

Community engagement: a crucial issue for community foundations

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Introduction

If we think about community foundations, we know that there is no “one size fits all” model: we have, instead, a variety of shapes and forms. However, it is also true that there are some shared features that we can find in each organization such as: the long term approach and vision, the presence of an endowment, a wide mission and different topics to work on, a governance made of different stakeholders, and, of course, a territory to focus on, that means a community.

More than for other kinds of foundations, the community itself plays a crucial role for the community foundation’s life: it is fundamental for gathering and leveraging resources, not only financial, but also intellectual ones, capacities, relations and so on (the so-called *continuum of capital*). It is also crucial for addressing priorities, defining projects and activities and share useful and effective proposals: for these reasons, *listening to the territory* is a priority for each community foundation.

In this short document I would like to explore how to engage the community and how to maintain this relationship, how to reach out new individuals and categories, and, in particular, how to engage with young people, who are a meaningful target for community philanthropy, bringing some examples from the Italian context.

1. Civic engagement: a researched topic in literature

In approaching this topic, I have to first clarify that in the articles I read the concept of civic engagement, not community engagement, was outlined: however, for the purpose of this paper, I am assuming here that *civic* refers to a broad space of society where we can find citizens and institutions; *community* refers to citizens in relation with associations and volunteering. In the first case we are talking about democracy; in the second one, we are talking about solidarity.

In its wider sense, referred to active participation, voter participation is the first element taken into consideration to evaluate civic engagement from an institutional point of view¹. For this research, this concept will manifest in the ability to involve actively communities in the decision-making process, in programs and projects.

Involving people in the decision-making process contributes to government accountability and people's trust in public institutions, so, if people participate in the development of State's rules and regulations, that will be embedded in the laws of the State, they will comply with them, or they will do more than in other cases.

Diving deeper in a local level, we can match civic engagement and neighbourhood. If citizens feel attached to their place (their neighbourhood), involved and feel engaged they probably think that they can do something useful for their community². We could say they might be changemakers.

The point is that people join voluntary associations, work with others on community problems, participate in community organizations, contribute to charity, and show many other forms of civic action because of the belief in the trustworthiness of their fellow citizens. Informal ties among neighbours help to be less concerned about strictly personal issues and encourage people to focus on community needs.

Another point is place attachment, that relates to the feelings, bonds, thoughts, and behavioral intentions that people develop over time with reference to their socio-physical environment. Neighborhood attachment is a specific form of place attachment that develops a sense of security, strengthens personal ties, cultures and experiences, and maintains group identity.

Local civic responsibility seems to be a forerunner of civic behaviours: the more people believe that they are responsible for contributing to the common good, the more likely they will actively take part in civic actions.

To provide a more in-depth background, it could be interesting to explore briefly some technics of engagement from the point of view of foundations, according to Moggi et al.

¹ OECD, Civic Engagement, <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/civic-engagement/>

² Enhancing Civic Engagement– The Role of Place Attachment and Neighbourhood Ties (Work in Progress), Ann-Kathrin Seemanna*, Lisa Danga

Different goals of participation are associated with the use of different tools of engagement. *Informing* is the founding principle of all community engagement processes and aims to provide stakeholders with knowledge about problems, alternatives, and solutions. Informing commonly involves one- or two-way communication tools such as fact sheets, websites, brochures, media releases and open houses. *Consulting* seeks community views, eliciting public feedback on analyses, alternatives, or decisions while responsibility remains with the consulting organization. Examples of consultation tools include public comments, focus groups, surveys, and public meetings. *Involving* the community means working directly with the public to ensure that its concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and taken into account. Although the organization still retains power over the final decision, this method of engagement assumes a greater level of participation, usually developed through workshops and deliberative polling. *Collaborating* with the public implies to partner with the community in formulating decisions through collaborative engagement arrangements such as citizen advisory committees, consensus-building, participatory decision-making and membership of boards and committees. Finally, *empowering* stakeholders aims to place final decision-making in the hands of the public in a way that communities share responsibility for decisions and accountability for the outcomes. Community empowerment tools include citizen juries, ballots, and delegated decisions³.

2. Civic engagement of young people

Generally, civic engagement deals with values, beliefs, attitudes, feelings, knowledge, skills and behaviours outside family and friends. It can be expressed by various acts in different spheres, from market to eating. Nowadays the relation between young people and what is “civic” is quite difficult to draw. Indeed, many adolescents do avoid politics in the strict sense of politics, but they act civically.

Does civic engagement at an early age have a positive impact on adult civic engagement? Is civic engagement that makes citizens internalize certain democratic attitudes and values, or citizens who are already democratically minded choose to engage in associational membership and volunteer work?⁴

Even though these are very interesting questions, we do not have a clear answer.

³ Meeting local community needs. A dashboard from the stakeholder engagement experience, Sara Moggi, Department of Business Administration, University of Verona; Chiara Leardini, Department of Business Administration, University of Verona; Gina Rossi, Department of Economics and Statistics, University of Udine; Alessandro Zardini, Department of Business Administration, University of Verona

⁴ How is civic engagement developed over time? Emerging answers from a multidisciplinary field, Erik Amnå*, Youth & Society (YeS), Örebro University, SE-701 82 Örebro, Sweden

Dahl and Abdelzadeh⁵ reveal that studies evidently show increases in positive outcomes and decreases in negative ones in young adulthood, as a consequence of participation in civic associations in adolescence. For example, voluntary work and participation in extracurricular school activities are linked to lower depression, higher levels of self-esteem, less drug use, lower levels of delinquency and higher academic achievement.

Participation in various voluntary activities in adolescence has also been shown to increase civic engagement and political participation in adulthood.

3. Community engagement in community foundations

A community foundation is founded to last and it is thought and run to benefit the community it refers to. We can find big community foundations that encompasses an entire region while others just a neighbourhood, but, in any case, knowing the problems and listening to the people within these communities is crucial. People is indeed the core business of a community foundation and it represents a key source of energies and resources, not only financial ones but also intellectual ones, capacities, relational (the so-called continuum of capital). Therefore, without the meaningful engagement of the community, a community foundation cannot be a community foundation.

But how to engage with people? How to maintain that engagement?

Sure, community foundations established many years ago and still operating benefit from the durable presence in the territory. In Italy, for instance, this is the case of Fondazione Comunitaria del Lecchese⁶, the Italian oldest one, born in 1999 from Fondazione Cariplo⁷. It represents a point of reference for the entire province of Lecco (northern area of the country) and the engagement of people is proven, for example, by *fondi di comunità*, dedicated funds to projects and activities run in the territory, financed and managed by the population and administrated by the foundation.

Indeed, social trust is a crucial factor. In the South of Italy, where social ties have a strategic importance in local communities, a community foundation can have a key role in people's life.

This is the case, for example, of Fondazione di Comunità di Messina⁸, in Sicily, where a cooperative supported by the community foundation is giving a second chance to the memorable Birrificio Messina⁹, closed in 2013 due to urban development.

⁵ Self-Selection or Socialization? The Longitudinal Relation Between Civic Engagement and Political Orientations Among Adolescents, Viktor Dahl and Ali Abdelzadeh

⁶ [Fondazione Comunitaria del Lecchese Onlus \(fondazionelecco.org\)](http://fondazionelecco.org)

⁷ [Fondazione Cariplo](http://fondazione.cariplo.it)

⁸ [Fondazione di Comunità Messina – Un nuovo sito targato WordPress \(fdcmessina.org\)](http://fdcmessina.org)

⁹ [Birrificio Messina - La vera e unica birra prodotta a Messina](http://www.birrificio.com)

It is also the case of Fondazione di Comunità San Gennaro¹⁰ in Naples: in just 10 years, the organization has established, among others, a cooperative of young people to manage the Catacombe di San Gennaro, a key artistic heritage. These catacombs managed to increase, in the last decade, from 5000 visitors per year to 150.000, giving to the young people of the Quartiere Sanità, the community of reference that have had an high rate of criminality, originally governed by mafia, an opportunity to work honestly, to learn English, to show pride in their origins and to relaunch the sustainable development of their community.

We cannot ignore what happened with the pandemic, when community foundations became a point of reference for people, but also for institutions, due to the easier decisional mechanism, the knowledge of the territory needs and the agility of their actions.

One of the best examples from the Italian context is Fondazione della Comunità Bresciana¹¹ (North of Italy, one of the province most hit at the beginning of the pandemic).The organization took care of finding and distributing personal protective equipment, food, medicines, providing any kind of assistance for people during the lockdown. The Municipality of Brescia asked to the community foundation to play this role, realizing it offered the most effective solution.

As a consequence of this new role played, due to the state of emergency, the community foundation reached out to new individuals, investors, companies, who donated goods or money, widening the group of stakeholders and affirming a stronger and more positive reputation of the foundation.

Another strategic relevant issue is the engagement of the community during the establishment process of the community foundation. I am currently following the case of Fondazione di Comunità dell'Agro Pontino, in the South of Rome, where professionals, retired people and students are working together on this ambitious project. They are focusing on the mission of the foundation, on “the why” and “the how” to meet to the community they would refer to.

Through the association Valore Pontino¹² they are focusing on the future mission of the community foundation and, in particular, on long life learning, social inclusion, cultural policies.

They are struggling with the engagement of people, first of all of possible stakeholders, like banks and companies, who hopefully will contribute to the endowment of the community foundation, and then proposing activities considered useful and effective.

¹⁰ [Fondazione San Gennaro Napoli - Fondazione di Comunità - Onlus](#)

¹¹ [Homepage - Fondazione della Comunità Bresciana Onlus \(fondazionebresciana.org\)](#)

¹² [Home - Valore Pontino](#)

It is not easy to win the trust of people who don't know what a community foundation is, who are the people who want to run it and why they think it could be the right tool to make the territory grow, so the first step is meeting people.

It takes time, sometimes years, for this reason before the establishment of a community foundation an association is needed to prepare this path.

4. Two tools of engagement of young people in Italy: Youth Bank and Servizio Civile Universale

There are several reasons why community foundations should engage with young people. First of all, they are representative of the community; secondly, transferring power and leadership process to them is a crucial step to grow and evolve as a good society. It also gives them accountability and sense of shared responsibility towards their community, possibly ensuring the long term future of the community foundation itself.

In the following paragraphs, I will focus on two main engagement tools that have, so far, been used by community foundations in Italy: Youth Bank and Servizio Civile Universale. After providing a more wider framework on the initiatives, I will be sharing some concrete examples and recommendations.

4.1 The Youth Bank

Youth Bank (YB) was born in Northern Ireland from the mind of Vernon Ringland, who spent 20 years developing a simple, flexible and transferable approach to promote young people as decision makers in their communities. Based on his youth work experience, he believed that young people should have had greater opportunities to experiment and test out their own ideas. In the sense of the philanthropy world, that meant that this emerging concept was stretched even further by adopting participatory grant-making methods¹³.

Golden rules of the Youth Bank:

1. Youth led;
2. Open to all young people;
3. Participation & inclusion;
4. Promoting understanding & respecting differences;
5. Clear and fair methods of grant-making;
6. Say it as it is;
7. Developing young people`s skills & experience;
8. Reflection & evaluation;
9. Celebration.

¹³ [Vernon Ringland - YBI Team \(youthbankinternational.org\)](http://youthbankinternational.org)

4.1.1 YB in Fondazione della Comunità Comasca

In Italy an adapted version of the Youth Bank was launched in 2007 in Como (Northern Italy, near Milan) by Fondazione della Comunità Comasca¹⁴. It was a fund dedicated to young people and for the first time managed by young people, not by adults. It was created a sort of committee, made up of boys and girls under 25 who evaluated projects focused on youth problems (youth bankers) proposed by their peers (youth planners).

In 2015, after some months in Dublin studying the Youth Bank International model, the community foundation's representatives for the Youth Bank proposed to move on to the original model and create more Youth Bank points within the province, in order to include as many young people as possible.

Now, the foundation dedicates €150.000 per year to its Youth Bank in Como and its five territorial points within the province.

Young people are engaged at school, where the local responsible for Youth Bank (an expert of the local association who supports the youth planner and formally manages the amount of money) illustrates this opportunity. To join this initiative, a three days in-house training, during which values are instilled, like working in group, being inclusive and accepting diversity, and capacities and skills are stimulated, like writing a project, communicating contents, planning fundraising actions, is mandatory. Subsequently, a survey is sent to the young people of the territory in order to know what the priorities are according to them, so they can write the grant, supported by the foundation. Every year, between April and December, the foundation launches the grant to reach out to as many young people as possible in schools, parishes, associations. In the latest years, Youth Bank is also a possible experience of *alternanza scuola-lavoro*, a program promoted by the Italian government to let young people become familiar with the job market. Whoever wants to participate (maximum 8-10 people per year) must present a motivation letter and is chosen based on previous experiences and what it is considered he/she can bring to the group.

During spring, the projects presented are evaluated by the committee of the youth bankers; then, the youth planners selected are interviewed and, in the end, the foundation ratifies the choice.

Projects consist of small activities, but they are very valuable for the youth planners, who feel the responsibility to implement the activities, carried out with the foundation support.

Sometimes, thanks to the Youth Bank experience, youth planners come up with an association to keep the commitment towards their territory: this is very meaningful for the

¹⁴ [Fondazione Comasca \(fondazione-comasca.it\)](http://fondazione-comasca.it)

community foundation, which plays a key role in this process, and it ensures continuity in projects and programs.

“Thanks to YB I realized two projects (We for the future and Our choice productions) that came into reality but above all I found my dimension in the Third Sector and within the community” Lorenzo Carbone, Youth Planner Olgiate (CO)

4.1.2 YB in Fondazione di Comunità di Monza e Brianza

In 2012 Fondazione di Comunità di Monza e Brianza (Northern Italy, near Milan) took inspiration from Fondazione della Comunità Comasca and launched its Youth Bank. However, it preferred to embrace an adapted model.

Indeed, this initiative targets technical institutes and high schools and youth bankers and youth planners are selected by schools themselves.

During autumn young people are engaged in some meeting during which it is explained what a social project is, how to evaluate it, how to make brainstorming about what is important for young people in the community. Usually, projects are chosen by the foundation.

Sometimes someone continues its collaboration after the experience ended, being available to peer exchanges with newcomers. Also in this case, the Youth Bank can be a form of *alternanza scuola-lavoro*, that might represent another opportunity for the foundation of gaining young volunteers.

Motivation plays a key role: people who take part because of a personal interest has more likely an higher civic engagement and can continue to contribute to do something good for the community in different ways.

The community foundation creates an informal group on social network and keep youth bankers and youth planners informed on the topic activities for young people also after the conclusion of the YB, so that they can be engaged longer.

“Taking part to the YB project means to me to help my community giving my little contribution in solving problems, trying to make my territory a better place for all” Valentina

4.1.3 YB in Fondazione Comunitaria della Valle d’Aosta

Very similar to the previous experiences is the one of Fondazione Comunitaria della Valle d’Aosta (North-West of Italy, at the border with France).

During the pandemic youth bankers and youth planners decided autonomously to cede their resources to the Covid emergency fund open by the foundation: this was really meaningful and appreciated, demonstrating a great civic responsibility.

A crucial aspect emerged interviewing the representative of the foundation is about the target: who is really engaged? Young people that are already brilliant and active in social issues, or who is generally left out? This is a crucial question and the best answer could be: both, but especially the second target, so that YB can be an effective tool of engagement.

In the South of Valle d'Aosta, far from the main city, there is a sort of baby gang that is vandalising shops and doing similar bad actions; now, thanks to a social worker, the baby gangers are cooperating with the Municipality to put in place positive actions to benefit the community. Now Fondazione Comunitaria della Valle d'Aosta would like to create a Youth Bank in that area.

Another interesting project would be involving in the foundation board young people that already collaborated in the past: in Italy this would be a sort of wonderful revolution among foundations, given the homogenous composition of governance in terms of age.

At the same time, instead of creating an association of young people coming from the experience of Youth Bank, it would be better, according to the foundation, creating a dedicated branch.

4.2 Servizio Civile Universale

It is a State-funded scheme through which young people can gain professional experience working at a non-profit organization. There are also trainings and upskilling courses that are made available for them during this work period, no matter the position they cover within the organization.

Being able to give access to foundations to this scheme is a key strategic development for Assifero because it would provide the opportunity to draw near two different worlds, usually apart: the young people, and foundations and philanthropic. The former has the chance to develop and strengthen new competences and skills, accessing foundations' experience, social, and human capital. The latter have the possibility to widen their horizon, become more accessible and diverse, and make their work evolve by integrating young people skills, for instance from a digital point of view and their refreshing perspective. It is really one of the greatest places of social imagination for Italian young people between 18 and 28 years old.

Unfortunately, in 2020 and in 2021 the funds were cut and Assifero programs were not financed. However, in its precedent form (called National Civic Service), we had few foundations that had their projects financed and, in some cases, foundations decided to fully employ them or they managed to remain in contact and involve them in other

projects. It is the case of Fondazione di Comunità di Messina, where one volunteer out of four kept collaborating in some activities after the twelve months of Servizio Civile.

Assifero is working hard on building a culture of Servizio Civile among foundations and among institutions, that still consider foundations as a mere ATM machine. We are at the very beginning of the path, but we are strongly convinced of the great of Servizio Civile as a tool of young people engagement.

5. Key findings

Youth Bank and Servizio Civile are two successful tools that can be used to engage with young people. The first one provides leadership and active engagement in setting the community priorities from their point of view, which is usually not represented in the decision-making process.

Youth Bank and Servizio Civile are forms of early-stage engagement of young people, one from addressing resources and the other from an operational point of view, and both are great means for community foundations to be influenced by new fresh ideas and practices, e.g. digital tools.

6. Some personal recommendations and suggestions

Italy is the country where, if you are 35 years old, you are still a «boy» or a «girl» or other, and you are not considered able to run a company or take a seat in the Parliament, but community foundations can create the space of action for young people, and I would really recommend them to do so.

Youth Bank and Servizio Civile represent great tools for young people to demonstrate that they feel a strong sense of community and they would like to express it through ideas and projects, so community foundations could give them the opportunity to do so.

Youth Bank is a fantastic tool for stimulating young people in expressing themselves and it is a good exercise to work together for a common goal: contributing to improve the community paying attention to their peers. In the meanwhile it allows them to gain soft and hard skills and it is a very important point in Italy, where education is most of the time too much theoretical.

Servizio Civile gives to young people the opportunity to play a role, learn and test their capacities in different fields, from culture to disability, from environmental protection to elder people, gaining skills and expertise they will spend in the future work lives.

Both requires time and resources, but Youth Bank can work with a minimum amount of money, because really the core element is the trust in Youth Planners and Youth Bankers;

Servizio Civile is paid by the State for almost the total costs and in both cases they are good investments.

I don't see obstacles for Italian community foundations to open to both Youth Bank and Servizio Civile to meet this strategic part of the community.

Young people are the future, we all need their eyes to see the world, so it would be very important to create a stable space in the organisations to let them express and act, so my recommendation is... simply meet the challenge and try!

Resources

- OECD, Civic Engagement, <https://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/civic-engagement/>
- Enhancing Civic Engagement– The Role of Place Attachment and Neighborhood Ties (Work in Progress), Ann-Kathrin Seemann*, Lisa Danga
- Meeting local community needs. A dashboard from the stakeholder engagement experience, Sara Moggi, Department of Business Administration, University of Verona; Chiara Leardini, Department of Business Administration, University of Verona; Gina Rossi, Department of Economics and Statistics, University of Udine; Alessandro Zardini, Department of Business Administration, University of Verona
- How is civic engagement developed over time? Emerging answers from a multidisciplinary field, Erik Amnå*, Youth & Society (YeS), Örebro University, SE-701 82 Örebro, Sweden
- Self-Selection or Socialization? The Longitudinal Relation Between Civic Engagement and Political Orientations Among Adolescents, Viktor Dahl and Ali Abdelzadeh
- Interviews:
Alessio Sala Tenna, Fondazione della Comunità Comasca
Lucia Mussi, Fondazione della Comunità di Monza e Brianza
Patrik Vesan, Fondazione Comunitaria della Valle d'Aosta
- Discussion with the ECFI Learning Lab students and team