Collective environmental awareness as leverage for a sustainable future: Italian cities as a lab for social, civic and political innovation?

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Europe, especially Southern Europe, is living a very critical moment, which questions the future of Europe itself. The economic crisis is stressing the population and (Mediterranean) European citizens are paying on their skin for choices and mistakes that are responsibility of public (namely, governments) and private (namely, banks) institutions. Citizens protest movements arise, largely enabled and empowered by social media.

In this scenario, Italy can pay a special role. In the past two decades, Italy has passed through a series of political changes in its institutional setting: in the years 1992-1993 shifting from the so called "first" to the "second" Republic; in the last year (2011-2012), from the "second" to something new that is still to be defined (a new electoral law is under discussion by the Parliament). Both transitions have been coupled with the demand from the bottom, i.e. from citizens, to participate to the political change and to the political choices. In the '90, this gave rise to the "reti civiche" (civic networks) movement: RCM, the Milan Community Network, launched in late 1994 by the University of Milan, and Iperbole, opened in early 1995 by the Bologna municipality, inspired an huge amount of initiatives across the country. This background has been reinforced by a National project (2004-2006) within the e-government initiative by the Ministry for Innovation and Technology, which funded 57 projects for promoting digital citizenship. This cultural background has been the basis for the rise of several grassroots movements, both at the local and at the national level, mainly based on social media. The most significant examples are the "Cinque Stelle" (Five Stars) movement, under the umbrella of Beppe Grillo's blog, and the "Popolo Viola" (Violet People) movement, entirely grown through a Facebook page, which organized a large national demonstration (more than 500.000 people in Rome). The "Cinque Stelle" movement is now a political subject relevant at the national level, owner in the polls of a score close to the 15% of votes. The net, namely the main social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, also provided the online platform which supported the change in the municipal elections in Spring 2011 and 2012 in cities such as Milan, Naples, Cagliari, Genoa, Parma, among the others.

However, the use of software platforms created for a different audience and different purposes introduces new hindrances (De Cindio and Peraboni, 2012). Moreover, the net, in its present state of evolution, seems more effective in supporting protests rather than actual government activities, which requires mediation among conflicting positions (Ross, 2012), and the online debates among active citizens suffer for an ideological approach.

We believe that collective awareness platforms centered around environmental sustainability issues provide engaged citizens, their grassroots movements and the "new" cities government the opportunity to develop a more rational public discourse and finalize discussions experimenting new form of democratic and participatory decision-making to foster individual and collective behavioural changes which are mandatory for facing the economic crisis.

The challenge for the project we are envisaging is therefore to pursue the development of the methodological and technological tools and test them for managing civic commons in cooperation with cities governments and grassroots movements. Our two decades of experience provides:

- a methodological framework for the design of social online environments for civic purposes (De Cindio, 2012);
- an open source software platform for online deliberation – openDCN, (De Cindio and Schuler, 2012) already tested in several cases, including:
  - www.partecipaMi.it, the civic online community in Milan which renews the spirit of the Milan Community network with the web 2.0 technology); it hosts several dedicated areas, including one managed in cooperation with the Milan waste management company and one for project CIVES (Citizens towards Sustainability);
  - www.ComunaliMilano2011.it (De Cindio, Krzatala-Jaworska and Sonnante, 2012) and www.ComunaliGenova2012.it, attempting to grasp the electoral moment to attract citizens and politicians in a website intended to survive after the electoral period. Both are is participative platforms, set up by an independent body not engaged in the campaign (respectively, the RCM Foundation and the Genoa university) where the different social actors play on a neutral ground.

Both the methodological framework and the technological platform have to be improved by the contamination with recent trends such as a complementary approach to the design of online deliberation environments (Davies and Chandler, 2012) and several tools recently developed including Liquidfeedback (which will be probably experimented in the forthcoming regional election in Sicily) and a tool for managing participatory budgets, presently under test in some small city (Cascina in Tuscany, Cernusco Lombardone and the Province of Pesaro).

We envisage to apply the methodological framework and the technological platform to support more sustainable behaviors in managing the so-called "commons goods" as for example water, a natural resource more and more critical. A collective awareness about the importance of such a common good significantly increased in Italy, as demonstrated by a recent (2011) Referendum whose application is now challenging the new local administrations.

Besides the Milan University, the research team, will include the staff of the RCM Foundation, and other academic and research institutions in Italy, France and UK (to be completed)

Potential Italian demonstration sites,(involving the Municipality, the public service suppliers, and the civil society) include: Milano, Napoli, Genova, Como, Cagliari (to be completed)

Contacts for potential international demonstration sites in Protugal (Coimbra, Lisboa, Cascais, Porto) (to be completed)

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