Overcoming EU Discontent in "Places That Don't Matter" through the Community-Led Local Development

Pietro L. Verga[1]

Introduction

The past year has certainly been a particularly difficult one for the strength and cohesion of the European Union. The outcomes of local and national elections in many countries (loudly) unveiled not only the emergence of new populist and nationalist movements and governments all across the Union, but also a growing disbelief in the European project and institutions.

Recent researches on the geography of EU discontent (*see* Dijkstra, 2018; Rodriguez-Pose, 2018) explain such phenomena as the citizens' reaction to a continuous increase of inequalities and socio-economic polarisation between – and within – territories. Over the past decades most of the attention focused on the growth of already attractive large urban areas, and most of the investments privileged highly remunerative targets and goals, whereas many places have been left behind facing a structural decline on many interconnected dimensions (e.g. economic, industrial, demographic, employment opportunities, etc...).

These very places *"that don't matter"* (Rodriguez-Pose, 2018) progressively became the major pockets of consensus for populist and anti-European movements. Even if the EU is strongly active in supporting and developing such places in many ways, its benefits are scarcely perceived by the population that, instead, sees in the EU one of the key causes of their problems.

A common and recurrent reaction of the political and technical policy-making community is that this phenomenon needs to be tackled with a change in the narrative: "*we have to tell a better story to the citizens*" has often been said from the podium during many EU-level conferences and seminars.

Unfortunately, I am convinced that one of the fundamental reasons of such a disconnection between the institutional and the real-world dimensions lays precisely in this attitude. Saying "*we have to tell a better story*" not only implies a one-way, top-down relationship among the parts, but it also implies that the citizens are misunderstanding all the good that the institutions in Brussels are doing for them, without even considering a small shade of a doubt that maybe some mistakes have been made also at the top level.

From a constructivist/discursive perspective, in fact, narratives can be understood as a process in which discursive practices produce meaning and attribute significance to things and phenomena (Hall 1997). If the "discourse is shaped ... by the imperatives of argument" (Hirschman 1991:x), then the narratives become instrumental to "the construction of [a] social

---

[1] Pietro L. Verga, PhD · Urban Researcher & Local Development Advisor
info@pietroverga.com · www.pietroverga.com

reality [that] is always the manifestation of specific forms of power" and they are aimed at "determining human perceptions, feelings and behaviours" (Colombo 2015:123, 125).

Yet, instead of trying to influence citizens' perceptions through new narratives, I argue that in order to overcome the growing EU discontent and regain a meaningful connection and sense of ownership to the European project, we need more two-ways interactions between the citizens and the Institutions.

The EU should not only be more present and visible, but it should ultimately seek to directly learn from – and to actively engage with the citizens in the shaping of local development policies and strategies.

What to do?

In his recent article, Andrés Rodriguez-Pose (2018) argues for "better policies" to address lagging left-behind places:

> *The answer has to come not from less or more intervention, but from a different type of intervention. One that moves away from simply providing welfare, away from continuing to shelter the inhabitants of less developed and declining areas, and away from supply-led interventions that end up becoming white elephants. The solution needs to be place-sensitive, that is policies that are informed by theory and empirical evidence but that, at the same time, respond to the structural opportunities, potential, and constraints of each place (Iammarino et al., 2017).*

Under this perspective, the central focus of "place-sensitive solutions" appears limited to the enhancement of the competitive performance and profitability on the market of lagging areas. Yet I fail to understand how citizens' discontent towards the EU – which is related to the growth of disparities and imbalances – could be mitigated by implementing economic growth policies – which intrinsically generate inequalities – also in the "places that don't matter", as Rodriguez-Pose calls them.

Rather, I would suggest to pursue a "participatory solidarity economy" agenda based on a "regulated capitalism" approach, where the added value brought by local economic development directly contributes to tackle inequalities and enhance people's living conditions and well-being (Hooghe, 1998; van den Berk-Clark & Pyles, 2012).

The potential of the Community-Led Local Development

The Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) is an area-based instrument focused on the development of small-scale territories between 10,000 and 150,000 inhabitants. It has to foster integrated regeneration strategies in which the physical, social, and economic dimensions coexist and mutually reinforce each other; and it should adopt a bottom-up approach, with the involvement of local partners in all phases of the development process.

In doing so, the CLLD aims at putting into practice three key principles of Cohesion Policy: (1) *territorial cohesion*, towards the balanced and sustainable development of all European places; (2) *subsidiarity and multilevel governance*, towards the downwards rescaling and reorganisation of regulatory powers, especially in the horizontal dimension of local

decision-making; and (3) *partnership*, towards the increase of democratic quality and the enhancement of the effectiveness of the policy.

Moreover, Urban-CLLD also builds on previous experiences, and in particular from the URBAN Initiatives and the LEADER programme. From the former it inherited, on the one hand, the values of community engagement and empowerment as a key factor for both the areas' economic regeneration and the enhancement of local capacities and social capital; and, on the other hand, the adoption of an integrated and cross-sectoral approach against neighbourhoods' deprivation. From the latter, the CLLD borrowed the concept of Local Action Groups, that is the institution of locally-based governance bodies composed by community members, local institutions and stakeholders, in which the even balance among different kinds of actors from the private, public and civil society sectors has to be guaranteed.

On these grounds, the CLLD seems to have the potential to build from the ground-up shared visions for the future of the target areas, to generate social and economic development at local level, and ultimately to effectively tackle urban deprivation and inequalities.

The Potential Pitfalls of CLLD's Participatory Arrangements

Previous research (see Verga, 2017a & 2017b) revealed that when a complex CLLD programme is launched top-down in an area mostly populated by disadvantaged and low-skilled people that are struggling to make their own ends meet and that are not already keen to community organising, widespread citizens' involvement is everything but granted (see Wagenaar, 2007) and falling into the local trap (Purcell, 2006) is a likely risk.

If the programme is not able to bring about the expected increase of citizens' participation in the local governance, a democratic deficit can occur. Citizens might be substantially bypassed by the formation of a coalition, which, in the end, would reinforce a nested local hierarchy in spite of the raise of heterarchy (see Bache, 2010; Eizaguirre et al., 2012; Faludi, 2013; Moulaert et al., 2003).

The pitfalls in the provision of an effectively open and inclusive governance framework, then, may also have repercussions on the design and implementation of local development strategies and on their capability of enhancing the well-being of disadvantaged residents.

Integrating Digital Tools to Citizens' Participation Strategies

The concept of civic participation defines a form of interaction between institutions and the citizenry that allows citizens – either individually or associated, and at variable degrees of involvement – to contribute to the public administration's planning and decision-making process. Civic participation is therefore a structured process of discussion and/or planning on publicly relevant matters, which involves a plurality of subjects (e.g. public institutions, organised groups, experts, citizens, etc...) and opinions, and which can be activated either bottom-up on civil society's impulse or promoted top-down.

Theoretically, discussions should follow predetermined rules and focus on specific topics within defined time limits, and assume that broad, transparent, and equal information is made available to all the parties involved (Manconi & Porcaro, 2015). Yet, reaching a

satisfactory level of transparency, availability of information and – overall – inclusion and engagement is still an unsolved challenge.

In order to tackle such challenge, in recent years new online tools emerged in support of participatory processes. Digital Participatory Platforms (DPPs) are a specific type of Web 2.0 civic technology that allows for user generated content and include a range of functionalities which transcend and considerably differ from traditional social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Falco & Kleinhans, 2018). DPPs are in fact tools to co-produce 'public value' and to contribute to achieving societal objectives (ibid.).

Even the efficacy of such tools is not granted and can be affected by several factors, among which citizens' technological literacy (Afzalan et al., 2017). Yet, a recent project proposal[2] submitted to the 4th Call of the Urban Innovative Actions by the Romanian city of Baia Mare with the collaboration of Urbasofia and Indeco Soft, has the potential to be groundbreaking. The proposal introduced a local e-currency based on tokens that stimulates trust building, encourages commercial cooperation between local actors and fosters collective ownership and responsibility, with the ultimate goal of co-creating a widely shared value-system within the community.

Conclusions

Against this background I argue that – if supported by an adequate and open strategy for citizens' engagement – the Community-Led Local Development could be an appropriate means to overcome EU discontent in the so-called *places that don't matter*.

The CLLD offers the opportunity to directly re-connect the "Brussels dimension" of EU institutions with the very local level of urban and/or rural communities. Yet, to seize this opportunity, a new and more inclusive approach to local development is urgently required.

In this sense, complementing the CLLD with the use of DPPs and token-based tools appears to be a promising strategy. These tools, in fact, would not only provide widely accessible online platforms to co-design development visions and scenarios, ensuring a faster, and much more accurate closing of the decision-making feedback loop. They would also enable the creation of a shared system of values at local and community level, and – ultimately – dramatically increase citizens' ownership of projects.

Moreover, while they can be built as a "standard", these platforms in no way impose a standardisation of the participatory planning approach itself. Instead, they support a non-conventional interface between the decision makers and the community, as well as the local rooting and adaptation of any integrated development proposals which may be proposed top-down.

In this way, with an increased empowerment and direct ownership of local initiatives, the perception of being left behind and living in *places that don't matter* would eventually possibly cease, leading to an enhanced trust and satisfaction towards the enabler of such improvements: the EU.

---

[2] SPIRE – Smart Post-Industrial Regenerative Ecosystem

References

Afzalan, N., Sanchez, T. W., & Evans-Cowley, J. (2017). Creating smarter cities: Considerations for selecting online participatory tools. Cities, 67.

Bache, I. (2010). Partnership as an EU Policy Instrument: A Political History. West European Politics, 33(1), 58-74. doi:10.1080/01402380903354080

Colombo, E. (2015). The Representations of Power and the Power of Representations. In L. C. Manzo (Ed.), Culture and Visual Forms of Power. Experiencing Contemporary Spaces of Resistance. Champaign: Common Ground Publishing.

Dijkstra, L., Poelman, H., & Rodriguez-Pose, A. (2018). The Geography of EU Discontent. Working Papers of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, WP 12/2018. Brussels: European Commission.

Eizaguirre, S., Pradel, M., Terrones, A., Martinez-Celorrio, X., & Garcia, M. (2012). Multilevel Governance and Social Cohesion: Bringing Back Conflict in Citizenship Practices. Urban Studies, 49(9), 1999-2016. doi:10.1177/0042098012444890

Falco, E., & Kleinhans, R. (2018). Digital Participatory Platforms for Co-Production in Urban Development: A Systematic Review. International Journal of E-Planning Research, 7(3).

Faludi, A. (2013). Territorial Cohesion and Subsidiarity under the European Union Treaties: A Critique of the 'Territorialism' Underlying. Regional Studies, 47(9), 1594-1606. doi:10.1080/00343404.2012.657170

Hall, S. (1997). Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice. London: Sage.

Hirschman, A. O. (1991). The Rhetoric of Reaction. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Hooghe, L. (1998). EU Cohesion Policy and Competing Models of European Capitalism. Journal of Common Market Studies, 36(4), 457-477.

Iammarino, S., Rodríguez-Pose, A., and Storper, M. 2017. Why regional development matters for Europe's economic future. Working Papers of the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy, WP 07/2017. Brussels: European Commission.

Manconi, L., & Porcaro, P. (2015). Cosa è la partecipazione civica. Formez PA, Roma.

Moulaert, F., Martinelli, F., Swyngedouw, E., & Rodriguez, A. (2003). The Globalized City: Economic Restructuring and Social Polarization in European Cities. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Musterd, S., Marcińczak, S., van Ham, M., & Tammaru, T. (2016). Socioeconomic segregation in European capital cities. Increasing separation between poor and rich. Urban Geography, 38(7), 1062-1083. doi:10.1080/02723638.2016.1228371

Purcell, M. (2006). Urban democracy and the local trap. Urban Studies, 43(11), 1921-1941. doi:10.1080/00420980600897826

Rodríguez-Pose, A. (2018). The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it). Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 11(1), 189-209.

van den Berk-Clark, C., & Pyles, L. (2012). Deconstructing Neoliberal Community Development Approaches and a Case for the Solidarity Economy. Journal of Progressive Human Services, 23(1), 1-17. doi:10.1080/10428232.2011.606736

Verga, P. L. (2015). Community Development as a Way-Out from Crisis. Guidelines from New York City's Experience. In A. Borghini & E. Campo (Eds.), Exploring the crisis: theoretical perspectives and empirical investigations (pp. 59-71). Pisa: Pisa University Press.

Verga, P. L. (2017a). Towards Urban CLLD in Europe. Learning from Soziale Stadt in the Körnerpark, Berlin. (Ph.D. Monograph), Gran Sasso Science Institute, L'Aquila.

Verga, P.L.. (2017b). Towards an Inclusive and Sustainable CLLD. Lessons from a Neighbourhood Management in Berlin. Working Paper. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2947817

Wagenaar, H. (2007). Governance, Complexity, and Democratic Participation. How Citizens and Public Officials Harness the Complexities of Neighborhood Decline. The American Review of Public Administration, 37(1), 17-50.