

## Beyond dichotomies, in the search for a democratic dialogue toward social-ecological care: lessons from the Simeto River Agreement in Sicily, IT

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### Abstract

Nelle società contemporanee, le crisi ambientali e sociali possono essere lette come due facce della stessa medaglia, in relazione con la crisi degli ordinamenti democratici attuali. Per superare tale condizione, è oggi necessario sperimentare nuove forme di governance basate su percorsi condivisi tra comunità auto-organizzate e istituzioni per produrre azioni responsabili ed efficaci nella tutela dei socio-ecosistemi. Come far sì che ciò accada, in contesti dove comunità e istituzioni non hanno alle spalle un'attitudine consolidata a intraprendere percorsi collaborativi? Il paper propone alcune riflessioni che emergono da un processo avviato nel 2008 dal LabPEAT dell'Università di Catania e alimentato mediante uno specifico approccio alla Terza Missione universitaria, ispirato ai paradigmi della ricerca azione. Il processo è stato condotto attraverso una partnership di lungo termine con la comunità della Valle del Simeto (Sicilia Orientale). Nonostante diverse fasi di conflitto, la partnership ha costruito una relazione dialogica con le istituzioni – a vari livelli – esitando nel 2015 in una sperimentazione in corso, il Patto di Fiume Simeto.

In contemporary societies, environmental and social crises arise as two faces of the same coin, in concert with the crisis of current democratic systems. Innovative forms of democratic governance are needed for facing these crises. This requires the search for a common path between self-organized communities and institutions toward more responsible and effective actions for taking care of social ecological systems. How can this be done, in contexts where communities and institutions do not have a strong background of collaborative practices? This paper reflects on a process that has been set up since 2008 by the LabPEAT of the University of Catania and developed thanks to a specific approach to the institutional academic Third Mission, inspired by the paradigms of action research. The process has been conducted through a long-term university-community partnership. Regardless of various phases of conflict, the partnership built a dialogical relationship with institutions at various levels, ending up in 2015 in an ongoing experiment, the Simeto River Agreement, in Eastern Sicily, IT.

**Parole Chiave:** Governance democratica, Comunità auto-organizzate, Terza Missione Universitaria

**Keywords:** Democratic governance, Self-organized communities, Third Mission of Universities

### 1. Introduction

When «No is not enough», as Naomi Klein states in her last work

(2017), urban planners – together with all those researchers interested in the field of cities and landscape – have the responsibility of exploring new spaces and tools for change, for an ‘enabling yes’.

Scholars have often faced *querelles* whose dichotomies seemed to be insurmountable: between conflicts and collaborative approaches (Flyvbjerg, 1998), between public/private management of resources (Ostrom, 1990), and so forth. Dichotomies cannot always frame the complexity of contemporary challenges. For instance, the spread of derelict areas in rural and urban peripheries is a tangible sign of a lack of public as well as private resources. It is also a tangible sign of a lack of direct interest in taking care of something that was previously considered wealth (it may be a brownfield, an abandoned farm, an empty building, a deserted area, etc.). At the same time, these marginal spaces are also being reborn as opportunities to experiment, in practice, with new forms of urban and rural resistance against the distortions of contemporaneity. In this worldwide scenario, various groups of grassroots actors are taking initiative to restore such areas with a community-based approach to sustainability (Agyeman and Angus, 2003).

Planning scholars have long discussed the kind of relationships grassroots groups need to develop with institutional bodies. In some cases, the civil society may seek to collaborate with institutions (Healey, 1997), rather than constantly fighting against them; in other cases, active citizens may pursue the aim of denouncing the limits of mainstream approaches of governments and planning (Yiftachel, 1998). Derelict areas are places where these dichotomies do not always work; rather, it is necessary to explore ways that allow the achievement of common goals for their revitalization, overcoming barriers and bridging differences (Holling et al., 1995, Forester, 2009). This is even more compelling in recent decades. As a matter of fact, we witness a constant rising of environmental and social crises that are emerging as a permanent condition for contemporaneity. Although environmental and social aspects have typically been investigated through separated fields of expertise, they need to be understood as a whole (Beck 1992; Gunderson 2001). Thus, we assume that environmental challenges and social crises have arisen as two faces of the same coin; also, we assume that environmental and social crises are connected with the crisis of

representative democratic systems.

It is then possible to observe that environmental and social crises cannot be easily solved where institutions and communities have gone through harsh conflicts and they have not been able to collaborate (e.g. 'Not In My Back Yard', or 'NIMBY' cases, environmental justice issues, and so forth; Fischer, 2000; Agyeman et al., 2003; Martinez-Alier, 2003). Differently, it is more likely that environmental and social crises are solved where communities and institutions are able to dialogue and to collaborate (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom, 2010; Healy, 2003, Ollson et al., 2006). In these contexts, it is possible to observe various cases of new experimental forms of governance within democratic institutions.

In the light of this wide debate, we argue that facing environmental and social crises in derelict areas is mostly a matter of democracy. Consequently, we argue that one way for overcoming environmental and social crises may be the design of new democratic institutions for citizens' participation and for sparking a meaningful dialogue among various grassroots and institutional actors (Smith 2009; Mathews 2014). In other words, the search for a common path between local communities and institutions challenges the democratic structures for governance, first of all. To find a common way toward more responsible and effective actions for taking care of social ecological systems requires rethinking democratic institutions.

How can there be innovation of democratic structures for governance, in contexts where communities and institutions have gone and still go through several harsh conflicts?

The authors have explored this broad question through direct engagement in a long-lasting partnership in the Simeto River Valley (Eastern Sicily, IT), between: a) the University of Catania; b) a network of grassroots associations at the very beginning of the process; c) a network of associations and institutions in subsequent years.

As a matter of fact, in 2008 the partnership has started as a self-organized effort (Alfasi and Portugali, 2004; Innes et al., 2010; Van Meerkerk, 2013; Boonstra, 2015) between the local community and the University of Catania. Then, the partnership evolved into an institutional setting, called the Simeto River Agreement (SRA), within the framework of the Third Mission of Universities for public service and community-engagement

(Inman and Schütze, 2010). Specifically, the SRA is a voluntary act that the LabPEAT of the University of Catania, a coalition of about 50 local NGOs under the umbrella of the so-called Participatory Presidium and 10 municipalities entered into 2015. The partnership is aimed at experimenting, with new organizational structures for democratic institutions - at various levels and centers of governance (Ostrom 2010) - how to take care of derelict areas in a specific social-ecological system, the Simeto River Valley. Developed in the widest watershed of Sicily, the Agreement has been designed as a river and landscape contract (Pahl-Wostl, 2002; Pizziolo et al., 2003; Bastiani, 2011; Micarelli and Pizziolo in Bastiani, 2011) as well as a bottom-up strategic plan.

The Agreement has been generated as a practical experience inspired by the paradigms of action research (Whyte, 1997; Given, 2008; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Saija and Gravagno 2009; Saija, 2014; Saija, 2017) and oriented at accomplishing the Third Mission of the Universities for public service and community-engagement, with a focus on service learning and the empowerment of local communities (Reardon, 1998; Reardon, 2005). The aim is to allow practices of participatory democracy that may positively contaminate the current representative democratic system beyond the conflicting dichotomies that paralyze local development. Nevertheless, this ambitious experiment is encountering various obstacles along its way of implementation.

This article discusses how a specific approach to the Third Mission of Universities may support self-organized communities in strengthening their democratic dialogue with institutions in derelict areas through new forms of governance. After an overview of the thematic debate about the relation between the institutional Third Mission of Universities and self-organizational practices, the authors present the main lessons drawn from the ongoing process of building and reframing the SRA.

### **What approach to Third Mission for Universities can help self-organized communities in enhance the democratic governance of derelict areas?**

Self-organization of communities is a key-aspect for local development; beyond various definitions and theoretical frameworks (Alfasi and Portugali, 2004; Innes et al., 2010;

Van Meerkerk, 2013; Boonstra, 2015], there are some pivotal aspects that characterize self-organized practices. First, they are moved from a strong voluntary and self-motivation of the involved actors that generally are bounded in networks. Also, self-organized practices are nurtured by active local interactions inside networks, a distributed control of the process of self-organization, and the capacity to learn from the experience of self-organizing. Self-organization inside local communities is an important precondition for building up processes of innovation of democratic governance in derelict areas. But self-organization alone is not always enough to be effective for the full revitalization of social-ecological systems. As already stated in the introduction, a co-evolution of the democratic dialogue between self-organized communities and institutions is necessary. But usually, neither communities nor institutions are aware of the need to reframe the mechanisms of their interaction and dialogue to face environmental and social challenges. This awareness cannot easily arise without a 'third subject' that may act as a catalyzer for change. Who has then the role of facilitating these innovative processes for improving our democratic systems?

In its institutional role of Third Mission, Universities can act as catalyzers for enhancing the process of democratic governance. The expression "Third Mission,"<sup>1</sup> which has recently gained attention in Europe<sup>2</sup>, identifies the necessity of linking research and education with local development. Scholars are currently discussing goals, strategies and tools as well as indicators for measuring the effective impact of their activities aimed at opening up the divide between the academia and the local contexts where the academia itself is merged<sup>3</sup>. Although there is general agreement on the necessity of developing the Third Mission as an integral commitment of Universities, there is not a univocal approach to the way the Third Mission is practiced.

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1 See, for example, the *Green Paper Fostering and Measuring "Third Mission" in Higher Education Institutions*, 2012

2 While in the United States, for example, the mission of "service" within the academia has been already fully developed in past years, e.g. within Land Grant Universities that have been established with the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890.

3 This topic has recently been embraced by the whole academia also due to the rising attention paid by assessing commissions such as ANVUR in Italy (Italian Agency for University and Research Evaluation), standing as a priority in the agenda of Departments.

Specifically, mainstream cases have been grounded on an economic/utilitarian dimension. Although the governmental sector and civil society have been acknowledged as important partners<sup>4</sup>, industries still remain the most common partners for implementing agreement based on the so-called 'Transfer of Technologies'. But, if the goal of the Third Mission is enhancing the democratic dialogue between communities and institutions - especially in those contexts where local development is challenged (Gravagno and Pappalardo, 2015) - a more complex approach is needed. It is necessary to move from the mere 'Transfer of Technologies' to a holistic 'Sharing of Knowledge'. This requires a shift in the way teaching and research are conducted, toward a more circular and maieutic approach (Freire, 1970; Dolci, 1996) in the co-production of knowledge. In this sense, Universities are called not just to apply and disseminate research findings. Universities are rather called to educate *and* advance knowledge working tightly *with* community-based actors and institutional actors.

This is consistent with the aforementioned paradigms of action research<sup>5</sup> that may guide the way Third Mission is developed when it comes to the enhancement of the democratic dialogue between communities and institutions.

In following sections we examine how this approach to Third Mission has catalyzed the process of experimenting with new forms of democratic governance in support of a self-organized community, that has shifted from an exacerbated conflict against institutions to an 'enabling yes' through the Simeto River Agreement. The SRA has been developed in a highly distressed context from an environmental and social standpoint. Before the start-up of the SRA, the community had completely lost trust in institutions, especially at the regional level. As a matter of fact, the public decision-making process was extremely distant

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4 The literature about the Third Mission usually shows the necessity of a triple helix (researchers, representatives, and entrepreneurs, as in Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz, 1996) in order to trigger development, adding the governmental sector to the nexus universities/industries. Years later, the role of civil society has been recognized as an essential "forth helix" (Cooper, 2009) for allowing long-lasting development.

5 As anticipated in the introduction, various authors such as Whyte (1997); Reardon (1998); Reason and Bradbury (2001); Reardon (2005); Given (2008); Saija and Gravagno (2009); Saija (2014); Saija (2017) have long discussed the paradigms of action research

from the real needs expressed by the community. Also, the local community needed to increase its relational and self-organizational capacity for acting as a 'community'. After a brief background of this story, we focus on these aspects discussing some crucial nodes of the SRA.

### **Exploitation and conflict as preconditions to the Simeto River Agreement: the social-ecological background**

In the last century, the Simeto River Valley has gone through a history of exploitation and drastic transformations. The River (113 Km long) has run freely for millennia with abundant flows, supporting a vital ecosystem<sup>6</sup>. But after World War II, things changed drastically. As has happened with the majority of the rivers in the world, the Simeto River's natural configuration has been reshaped and highly modified through anthropic transformations. Large-scale agricultural activities and the fertilized agricultural soil, as well as the inefficiency of the waste treatment plants and the runoff from the growing urban areas, have impacted the riverine ecosystem. As a consequence, the river's minimum flow has been highly affected and water quality has been lowered. Concrete structures and engineered modifications of the basin have heavily altered the riverine ecosystem<sup>6</sup>. The violence to the River went together with violence throughout the community, worsened by mafia interests and affairs in the Simeto area<sup>7</sup>.

At the beginning of 2000, the environmental crisis of waste was

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<sup>6</sup> For example, in the '70s a huge reservoir, the Lentini Lake (12 km<sup>2</sup> wide, the widest lake of Sicily and the largest artificial lake of Italy) was built impairing the natural flow of the River and so forth; in the same years, the mouth area started being drastically urbanized, mostly with illegal settlements for resorts that have destroyed the pre-existing dunes; etc.

<sup>7</sup> For example, during the '80s, the area around the 3 towns of Adrano, Biancavilla and Paternò was known as 'the death triangle' because of the high number of murders for mafia affairs that has been executed in that area. It has already been widely discussed (Armiero et al., forthcoming) as the history of environmental exploitation of the basin has been amplified because of the presence of obscure relations of power, known as the mafia, related also with the weakness of democratic Institutions that have governed Sicily in the last decades. As a matter of fact, the mafia itself has drained economic resources operating transformations of the Simeto River since the 1950s, the same time when the mafia began to be structured in Eastern Sicily. Along the years, the mafia also entered the institutional system and became one of the reasons for a broad malfunction of democracy.

the straw that broke the camel's back. In those years, the EU Regions had to implement waste management plans to address the growing production of garbage, but the Sicilian Region arrived to the point of declaring a state of emergency. In 2001 Salvatore Cuffaro was elected governor of the Sicilian Region and also became the commissioner for the waste emergency. In 2002, a Regional Waste Management Plan was issued; it identified the construction of 4 waste-to-energy facilities for the non-recyclable portion of solid waste that would be managed by private actors. One of these facilities was to be located inside a Special Area of Conservation close to Simeto River main course. There were concerns that the plan was also connected to mafia interests. A 'Coalition' of grassroots associations self-organized against the waste management plan to defend the Simeto River and its social-ecological system<sup>8</sup>. The campaign, carried out by the Coalition, was the beginning of a conflict between governmental and non governmental representatives: the former moved by business-related interests and the latter animated by a common rebuttal against a highly exploitative plan connected with mafia affairs (Saija, 2014). The mobilization against the incinerator in the Simeto area was successful and the Cuffaro waste management plan was never implemented<sup>9</sup>.

### **Community and institutions regain ground for a democratic dialogue: why the Third Mission of Universities matters**

The Coalition of associations had said 'no' to the status quo institutional decision-making process, having definitively lost trust in institutions, especially the ones at the Regional level. From the beginning, their self-organizational effort (Alfasi and Portugali, 2004; Innes et al., 2010; Van Meerkerk, 2013; Boonstra, 2015) was based on a strong motivation to take care of the environment. However, their 'no' was not enough. The Coalition knew it was necessary to move forward beyond the opposition to the Regional Waste Management Plan. In a first phase, the

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8 The Cuffaro plan generated mistrust from the grassroots because it was in antithesis with the approach of reducing waste and supporting recycling; it was creating a private monopolistic regime and - above all - there was a real risk of mafia infiltrations in the business. Details of this story have already been widely discussed in Saija, 2014.

9 On January 2011, Salvatore Cuffaro has been condemned for aiding and abetting.

Coalition contacted the University of Catania– LabPEAT<sup>10</sup> – asking for expertise in the lawsuit against the incinerator, as well as for the implementation of the River Park. At the beginning, the Coalition assumed that the protection of the River and its ecosystems was related to the institution of a River Park. In our interactions we (engaged scholars and community partners) debated for a long time about how to transform the idea of instituting a River Park into something different<sup>11</sup>. As a matter of fact, our joint work was aimed at building a collaborative process in order to face the social-ecological challenges of the Valley and to find possible ways for regenerating this social-ecological system. Initially, we (engaged scholars) started the partnership with the aim of supporting the self-organized community to strengthen local interactions and start a common learning process through our common experience. Together, we (engaged scholars and community partners) have learned from the practice of working collectively (Freire, 1970; Dolci, 1996; Whyte, 1997; Reardon, 1998; Given, 2008; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Reardon, 2005; Saija and Gravagno 2009; Saija, 2014; Saija, 2017) how to frame possible visions and actions for community-based sustainable development of the valley (Agyeman and Angus, 2003). Progressively, we all have collectively built up a process of the Third Mission inspired by action research. Not only was community engagement our purpose; we realized that also a strong interaction with governmental agencies was necessary. We decided to develop an experiment aimed at renewing relations between communities and institutions, in an attempt to build more democratic organizational structures . Our joint work then evolved into the proposal of the Simeto River Agreement. As already stated, we have structured the Agreement

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<sup>10</sup> Environmental and Ecological Planning and Design Lab.

<sup>11</sup> As we were focusing on the necessity of «democratizing democracy» (De Sousa, 2009) through the democratization of knowledge, we underlined the importance of opening up the experts VS laypersons divide, promoting a 'non-technocratic' approach to our collaboration (Gravagno, Saija, Pappalardo, 2011). We developed a 'Community Mapping Initiative' aimed at contaminating local knowledge with experts' knowledge and at rebuilding the relations inside the community itself through the act of mapping together (Pappalardo, 2017). Our joint work has collectively produced a system of knowledge, projects and actions aimed at improving the Simeto social ecological system from the bottom.

as a river contract<sup>12</sup> aimed at encouraging local development. Within the University-community partnership, we have reflected on the necessity of including more actors in order to be more representative of the Simeto community<sup>13</sup>. Also, our debate focused on the limits of the current interaction between the community and the governmental institutions.

As a result, we have chosen – as the core of the Agreement – to design and test a new governance structure aimed at innovating democratic interactions between communities and institutions. The governance structure has the ambitious commitment of organizing the process of social-ecological regeneration and of contrasting the mafia dynamics and interests in the Valley.

The Agreement has progressively been built from 2010 to 2015 thanks to the mutual interactions with various actors that have been gradually engaged into the process. The first Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2012; it was set up in order to collect the willingness and commitment of the grassroots associations and Municipalities in a collaborative effort to build the Simeto River Agreement. In May 2015, the Agreement was signed and it contains a proposed structure of a new governance system. The specific objectives of this new governance system are clearly defined in this document, including a system of common values, knowledge, rules and projects related to the Simeto River and the rural and urban areas along it. Additionally, the Agreement defines the organization of the proposed governance system.

The Participatory Presidium, established in February 2015, is an umbrella organization created in order to coordinate more than 40 non-profit associations and dozens of citizens and actors in

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12 We refer to the wide debate about River Contracts in Europe and Italy (Pahl-Wostl, 2002; Pizziolo et al., 2003; Bastiani, 2011; Micarelli and Pizziolo in Bastiani, 2011) that are related to specific EU Directive such as the 2000/60/EC 'Water' and the 2007/60/EC 'Flood Risk'

13 The term 'community' is something that the authors still question in its essence. Referring to the local community in the Simeto Valley, one can argue: what are the boundaries of this community? Who is part and who is excluded and by what mechanisms of power? Are the most underprivileged persons involved? Various authors (such as Harvey, 1996; Agyeman et al., 2003; Martinez-Alier, 2003) have full discussed the relationship between environmental and social justice. The aim of this article is not exploring these questions. Other manuscripts are in the process of being issued with a focus on identifying the dynamic of actors within the 'local community' in the Simeto Valley.

the third sector that are involved in the process of building up the Agreement. The active members of the Presidium are committed to listen to the needs and wishes of the Simeto community and to organize community-based actions. With this aim, the Presidium promotes a democratic dialogue with institutions, which occurs mainly in the Assembly of the River Agreement.

The Assembly is the core of the governance system; it is the political body where the decision-making process within the Agreement occurs. The components of the Assembly are: 10 mayors on behalf of the 10 Municipalities located along the Simeto River; 2 members of the Participatory Presidium; and 1 scientific coordinator on behalf of the University of Catania.

These 13 members are meant to be the spokespersons on behalf of the community, but the Assembly tries to be something more. In order to overcome the mechanism of representative democracy and delegation, Assemblies are public events; each citizen can take part in them and can propose specific focuses and actions through the collaborative process within the Participatory Presidium. As a matter of fact, the idea of establishing the Presidium and the Assembly responds to the need for a permanent instrument to increase and maintain the involvement of various community actors to guarantee their participation in the Agreement's decision-making process and organize the various contributions within transparent and accountable bodies.

Finally, in order to implement the deliberations of the Assembly, the Agreement is also organized through an executive commission, an international scientific committee and an operative lab. This system of bodies constitutes the governance structure for the Agreement and functions as a tool for facilitating participatory democracy (Smith 2009; Mathews 2014).

The Agreement has built various multi-level interactions (Ostrom 2010). The first interaction occurred with the Sicilian Regional Boards, in order to build a collaborative process for managing hydrological risks through the Flood Risk Management Plan (according with the EU Directive 2007/60/EC) and the River Basin Management Plan (according with the EU Directive 2000/60/EC). EU Directives recommend the maximization of actors' involvement in setting up the planning process. Regional officers that were responsible for the aforementioned plans tried to set up focus groups with Municipal officers and some other

local stakeholders. The outcomes of these outreach activities was not significant due to a very low level of engagement and participation. Consequently, the Simeto River Agreement decided to support the Regional officers through a more specific set of focus groups with Municipal officers and public meetings. The level of participation in both planning processes rose drastically. With respect to the Risk Management Plan, this was due to a contextual event that occurred in May 2015: the overflow of the Simeto River due to an intense rain and, above all, because of a lack of coordination between all the authorities in charge of dams and reservoirs along the River. The Agreement was able to insert specific local issues that had not been considered in the Regional planning process before these events. Also, the Agreement worked for increasing the level of citizens' awareness of the need to mitigate hydrogeological risk in urban and rural settings and adapt to severe rainfall due to overall climate change.

At the same time, some representatives of the Simeto River Agreement met with the Regional officers in charge of the River Basin Management Plan. They agreed to start a structured participatory process involving local communities through the Agreement's activities in order to enrich the contents of the River Basin Management Plan and to allow its broad dissemination. As a consequence of this set of multi-level activities, the Agreement organized a workgroup among the various Municipal officers in charge of the projects related to the hydraulic and hydrogeological infrastructures. For the first time this working group was committed to the production of a master plan – representing the 10 municipalities involved in the Agreement – to the coordination of the projects and the management activities of the aforementioned infrastructures.

Moreover, the Agreement organized a community-based process for mapping the areas of high hydraulic danger. For this purpose, 6 public meetings were conducted with the objective of constructing an open GIS that could be updated through crowdsourcing. Alongside these activities, a Life project was presented to the EU and approved: this Life project centers on community resilience and increased awareness with the structured involvement of schools as catalyzers for community engagement.

Also, the Agreement was selected as an experimental case for

the National Strategy for Inner Areas, a program of the Italian Government. In this framework, actors from the local level (associations and municipalities) built a co-design process with institutional actors from the provincial, regional levels and the national one. The objective was to identify a strategy that can strengthen economic and social cohesion with the support of a multi-fund set of economic resources that the National and the Regional agencies have allocated for Inner Areas<sup>14</sup>.

### **Self-reflections on the Simeto River Agreement**

After almost a decade of work, the Agreement tried to collectively accomplish some broad goals and mid-term outcomes. Nonetheless, the process has gone through various phases of distress and pitfalls. One main overall goal was to improve relations within the community itself to strengthen self-organization. This goal was partially accomplished through the creation of the Participatory Presidium, which was an attempt to involve more laypersons and organize a variety of perspectives and interests into a 'common voice' for the Simeto Community. The Presidium tried to transform the established practice of delegating actions for change into a more direct proves of involvement in co-creating the changes. The Presidium has produced a variety of bottom-up projects - such as the 'Bio-district of the Simeto Valley'<sup>15</sup>, and fully contributed to institutional projects - such as the EU Life on resilience - proposing specific community-based actions.

As a pitfall, we have experienced difficulties in organizing the complexity of the social relations through a brand-new body – the Participatory Presidium – that operates only on a voluntary basis.

Another main goal was to improve trust and relations between the self-organized community and institutions at the local, regional,

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14 Specifically, the Simeto Area would benefit of 3.7 euro of National funds - plus EU Regional Development Funds, EU Social Funds and EU Community Led Local Development Funds for about 30 millions of euro - to be spent in the next 3 years 2018/2021. This set of economic resources will be used for improving citizens' services - such as education, wealth, mobility - and for encouraging sustainable local development.

15 The Bio-district of the Simeto Valley is an organization focused on the rural cycles (production/sell/consumption of high quality local products of the Valley), e.g. promoting Community Supported Agriculture, Participatory Guarantee Systems, and so forth.

national levels. This goal has been partially accomplished through the participation in specific regional and national planning processes, such as the regional hydrological risk and watershed management plans and the National Strategy for Inner Areas. In this respect, these programs were relevant because the community had the opportunity to work closely with representatives from various institutions that wanted to experiment with a different way of working inside institutional structures. These programs tried to promote and implement a process of listening to the community's needs and projects rather than just planning top-down. Also, the Agreement attempted to produce an integrated vision to address the challenges of the Valley with a holistic approach. These opportunities allowed us to experiment with a multi-level collaborative process, although not immune to the persistence of several conflicts along the way. Indeed, we have seen a large divide between the initial declared intentions and the actual outcomes of the aforementioned programs. They had little capacity to transform the real community's needs in an efficient set of actions, up to this point. This is partially due to the rigidity of the EU funding mechanisms, as well as to the opacity in decision-making processes that still characterizes several institutional bodies.

Recall that the mafia affairs – that notoriously affect Sicily<sup>16</sup>– are able to flourish where there is no real transparency and accountability of public administrations and substantial involvement of the whole community in public decision-making processes.

Consequently, the ambitious mission of the Agreement is to overcome the democratic divide between institutions and community within the public decision-making process. For this reason, the new proposed governance system is an important experiment that can become a long-lasting opportunity for sustaining anti-mafia in Sicily. The attempt is to nurturing the culture of active citizenship as anti-mafia in the public decision-making processes throughout community, undertaking processes that involve various actors, especially youth.

After 10 years of work, we have seen the resilience and co-evolution of this process, proved by its mid-term outcomes despite of pitfalls. We believe that the resilience of the

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<sup>16</sup> For an excursus, see e.g. Dickie, J. (2011). *Blood brotherhoods: the rise of the Italian mafias*. UK: Hachette.

Agreement is an accomplishment itself, as the Agreement is mostly conducted by volunteers. Through this process, we have tried to create the best preconditions for a meaningful and long-lasting common way for social ecological care. This common way needs to be traced and sustained by functioning and strong democratic structures that community and institutions agree to build, including the University in its role of Third Mission. These structures – roughly tested through the Agreement itself – are our proposal for an ‘enabling yes’ to a renewed approach to care (Klein 2017) of social ecological systems.

### Conclusions

The article has discussed achievements and pitfalls of what started as a self-organized experiment from the grassroots (Alfasi and Portugali, 2004; Innes et al., 2010; Van Meerkerk, 2013; Boonstra, 2015) in partnership with the LabPEAT of the University of Catania, and it has become today a more complex partnership with public institutions in the form of a river and landscape contract (Pahl-Wostl, 2002; Pizziolo et al., 2003; Bastiani, 2011; Micarelli and Pizziolo in Bastiani, 2011) as well as a bottom-up strategic plan. We argue for the necessity of fostering self-organization to improve relations between community-based actors (such through the Participatory Presidium) and between community-based actors with institutional actors (such through the Assembly of the Simeto River Agreement). We highlight the necessity of reframing the role of the Third Mission of the University aimed at public service and community engagement (Inman and Schütze, 2010) in those contexts where local development is challenged (Gravagno and Pappalardo, 2015) with approaches inspired by the paradigms of action research (Whyte, 1997; Reardon, 1998; Reason and Bradbury, 2001; Reardon, 2005; Given, 2008; Saija and Gravagno, 2009; Saija, 2014; Saija, 2017) We have argued the importance of reflecting on the necessity of renewed approaches for the Third Mission of Universities in order to allow for the care of derelict areas.

Various questions<sup>17</sup> can be answered through the discussion of the ongoing experience of the Simeto River Agreement. First,

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<sup>17</sup> We specifically refer to a set of questions that arose during the International conference ‘Cities and Self-Organization’ held at ‘La Sapienza’ University of Rome, 11-13 December 2017,

if one asks what constitutes experiences of self-organization, we argue that first of all the Simeto River Agreement has been mostly a voluntary effort. It has been an attempt to improve democratic institutions through the experimentation of a new form of governance, starting with strong grassroots input. The Participatory Presidium was proposed as a self-organizational tool for: a) creating a 'common voice' on behalf of the various grassroots contributions from the involved actors; and b) for developing practices aimed at increasing the level of awareness and collective learning inside the local community. This is consistent with the main characteristics of self-organization: strong self-motivation; high levels of local interaction; distributed control; learning from experience.

The Simeto River Agreement demonstrates the necessity of having a 'third subject' to catalyze such a process. We argue that what we have accomplished reflects a specific approach to the Third Mission of Universities inspired by the paradigms of action research. Following Freire (1970) and Dolci (1996), we have tried to develop a maieutic<sup>18</sup> approach, which has been aimed at raising the awareness of community members with respect to their self-organizational potential, as well as at arousing more openness of institutional actors toward community engagement. The benefits of this interaction are two-fold. On one hand, the intense 'Sharing of Knowledge' has primarily been a bi-directional exchange of experience and mutual learning that has enriched not only the various actors, but also the University itself. On the other hand, the local context benefits from the direct engagement of the University as a 'third subject' that can facilitate the interaction between communities and institutions. If one asks what kind of interactions (such as dialogue, negotiation or conflict as in Flyvbjerg, 1998 among others) have emerged through the overall process, we argue that conflict, dialogue, negotiation and collaboration between governmental and non-governmental actors have all been crucial elements. They have been operating with a strategic long-term and adaptive vision for nurturing a new system of governance through the practice

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18 As in Pappalardo (2015), the maieutic approach can be defined as «the ability of activating critical thinking, rather than transferring notions. According with the Socratic dialectical method [...] lighting up a possible way for gaining knowledge, rather than imposing preconceived, yet partial, forms of knowledge» (p.155)

of active citizenship and deliberative democracy. Also, if we ask, what kind of 'community' is this process producing? Is it creating new political communities or reducing social conflict? Although the term 'community' has to be questioned in each specific stage of the process, as it is an evolving concept, we can say that the process of the Simeto River Agreement has certainly produced a new political community. This political community is identified with the Participatory Presidium and it is an evolving group that changes along the way. This political community is based on a deep sense of active citizenship. It is able to go through conflict (Fischer, 2000; Agyeman et al., 2003; Martinez-Alier, 2003), dialogue, negotiation and collaboration (Ostrom, 1990; Ostrom, 2010; Healy, 2003, Ollson et al., 2006) with an awareness of how these approaches contribute to the evolution of democratic public decision-making processes (Forester, 2009). Conflict has been used as a spark for igniting the process at the very beginning, and also in other phases of the process itself; however, it has not paralyzed the dialogue. Rather, in this case, conflict has been the reason for starting a dialogue among various actors. In this respect, the new political community is not aimed at reducing social conflict but at allowing democratic dialogue to emerge through a more mature and aware approach to conflict.

Is the Simeto River Agreement a new democratic institution or is it an attempt to make institutions more accountable? The Simeto River Agreement is a voluntary act that has not been implemented due to a compulsory law. As a consequence, it does not establish a new institution. It is rather an experience that tries to overcome the vacuum of the current Regional and National regulatory frameworks related with democratic participation within decision making processes. This is one of the current limits of the Italian and Sicilian governmental system: participation is mostly a declaration of intents that has not been sustained by any specific laws, differently than in other Italian Regions. In other words, in Sicily participatory activities are not usually framed within an institutional setting and are not usually sustained by economic resources; consequently, participatory activities are usually not efficient and enduring.

The Agreement has been set up to experiment with practical strategies for structured participation in decision-making processes, with the aim (among the others) of making institutions

more accountable. Further experimentation is still needed in order to reach this goal.

Finally, through our direct experience as engaged-scholars in a long-term university-community partnership based on action research, we have taken part in a learning process where all the involved actors – including ourselves – have exchanged specific and diverse types of knowledge and expertise. The network of associations learned the importance of going beyond conflict; to strengthening enduring alliances between various organizations that used to work separately, dialoging with local, regional and national institutions, and constructing a strategic long-term vision for their action (Forester, 2009). The governmental institutions learned to collaborate at a multi-level scale and within the same level (Ostrom, 2010), to listen to various community members' needs and expectations and to build a fruitful dialogue with them, and finally, to recognize the significant role of active citizenship in democratic decision-making (Smith, 2009; Mathews, 2014).

We, as engaged scholars, have learned that theory needs a continuous adaptation to practice: drawing from Schön (1983), we have experienced that practice requires specific skills that cannot be acquired without a full immersion into practice itself. As a consequence, we highlight that more practice-oriented learning activities are needed within the current Italian academic curricula.

Finally, this article has discussed how an Italian University has responded to its institutional role of Third Mission with a specific approach inspired by the paradigms of action research. As we have already said, this approach has specific benefits, as well as challenges. It requires significant effort in terms of fieldwork and human resources. One question remains: will it still be possible to undertake such activities of the Third Mission given the changing conditions of Italian Universities, especially if cuts of public funds result in cuts of human resources?

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