

# 7. An organizational approach to citizen engagement for social cohesion: the gardening experience in an Italian public housing neighborhood

**Laura Saija, Giulia Li Destri Nicosia and  
Carla Barbanti**

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## 7.1 INTRODUCTION

For years planning scholars have debated the importance of looking at city planning as an endeavor engaging not just decision-makers supported by trained professionals but also urban residents (see Chapter 1). This assumption plays a key role in the relatively recent debate on co-production, i.e., new conceptualizations of the relationship between public institutions and civic society beyond the top-down model. This chapter contributes to the co-production for social cohesion debate through the discussion of a single case of co-productive planning in the rationalist public housing neighborhood of Librino (Catania, Italy). The datasets and events described in the following paragraphs have been researched by combining two different methodological approaches:

- participatory action-research (Saija 2016); authors conducted research in collaboration with local organizations between 2007 and 2010, supporting the development of a neighborhood regeneration plan called *Librino Platform*, as well as in 2021, with the aim to enhance social cohesion around a specific neighborhood site (the San Teodoro gardens);
- case-study research methodology, including archival research, participant observation and in-depth open-ended interviews with eight key informants.

The Librino case is used to discuss what we think is an understudied dimension of co-production, i.e., the organizational one. Does the “organizational” dimension of residents’ engagement have an impact on co-productive planning and its relevance when it comes to social cohesion? Drawing from the assumption that it is important to overcome the top-down model towards a more

effective institutions/society relationship, our research suggests that specific organizational tools and methods can be instrumental in building solidarity among residents through co-production in planning.

## 7.2 THE LINK BETWEEN CO-PRODUCTIVE PLANNING AND ORGANIZING

Decades ago, planning scholars began recognizing the direct, proactive role of urban dwellers in socially cohesive and/or resilient urban regeneration processes (see Chapter 2). A specific role within this debate has been played by the concept of co-production, which questions traditional conceptualizations of the relationship between society and public institutions (including planning authorities). Co-production goes beyond both:

- the largely unfulfilled (European, at least) social-democratic promise that the State can decide and act to address residents' spatial needs; and
- the over-criticized collaborative/deliberative illusion that “good administrators”, alone, are going to share their political powers with stakeholders participating in decision-making processes on “substantial” and highly controversial spatial issues.

Co-production in planning occurs when the *civics* contributes directly to the shaping of plans and/or spaces. According to scholars, co-production occurs when institutions are willing to accept strategic collaboration agreements with civic organizations (Albrechts 2012) and shared governance solutions (Ostrom 1990), and also includes the case of socio-spatial effects generated by independent groups and social movements operating in the face of indifferent or conflicting institutional powers (Miraftab and Wills 2005; Swyngedouw 2014; Cellamare 2019). According to this comprehensive definition, scholars' current understanding of co-productive planning becomes inclusive of long-term traditions of “extra-institutional planning approaches” such as Davidoff's advocacy planning (1965) or Goodman's guerilla planning (1972), encompassing insurgent practices able to shape space and, eventually, impact the institutional dimension. In reviewing this literature, Watson (2014) argues that co-productive social mobilization and conflict are more likely than institution-led co-production to prioritize residents' quality of life over “planning efficacy,” especially in the face of those institutional instabilities and power imbalances that are likely to occur in the Global South-East.

In the many cases of co-productive planning not generated from exclusive collaborative relationship between institutions and the civics, it becomes crucial to identify what forms are assumed by the art and craft of spatial planning. Many scholars focus on the planning value of social practices occurring

“without professional help.” In this stream of literature, genuine co-productive planning escapes the boundary of a (often corrupted by power) profession and becomes a realm of non-professional civic practices with spatial implications (Miraftab & Wills 2005; Swyngedouw 2014; Cellamare 2019). Other scholars take a different – we believe more productive – approach to the matter, looking at the necessary new skills required by professional planners so that they can play a desirable role in co-productive planning, both from within (Krumholtz 1982; Hoch 1984) and outside the City Hall (Davidoff 1965; Hartman 2002).

Drawing from these premises, this chapter draws from Watson’s (2014) framework to argue for the centrality of the “organizational” dimension of co-productivity in planning – i.e., the specific mechanisms through which individuals get involved, interact, make decisions, develop, and implement strategies, etc. Our research shows that those mechanisms play a primary role in the ability of co-production to genuinely advance social cohesion.

There is a very large amount of research dealing with such an organizational dimension, only partially connected with planning literature. In the sociological literature on social movements, for instance, within the broad realm of “collective actors who, through an organized effort and supported by networks of individuals and groups sharing a common identity, mobilize through protest campaigns for the achievement of social and political changes” (Della Porta 1996, p. 4, translation by the authors), there is a special type of mobilization – the local, neighborhood-based “citizens’ committee” that overlaps with the kind of co-productive resident-led initiatives studied by planning scholars. They are “organized but loosely structured groups of citizens, who gather on a territorial base and use primarily forms of protest to either oppose interventions they think would damage the quality of life in their territory or ask for its enhancement” (Della Porta 2004, p. 7, translation by the authors). According to Della Porta, Italian committees arose from the crisis of traditional representative democracy and traditional mass parties. They are mostly small “spontaneous” groups, with a strong leadership of a few motivated voluntary activists with previous political experience and relatively high economic and intellectual means. Their effectiveness depends on leaders’ ability to mobilize larger groups when it comes to demonstrations and protest events as well as to reach out to experts to produce counter-narratives and counter-documents. Only occasionally, a single committee enters large networks or partnerships, not without significant challenges and conflicts, and their activity is not easily sustainable over time.

A slightly different picture is depicted by the literature on neighborhood-based organizations inspired by the US “direct action organizing” tradition (DAO), increasingly influencing the European debate. Saul Alinsky (1909–1972) was the first to experiment with DAO at the neighborhood scale, beginning in Chicago during the Great Depression and the Second World War. He

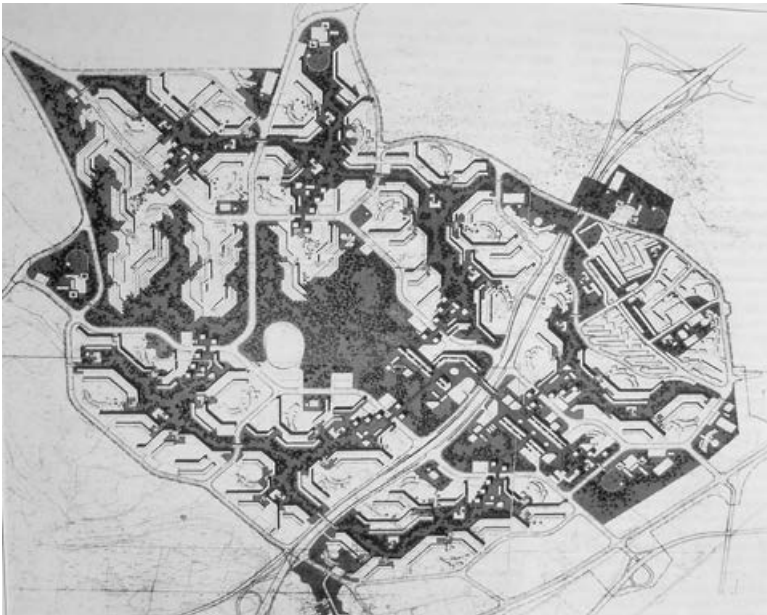
developed a model that is still used by many organizers around the world (Alinsky 1969, 1971). Based on the fact that most of the distressed neighborhood inhabitants were already members of what he called anchor institutions – churches, labor unions, associations, etc. – he facilitated the establishment of a “neighborhood council” with representatives from all these institutions: thanks to their representativeness of social distress, a council exercises political power since it is able to put pressure on decision-makers and even strong private interests through effective protests, boycotts, etc. A different DAO model was developed and applied by a network of hundreds of community organizations called ACORN (Atlas 2010), operating from the 1970s until the early 2000s. ACORN groups were based on an organizing model developed as an alternative to Alinsky’s, for places where anchor institutions are not socially representative or willing to engage in political conflict. This model mobilizes individuals not through their anchor institutions but through a rigorous “door-to-door” approach aimed at developing a base that is quantitatively representative of the population residing in a single geography. In all the DAO traditions, community organizations are characterized by a systematic turnover of local leaders, who are supported by “professional organizers” with know-how on how to manage daily operations, run campaigns, etc. Organizers can be paid by a variety of methods (sponsorships, projects, etc.). In ACORN groups, organizers were paid mainly through membership fees in order to maximize independence. DAO has had a major impact on the planning literature through Davidoff’s theorization of *advocacy planning* (Davidoff 1965), i.e., planning performed by professionals working in support of community organizations, which was introduced in Italy by Crosta in 1973.

In this chapter, we use the conceptual lens of DAO to look at the link between co-production and planning in the specific case of Librino residents’ gardening practices taking over, since 2012, various portions of vacant public land. We believe this case is of particular relevance for the broad debate on resident-led planning for social cohesion since it shows the coexistence of various forms of co-productive planning, which we argue can be identified by looking at organizational aspects, which have different impacts on space, residents, and institutions.

### 7.3 CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Librino is a public housing neighborhood planned in the 1970s by the City of Catania with the consultancy of famous Japanese architect Kenzo Tange. The famous 1962 National Law no. 167 required municipalities to plan for a minimum amount of public and affordable housing units within special “zones” comprising land acquired by the public through eminent domain.

Tange's "Piano di Zona Librino" (Figure 7.1) was completed in November 1972, and adopted by the city in 1974, following all the state-of-the-art theories and methods of rationalist planning. A little less than 400 hectares of rural fields south-west of the city center were zoned as an affordable "satellite town" for 70,000 people, connected with Catania through a new expressway. The town was composed of eight self-sufficient residential "rings" located around a directional core for municipal services and other activities. The design was based on the rigorous separation of motorized mobility along the roads around the rings from pedestrian mobility along pathways inside the rings. Residential activities were located in high-rise towers and multi-story linear blocks inside the rings, together with the legally required amount of parking, social activities, and schools. Special attention was paid to green spaces and public parks: the proposed plan included a significant "green network system" (shaded areas in Figure 7.1), which included pedestrian paths and underpasses crossing the different rings, parks, and squares of various dimensions. Tange's plan implied the demolition of the pre-existing rural settlements and informal villages, especially the central "Borgo Librino," but this was avoided with a revision of the plan by the local "STA progetti" firm (Figure 7.2).



Source: DICAr - University of Catania cartographic archive.

Figure 7.1 *The masterplan of Tange's "Piano di Zona Librino"*



Source: DICAr - University of Catania cartographic archive.

*Figure 7.2 The revised “Piano di Zona Librina,” officially adopted by Catania Municipality in 1979*

The implementation of such an ambitious plan has engaged a variety of public and private actors and is still ongoing, after almost 50 years. Most of the housing was developed, in a relatively short amount of time, by the local

Public Housing Authority, housing co-ops, and private affordable housing developers. However, significant delays have characterized the implementation of public services and public infrastructures, whose responsibility was granted entirely to the “STA progetti” firm. The biggest implementation challenge has been the completion and maintenance of the “green network system”: it has remained on paper for almost 40 years, leaving most Librino residents in an urban landscape of overall abandonment.

The large amount of “vacant land,” however, has not been the only issue at stake. Like many other rationalist affordable complexes all around the world, Librino has become a manifesto for the failure of the rationalist urban “tower in the garden” ideal. Despite their being inspired by social justice values, these top-down plans have not matched people’s real needs and habits, generating socio-economic distress. Since its foundation, Librino has held the reputation of an “urban ghetto,” with local newspapers reporting weekly on criminal activities and decay. Librino is indeed a distressed neighborhood, where the concentration of low- to moderate-income families corresponds to lower educational attainments as well as higher percentages of unemployment, felonies, squats, and illegal dumping compared with richer neighborhoods. However, Librino is not the only distressed Catania neighborhood and certainly not the worst. Many Librino areas, especially the one where privately owned units and co-ops prevail, are safer, cleaner, and quieter than many areas in the historic center. For many years, the peculiarity of the unfinished modern urban landscape has fed into Librino’s negative public image as well as residents’ feelings of being second rank citizens.

Since its foundational years, in the late 1980s, Librino has been the home of several community organizations that Alinsky would have called “anchor institutions.” They can be classified in four different groups:

- Librino public schools, which are recognized amongst the best in the province; highly committed school principals and teachers provide a variety of extra services to local students aimed at keeping them busy and “off the streets” for as long as possible.
- Non-profit social service providers, both Catholic groups and social cooperatives, targeting low- to moderate-income families; for them, Librino is a convenient location in the vicinity of a large concentration of social service-seeking residents.
- Left-oriented organizations. Left-leaning housing co-ops were amongst the first groups to move in, in the late 1980s. A local section of the Italian Communist Party was established in their vicinity at the same time. While the section closed its operation a few years after the 1991 dismantling of the Party, its social base was engaged in the establishment, in 2004, of the local section of the CGIL, the largest left-oriented national workers

union. Local activists “structured the work at the section like we used to in the Communist Party; if you listen, people were happy to talk, and every meeting was an occasion to gather information on what people wanted in the neighborhood, what they were willing to do, and I always asked for their interest in being contacted for initiatives of common interests” (former director of Librino CGIL section, interviewed by LS on February 22, 2023). In 2005, CGIL activists decided to form the “Comitato Librino Attivo” (Active Librino Committee, the Committee hereafter) to further enhance their organizing through its detachment from the reputation of the union to be “politically and electorally sided.” One of the first activities carried out by the Committee was a door-to-door residents’ survey on people’s perception of the neighborhood, in collaboration with the University of Catania (AA. VV. 2008). In its early years, there were seven or eight active committee members while an average of one hundred residents used to participate in monthly meetings and common initiatives. Another important organization, established in 1995 by former ARCI “civil servants” (Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana, Italian Cultural Recreational Association, the biggest Italian non-profit association not linked with the Catholic Church), is the Iqbal Masih Center. This is a self-organized informal group of non-Librino activists, volunteering in after-school “empowering” programs for Librino minors. In 2006, from within the Iqbal Masih group, a couple of passionate rugby supporters launched what is today an internationally acclaimed Rugby school and team, “I Briganti di Librino” (the Librino Brigands, *I Briganti* hereafter), engaging hundreds of Librino children in a sport considered particularly effective when it comes to teaching the ethical foundations of competing and hard work.

- Catholic parishes and religious operations aimed at spiritual and, occasionally, material nurturing of distressed residents. Amongst those, the Talita Kum Onlus was established in 2010 by the Catania section of the Caritas Diocesana, as an educational center for minors in the proximity of what was, then, the most dangerous drug dealing spot of the neighborhood. For more than a decade Talita Kum has offered free educational and psychological support to children of highly distressed families and minors with criminal records.

While each one of these organizations has played an important social role for Librino residents, from a planning perspective, only a relatively small group has played a co-productive role.

## 7.4 RESIDENT-LED CO-PRODUCTION: THE CAMPO S. TEODORO URBAN GARDENS

On March 5, 2008, inside the fancy Catania City Council Hall facing the central Duomo square, an unusual event occurred: representatives of two Librino public schools, CGIL Librino, and five community-based organizations (including the Committee, Talita Kum, and Iqbal Masih) officially presented to a dozen representatives of the press and other interested individuals a document called “Librino Platform.” The document channeled a diagnosis of Librino’s most relevant issues and potential solutions. From a co-productive perspective, this event is interesting for at least two reasons.

First, the Platform is substantially a planning document, developed in complete autonomy from city planning offices and with the intention of impacting public decision-making (partial support was provided by at least two research groups from the local university; AA. VV. 2008; Saija 2013). It was the first document not simply asking for the completion of the original plan, but pushing for its revision according to residents’ perspectives and needs.

Second, it represented an innovative attempt, led by CGIL and the Committee, to develop – using Alinsky terminology – a “neighborhood council” able to impact decision-making thanks to the convergence and synergy between local anchor institutions: the document’s signatories ended up becoming a collective actor named Librino Platform.

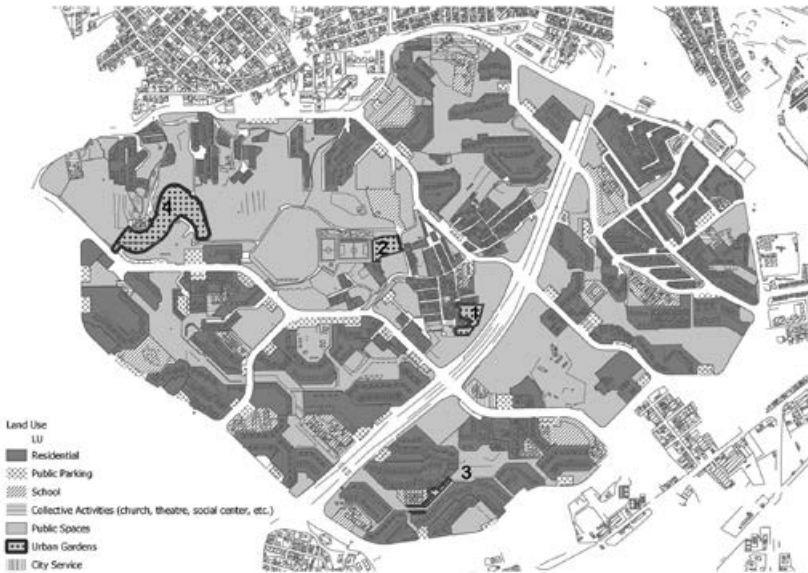
The 2008 public event did not produce immediate impacts. At that time, the city was at the very beginning of a long period of financial crisis (financial bankruptcy became official in 2018 and is still ongoing). However, the establishment of the Platform led to several successful campaigns, like the opening of Librino’s hospital and the high school. Moreover, although collaboration was not sustained over time, leading to formal closure in 2022, the Platform has been an important forum for all these organizations and has most certainly played a central role in enabling the co-productive role of single organizations. This can be shown through a focus on a specific set of initiatives: the birth, between 2012 and 2018, of three different sites of urban gardens on more than 4 hectares of previously abandoned public land (Table 7.1).

**Table 7.1** List and characteristics of urban gardens in Librino

| No. | Name                                | Area ha | Birth       |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---------|-------------|
| 1   | Orti Borgo Librino                  | 0.7     | Before 1979 |
| 2   | Orti del Campo San Teodoro Liberato | 0.7     | 2013        |
| 3   | Orti del Castagnola                 | 0.3     | 2016        |
| 4   | Orti del Viale S. Teodoro           | 3.2     | 2018        |

*Note:* ID number corresponds to their localization in Figure 7.3.

*Source:* Authors.



*Note:* Numbers refer to Table 7.1.

*Source:* Authors.

**Figure 7.3** Garden localization on Librino current land use map

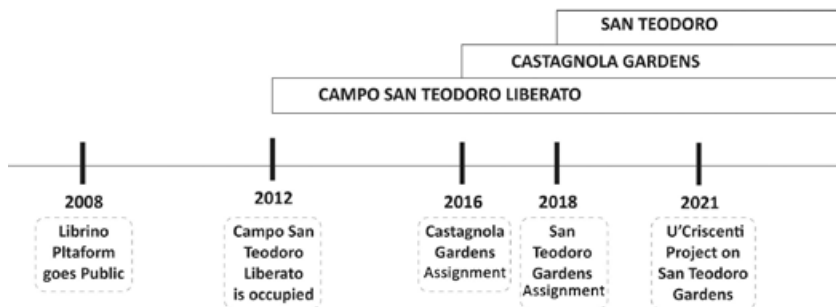
The idea of urban gardens in Librino started circulating within the Librino Platform circle, especially when members of the cultural organization *Terre Forti* joined the platform (Scalisi 2009). They were predominantly long-term residents from the Borgo Librino settlement, already caring for private gardens (localization no. 1 in Figure 7.3) and sharing vivid memories of Librino's historic rich agricultural landscape.

The idea started to become reality in 2012, when Iqbal Masih activists, operating in a small ground-floor commercial space in Viale Moncada, decided to occupy a 2-hectare abandoned city-owned sports facility, the Campo San Teodoro, in the vicinity of Borgo Librino. San Teodoro was built by the city in the mid-1990s but never opened to the public. For years, Iqbal Masih and I Briganti had requested the city's permission to use it, but without receiving any answer. In 2012, Iqbal Masih volunteers, with the help of a hundred volunteers from all around the city and other organizations from Piattaforma Librino, broke into the area and established their operation there without permission. Through independent fundraising and thousands of volunteering hours, they initiated the renovation works. In less than a year, I Briganti had an operating rugby pitch in Librino and the Iqbal Masih group had a functioning clubhouse for their socio-cultural initiatives. One of the first set of activities carried out by Iqbal Masih volunteers, including a planning graduate student from the University of Catania (Maccaronello 2013), was an urban gardens initiative. Through door-to-door flyer distribution, Borgo Librino residents were invited in December 2012 to a first meeting together with representatives of Terre Forti and other city organizations with expertise in urban gardening. Participants decided to work on a first set of 10 gardens located along the string of land immediately south of the rugby field (volunteers had already provided water for the field, so it was easy to plan for an extension of the irrigation system). All gardens were assigned to single households. Even two of them which had initially remained collective were soon converted into individual gardens. A lot happened in the course of the first year of "self-inorganization" (the term used by one of the Iqbal Maish promoters, interviewed by LS on March 13, 2023). By the end of 2014, the first gardens had been moved up the hill, and 35 more had been added, thanks to a self-funded and self-made extension of the irrigation system. The extension had occurred despite the fact that almost half of the pioneering gardeners had left. The word-of-mouth amongst friends, neighbors, and even relatives from out of Librino had allowed not only the easy replacement of those who had left but also the engagement of more gardeners. Most importantly, the group realized the need to work as a collective, sharing a set of rules developed on the basis of the challenges faced in the course of the first year. Their rules referred to the commitment of each gardener to care for the garden only for the purpose of growing plants (other spaces were suitable for other types of activities); not use polluting substances; not to take over other gardens; participate regularly in periodic meetings; and respect and be kind to each other.

The first year of operation of the gardens was also a time of political change in the city (a new mayor and council were elected in 2013). Those political representatives that had for years remained indifferent to Iqbal Masih and I Briganti's requests were replaced by others more open to collaboration. The

new City Administration granted I Briganti free-of-charge use of the facility. It allocated about half a million euros to enhance the rugby pitch up to National Rugby Federation standards. Renovation works were initiated in 2013 but encountered significant delays and lasted nine long years (it reopened in February 2022), creating significant distress to both the team and the gardeners. During these years, administrators were also involved in a set of regenerative activities involving young designers funded by international architect Renzo Piano, called the 124 Group. The group worked in Librino between 2014 and 2015, supported by local urban sociologist Carlo Colloca (2014), delivering a masterplan for the improvement of the overall San Teodoro area. Besides the 124 Masterplan, concrete improvements were funded by external donors, attracted by the good publicity associated with Piano's reputation: a local developer donated material to stabilize the hill and to asphalt the parking lot and the pathway running up the hill; local businesses donated the materials to decorate the site and paint on the asphalt street games designed by the architects. Games and other improvements were realized through participatory DIY.

Today, operations at the Campo San Teodoro are back to "normal." I Briganti are back in Librino for their practice and games while the gardens are up and running (Figure 7.4). Despite almost all the initial Iqbal Masih promoters moving out of town, a new group is in place with a new coordinator and still operates within a set of common rules, including a monthly fee for maintenance expenses.



Source: Authors.

Figure 7.4 Timeline of Librino urban gardens

## 7.5 CITY-LED URBAN GARDENS

The mayor and the urban planning deputy mayor were certainly inspired by the success of the Campo San Teodoro gardens and they aggressively pursued the establishment of new ones.

By the summer of 2016, the city had already provided for site planning, public lighting, fencing, and leveling of 10 new gardens located inside the “Campagnola” ring (localized with no. 3 in Figure 7.3). Following a new set of approved “Rules for the implementation, granting, and management of urban gardens” (deliberation no. 14, February 9, 2016), the call for “gardeners” was highly successful. According to the city official working on the project at that time, “gardens were immediately assigned to single households and to the nearby parish. I can assure you, during the work and right after, residents from the apartments overlooking the gardens used to call us as soon as somebody was trying to do something wrong, like self-appointed guardians. They also started organizing, autonomously, the first block parties” (interviewed by LS on February 21, 2023). Librino Platform’s activists welcomed the Castagnola urban gardens, viewed as the first sign of the implementation of Tange’s green walk- and bikeways system, which eventually received complete funding and is currently under construction. However, they questioned the size of the gardens (“Castagnola gardens, each of them is about 200 square meters, which is more than twice the size of our gardens in Campo S. Teodoro. They are too large for a single family”) and the quality of the works (“a private company would have done more in less time”). Today half of the gardens are abandoned: they were realized so quickly and under the direct pressure of the political head of the Urban Planning Department, that the political changes that occurred after the 2018 local elections led to a form of “institutional abandonment” of the site. After the completion of the works, the public management responsibilities were never transferred to the “Green Areas Department” and no one is currently in charge.

Right after the completion of the Castagnola gardens, the same political representatives applied pressure for the implementation of another, more ambitious, urban garden project, within the framework of the PON Metro 2014–2020 funding program,<sup>1</sup> on a 3-hectare site inside the San Teodoro ring. The area had been already transformed in the early 2000s by “STA progetti”

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<sup>1</sup> PON Metro, which stands for “Programma Operativo Nazionale per le Aree Metropolitane” (Operative National Program for Metropolitan Areas) is the national funding program aimed at advancing the European Urban Strategy 2020 for smart, inclusive, and sustainable growth. A first round of funding was provided within the 2014–2020 period.

as part of the implementation of Tange's green network, into a "public park" made of four curvy terraces around what was supposed to be an artificial lake. The actual implementation of the park was limited to land movements and the installation of public lighting. The lake was never realized, and residents had been using the area as an illegal dumping site. In 2018, the Administration used PON Metro funds to realize one of the largest urban garden sites in Europe (Viale San Teodoro urban garden) made of 70 fenced gardens of about 150 square meters each, distributed in four rows (one row for each of the terraces), equipped with irrigation and independent wooden toolhouses. Common areas were also equipped with stabilized gravel for pathways, public lighting, and decorative trees.

Under the pressure of the upcoming elections, the Viale S. Teodoro Gardens ribbon was solemnly cut in the presence of the national president Sergio Mattarella on January 16, 2018, even though only 10 applications had been received for the first official call for gardeners. Most likely, the site was not as attractive as the Castagnola site, located in a nicer area of the neighborhood, or the Campo San Teodoro, characterized by a unique form of civic self-organization. A second call, published in May of the same year, was accompanied by a more aggressive outreach campaign by city officials. In particular, low-ranked but highly committed city officials made use of their personal ties with local activists and leaders as well as experienced gardeners from the Campo San Teodoro site.

As a result, gardens were all assigned to individual households from around the neighborhood and two local associations (including Talita Kum). In general, gardeners have begun to take very good care of their individual plots, sometimes with significant structural improvements (many toolhouses have been transformed into relaxing areas equipped with self-constructed porches and verandas). However, activists' impression was that people enjoying the outdoors and the opportunity to grow their own food did not encourage cohesion among gardeners. Rather, local organizations believed that specific actions to enhance gardeners' cohesion were needed.

With this purpose, Talita Kum (granted one of the gardens) made the choice to form a partnership, which included the three authors as action-researchers, to successfully apply, with a project called U'Criscenti, for a National Ministry call for resident-led urban regeneration projects. The project aimed to enhance cohesion among gardeners of Viale San Teodoro, and it took place from October 2021 until July 2022 and explicitly adopted the ACORN community organizing approach to urban regeneration. This methodological choice was related to the fact that none of the gardeners were engaged in any of the local anchor institutions. Every gardener was initially interviewed, period-

ically updated,<sup>2</sup> and encouraged to participate in periodic project meetings. Gardeners were also engaged as co-organizers of two parties (Figure 7.5). These activities were integrated with research on gardeners' motivations and their perceived challenges and priorities.



Source: Authors.

*Figure 7.5 A view of the Campo San Teodoro site today, with the gardens in the front and the renovated rugby pitch on the right*

U'Criscenti organizers have successfully contacted and collected data from almost 70 percent of the gardeners. As a result, an average of 30 out of 70 gardeners have participated periodically in the project activities, ending up sharing a common understanding of problems and priorities. Amongst the problems, there are signs of collapse along several sections of the terraces, since stormwater runoff erodes the clay soil that is not blocked by terrace walls made of a porous metallic net. Gardeners' autonomous yearly attempts to stabilize the soil prove to be costly and not effective. When damage is not caused by heavy water, it is caused by vandals, who steal food and tools and damage structures on a weekly basis. The formal request for city intervention, expressed by almost half of the gardeners during a meeting with city officials, in June 2022, brought to the surface the scarcity of resources available to the only public employee who oversees the gardens with the exclusive use of his good heart and passion (city bankruptcy, filed by the newly elected mayor in 2018, left city departments with no operating budget). The sense of collective despair was overcome through the decision to use a portion of

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<sup>2</sup> Communication was kept horizontal, through the re-activation of an existing but silent WhatsApp group, which grew from 25 to 46 members. The group is still active and is a main vehicle of communication amongst gardeners.

the project money to build sitting areas and stabilize part of the soil in the collective areas of the gardens. In the aftermath of U’Criscenti, a dozen active gardeners, under the leadership of Campo San Teodoro gardens’ manager, who is also the Comitato Librino Attivo’s vice-president, have submitted a proposal for the City of Catania’s call for participatory projects (Figures 7.6 and 7.7). Their proposal of restructuring the collapsing San Teodoro gardens with soil-stabilizing vegetable species to be planted vertically along the terrace walls was declared, in November 2022, the most voted proposal city-wide and is going to be funded by the city with 200,000 euros.



*Source:* Authors.

*Figure 7.6 San Teodoro gardeners meeting within the U’Criscenti project*

## 7.6 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Librino case speaks to the planning scholarly debate on resident-led urban regeneration, since here such a regeneration is tangible. More than 40,000 square meters of previously abandoned land and illegal dumping sites, located at the heart of what is considered Catania’s most “infamous neighborhood,” are currently cared for, daily. Caring means residents moving land, buying



Source: Authors.

*Figure 7.7 A U'Criscenti gardens festival, April 3, 2022*

and/or building stuff, seeding, cutting plants, harvesting, watching out for vandals, organizing meetings, and even participating in the development of proposals for enhancing the commons. When all these things are carried out “together” they might be interpreted as a tangible sign of socially cohesive urban regeneration. From a co-productive planning perspective integrated with the conceptual lens of DAO, it is crucial to look at the events, the mechanisms, and the approaches that made all this possible.

Between 2012 and 2015, the birth and growth of the Campo San Teodoro gardens are clearly the outcomes of resident-led co-production supported by a mixed approach to organizing. On one hand, Librino Platform operated as an Alinsky “neighborhood council” holding together representatives of Librino’s already organized civil society. On the other, Iqbal Masih’s practices, using door-to-door techniques in search of gardeners, are more similar to the ACORN model. This combined strategy succeeded, on the one side, in spurring civic autonomous and self-governed proactivity (gardening) while, on the other, pushing for recognition and material support by public authorities (free-of-charge grant, renovation of the rugby pitch). This means that social cohesion was enhanced both as the creation of a safe space for collaboration aimed at the common good and as transformation of a highly conflictual relationship between civics and public officials into a formal collaborative agreement.

Between 2016 and 2020, the birth of both the Castagnola and the Viale San Teodoro gardens was the outcome of institution-led co-production. In both sites, as the outcome of a clear political commitment with the support of passionate city officials, gardens were not as successful as in the previous case (first phase of Viale S. Teodoro Gardens) and did not last as long (Castagnola). In both cases, top-down decision-making on a less organized civil society produced gardening that did not equate with long-lasting social cohesion as exemplified in the case of the Campo San Teodoro gardens.

Such a lesson is reinforced by the events that occurred in 2021 and 2022, showing the ability to organize performed by local activists (garden-to-garden reach-outs, periodic meetings and reports, etc.) to transform several passionate gardeners, not frequently collaborating or even communicating with each other, into an organized and co-productive group.

As far as the future is concerned, further attention should be paid to the quality of the interaction between gardeners and the city, especially related to the implementation of the Comitato Librino Attivo's proposal. However, a few general reflections can be drawn for the benefit of the disciplinary debate. Assuming the centrality of the organizational aspects, which depends on the nature of the interaction between leaders, eventual planners, and every single resident, some questions need to be urgently addressed, concerning who should be doing the organizing and why, and whether it requires specific expertise and dedicated resources. In Librino, people in charge of organizing during the most successful phases of co-production were the ones with some level of training: CGIL activists promoting the Librino Platform; former "civil servants" and a planning graduate promoting the Campo San Teodoro initiative; and university researchers with some community organizing training within U'Criscenti. These are individuals who are not necessarily aware of their having "organizing" as a common base. More importantly, from a planning perspective, it is not yet clear whether the skills for this type of work, which have proven to be foundational for genuine co-productive planning, should be expected by planners interested in operating within a co-productive framework. While this question needs further research and reflection, cases like Librino show the importance of further developing the disciplinary understanding of DAO in a co-productive planning that effectively enhances social cohesion.<sup>3</sup>

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