The Community Development in the Italian Third Sector

Michele Bianchi[1] ●

Abstract Community Development (CD) is a process to favour the socio-economic development of communities through the engagement of citizens, social workers, public authorities or non-profit organizations. Over the last decades, theories and practices of the CD have spread all over the world. Italy has a consistent "Third Sector" (TS) with a long-standing tradition; Despite the absence of a well-defined area of the Italian CD, in recent years, particularly within theso-called Third Sector (TS), there has been to develop characterizes of the CD. This paper aims to theorize the features of the CD in the Italian TS. The research engages representatives of 23 organizations—from neighbourhood associations to foundations and national bodies—and investigates through qualitative semi-structured interviews how they promote and conceptualize CD processes. Through the framework of international theories, it is possible to define the field of the CD in the Italian TS.

Keywords Third sector · Italy · Community development · Non-profit · Community welfare

Introduction

In many European countries, Community Development (CD) is a well-recognized practice that fosters grass-roots initiatives for local interest and well-being (Hautekeur, 2005; Ife, 2016). Generally, local actors—both public and private—adopt this as a participatory way to figure out self-reliant solutions to local socio-economic problems, such as needs for urban regeneration, new economic development or social cohesion (Ife, 2016; Moulaert et al., 2010; Westoby & Dowling, 2013).

In Italy, the CD is less common, some traces of which can be found in initiatives for civic engagement in public decision-making (Allegretti, 2010), social work approaches (Noto, 2007), public health budget (Righetti, 2014) or projects for urban regeneration (Cottino & Zandonai, 2012) there has been a blooming of proposals, actions and new organization models that fit into the definitions by the international theories. The "Third Sector" (TS) refers to that area of the society that does not fall into the public or for-profit-private spheres; the tertiary of this sector is determined by its social-oriented mission (therefore non-profit) and its independency from the public authority (Pape et al., 2020; Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2019). Nevertheless, no attempt has been made to clearly define this area within the ITS, despite the rising number of organizations and initiatives that address this as the main approach; therefore, it is important to state the questions, is it possible to define the CD area in the ITS? Which are its characteristics?

This paper aims to define the features of the CD field within the ITS examining various forms of this; this examination can show which are the characteristics of the Italian CD that are common to those described in the international literature. Consequently, this paper engages the international literature on CD to design the theoretical framework to examine evidence from ITS. The research involves data and information from different ITS organizations that operate at various levels and with diverse grades of organizational complexity.

The paper presents the following parts: first, the examination of the research objects; second, an analysis of the international CD theories to design the framework; third,

✉ Michele Bianchi
   bianchi.michele.1990@gmail.com

1   Independent Researcher, Cantù, Italy

the methodology section; and fourth, the results of the qualitative research followed by discussion and conclusions.

The Italian Third Sector and the Commitment Towards Communities

Despite the recent development of the TS—the origin of the contemporary Italian TS can be traced back to the 1970s (Bianchi, 2023)—certain signs of CD practices were already present in the social and political movements that characterized the post-WWII period and the 1970s in Italy (Della Porta, 2004; Grifo, 2021).

Alongside, CD practices have been present in the social work public sector for decades. The community social work sustains the idea that social workers can develop networks and collaborations with local actors—particularly those affected by socio-economic problems—and figure out solutions to improve the conditions of communities (Landi & Calcaterra, 2021; Zamengo, 2021). Moreover, CD practices and TS organizations have been intertwined in new interpretations of urban regeneration for sustainable development (Calvaresi, 2018; Cottino & Zandonai, 2012; Tricarico, 2014).

Consequently, it is possible to hypnotize that the recent implementation of co-planning strategies for the design of local welfare community systems might have had a role in spreading the CD practices and initiatives in the ITS. The Law no. 328 (2000) reformed the planning of local welfare systems introducing the concept of "Horizontal Subsidiarity"; this designs a structure of co-planning of local community welfare systems with collaborations among the public (education, health and social services), decision-makers and the TS (Moschetti, 2016). Within this framework for the local welfare co-planning, the TS has developed a stronger awareness of its role as a player in the enhancement of the common good (Bianchi, 2023).

Despite this evidence, there has never been an attempt to define the CD field in the Italian TS describing its main characteristics and practices. Consequently, this research aims to investigate the TS by looking at those experiences that more closely operate for the CD; through the framework of international theories of CD, it is possible to define the CD in the Italian TS.

Framing the Community Development Fields

To begin this examination, it is important to recall Bhattacharyya's work (2009) regarding the difficulties to have a unique definition of community development; therefore, the author suggests to clarify the meaning of this concept when it is used stating its main parts such as the idea of community and the purposes that the process wants to achieve.

As first step in the definition of the theoretical framework, it is crucial to identify the main subject of the research topic; within a global and fluid society, it is fundamental to define the meaning of "community". Bauman (2001) points out that the discussion on the "community" has begun—paradoxically—when it has disappeared from social reality; nowadays, the community is an artificial concept. People are embedded in a fluid society where radical individualism replaces the consciousness of class, and consumerism is the new factor that determines the social order (Bauman, 2013). Consequently, contemporary communities arise from dialectical constructions among people who live in them and intend to re-significate them (Blackshaw, 2010). Consequently, CD theories have elaborated their concepts of "community" and from them, it is possible to deduce a useful definition for this study. First, "communities" are social groups of people bonded among themselves (Phillips & Pittman, 2015a). Second, these groups refer themselves to a specific geographical area, defined by boundaries (e.g. local authorities areas), into which their networks exist (ibidem). Third, the only reference to a determined spatial place is not enough because within the same area can be present diverse social, economic, political, cultural and religious groups and, thus, identities (Craig et al., 2011); therefore, participants acknowledge also a common belonging to their communities. Following Wegner (2002), people engaged in CD refer to "imaginary communities", which means that they believe to be part of a constructed idea of community that they create and animate. Given these presuppositions, it is possible to say that the "community" in CD is a group of people who shared a vision of themselves as a community because of a common belonging to a place but also common values and social identities (Bianchi, 2021a).

Establishing the point on the meaning of "community", it is consequently fundamental to define the main features of the theoretical framework of CD. Despite the wide diversity of approaches, the CD can be generally considered as a way to solve local social, economic or environmental issues through citizens' engagement and active participation (Phillips & Pittman, 2015b; Robinson & Green, 2011; Westoby & Dowling, 2013). Specifically, the CD is a process that aims to engage local actors, both public and private, in a determined community, to achieve economic goals (local development) and social objectives (tackle social issues) and enhance a psychological sense of community (stronger attitude towards collaboration and shares sense of belonging); to realize this process, local actors can use resources (both material and immaterial) either internal or external to the community (Ife, 2016).

A main element, in the theoretical structure of CD, is the goal of empowering communities and people. The empowerment aims to develop social inclusions, capacity building and asset improvement for local well-being (Henderson & Vercseg, 2010). As Pigg (2009) indicates, empowerment in CD occurs in three spheres: "*self-empowerment through individual action, mutual empowerment that is interpersonal, and social empowerment in the outcomes of social action*" (p. 108). These are three interconnected dimensions which can operate together to bring benefit to both individuals and communities.

Consequently, it is necessary to understand what can be defined as "Community Well-being". Considering that the axiom of economic development as the source of general well-being has been put under discussion "development" needs to enlarge its meaning to other concepts and not be monothematic (Anand & Sen, 2000). "Community Well-being" is considered an umbrella concept that encompasses environmental sustainability, social inclusion, happiness and quality of life (Phillips & Pittman, 2015b).

To conclude, it is possible to consider how key elements from the literature can be applied to this research as the main theoretical framework to examine TS organizations mission and work and conceptualize these as CD practices:

- Identify a specific community, which live in a defined area.
- State the aim to achieve goals of social interest to enhance the community well-being.
- Promote the socio-economic development.
- Include a wide plethora of local actors, both public and private.
- Empower people and organizations.

Considering these elements, it is now possible to examine the results collected through the methodology stated in the next section and define the CD in the ITS.

Methodology

The present research proposes the analysis of data and information derived from a qualitative investigation carried out with semi-structured interviews with representatives of ITS organizations. Following Eisenhardt (1989), the research involves a variety of subjects that represent diverse characteristics of the main topic under investigation; in this sense, the legal forms, areas of action, and geographical areas constitute criteria of differentiation and allow a certain grade of generalization. As Gioia et al. (2012) sustain, the actors of the organizational reality are "knowledgeable agents" who have direct experience of this reality and can report on it. Consequently, representatives of these organizations participated in this research

presenting the history of their bodies, their interpretation of the CD mission and how they work to achieve this. The intertwining of data and information, from both the local and national levels, allows for comprehending deeper the phenomena in the ITS.

The selection of participants happened through a process of purposeful sampling (Bell et al., 2022); they were selected from the author's network of contacts under indications of key national representatives of each area. Every interviewee represents a best practice of each sub-area; they can provide key information about the most relevant features of them. This is a type of non-probability sampling that considers aspects related to the research goals (Flick, 2009).

Between January and June 2021, the organizations were contacted, and the research project was illustrated; 23 representatives agreed to participate in it. Table 1 presents the list of participants, their legal form, area of action and geographical space of interest. The interview modality was mostly online (Microsoft Teams platform) due to the COVID-19 pandemic risk and difficulties in reaching all the interviewees in person due to geographical distance.

After the transcription of all the audio tracks, a couple of rounds of reading proceeded. Then, the analysis began with a first round of examination of CD characteristics for each type of organization. This allowed to carry out the analysis on each sub-area and code CD characteristics for each of them. Then, an overall analysis of common elements was carried out. The next section shows many results, firstly divided into areas of action and then common elements.

Results

Neighbourhood Activism and Social Participation

This first area under examination is the forms of civic engagement for social participation. The Social Street model has become a very common way to organize these bottom-up civic energies; this was born in 2013 from the casual intuition of a group of residents in a neighbourhood in Bologna. They created a Facebook group with the name of their street; then, they invited all other residents to join in; finally, they became to exchange ideas online and organize activities offline. The great success of this model is witnessed by its numbers; nowadays, there are 388 social streets in Italy.[1] The second model under investigation is Retake; born in Rome in 2009, this fulfils citizens' need to activate themselves to take care of their neighbourhoods. People felt the absence of public actions to deal with many

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[1] https://www.socialstreet.it/social-steet/ consulted on 28 January 2023.

Table 1 List of Participants

	Type of organization	Goals	Level of action	Area
1	Association	Civic Activism	National	Italy
2	Association	Social Aggregation	Neighbourhood	Milan
3	Association	Social Aggregation	Neighbourhood	Turin
4	Association	Civic Activism	National	Italy
5	Association	Civic Activism	Neighbourhood	Rome
6	Association	Civic Activism	Neighbourhood	Rome
7	Association	Civic Use of Commons	National	Italy
8	Association	Civic Use of Commons	Neighbourhood	Milan
9	Association	Civic Use of Commons	Town	Pisa
10	Association	Civic Use of Commons	Town	Pontecorvo
11	Association	Civic Use of Commons	Town	Pontecorvo
12	Association	After-School Activities	Neighbourhood	Rome
13	Co-operative Confederation	Advocacy for Co-operative Economy	National	Italy
14	Co-operative Confederation	Advocacy for Co-operative Economy	National	Italy
15	Community Co-operative	Community Development	Village	Imperia area
16	Community Co-operative	Community Development	Neighbourhood	Naples
17	Philanthropic Foundation	Support to Third Sector	Regional	North Italy
18	Philanthropic Foundation	Support to Third Sector	Regional	North Italy
19	Philanthropic Foundation	Support to Third Sector	Regional	South Italy
20	Community Foundation	Community Development	Province	Brescia
21	Community Foundation	Community Development	Province	Lecco
22	Community Foundation	Community Development	City	Messina
23	Community Foundation	Community Development	Neighbourhood	Napoli

cases of degradation and abandonment of public spaces. Therefore, they decided to create local branches of this association, call to action other fellow citizens and organize activities of requalification and regeneration. Meanwhile, Retake has become a foundation that promotes its model around Italy and can count branches in 44 towns and cities.[2] Interviewees 1 and 4 are national representatives of these two organizations, while Interviewees 2, 3, 5 and 6 are spokespeople of local branches.

Online social networks (mostly Facebook groups) play a key role in many of these cases because they permit the establishment of first contact with unknown people in the same area. In these online arenas, neighbours can talk about local issues, exchange information, share ideas to improve the same place and propose projects. Social events (e.g. dinners or aperitives), neighbourhoods festivals, after-school activities, informal support for those in either need or social isolation, and regeneration of local public areas; these are some examples of what these groups do to engage, entertain and activate their fellow citizens offline to make their places more liveable and participated.

"Knowing that a place has become your home, you work to make it more accessible, welcoming, a space for encountering other people and, also, where you can have adequate services for them, such as a public park". (Int. 5)

These initiatives raise from people's willingness to aggregate those who—generally—live in anonymous urban spaces where they have migrated from other places. Therefore, they feel the need to develop a new sense of belonging and community; this is translated into actions that allow them to meet, discuss and enhance the sense of belonging. Indeed, they fill in a gap in terms of occasions and places where people can socialize and know each other.

Furthermore, these active citizens express their need to take care of their neighbourhoods; they feel a distance from the local authorities—which are recognized as the official institutions in charge of this goal—but instead of complaining about this issue, they prefer to act directly and frame their action as a political pressure on these institutions to close the gap with citizens and actuate subsidiary support for their activities. Particularly, these emerge when these groups activate themselves to provide services of cleaning, requalification, regeneration and management of local public spaces (e.g. parks, squares or streets) and would like to witness a major involvement of local authorities.

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[2] https://www.retake.org/citta-retake/ consulted on 28 January 2023.

Civic Activism for Commons

In 2001, a Constitutional reform introduced the concept of "Horizontal Subsidiarity"; this establishes citizens' role as co-participants in the enhancement of the commonwealth, along with the state and all its institutions. In the last 15 years, the work of "Laboratorio per la Sussidiarietà" (LabSus) has been fundamental in enhancing civic activism for the horizontal subsidiarity in managing local commons. The main achievement of this association is the realization of a set of rules (Regolamento per l'Amministrazione Condivisa Beni Comuni—Regulation for the Shared Administration of Commons, Author's translation) that local authorities can adopt to establish horizontal subsidiary collaborations with citizens and TS organizations; these are Patti (Agreements) that define roles, tasks and responsibilities between local authorities and active citizens. Approved for the first time by the Municipality of Bologna in 2014, the Regolamento has spread all over the country from small villages to cities; nowadays, 282 agreements have been stipulated.[3]

> These communities of citizens claim a major involvement of the state, they call the public authorities to fulfil their role, they do not want to substitute them. The agreements ("Patti" Author's note) allow various private and public subjects to establish collaborations with local authorities. (Int. 7)

Projects with local schools for managing a park, the realization of an area for public meetings in a square, cultural activities at the local community centre, and the revitalization of a natural area outside the town. These are just some examples from the multitudes of "Patti" created around Italy over the years. Interviewee 8 helps to manage various projects for commons management in the city of Milan. Interviewee 9 is the president of a local association that runs a community centre in a mountain area that maintains alive local traditions and organizes occasions for socialization and cultural activities. Similarly, Interviewee 11 runs a project to engage other citizens in managing a local wood on the hills around the town. Last, Interviewee 12 is the promoter of an innovative project to use the spaces of a public school in Rome for afternoon and evening activities that involve students' families and the rest of the community.

> The local project is around the local neighbourhood market, it involves the vendors, citizens and there is the sustain of the local association and a foundation […] In a context like this (a neighbourhood in Milan – Author's note), there is for sure a will to re-signify

both the places and people's social experiences. (Int. 8)
The success and efficacy to develop cultural activities for the community is to make people grow (intellectually – Author's note) and share their ideas. (Int. 9)
The hills around our town have been a participatory place for 25 years (place for sport and social activities – Author's note) I have seen a great potentiality in these spaces. I have always believed in citizens' bottom-up activism, and, in the last 12/13 years, we have tried to develop a more concrete participatory project to manage together these spaces. (Int. 11)
At the local school, we organize courses and workshops intending to unite the community […] the participatory method has allowed to include anyone independently from their culture. (Int. 12)

Citizens identify their local commons and define their social values enhancing this through processes of CD that develop new social connections, resources and benefit for the community.

Community Co-operatives

Italy has a long tradition of a co-operative economy; since the mid-nineteenth century, various forms of co-operative enterprises have composed significant shares of the national economy. One of the latest evolutions of this firm model is the community co-operatives. In the last 10 years, the co-operative movement has witnessed an increase in the number of co-operatives that self-identify themselves as co-operatives at the service of their communities. The most updated mapping of them—a national register is not in place yet—counts around 200 organizations that fit into this model (Venturi & Miccolis, 2021). Interviewees 13 and 14 are representatives of the two most important national bodies for co-operatives, Legacoop and Confcooperative. Both organizations have consistently invested in this new form of co-operative because they see the potential this can have in regenerating local economies and communities.

> These organizations work for the social cohesion of fragile territories. They give answers not only to the consequences of the economic crisis but also to the emergency of trust in the market players and public authorities. (Int. 13)

The community co-operatives operate for local development and the community's well-being; they assess local socio-economic issues and potentiality for local development and design solutions involving both public and private partners.

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[3] https://www.labsus.org/i-regolamenti-per-lamministrazione-condivisa-dei-beni-comuni/ consulted on 18 January 2023.

The two cases here under examination—one in the rural and another in the urban context—can well represent the work of community co-operatives showing how they intertwine various socio-economic activities to achieve their CD goals. They both were born from a group of locals who desire to revitalize the local economy and invert the negative trend of their communities; in the first case a village on the mountains, affected by depopulation and ageing dynamics; the second a critical neighbourhood in Naples with many socio-economic fragilities. They both manage local assets (first case an adventure park with a B&B—property of the town hall—and the second an archaeological area) using them to generate job positions for local young people, resources to invest in the community (e.g. programs to help people in need), and develop new social services to respond to new challenges.

> We try to open the co-operative to local people. Every year, in August, we organize an open debate to report on our activities and discuss them with the community. […] We manage community assets because the property is public, and this is exactly why a community co-operative manage them because they are of the community. (int. 15)
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> We created our co-operative because we knew that there was a huge hidden potential in our neighbourhood and that this could be valorised, following the example of many other organisations in various European cities. […] Managing a community asset, for the territory and with the territory, transforms it into a collector of positive energies that voluntarily decide to give themselves for the general good. (Int. 16)

The two case studies report a similar history—which appears common as confirmed by the two interviewees from the national bodies—that many co-operatives begin from the willingness of local groups of people who want to reverse the socio-economic conditions of their communities. Differently from the previous cases, these groups look at possible solutions to provide the project with financial sustainability and permanent workers who can manage the services with a professional approach. As the first step, they engage the community (local authorities, other TS organizations, citizens and firms) to design a project that can generate connections, help to figure out solutions and promote future benefits for the community. The use of community assets is central in these projects; indeed, the idea to become a community co-operative emerges directly from the awareness of being managers of these resources and that the collective firm must provide the community with benefits to "payback". This commitment arises also from the acknowledgement of difficulties for the local authorities to intervene directly in the socio-economic

conditions (depopulation in mountain areas and degradation in the urban neighbourhood) because they lack adequate instruments and resources to act. Furthermore, public authorities are recognized as actors that do not have the right skills and organizational efficacy to manage these assets, while the TS—particularly the co-operative form—is suitable for developing business projects with high social impacts. Nevertheless, local authorities are involved in the co-planning of actions for the CD. These are initiatives for local development through the regeneration of assets and the design of businesses with an attitude towards social impact.

Community Foundations

Community foundations work for the emanation of resources to local TS organizations that are committed to carrying out CD processes or welfare initiatives in general. In the last 20 years (the first Italian community foundation was created in 1999), they have become a growing phenomenon; nowadays there are around 110 community foundations.[4] Over the years, certain foundations have developed their own system of local satellites; this is the case of Fondazione Cariplo—which has given origin to 16 local community foundations in Piedmont and Lombardy—and Fondazione Con Il Sud, which operates in South Italy and has supported the start-up of 6 foundations.

Born in 1991, the mission of Fondazione Cariplo is to sustain the social and economic development of its territory of competency. Since the beginning of the new century, it has begun the creation of local community foundations, intending to establish one in each province of Lombardy; it also operates the same strategy in the Western area of Piedmont. As one of its representatives explains:

> They are (The local community foundations – Author's note) philanthropic and independent entities that operate to attract and aggregate actors and resources to realize initiatives with social, environmental, and cultural purposes. Their vicinity to the communities makes them sensible antennas able to comprehend communities' needs and sustain their initiatives to fulfil them. (Int. 18)

Most recently, in 2007, the Fondazione con Il Sud started its activities in South Italy with similar dynamics; it sustains local TS projects and supports the start-up phase of new community foundations. As the interviewee from this organization describes:

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[4] https://italianonprofit.it/filantropia-istituzionale/cerca/tipologia-fondazioni-comunita/ consulted on 21 January 2023.

Our work is a challenge that we set with the communities; they should self-organize themselves and activate their resources, not only the economic ones but also the human capital. We try to go very often in the territories and accompany the projects but we leave the promoters and the communities free to examine their needs and express their solutions to them. (Int. 19)

Along with the strengthening of local networks, the other element that concurs to promote the CD by community foundations is the capacity to finance and develop projects and initiatives that target specific social needs and elaborate innovative solutions for them. These foundations do not act alone; they spur local actors to fundraise—if promoters—or donate to sustain projects. This generates a major sense of commitment in communities. A fundamental finding that emerges from the interviews is that community foundations have achieved a well-recognized social role in their communities, so they act as trustworthy players and ensure the value of the projects promoted under their names. During the first lockdown, certain community foundations witnessed an incredible increase in the volume of donations.

Behind these numbers (Figures of the donations in 2020 – Author's note) there is – without any doubt – the push to donate because of the emergency but it is significant that, in the emergency, people donated to foundations. This is because these are philanthropic entities that have continuity and utilize the resources according to the needs that come up. (Int. 18)

These dynamics appear clearly in the words of the representatives of local community foundations:

During the pandemic, we fundraised 18 million € in two months. This worked for four reasons: promoters' reputation; the capacity to transform the money into resources more important at that moment, such as masks and ventilators; the constant communication of what we were doing; the efficacy in the immediate allocation of these resources. (Int. 21)

Here precisely appears how the autonomy of these organizations, combined with their well-established reputation and their capacity to read the context through their networks and act immediately, has determined their CD impact, particularly during the hardest times of the pandemic.

Our approach is to create spaces of discussion on certain topics and, within these debates, generate a new process of co-planning. (Int. 20)

Indeed, the co-planning of welfare actions has become a fundamental aspect of the foundations; the "Piani di Zona" (Local Zone Plans—Author's translation) is the backbone of local welfare planning. Created in 2000 with the Law no. 328, they must favour the creation of integrated networks between the public sector (social, education and health services), the local governments and the TS. Community foundations stress the key role they have had over the years in determining more efficacy Local Zone Plans and how they have achieved a fundamental role in them. They do not see themselves as simply resource providers; after many years of experience, they have conceptualized their role as aggregators of actors and resources to lead the CD processes in the co-planning of Local Zone Plans.

We do not simply finance grants but we operate to develop permanent policies of development for the territory. The goal is to coordinate, finance and lead these policies because this place needs justice, not philanthropy. (Int. 22)

This evolution of the role of the community foundations emerges as the most relevant finding from the results; community foundations acknowledge their role as players of the welfare throughout CD processes. They have understood that their assets can function not only as financial support to the TS but also as an element of attraction. Indeed, their social capital plays a fundamental role because they have achieved a role—acknowledged by other actors, both public and private—as trustworthy and meritorious promoters of welfare.

Discussion

Over the decades, the ITS has evolved and achieved a role of key player in the provision of welfare services and development of social movements for the advocacy of social and civil rights (Bianchi, 2023). Along with the voluntary, solidarity and social economy areas, the results present a new feature of this sectors, the CD as one of the main processes that ITS organizations implement to achieve their social mission. Generally, results show how people involved in these processes present their willing to constitute a new social identity or to implement solutions for their local problems in a constructive way.

In the following sections, the findings are examined through the theoretical framework abovementioned.

Generating Communities

Results point to a well-known aspect of our contemporary Western societies, the loss of communities—in the sense of social groups bounded by mechanic solidarity embedded in

old rural societies (Durkheim, 1997)—has required the development of new social bodies able to foster social capital, the civil societies (Putnam, 2000). The CD in ITS represents what Giddens (1990) describes as the "re-embedding" after the "dis-embedding"; the complexation of the society, parallel to the disappearance of the ancient communities put people in front of the necessity to generate new forms of socialization. Consequently, it is possible to observe how the CD processes, led by the organizations, recall the generation of those dialectic processes of reciprocal recognizing that happen among the actors that decide to become a community and enhance its well-being (Wegner, 2022; Blackshaw, 2010).

To interpret the results, we must consider that CD is a process that involves various local actors in figuring out possible solutions through participatory methods (Ife, 2016) and TS organizations emerge as the outcomes of these processes (Bianchi, 2021a). Following Bourdieu (1977), it is possible to interpret the results as the positionality of certain local actors who decide to establish a new social identity within the abstract concept of "local community"; to enhance their impact and develop the CD process, the step into the modality of a structured organization seems necessary to enable their ideas into initiatives, projects and plans.

Enhancing the Well-Being and Empowering the People

With different grades and at diverse levels, the organizations under analysis present evidence of goals to favour the growth of their communities enabling them to become more responsible of the places where they live and with more competences to implement new solutions for the problems and initiatives for taking opportunities. Following Sen (1999), it is possible to consider the work of these organizations as an implementation of the "capacity building"; they operate to improve the well-begin of their communities, in other words, of those people who enter in their networks and look for new opportunity to be engaged into their socio-economic activities. Furthermore, these activities apply to people's sense of belonging to a place strengthening their "sense of community" (Noto, 2007). First, the direct engagement of local actors is fundamental to structure these initiatives (Phillips & Pittman, 2015b); in all the cases presented, the willingness to meet other people and organizations that live in the same area and figure out with them is considered a key step by all the interviewees. All the organizations work to achieve social and non-profit mission with a specific focus on the benefits for their communities assisting people in becoming active citizens (Henderson & Vercseg, 2010). The differences between the diverse models are related to the possibilities given by the organizational features of each one; the less structured and more informal actors (neighbourhood activists and citizens for commons groups) can operate at a basic level engaging other people and asking for support to other organizations. They mostly enhance the sense of belonging to a place and the responsibility of taking care of the physical space where the communities live. The community co-operatives operate at an economic level introducing a new economic vision in the local market promoting business activities that favour the local economy rather than extract value. In the end, the community foundations work to support the local TS in promoting its mission towards the social goals, they develop what are called "social infrastructures" (Bandera, 2017), in other words, services, resources and support that can allow the TS to develop its activities and initiatives. Recalling Bhattacharyya's work (2009), the processes led by these organizations are intended to be agencies of solidarity and empowerment for their communities.

Current Appearance of the Phenomenon and Relation to the Rest of the TS

Although Italian society witnessed various social and political movements that improved practices of CD to promote social changes between the 1950s and 1980s (Grifo, 2021), it is only in the last 10 years that it is possible to observe a raise and spread of these initiatives (Bianchi, 2023). The ITS parallel evolution to the decrease of political participation has been a symptom of Italians' willingness to abandon civic participation framed through traditional political parties and look for new models of bottom-up self-organizations of their socio-political claims (Della Porta, 2004; Bianchi, 2021b). Indeed, as Corbisiero and Delle Cave (2021) observe, the ITS can become a "mediator" of local civic energy and help them to take an organized form that can support the claim for a better quality of life and local development. The TS has consequently become able to promote new forms of participation, throughout associations, groups, co-operatives and foundations that could help citizens, local authorities and other organizations in figuring out solutions for the communities. Although the rest of the TS remains an important factor in providing welfare services and support social and civil movements, this new feature of the CD demonstrates a capacity of this to evolve and respond to the new challenges presented by the society.

Peculiarities of the Italian CD

Among the various results, certain characteristics appear as peculiar in defining the CD in the ITS. As emerged in all the areas, the CD is frequently asset-based (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003); from project to use and manage local

resources and commons, to the use of building passing through the creation of community enterprises, the asset-based CD makes local processes of developing more sustainable and reliant on local resources (Gibbons, 2020). Around these assets, local groups create organizations able to gather further resources and generate connections with other members of the community. Local assets become functional to the community's well-being through the social actions of ITS organizations that carry out CD processes. Although the asset-based CD is a well-established approach in many other national contexts (Feldhoff, 2016; Forrester et al., 2020; Nel, 2015), in the Italian CD there is a particular predominance of the commons management topic. This can be explained by the necessity to establish connections with those "community assets" that more represent a collective utility (Battistoni & Zandonai, 2017). As Arena and Iaione (2015) point out, it is the community that identifies what are their commons and community assets and this constitutes, per se, a first step into a CD process.

Another key characteristic of the Italian CD field in the TS is the centrality of the "Horizontal Subsidiarity" principle that governs the relationships with the public sector. As Sacconi and Ottone, (2015) indicate, in the public debate around these relationships between the state and TS, it has been developed a new awareness by the active citizens related to their role as promoters of the common good. In this sense, the "Horizontal Subsidiarity" has pushed more groups to organize their efforts and become promoters of community well-being through processes of CD (Arena & Iaione, 2015). In this new vision, the citizen is equally entitled to enhance the common good as the public actors and to achieve this, it systematizes its efforts through TS organizations.

Another peculiar aspect of the CD in the ITS is that this can find a place in the co-planning of the local welfare system; indeed, many interviewees report how their conception of the CD mission is mostly oriented to play a major role in these local dynamics. Generally, the Italian welfare system deeply relies on the TS Horizontal Subsidiarity (Fazzi, 2013). Citizens' responses to the new liquid society—considering the inadequacy of a welfare system (Migliavacca, 2008)—have become the creation of CD processes to figure out solutions that involve the strengthening of a local sense of community as a principal pillar of the new local welfare systems.

Criticality of the Italian CD

Despite the important elements that emerge from the results, it is also necessary to point out possible limitations and criticalities present in this field and related to CD practices. First, TS organizations might suffer from some "typical" issues that affect this sector, such as the balance between their social mission and the necessity to either raise or generate enough funds to sustain their work (Teasdale, 2012).

Another limit of the CD is the reliance on solely bottom-up forces that determine a patchy effect. Those who are more will to carry out CD processes have already a background in TS and propose a vision for the solution of local issues that mostly rely on this (Castrignanò & Morelli, 2019). This determines the uneven presence of CD initiatives and the risk to generate inequalities if the theme of local welfare is delegated solely to TS.

Furthermore, the difficulty to aggregate people around the idea of a community can arise as an issue because—as argued above—the concept of 'community' is abstract and involves only those who want to believe in this and can become exclusionary (Bianchi, 2021b).

Conclusion

CD in the ITS represents citizens' willingness to act locally and have a direct impact on their realities strengthening their bonds with the space—defined by specific territorial and social characteristics—that they live in every day. Indeed, the dimension of the locality is a quintessence of the Italian CD because, more than abroad, it is in this dimension that people define—partially—their social identity; therefore, participation in a CD process enhances their sense of belonging.

The TS organizations are the tool for triggering CD processes in the community because they allow organizing permanent structures for managing activities and initiatives that aim to form and strengthen the sense of community, design new projects for the community's well-being and establish new social capitals among actors to networking with them.

The CD in the ITS is mostly part of a welfare of proximity that TS organizations, in collaboration with local authorities, want to improve. These actors frame the local welfare as taking care of their communities looking not only for social aspects—in the strict sense e.g. response to social issues—but also economic development and fulfilment of a psychological need for a sense of belonging to the place where people live and/or work. This is an important element because of the social impact that generates on people. Through the experience of being part of actions, initiatives, projects or plans for the CD, people and organizations strengthen their sense of belonging and intertwine their social identity with the community identity, which is bonded to a specific place. The success of the CD is when actors have a stronger feeling to be part of their

communities and a major commitment to taking care of them.

A key element of the CD in the ITS is the aspect of capacity building that happens at diverse levels; from citizens that volunteer in their neighbourhood to organizations that learn how to function in networks, the CD provide them with new skills and awareness about their role in society. ITS actors work to implement these capabilities and make others more able to become self-reliant and independent in carrying out their processes of CD.

In conclusion, it is possible to define the CD field in the ITS with its specific characteristics. This aims to both enhance local development and improve local community welfare systems. The CD is a translation of the marked Italian localism into processes of solidarity and civic participation for the regeneration of local economies, assets, welfare system and sense of community. Above them, assets have a key role because they are a fundamental element of the definition of a community; in Italian cases, the local commons have become a predominant topic in many local CD processes. The CD is the establishment, evolvement and conservation of social capital that can make these processes work. The collaborations with public actors are fundamental and this happens through a concept of Horizontal Subsidiarity. The diversity of organizational forms involved in this field demonstrates the applicability of CD to many areas of the ITS. Despite this diversity, the ITS organizations demonstrate a variety of capacities to carry out CD processes.

Data availability The data are not publicly available due to ethical, legal, or other concerns.

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