



The transformative potential of civic enterprise

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Counteracting marginality: The Associazione Quartieri Spagnoli, Naples

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The Quartieri Spagnoli is a working class neighbourhood in the historical centre of Naples, characterised by many commercial and artisan activities. It is a “sponge” neighbourhood¹ that since the Second World War has been hosting people living a marginal existence through irregular economic activities (see Cavola, 2010; Laino, 2012).

The Associazione Quartieri Spagnoli (AQS) is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) established in 1986 by an informal group that has been working in the neighbourhood since 1978. For the first 15 years AQS was deeply involved in the neighbourhood reality. It immersed itself in local social networks and obtained hands-on knowledge of the neighbourhood and the trust of its residents. From the early 1990s, AQS initiated a number of projects paying close attention to networking with local and extra-local connections. The main activities were a social secretariat always open on the street, out-of-school education for children² (which took place for more than 15 years in the neighbourhood education workshops), socialisation into teamwork as a key practice to improve the employability profile of adolescents³ with low educational achievement, and direct collaboration with women caring for children (Nidi di Mamme (Mum’s Nests)) (Laino, 2012). With these activities, in approximately 20 years, the AQS attracted public funds of about €9 million into the area, and became well known as an innovative civil society organisation. Those in charge of AQS reached out to, and mobilised, various kinds of people – those with special knowledge, artists, pioneers. For example, first as a volunteer and then seconded from the national Ministry of Education, Universities and Research to the Associazione, Marco Rossi-Doria created the “taking action” model to tackle non-attendance at school, with the “street teacher” project⁴. I was involved from the beginning, as AQS helped me to imagine and design the action models for some EU framework policies that were implemented by the Naples municipality.

Table 1 shows that, due to the cuts in public funding to social services, the turnover of AQS declined over the years. Moreover, it is evident that, thanks to its activities, AQS, like many other NGOs, is also an economic force in the neighbourhood that activates the local economy and pays its taxes to the revenue authorities.

The Associazione welcomed about 120 people each day, taking care of at least 40 people on a continuous basis. Apart from intensive, continuous, and free of charge social services activity supporting women prisoners, the Associazione implemented a first level social service, in an office open on the street, ensuring an intensive networking activity with all the other social services. The sum of the contractualised working hours reached an annual average equivalent to between 20 and 30 full-time jobs.

Through many years of voluntary work and a small amount of money collected thanks to donations from various individuals and organisations, the AQS has built a social work

neighbourhood infrastructure with good research, action and policy design support, often using European, national and local public resources. However, after so many years of extraordinary effort, the municipality has not been a reflective, careful and sensitive partner – not having been able to institutionalise the good elements produced by this and other social experiences which took place in the city.

Obviously, the work of the Associazione encountered limitations, especially with regard to raising awareness and the mobilisation of residents of the neighbourhood. Consequently, not all the AQS initiatives have succeeded. In 2002 the Associazione tried to support the creation of a cooperative, formed by social workers formerly working in the AQS, obtaining funding from Sviluppo Italia. This cooperative closed after 10 years because the project proved to be unsustainable.⁵ Nevertheless, the AQS, as a small organisation, developed a community model based on confidence and leadership, though not very focused on the formal tools of internal democracy (assemblies, decisions taken through majority vote, and so on). The main method for the inclusion of residents was, in addition to listening to their concerns, their direct involvement in useful activities⁶. In this way, over the course of many years, the Associazione was able to develop a climate of confidence with residents, stakeholders and social workers. However, the project faltered because of the delayed reimbursement of payments by the municipal and regional authorities; the participating social workers had to wait many months to receive their salaries.

Participation as social involvement

The AQS expresses a working philosophy that focuses on people's agency as a key factor in initiatives and policies, as well as their direct involvement in the treatment of critical problems (work, income, emancipation, education and training, services, taking care of the environment and people, strengthening confidence). This was all done without replacing the much-needed formal assistance policies provided by the government. The work of AQS was related to a variety of approaches that focused on the active involvement of people, and fostering their resilience. This was a key consideration in a region where groups of people have internalised an attitude of fatalism and subordination across generations, which results in the suppression of the ability to express a "voice" or the capacity to aspire (Appadurai, 2004).

AQS acted in the belief that the most promising approaches stimulate "doing with" before "talking with", and sharing in activities, even before deliberation. For this reason, it launched the Nidi di Mamme project, based on the direct involvement of women from the neighbourhood in childcare; the involvement of adolescents in practical activities to support their school success, and the training of young people who drop out of school through their full involvement in

Table 1. Budgetary data of the Quartieri Spagnoli NGO, in euros. (There is no unequivocal and direct correspondence between the annual turnover, the taxes paid, and the social security and insurance contributions provided by government to those involved in AQS programmes. Taxes and contributions include the partly already anticipated expenses or what will be received after the calendar year.)

Year	Turnover	VAT	National and local taxes	Social security contributions	Insurance against work-related injuries contributions
2008	1,059,124	15,274	103,824	187,684	2,226
2009	764,469	18,460	74,921	136,774	2,279
2010	884,387	14,804	61,484	100,840	3,664
2011	393,422	7,239	78,745	113,693	5,974
2012	511,712	n/a	39,097	43,226	1,696
2013	189,143	n/a	55,822	81,347	1,584

the activities of craft businesses. A large part of the social work of AQS can be defined as an activity of empowerment of the weakest sections of the local population. Many years of experience demonstrate that only good harmony between a “bottom-up” activation and an intelligent (not opportunistic) openness by public institutions, in addition to good luck and other essential ingredients, is able to generate effective “empowered participation” contexts (Fung, 2004; Laino, 2012).

AQS in the Italian context: an assessment

In the 1990s, many researchers and actors inside and outside Italian public administrations experienced a period which appeared to promise the beginning of a progressive and positive Europeanisation of local welfare policies. In the southern regions of Italy, especially in the fields of health services and education, a form of universalist welfare was realised. Finally, the possibility seemed to arise in the 1990s to achieve something similar to the social and educational services provided (until recently) in other European welfare states. From 1993 to 1997, in dozens of Italian cities we experienced the trajectory of enthusiastic modernisation towards a decent local welfare system characterised by the rhetoric of participation.

While the hope of the 1990s – of universalist social welfare policies – remains in the collective imagination, in reality this did not happen. Instead, in addition to profound changes in politics at the national level, we have seen, especially in the south of Italy, the impact of contradictory welfare initiatives and imbalances related to different generations, genders, geographical areas and, more generally, to a considerable deficit as regards social justice. A return to pauperistic logic is very evident. With the increase in the number of people lacking essential needs (such as eating in a soup kitchen, sleeping in a public dormitory or without enough money to pay bills), there has been a reassertion by secular and Catholic organisations of an approach driven by charitable motives rather than a recognition of people’s rights.

It is against this background of the failure of the Italian welfare state in southern Italy that initiatives such as ASQ must be understood. In many peripheral regions the experiences of these organisations, even very prestigious ones, followed a similar trajectory. In general, it is possible to observe a constituent phase, in which Catholic democrats, dissatisfied with ecclesiastical practices, as well as with party organisations, or communist and socialist activists, or sometimes other lay people, disappointed by the way of being and the way of doing of the parties, gave birth to organisations active in the localities. In general, with the faltering of universalist models of service provision, the leadership of individuals who were able to provide a reference point or a charismatic guide was significant. Those involved in the various networks which link the range of associations and social cooperatives active in the southern conurbations were able to organise significant and inspirational citizen-based initiatives which have earned for years the praise of observers, and which have often been able to attract funding, support, and attention from newspapers, web sites and radio/TV channels.

For convenience, I call these exemplary stories “sparkling diamonds” which, whether through obstinate persistence, capacity of vision and relationships, or a spirit of self-denial, have somehow implemented successful practices over the years. In some cases, as in the case of agencies engaged in socio-educational services for minors and disadvantaged populations, such organisations are firmly rooted in neighbourhoods where people experience many life difficulties. Examples are organisations which started with government funding in the 1990s⁷ and then consolidated activities related to local experiments, such as after-school learning and recreation centres. There are also other organisations which faced more complex programmes, such as the need to integrate vulnerable people into social and working life, and took up the challenge to activate local resources. In some cases, sometimes in very difficult situations, due to the

presence of large groups of people living in extreme poverty, of mafia groups and of totally ineffective local public administrations, activities of high human, civil and political value were built and kept alive. In some cases, breakthrough innovations were achieved. A recent example is the Fondazione di Comunità di Messina (FCM, 2014), as well as the cluster of activities launched by Father Antonio Loffredo, initially the relaunch of the catacombs in the Sanità Neapolitan neighbourhood (Loffredo, 2014). In recent years the AQS has also been a breeding ground of invention and innovation.

Key questions arise, however, with regard to sustainability and development possibilities. Without having the possibility to conduct a detailed evaluation here, it may be said that in the case of the “sparkling diamonds” there are elements suggesting that the models we are talking about are, at least in part, unrepeatable, linked to specific personalities, favourable circumstances, intelligent networking practices and resource availability (material and intangible). In the social peripheries of the southern Italian cities today, the central question is how to support and relaunch the good initiatives, implementing a reliable network of social protection. Today, the aim is not to try to create “diamonds”, but to consolidate and regenerate previous or current initiatives. Italians generally prefer the initiation of initiatives over their maintenance. This approach, which is true also for the social services in the various areas, has been disastrous and must be avoided.

Notes

1. By sponge neighbourhood I mean an area that because of a variety of typologies of dwellings and activities appears to be very porous and therefore capable of hosting different populations.
2. See video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycEYcbWB-vg>.
3. See video of the Trespassing project: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tsJ1QjmS0lo>.
4. With the Monti Government, Rossi-Doria was appointed Under-Secretary of State for the fight against non-attendance at school.
5. It is possible to find a beautiful video on the Internet which contains a presentation of the activities by Marina Vergiani, dated 1994, see <http://www.lamemoriagassosa.it/spazioesocieta.php>. For a clearer and more recent picture, see Laino (2012).
6. On this subject see Bifulco, Mozzana and Monteleone (2015).
7. Specifically, the Jervolino Law No. 216/93.

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Creating a special place: The Ouseburn Valley and Trust in Newcastle

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The story of the Trust¹

The city centre of the regional capital of North East England, Newcastle upon Tyne lies between working-class neighbourhoods to the east and west. Dividing the city from these neighbourhoods to the east is a steep-sided valley where the Ouse burn flows down to the river Tyne. This valley was the cradle of the industrial revolution on Tyneside in the eighteenth century. Factories and workshops spread up the valley, but during the twentieth century it had become a neglected place, lying below viaducts which connected the city centre to its eastern areas. By the end of the century, this “in-between place” was attracting the interest of a few people – intrigued by urban history, in search of cheap premises, or seeking a place to promote “alternative” projects.

Meanwhile, in 1988, the Tyne and Wear Development Corporation was created, with a remit to develop the Tyne Waterfront. Proposals were put forward to transform the area where the Ouseburn joins the Tyne into a zone of residential apartments with prestigious offices nearby. These proposals brought together the pioneer “discoverers” of the Ouseburn area, who feared the Valley would be cut off from the main river frontage and the Valley itself penetrated by speculative profit-seeking developers. This act of protest sparked the wider recognition of the Ouseburn Valley as a distinctive area within Newcastle.

Newcastle City Council itself cultivated an ambiguous relationship with the nationally funded Development Corporation, as until 1997, the Council was in the control of the Labour Party, while national government was Tory-controlled. The Council was also interested in, and hopeful of funding opportunities for, urban regeneration projects. By the 1990s, national funding for urban regeneration emphasised schemes which had a “partnership” focus, involving businesses and residents in an area. Through these connections, the protest group slowly morphed into the Ouseburn Trust. As a charitable trust established under Charitable Law in 1995, it has, as of 2014, a volunteer board of 12 trustees and a small staff of five (some part-time). Volunteer board members have an association with the Valley and have a range of skills which complement those of staff. They include some of the original pioneers. In the 1990s, the Council transferred some largely derelict sites and properties which had ended up in its ownership to the