

## Leadership in community social development. The novelty and long 'history' of an approach

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*Consistently, in a generative community or other local organisation, strategies for dealing with the future of the territory are not defined ex ante by their members, but are the result of 'successive approximations', in relation to the planning negotiated by individuals within the group or community. The objectives selected, whether they are 'territorial commons' already recognised and shared, or related to interests and cognitions exchanged through negotiation, are all considered sufficiently loose so as to assemble from time to time resources, objectives achieved, pre-existing objects identified as strengths or weaknesses, which are then decontextualised and reinterpreted so as to modify their meaning and details in the course of the process (Battaglini, 2019: 14).*

The approach to community development that we are proposing is nothing new because many of the aspects of the process have been and are present in the landscape of those who deal with sociality, social relations, social cohesion. What we have tried to do is to "line up" some of these aspects (ideas, methods, tools, technologies) to build a framework that we hope can be interpreted by those who want to try to enter communities in a different way. But let us start from the multiplication and differentiation in the ways of building and making communities that accompany us in contemporary society. A multiplication from which we can draw some reflections. The first is that there is no single 'recipe' for dealing with this differentiation and multiplication. Those who imagine they can intervene using old conceptual schemes mainly related to the traditional economic development of communities have and will have great difficulties. The second and more important issue is that at the centre of development and community building are people and communities themselves. To be at the centre means to be protagonists of one's own future through an individual and especially collective capacity to think and imagine what could be. But one cannot be a protagonist if we are not aware of our being part of a community and of the condition in which we find ourselves. The third issue is that there is no one who is more equal than others, to use the terms George Orwell (1988) used in *Animal Farm*, in working for community development. Many experiences fail precisely because someone 'imposes' ideas and projects on others who, often, can only agree to participate in something thought up by others. Not only that, and we come to the fourth issue, but any idea for community development is born in and with the community itself if we think there can be a real process of emancipation and *empowerment*. Fifth issue, communities are not embedded in a cosmic void; they have a history sometimes short, sometimes long and very long, there are community experiences with very strong and intense ties but short in time or with very weak ties but with a capacity to maintain themselves temporally, there are small and isolated communities and others that are confronted with urban and metropolitan complexity, there are communities that make the territory under their feet a strong point and communities that have no territory under their feet but have a lot of it in the digital network. Although it may seem trivial, each community is embedded in a more or less extensive context of relationality with which it builds cooperative, conflictual and even mutually indifferent relations, but nevertheless always characterising a relationship. No community is completely isolated and isolable from its surroundings<sup>1</sup> although this does not mean that it is not possible to think and imagine original and differentiated development paths. Sixth and finally, all communities are based on relationships and communication. Sometimes the density of relations and social capital are very high and become a resource for social development, other times the density is so low and rarefied that it hampers even the weakest and simplest relations and ties to last. Although there is no direct relationship between social capital, social cohesion and social development<sup>2</sup>, certainly a context

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<sup>1</sup> Even the so-called community of elves in the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, although they have chosen to live without the use of any technology (although books are also a technology) still has contact with the societies and communities with which it borders. See <https://ecovillaggi.it/rive/ecovillaggi/13-elfi.html?jjj=1591206022634> for more details. <sup>16</sup> This does not depend on the numerosity of the community. There are, for example, communities of 50 people who have no relations with each other other than parental relations.

<sup>2</sup> Despite the presence of studies since the 1980s linking the increased density of relationships and social capital with social cohesion and economic development (Bagnasco, Trigilia, 1984,1985), it is still not entirely clear which relationships go in this direction and which ones hinder (such as those linked to organised crime).

richer in relations has the capacity to more easily activate places where one can collectively imagine the future of the community itself. At this basic level, we think that concepts and methods must be recovered that enable the activation of communities in the direction of what Freire called the "conscientization" of the oppressed (1970).

### **From conscientisation to educommunication**

Why retrieve and update Freire in our approach to community development? We believe that, although in completely different historical, economic, cultural and social conditions, many people and communities may lack awareness of their role, their potential in terms of imagination and aspirations.

As Freire (1985: 172) states

*... Each of us is engaged in a permanent process of conscientization, as a thinking being in dialectical relationship with the objective reality in which he or she operates. What varies in space and time are the contents, methods and goals of conscientization ... when human beings have become aware of and capable of displaying their active reality, of knowing it and understanding what they know.*

But how is this process of consciousness-raising activated? Why do people 'discover' community development? Does the desire to become active come after particular triggering events? Or through the growth of spaces for real participation and the multiplication of active citizenship? Or through the active and integrated presence of digital media in support of community-driven actions? Probably a mix of all these with additional elements that we will explore in this chapter.

What we are interested in is building widespread and capillary awareness in communities and not, instead, an intelligent vanguard capable of having ideas and projects on the community which often, especially in the South, remains isolated and incapable of affecting the structural dimensions of social, cultural and economic change. It is only through the involvement of the entire population in this collective process of growing awareness that plural paths of community development can be set in motion.

The first step is first of all to investigate the work done by Freire and others from an educommunication perspective (Barbas, 2020: 74-75).

*In response to the diffusionist approach, in which communication was understood as the hierarchical transmission of knowledge from one to many, Freire proposed a participatory and dialogic approach, in which communication was understood as the democratic production of knowledge. Furthermore, in response to the banking model, in which education was understood as an instrument of domestication and oppression of groups subjugated by dominant groups, Freire proposed problematising and liberating models of education. Freire established a reciprocal relationship between communicative and educational practices and interpreted the processes of communication and education as cultural circles, which generated the consciousness and politicisation of the participants..... Other authors (Gutierrez, Kaplun and Prieto) laid the foundations for an educational model of communication characterised by fostering participation, empowerment and consciousness-raising to generate individual and collective transformation.*

The work analysed and proposed by Barbas refers to a number of methodologies that focus on people's protagonism, *feed-forward* (describing participatory work carried out with the media) and *participatory* action research. It is interesting to mention here the experience of feed-forward in a community realised by Kaplun that we find in Barbas (2020:79-80).

*Kaplun and his collaborators used it as a research method to discover the social problems of the communities in which they worked, asking questions, living in the community and discussing with them to help them solve their problems. The researchers involved community members in edu-communicative projects with the aim of transforming their reality. Feed-forward is a way of analysing reality that emerges from edu-communicative practices, in which distances and distinctions between producers and recipients, as well as those between educators and learners, are eliminated, with the aim of involving the community in solving their own problems.*

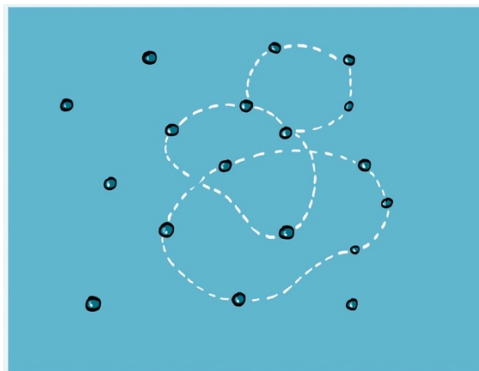
Closely related to this method is that of participatory action research, which is

*A qualitative research and action strategy that seeks to analyse and understand social situations with the aim of developing solutions that contribute to improving the quality of life of the community or group under study. Using the concept of feed-forward, participatory action research makes the collectives themselves participants in the investigation process. The collective is the protagonist of the investigation, becoming the subject rather than the object of study.*

Being able to adopt methods and techniques that can foster individual, group and community *empowerment* processes (Piccardo, 1995) is not easy, because we are still immersed in cultural frames where it is difficult to imagine that even the most fragile and vulnerable people in a community can become protagonists. For example, in the case of persons with disabilities, solutions are often found to their supposed needs without even questioning those directly concerned because they consider themselves incapable of expressing an opinion or even a thought. The first revolution is a cultural one, especially in those who have been engaged for years in social policies and also in the third sector, who find it difficult to imagine the possibility of building from the bottom up, together with the people of communities through communication, relationships and social ties connected to shared educational processes. But what process can we imagine?

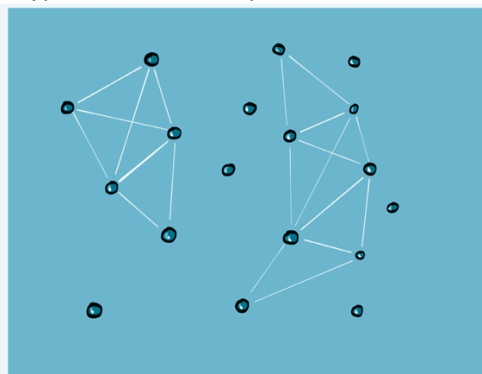
### **A process idea for the empowerment of people and communities**

First of all, we must try to demarcate potential communities. By this we do not mean that we erect barriers of any kind (cultural, social or physical), but rather that we identify the initial range where we can imagine the development of communities. Moreover, we speak of potential communities because we know neither the type nor the morphology, nor even whether even weak community ties exist. At the outset, we find ourselves in a context like the one depicted in Figure 3.



*Figure 3. The initial framework of the community development process*

Within this space (real, digital, imaginary) it is possible to detect, through participant observation and widespread listening, the multiple types of relationships and social ties between people (Figure 4).



*Figure 4. The survey of types of relationships and social ties*

In what is depicted we can identify three situations that are more interesting than others. The first is that of relational voids, i.e. individuals who have no significant social relations and ties of either a family or community type. They can be people who, although belonging to the community are isolated by choice (more rarely), for reasons that can be linked to the spheres of life, for temporary conditions, for specific characteristics of the place where the community was formed. It is the theme of universal vulnerability that must be emphasised that crosses the life cycle with the spheres of life (Figure 5)

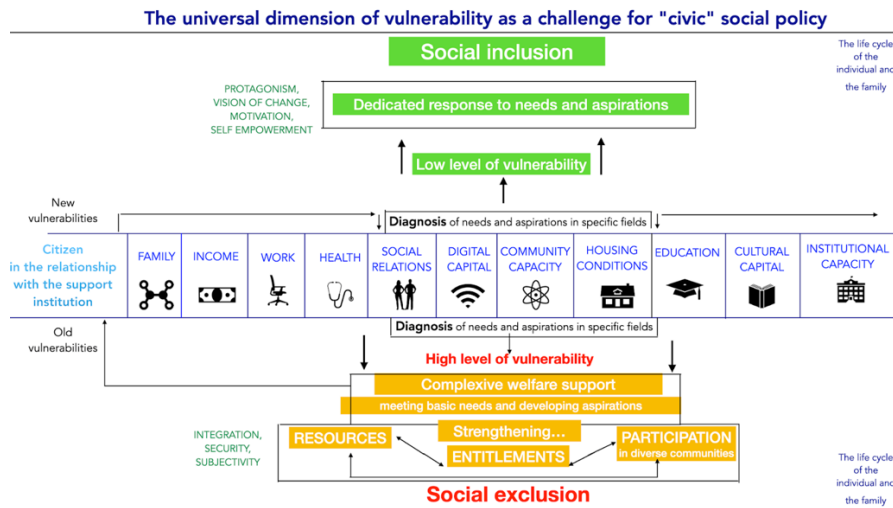


Figure 5 Elaboration of the concept of universal vulnerability (Karwacki, Volterrani 2024)

Each one of us is vulnerable and each person living in a community at some time is vulnerable in one or more spheres of life. These are completely different conditions that within a potential community can be a problem, but also a resource for building relational bridges with different realities and communities. The second is that of spaces where there is a higher density of relationships from a quantitative point of view. If this correlates positively with the quality of relations, we have the constitution and permanence of micro nuclei of community social capital available to those who inhabit that territory. The third is the multiple intermediate situations that often make up the majority of the relationships and social ties detectable in communities. Those relations that are legible through Blokland's concept of public familiarity that we explored in the previous chapter and that can be either referable to intimacy or to the public sphere. Relationships that often constitute the backbone of communities with little capacity to affect the process of possible conscientization that we have described.



Figure 6. New relationship densities and social capital micro-nuclei

Those who work in the social sphere often focus only on relational gaps, favouring interventions aimed at containing situations of social exclusion and, only in exceptional cases such as those caused recently by the Covid-19 pandemic, also on the public familiarity side of communities. From the perspective of the community development approach we propose (see figure 6), the idea is to activate both the construction of relational networks and social ties to 'cover' relational gaps, but also to increase the density of relations

and social ties in intermediate situations by linking them both to the micro-nuclei of social capital already present and by favouring the construction of new ones.

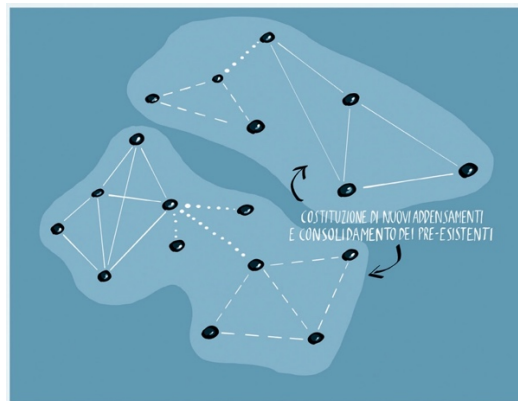


Figure 7. The activation of communities

In this process of community activation, a fundamental role is played by community activators, figures who should have a mix of skills and knowledge: methods and tools of the anthropologist acting on real and digital territories (listening, participant observation); methods and tools for the management of *face-to-face* and digitally mediated interpersonal communication; methods and tools for the realisation of digital and non-digital multimedia productions and for the management of digital platforms of participation and community; methods and tools for facilitating participation, networking and individual, group and community *empowerment*; methods and tools for building informal and formal groups and, more generally, associative forms. Through the continuous presence on the territories of on-site and digital communities activators, alongside the people in the communities, can support (and not replace) the constitution of informal and formal groups, grassroots associations, neighbourhood committees, specific digital platforms, and digital spaces for social inclusion, as explained in figure 7. The results of this process are neither predictable nor illustratable at the outset because, precisely, we are dealing with a very broad complexity and articulation of communities. Secondly, the reactions of the people belonging to that specific community context to the activators' urges are not predictable. Finally, it would not make sense in the logic of the conscientisation and protagonism of people and communities, to bring from outside the idea of development to which to adhere and the expected results. This modality was inspired by a season, not yet completely over, of an idea of social and economic development 'dropped from above by those who already knew what that community needed after an accurate reading of people's needs. But what are the variables to be kept under control in a community development process? First of all, time. Community development processes need to extend in time in order to be able to build trust with people and, above all, to make them aware and protagonists. Secondly, methods for facilitating participatory and democratic processes are an important variable for initiating *real empowerment* processes. Beyond the techniques, it is important to emphasise that it is not possible to activate social development of communities where open even conflictual confrontation of a democratic nature is not possible. Where this is not permitted, as in the case of places with a high density and presence of organised crime, then the activation of the process aims first and foremost at building spaces of freedom. Finally, the third variable, one cannot disregard the building of social relations and ties. Where these are scarce or rarefied, the work of connecting, of stitching, of building is even more important to achieve. Communities where there are widespread relationalities (Mazza, Volterrani 2008) are not many, and those where there are, often find it difficult to care for, maintain and reproduce them over time because there are so many and varied social dynamics that have pushed and are pushing in the opposite direction: processes of individualisation, hegemonic market culture, growing social and economic inequalities.

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