediate applicability but also in its ability to be replicated across different contexts, suggesting a framework that could be institutionalized as a permanent participatory laboratory in Italian inner/rural areas.

This recognition lends support to the critical role of bottom-up processes in addressing environmental issues and concerns. By integrating such participatory frameworks into the structure of local governance, we can establish long-lasting platforms for continuous dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. The success of the Café in Santa Caterina, but also in Gazzola, Bologna, and Cosenza, thus serves as a compelling model for how local knowledge and individual action can drive meaningful and sustainable environmental solutions, emphasizing the necessity of fostering environments where community voices are integral to the decision-making processes, ensuring that climate action is both inclusive and effective.

The World Café's open and inclusive nature can facilitate dialogue and understanding between project developers, local communities, and other stakeholders. By establishing a secure environment for diverse viewpoints, the World Café can assist in identifying potential concerns and developing mutually beneficial solutions by emphasizing the following aspects: 1) **Transparency and early engagement.** Encourage transparent and early engagement with local

communities throughout the project development using participatory and deliberative ideas of democracy; 2) **Addressing concerns proactively.** Proactively address community concerns by providing clear information and engaging in open dialogue; 3) **Sharing benefits and fostering ownership.** Highlight the potential benefits of renewable energy projects (or projects concerning other environmental issues and concerns, such as waste management, green areas, and so forth) for the local community and encourage citizens' participation in project ownership; 4) **Considering alternative solutions.** Explore alternative project designs or locations that may address community concerns while still achieving sustainability goals.

In such a framework, as Haas (2014) proposes, deliberation may serve as a principal method of preventing the pitfalls of 'fast democracy' approaches to problem-solving. By focusing on broad themes that directly impacted communities (i.e. separate waste collection, green urban areas, and renewables) rather than specific policy issues, our fieldworks facilitated the emergence of alternative perspectives that transcended binary thinking (*ivi*) and discussion.

It can facilitate an innovative vision of decision-making based on a participatory and deliberative model of democracy to weighing the relative merits and drawbacks of a given project, thereby advancing an innovative form of bottom-up approach to sustainability.

Participation can be an effective method of including residents in the policymaking process (Stapper & Duyvendak, 2020). Consequently, it is incumbent upon policymakers to be cognizant of the discrepancies in individuals' access to participation and other political and legal domains (*ivi*). Moreover, municipal governments should implement mechanisms for monitoring and assessing the efficacy of participation initiatives, encouraging a full participation (*ivi*).

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that these experiences underscore the significance of participation beyond mere electoral involvement. However, as Latouche (2005) cautions, these participatory and/or deliberative experiences should not be intermittent, discontinuous, or isolated niche endeavors. While this was justified in our case by the initial research objectives, we nonetheless achieved notable results. These include stakeholder receptivity to adopting participatory and/or deliberative techniques following our example and participants' satisfaction, with the majority viewing our fieldwork as a valuable participatory practice for local climate change decision-making. Bottom-up initiatives like our participatory/deliberative laboratories, which perfectly fit the niche-innovation category (micro-level), can introduce innovative products or sustainable practices within civil society (Landi, 2015). Moreover, as Landi (2015) emphasizes, the effectiveness of niche practices depends on support from the institution (e.g. meso-level of local government). The key challenge lies in identifying a

window of opportunity for niche innovations to achieve mainstream adoption. However, it is important to acknowledge that niches often have a competitive relationship with the existing system, aiming for its eventual replacement with new practices. In other words, from a sustainability perspective, niche innovations have the potential to become an added value for the existing system. Furthermore, their knowledge and practices can be adopted to address challenges and enhance its overall effectiveness (Landi, 2015). However, it is essential to consider the above-mentioned concepts of ‘participatory parity’ and ‘scalar parity’ (Ross *et al.*, 2021) when evaluating the impact of such innovations.

APPENDIX. Lessons from ‘Community PRO’ by Cittadinanzattiva

a. How to involve citizens: the experience of the ‘Community PRO’ Project in Bologna’s historic center

‘Community PRO’, which stands for ‘Participation, Resilience, Organizing’, was a project initiated by Cittadinanzattiva with funding support from the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies¹³⁴.

The purpose of this appendix is to tackle some inquiries and provide comprehensive answers:

- What were the project’s primary objectives?
- How did ‘Community PRO’ aim to foster innovative interactions between citizens in the community?
- What role did strengthening social bonds play in the project’s goals and outcomes?
- What were the demographic characteristics of the participants, and what were the ‘opportunities’ and ‘critical issues’ recognized by the participants in the city of Bologna to build the Community Map?
- What were the vital structural components and steps in formulating a comprehensive Community Strategy, and how do these elements collectively contribute to developing and successfully implementing initiatives to enhance community well-being, growth, and resilience?
- What role did I play within the project, and how does this relate to our research?

This project marked a pivotal initiative, acting as a springboard for our World Café quasi-experiments, and it was designed to address some key objectives (Cittadinanzattiva, 2023)¹³⁵:

- **Designing and developing innovative ways of interactions between citizens.** A core aim of the ‘Community PRO’ project was to pioneer inventive methods of fostering interactions between citizens. By creating dynamic and engaging platforms for dialogue, the project sought to break down communication barriers and encourage active participation in community affairs.

¹³⁴See

https://www.huffingtonpost.it/blog/2023/06/28/news/comunita_attive_leesperienza_di_community_pro-12516960/

¹³⁵ *Laboratorio di Progettazione. Mappe, Strategie e Piano di Resilienza di Comunità. Bologna, Centro storico.* Cittadinanzattiva (2023)

- **Developing a culture of volunteerism and active citizenship.** A strong focus of ‘Community PRO’ was to nurture a culture of volunteerism and active citizenship within the community. The project encouraged residents to take ownership of their community’s well-being and empower individuals to become proactive contributors to local governance.
- **Strengthening social bonds.** Recognizing the vital role that social bonds play in the cohesion of a community, the project sought to strengthen these bonds. Citizens were encouraged to connect, collaborate, and form stronger social ties through various activities and initiatives, ultimately creating a sense of belonging and unity.
- **Strengthening the community’s ability to respond to changes caused by external events.** The ‘Community PRO’ project aimed to enhance the community’s ability to respond effectively to changes prompted by external events. The project sought to equip the community with the tools and strategies to adapt and thrive in adversity, whether it was economic challenges, environmental issues, or unforeseen crisis.
- **Defining co-designed actions.** ‘Community PRO’ placed a strong emphasis on participatory decision-making. Actions and initiatives were not imposed from above but were co-designed with the active involvement of community members. This co-creation approach ensured that solutions were both contextually relevant and reflective of the needs and aspirations of the community.

In other words, the underlying essence of this project lied in the empowerment of residents to confront contemporary challenges and crisis, ranging from climate change to pandemics. The core strategy revolved around transforming behaviors and relationships while bolstering self-organization within these communities. Notably, the project spanned diverse local communities and an array of settlement types, encompassing both urban and rural/inner areas, spanning from the northern reaches of Italy (e.g. Emilia-Romagna, Lombardia, etc.) to the southernmost regions (e.g. Calabria, Campania, etc.).

As also described in the project’s sheet¹³⁶,

«The project was implemented nationwide and involved the associational network of Cittadinanzattiva (20 regional offices, 20 regional protection centers, and 225 territorial assemblies in 98 provinces, totaling 30.000 members). It also engaged over 100 associations and federations of individuals affected by chronic and rare

¹³⁶ Community PRO’s project sheet is available at the following website:
https://www.cittadinanzattiva.it/multimedia/import/files/progetti/consumatori/Community_PRO_Le_attivita_di_progetto.pdf

diseases affiliated with the National Coordination of Associations of Chronic Patients (i.e. Cnamc), as well as other networks of citizens, volunteers, institutions, and professionals with whom Cittadinanzattiva collaborated systematically. The project activities were carried out in all regions and in various types of settlements, including municipalities, municipalities within inner areas, and neighborhoods in urban/metropolitan areas. The aim was to develop a method adaptable to the specific needs of each location, employing a place-based approach that could be replicable. Specifically, the project was implemented in places identified as particularly significant in terms of existing challenges (lack of services, impact of social and environmental inequalities, real or perceived insecurity). These locations were also characterized by the presence of civic activism resources, including informal ones, which constituted a favorable condition for strengthening and stabilizing experiences and practices of community empowerment» (Cittadinanzattiva, 2020, p. 3, translated by the author).

Thus, such a comprehensive reach was underscored by a place-based approach, a fundamental concept harmonizing with the principles articulated in the National Strategy for Inner Areas, already mentioned in the previous chapters.

So, due that ‘Community PRO’ was not confined to one specific type of community or geographic location, bridging both urban and rural/inner areas, it is an important feature, strictly intertwined with our fieldworks that, albeit tangentially, delve into the realm of National Strategy for Inner Areas.

The ‘Community PRO’ inclusive nature acknowledged the unique challenges different communities face and the vast array of perspectives and local wisdom they brought to the table, recognizing that every community has unique character, strengths, and challenges.

As we can observe, the project highlighted certain features associated with deliberative and participatory democracy, providing an opportunity to assess the most suitable approach for our fieldworks: it should be emphasized that in the project sheet of ‘Community PRO’, the World Café was among the methodologies or «technologies of civic activism» (Cittadinanzattiva, 2020, p. 5) that could have been utilized by the project itself.

Nevertheless, as also highlighted within the online platform of Cittadinanzattiva’s Civic School (in Italian, *Scuola Civica di Alta Formazione – Diritti e Partecipazione*)¹³⁷, ‘Community PRO’ started from basic assumptions that deserve to be mentioned: 1) cities and territories can transform into more inclusive, participatory, and resilient contexts, and citizens have a central role in allowing it; 2) living standards, security, and inclusiveness of the settlements determine an environment favorable to the quality of democracy and protagonism of the communities. It has been shown that, generally, there is a direct correlation between citizens’ participation in the creation of public policies and living conditions in human settlements, in the sense that

¹³⁷ <https://www.scuolacivica.it/>

participation favors more effective decisions, more adequate services, and more excellent protection of rights; 3) strengthening civic activism in terms of numbers, territorial diffusion, skill acquisition, and the ability of citizens to organize themselves to carry out activities of general interest is a necessary precondition for civic involvement and the protagonism of communities in knowledge and reality-changing processes to protect rights and care for common goods; 4) engine and foremost goal of the entire project is the ‘empowerment’ of citizen.

Concerning the city of Bologna, ‘Community PRO’ was carried out by seven ‘civic activators’¹³⁸ (with different cultural backgrounds), fundamental mediators who followed a specific training before the launch of the project: the training, through a capacity building process, was imparted by the Cittadinanzattiva’s national team and experts, among which Adriano Paoella, professor of architecture at the University of Reggio Calabria (*Università degli Studi Mediterranea*), was Cittadinanzattiva’s Environment and Territory Officer.

Thanks to this formative action, each ‘civic activator’ understood why residents are fundamental for developing the local community and territory, learning tools and practices to ‘map’ problems and resources of the territory, aiming at co-designing solutions with and for communities.

It is also interesting to note the geographic distribution of the ‘civic activators’, with reference to the municipalities of residence: 31.4% of the activators were resident in the central municipalities of metropolitan areas (i.e. Turin, Milan, Venice, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, Bari, Palermo, Catania, Cagliari), 18.7% in municipalities with over 50.000 inhabitants, 28.4% in municipalities with 10.001 to 50.000 inhabitants, 17.6% in municipalities with 2.001 to 10.000 inhabitants, and 3.9% in small municipalities with up to 2.000 inhabitants, while 54 activators (52.9%) resided in a provincial capital municipality (FONDACA, 2023)¹³⁹. Returning to the issue of Italian inner areas, the *Officine Sperimentali Aree Interne*, a co-design initiative conducted amidst the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, have yielded documentation on effective strategies for fostering participation in sparsely populated areas, also providing insights on how to enhance adaptation and mitigation actions in response to climate change within territories (Tantillo, 2022). Additionally, such documentation offers guidance on actively involving young individuals in the social, economic, and cultural fabric

¹³⁸ In Italy, there were 103 ‘civic activators’, 3 of which in Calabria, and 11 in Emilia-Romagna (source: Scuola Civica di Alta Formazione – Diritti e Partecipazione), eventual resignation not included

¹³⁹ FONDACA is the acronym that stands for *Fondazione per la Cittadinanza Attiva* (<https://www.fondaca.org/index.php/it/>)

of inner contexts: as also written by Tantillo (2022), to promote broad participation within such contexts, establishing and recognizing the role of the ‘civic activators’ would be of crucial importance (*ivi*).

On the other hand, it is imperative to ensure access to residences to encourage the revitalization of spaces, provide education on the local environmental heritage, and promote the development of energy communities (*ivi*). As emphasized by Tantillo (2022), since the National Strategy for Inner Areas launched in 2013, co-design tools have been refined to the point where their incorporation into regular policies is crucial, underscoring the importance of citizens’ involvement.

Precisely, ‘Community PRO’, which took place within the context of the Article 118 of the Italian Constitution (« [...] The State, regions, metropolitan cities, provinces and municipalities shall promote the autonomous initiatives of citizens, both as individuals and as members of associations, relating to activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity»), followed three stages using three operational tools:

- 1) Community Map.
- 2) Community Strategy.
- 3) Resilience Plan.

First of all, it must be highlighted that ‘Community PRO’ was a place where everyone’s knowledge and ideas constituted an accurate starting point for collective actions (a co-designed environment of discussion) to define proposals.

As with our World Cafés, we may be wondering which one was the selection parameter of participants: ‘Community PRO’ started from the assumption that all citizens’ ideas must be listened to, without a majority or minority, while ensuring mutual respect context. On the other side, the initiatives were informal (each participatory laboratory was an informal self-convoked assembly), based on every person’s right to define the local community’s future.

The call for participation was encouraged using public notices (e.g. flyers and posters), Cittadinanzattiva’s social networks (e.g. Instagram and Facebook), newsletters, and website, recalling our World Cafés’ recruitment strategy.

The Community Map (1) was elaborated by looking at the local issues and opportunities of Bologna’s city center, as emphasized during the citizens’ meetings: two meetings were needed

(May 4 and June 13, 2022¹⁴⁰) to identify and collect participant reports and information. During the first meeting (May 4, 2022), ‘opportunities’ and ‘critical issues’ concerning Bologna’s historic center were separately collected using posters to allow everyone an end-to-end view across the different considerations (Cittadinanzattiva, 2023).

The second meeting (June 13, 2022) was conceived as correcting the data/thoughts that emerged within the first laboratory, encouraging possible additions or modifications (*ivi*). The first two meetings were crucial to elaborating the Community Map: information gathering from citizens occurred through a continuous interlocution, giving room to the spontaneous flow of citizens’ thoughts.

On September 7, 2022, a draft of the Community Map was shared with citizens in virtual mode, using the Zoom platform: in that case, the purpose was to confirm it and, if necessary, enrich it, while moderators from Cittadinanzattiva’s national team managed the online meeting. In this last case, the purpose of the online meeting was also to understand why residents highly emphasized such concerns.

As highlighted by Edwards (2002), the moderator in Internet discussions about public issues can be intended as a «democratic intermediary» who, in the case of a deliberative democratic process, may enhance the quality of discussions as forms of deliberative democracy; nevertheless, in the case of ‘Community PRO’, the participatory process mainly took place in presence, and the online discussions constituted a form of summary about the issues tackled by the citizens in presence.

Despite the diverse use of such maps (as we shall see below), Community Maps are characterized by a method based on the ‘activation’ of communities with different analysis objects. Within ‘Community PRO’, the purpose was to gather participants’ knowledge about the opportunities and socio-environmental issues, including the characteristics of places, how it feels to live there, citizens’ perception of quality of life, major issues, social relationships, and the community’s formal and informal civic structure (Cittadinanzattiva, 2023). The maps represented a tool to increase awareness about the territory’s features (mainly from the socio-environmental point of view) and the ability to take action within the local context (*ivi*).

However, clarifying what ‘Community PRO’ means by ‘opportunities’ and ‘critical issues’ (or ‘challenges’) about the specific geographic area may be necessary. The ‘opportunities’ are those common tangible and intangible goods, which, in their conservation, may be used by the local community to raise levels of widespread well-being, reducing the harmful effects of human

¹⁴⁰<https://www.cittadinanzattiva-er.it/communitypro-il-laboratorio-di-progettazione-sociale-centro-bologna-mappa-di-comunita/>

activities on the environment (*ivi*). The detection of such goods is related to citizens' capacity to identify the common goods in order to implement innovative and sustainable forms of social creativity. Such goods concern different spheres of the local context: environment (e.g. lakes, rivers, flora, and fauna); social variables (e.g. citizens' ability to organize and propose collective events; associations and volunteering); cultural heritage, both tangible (e.g. libraries) and intangible (e.g. festivals) (*ivi*).

Conversely, 'critical issues' refer to specific situations that may cause damage to the local community, also from the environmental point of view, the removal of which would lead to general well-being for inhabitants, promoting cultural and sustainable development for the community (*ivi*). Such 'issues' entail environmental issues (e.g. traffic and pollution, green areas, hydrogeological instability), social issues (e.g. youth unemployment, vulnerable urban settlements), issues concerning services (e.g. education, healthcare, mobility), abandonment of buildings that may allow solving some local problems (such as housing issue in Bologna's context) (*ivi*).

Nevertheless, we should briefly discuss Community Maps from the conceptual and theoretical standpoint: a Community Map originates from participatory processes, obviously at a bottom-up level, where the actors are the inhabitants of the local community involved (Bianchetti & Guaran, 2018). In other words, it is a tool that allows locals to represent the heritage, environment, and knowledge they identify with and want to pass on to future generations. Furthermore, it is based on how the local community views, perceives, and values its land, past, changes, present reality, and how it would like it to be in the future. It takes the form of a cartographic representation or appears in any other work that allows the community to be recognized¹⁴¹.

Moreover, Community Maps may be intended as an evolution of 'Parish Maps', which emerged in England in late 1900: «Making a Parish Map can help people to come together to chart the things that they value locally, to make their voice heard amongst professionals and developers, to inform and assert their need for nature and culture on their own terms, and to begin to take action and some control in shaping the future of their place»¹⁴².

Nonetheless, Community Maps are a very flexible tool that can be used for several issues (e.g. cultural local heritage and tourism, local practices), and in the 'Community PRO' project, they were used as a tool to build a shared awareness about resources and problems of the local

¹⁴¹ See <http://www.mappadicomunita.it/>

¹⁴² <https://www.commonground.org.uk/parish-maps/>; see also Crouch & Matless (1996)

community (on environmental and social issues; services such as waste management, education and healthcare; alteration of settlement system; value of public places according to citizens, and not only from an economic point of view), thereby encouraging the development of social bonds.

Ultimately, it should be stressed that the Community Map is not the objective representation of territorial knowledge (as emerged within ‘Community PRO’), but it is the representation of a common culture limited to a group of citizens able to create a shared pool of individual knowledge, subjective feelings, and interpretations, trying to bring out a «collective intelligence» (Brown & Isaacs, 2005, p. 4) as in a World Café session.

Conversely, the elaboration of a Community Strategy (2) constituted the second step of the project, characterized by the identification of approaches, criteria, and references that could have given substance to the choices within the Resilience Plan (3) (Cittadinanzattiva, 2023). The project’s second stage contributed to the design and development of new ways of interaction between citizens and between them and local administrations (*ivi*). It also went beyond a formal way of participation (*ivi*). At this stage, the whole project aimed to develop a ‘Community PRO’ culture, marked by a particular focus on civic activism and strengthening social bonds.

In short, on the other side, the Resilience Plan (3) sought to increase the resilience of local communities, looking at specific phenomena that directly impact a territorial area, producing rapid and consistent environmental transformations also affecting individual behaviors (*ivi*).

The Resilience Plan, defined by the participant and active communities, was conceived as a set of actions that, starting from knowing territorial ‘opportunities’ and ‘critical issues’, may contribute to generating an optimistic, alternative, innovative, and sustainable response.

The following sections of this appendix provide detailed descriptions and discussions for the second and third steps of the project. In the forthcoming sections, we delve into the intricacies of these phases, offering a comprehensive examination and thorough analysis to ensure a clear understanding of each step.

b. Bologna’s Map of Community Process

According to data collected by Cittadinanzattiva Emilia-Romagna at the outset, 52% of participants were women, and 48% were men (Cittadinanzattiva, 2023). Among the participants, 56% held university degrees, with the most prominent age group falling within the 26-35 range (*ivi*).

Notably, 52% of the participants were affiliated with an association (e.g. Cittadinanzattiva), while the remaining 48% were not in any specific association (*ivi*).

In contrast, 70% of respondents expressed that current measures addressing environmental and social changes were inadequate (*ivi*). Only 11% found these measures sufficient, while 19% offered no specific comments (*ivi*). Considering the other survey data, 81% of participants firmly believed that collective issues demand collective responses, necessitating the involvement of the entire citizenry (*ivi*).

Below, some participants' free-form responses within the initial questionnaire, concerning some local (but not exclusively) issues: «no communication between parties»; «participation, although possible, remains one-sided»; «the real problem is due to the absence of a civic spirit, at once critical and communitarian»; «the historical center is no longer inhabited only by Bolognesi [ed: people native from Bologna], but temporary users such as students and tourists»; «the work tables and the results produced are not always integrated into implemented actions»; «adopted measures and policies are not considering international action»; «over the years, the intrinsic meaning of 'participation' was lost»; «participation in Bologna risks to become a buzzword»; «above all, a shared well-being is necessary»; «a new vision of environment and community is needed»; «more funding against inequalities»; «the current economic model is not compatible with the survival of many ecosystems. Oil lobbies are still too powerful, while citizens' awareness is still too modest» (*ivi*, p. 11).

However, participants' local concerns and critiques can be categorized into five overarching themes: 1) population density (e.g. high rents for students and 'touristification' of the historic center, waste disposal, urban transport, nightlife); 2) pollution (e.g. particulate matter and air pollution, green urban areas, sustainable transport, noise pollution); 3) prejudice (e.g. homeless); 4) social problems (e.g. urban safety, public lighting); 5) places of socialization (e.g. unused/empty buildings, kindergartens) (*ivi*). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the climate crisis and the multifaceted concept of sustainability extend beyond environmental concerns, influencing and interweaving with various aspects across these considerations. The intricate interplay of ecological, social, and economic dimensions underscores the pervasive nature of these issues, highlighting the imperative for comprehensive and integrated approaches in addressing the challenges at hand.

Simultaneously, the environmental issue was the central thread running through participants' thoughts. Recurring themes included air pollution, the perception of Bologna as a «capped city», and the need for sustainable mobility. On the other hand, citizens emphasized how Bologna's city center seems exceptionally devoted to tourism (e.g. several commercial

premises are intended for temporary tourism rental). In this regard, Nalin *et al.* (2023), for instance, analyze how such tourism is generating tensions between tourists and residents. Furthermore, the scholars put in evidence that

«The spread of new technologies and internet-based services, such as online booking, has played a disruptive role in reshaping the approaches of accommodation search and reservation. Moreover, traditional accommodation suppliers, i.e., hotels and licenced B&Bs, have started suffering the competition of new web-based platforms, such as Airbnb, which allow room finders to match tenants in a context of extreme fragmentation where every house owner can potentially become a host. This apparently win-win business model has become troublesome in both the real estate and rental market, especially in cities that suffer a lack of housing, because short-term rents take out long-term accommodations» (*ivi*, p. 3156).

On the other side, nightlife and urban decor seemed to be two closely linked elements: the almost complete absence of public toilets and littering represent a real problem for most citizens participating in ‘Community PRO’.

Conversely, concerning the ‘opportunities’, participants’ discourse was linked to the following three macro areas: 1) associative network, 2) culture, and 3) welfare (*ivi*).

Participants recognized the potential in Bologna, emphasizing the sharing of best practices among citizens, socio-political stability (we can think to the left-wing tradition, as demonstrated by the uninterrupted 40-year hegemony of the Communist Party in Bologna’s local government until 1999 – Caponio, 2005), the presence of several associations, and a robust civic consciousness (*ivi*). They also noted the availability of quality services, such as healthcare, green spaces outside the city center, and the promotion of slow tourism, exemplified by sustainable treks like ‘*La Via degli Dei*’ from Bologna to Florence¹⁴³. The rich intangible heritage, including gastronomic culture, local farmers’ markets, and tangible heritage in the form of religious and historic buildings, were appreciated and acknowledged as valuable assets in the city (*ivi*).

Ultimately, the project’s initial phase (i.e. Map of Community) has resulted in creating a Bologna’s Map of Community (Fig. 49) that encapsulates both critical issues and opportunities of the urban area. Indeed, such a comprehensive map serves as a visual encapsulation, proficiently delineating the prevailing critical issues and illuminating potential opportunities within the urban milieu.

¹⁴³ <https://www.viadeglidei.it/>



Fig. 49 Bologna's Map of Community
Source: Cittadinanzattiva (2023), pp. 30-31

The intricacy of Bologna's Map of Community lies in its ability to synthesize and articulate a multifaceted understanding of the urban dynamics as perceived by participants. It operates as a visual nexus, intertwining intricate layers of qualitative data to depict a nuanced narrative of the city's socio-economic, environmental, and cultural fabric.

In essence, Bologna's Map of Community may be intended as a testament to the efficacy of employing a transdisciplinary approach in urban studies (Ramadier, 2004). It represents a pivotal step toward understanding the intricate dynamics of the urban environment and provides a foundation for informed decision-making.

c. The second step of 'Community PRO': the Community Strategy adoption

In the second phase of the project, the focus was on aligning each of the opportunities and critical issues that emerged during the Community Map design process with specific crisis contexts, namely: 1) climate and environmental crisis, 2) economic crisis, 3) socio-demographic crisis, 4) emergency crisis (Cittadinanzattiva, 2023).

As previously mentioned, the primary objective of this phase was to explore strategies that could be employed to implement the decisions made during the third step of the laboratory, which involved developing a 'Resilience Plan'.

The second laboratory took a global perspective on issues predominantly associated with the local environment by connecting these concerns to the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (ivi).

Consequently, within the framework of the four crisis contexts mentioned earlier, concerted efforts were made to establish a cohesive structure that grouped local critical issues (as illustrated in Figure 50) and local opportunities (as depicted in Figure 51) based on shared themes and common goals: it was precisely from the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that the four crisis areas have been identified, attempting to create, with participants, a comprehensive framework of aggregated problems and resources organized by theme and common objectives.

This approach gave a more comprehensive understanding of how local challenges could be linked to broader global initiatives. It underscored the importance of addressing these concerns within a more overall sustainability and resilience framework. By bridging the gap between local and international objectives, the project aimed to foster a more interconnected and practical approach to addressing critical issues and harnessing available resources for the benefit of the community.

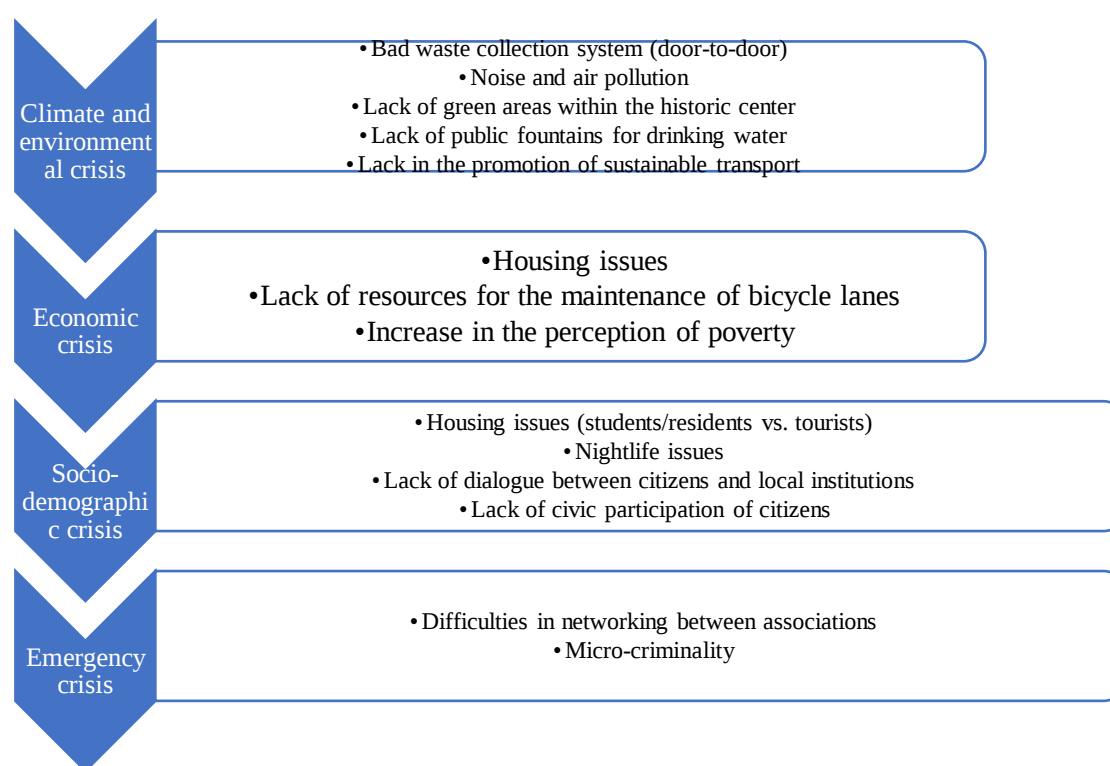


Fig. 50 Local critical issues and contexts of crisis

Source: elaborated by the author, based on data collected by Cittadinanzattiva (2023)

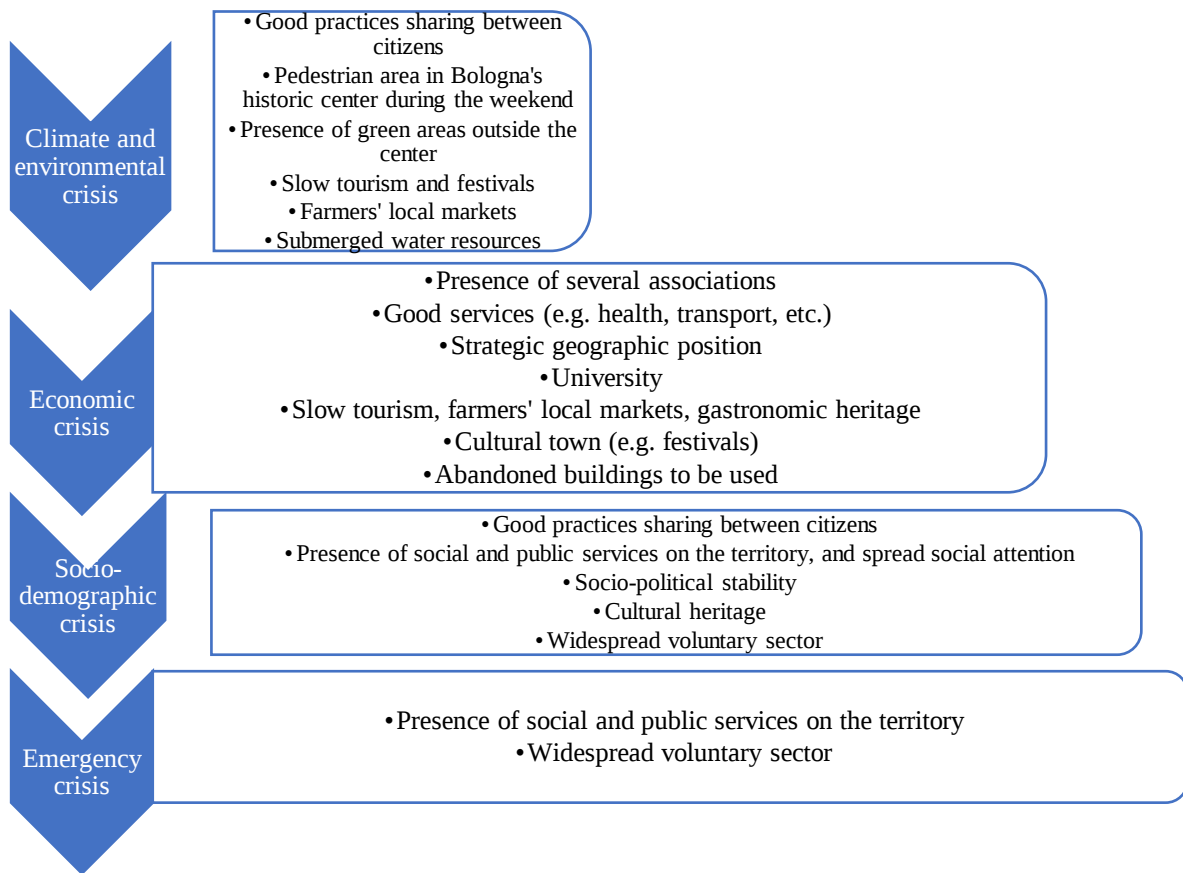


Fig. 51 Opportunities and contexts of crisis

Source: elaborated by the author, based on data collected by Cittadinanzattiva (2023)

The interconnected nature of critical issues and opportunities is unmistakable: this interdependence arises from a web of intertwined facets. For instance, it is clear that certain elements, like housing problems, are intricately linked to economic and socio-demographic crisis. It underscores the need for a systemic and holistic approach when confronting multifaceted issues. To delve deeper into this connection, it is worth noting that housing issues, particularly concerning affordability for various segments of the population, such as students, workers, and vulnerable groups, emerge as a common thread amidst economic and socio-demographic crisis, emphasizing the idea that a comprehensive perspective is essential for addressing complex issues effectively.

However, on the other hand, within this step, two questionnaires were completed by participants: the first questionnaire revolved around 14 alternative operational solutions, providing a structured framework for exploring potential avenues of action (*ivi*). The second questionnaire was a series of actionable steps designed to facilitate the implementation of the

identified strategies (*ivi*). This two-pronged approach ensured that a broad spectrum of ideas and perspectives was considered, contributing to a comprehensive and well-rounded examination of the critical issues and opportunities.

However, as demonstrated by the results of one of the two questionnaires administered during the Community Strategy phase, all participants in the Bologna laboratory expressed the need to expand their network of relationships to develop more effective strategies (*ivi*). For instance, it included becoming active in the search for solutions and funding, engaging with relevant institutions, seeking specific allies, adapting to natural environment characteristics, and intensifying pressure on decision-makers (*ivi*).

d. The third step of ‘Community PRO’: the Resilience Plan elaboration

Concerning the third step of the project, i.e. the Resilience Plan, the outlined actions were systematically categorized into three distinct domains (Cittadinanzattiva, 2023). Firstly, such actions were organized according to social, environmental, and cultural priorities, emphasizing the plan’s commitment to addressing critical societal, ecological, and cultural concerns (*ivi*).

For instance, these social priorities may encompass deliberative decision-making processes aimed at promoting the direct well-being of residents and preserving the integrity of the local environment. Additionally, these priorities might entail fostering an open and participatory approach to decision-making, facilitating a more direct interaction between citizens and local governmental bodies.

From an environmental perspective, the operative keyword was ‘reduction’ (*ivi*), denoting a pivotal action geared toward infusing purpose into efficiency. This directive underscores the plan’s unwavering commitment to enhancing resource conservation and minimizing environmental impacts. A concrete manifestation of this commitment lies in the widespread initiation of urban reforestation efforts, deemed a necessary adaptation strategy to mitigate the effects of climate change. By fostering urban tree-planting initiatives, the plan underscored its dedication to ecological resilience and fortified its resolve to improve the urban environment. Moreover, the plan advocated promoting active and sustainable mobility as an integral environmental priority. It was also aimed at encouraging a paradigm shift toward more environmentally friendly and sustainable transportation modes, thus furthering the overarching ecological goals of the plan.

Regarding cultural priorities, for instance, the plan placed a pronounced emphasis on promoting environmental and cultural heritage awareness, emphasizing its commitment to revitalizing

cultural and ecological assets as central components in shaping the community's identity and its local landscape.

Subsequently, the actions were further classified under the rubric of initiatives that can be promptly initiated, underscoring a proactive stance in the plan's implementation: the assessment was conducted by citizens through a structured evaluation framework, providing a more comprehensive view of the evaluation process, by categorizing actions into 1) institutional actions (e.g. analysis, data collection), 2) social critique (e.g. establishment of active networks), and 3) direct activities (e.g. organized management of places and buildings; dedicated walks/events) (*ivi*).

Lastly, delineating specific projects encapsulates the plan's detailed and project-specific approach, signifying a comprehensive strategy tailored to achieve predefined objectives.

In particular, as reported by Cittadinanzattiva (2023), two projects were elaborated, each distinguished by some identified components:

- 1) Location.
- 2) Focus.
- 3) Timeline.
- 4) Goals and specific objectives.
- 5) Strategic actions.
- 6) Deliverables.
- 7) Project schedule.
- 8) Partner description.
- 9) Municipal Administration partners of the project.

The projects, in particular, centered around the Municipality of Bologna and encompassed the creation of a new social space (initiated through a mapping of underutilized public and private spaces) and the enhancement of safety measures on the bicycle lanes within the city (*ivi*).

Ultimately, I actively participated in this project, wearing two distinct hats as a concerned citizen and a scholar, drawing inspiration for our Cafés. The participatory laboratory served to collect citizens' reflections, critiques, and ideas. The guidance of an experienced facilitator and civic activators' engagement significantly contributed to heightening the collective awareness of decision-making processes. It also played a pivotal role in structuring the proposals within the emerging strategies and criteria framework.

As emphasized across the chapters of this thesis, there are indeed numerous points of convergence with our Cafés, for instance, concerning the recruitment process of participants, although some key objectives are directly linked to our research work (e.g. designing and developing innovative ways of interactions between citizens; defining co-designed actions). In addition, citizens' perspectives on specific issues, such as separate waste collection and green urban areas, have also shaped the choice of topics for the Cafés.

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