

Le Agorà di Messina

For citizens, by citizens: reinvigorating and reimagining the role of the citizen in southern Italy

Introduction

Le Agorà di Messina programme, based in Sicily, was run with the Council of Europe by The Democratic Society. Through a set of activities over nine months, Le Agorà di Messina aimed to encourage citizen participation in decision-making across Messina, with its final goal to set a protocol for participation – or “Charter for Participation”. The project was named ‘agora’, meaning gathering place in ancient Greek, used by citizens for public meetings and decision making.

How it started

Le Agorà di Messina started with a world-café event run by The Democratic Society in Messina in October 2017 for the [Incubator for Participatory Democracy](#), run by the [Council of Europe](#).

At the event, Messina citizens shared their ideas for greater citizen involvement in decisions for the city. Francesca explained that they asked citizen’s five questions about the city. The main points to come out of the event were:

- The need to avoid one-shot participation exercise;
- To empower citizens;
- To identify places for citizens to meet and discuss;
- To spend time listening to citizens’ ideas;
- To identify instruments to develop citizens’ autonomy. (In reference to art. 118 of Italian Constitution);
- The need to build participative skills for citizens;
- That institutions should look at emotions, not only at rationality.

From this starting point the Le Agora di Messina project was established. Over nine months, a set of events, including a festival of Democracy, would help to understand how local democratic involvement could be reinvigorated in Messina.

The project: starting out

Before the project was able to deliver its set of activities, a project team, steering group and a grounding for the work was established.

Announcing the programme

The programme started with a Memorandum of Understanding with the then Messina Mayor, Renato Accorinti, the deputy mayor Federico Alagna and The Democratic Society's President, Anthony Zacharzewski in May. Soon afterwards the programme was announced with a press conference - where Francesca was interviewed by local radio.

Seeking expertise

The programme sought the knowledge and insight of local and international partners, including:

- Università di Messina, with Professor Pierpaolo Zampieri and Professor Giuseppe Restifo helping us to understand Messina and its history.
- Eliana Coraci (Secretariat of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities for the Council of Europe) who also helped with the concept of a local democracy festival.
- Maria Andaloro, creator of "Posto Occupato" and orienteer for the Italian Sprar System, who was also became one of our steering group members.

They helped the Demsoc team to establish three themes for their activities to explore, which were:

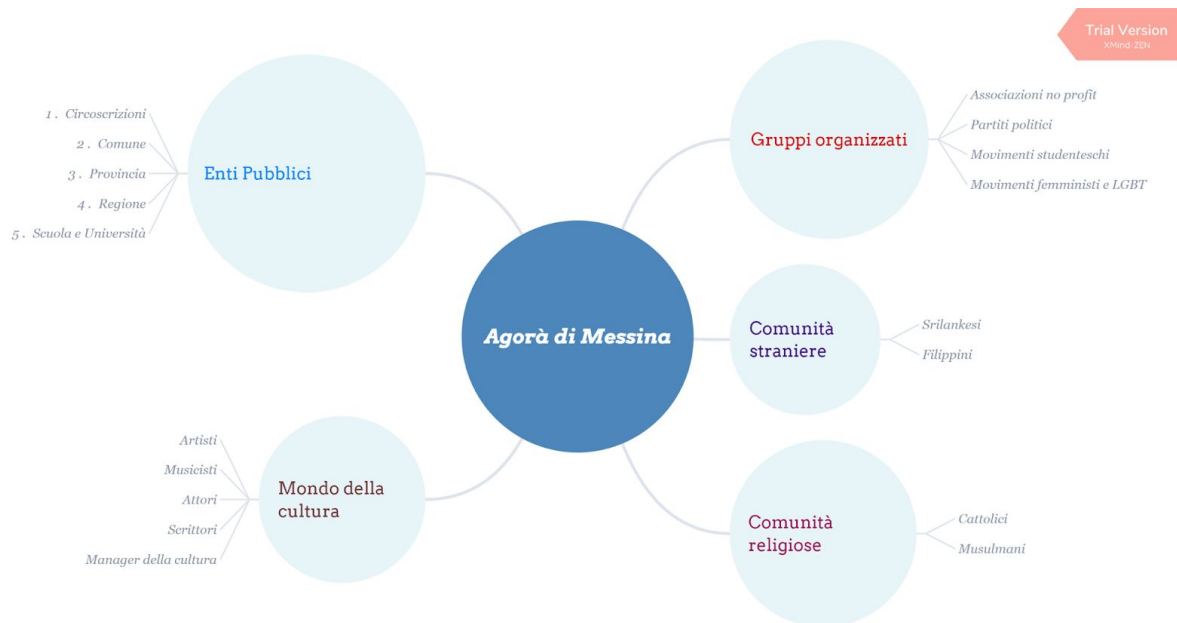
1. How to innovate participatory processes, and use digital participation tech as part of this;
2. How to include women, young people and people who don't normally take part or would be at risk of exclusion;
3. How to work with citizens on public spaces and regeneration.

Establishing the team

Francesca explained to us that the work for the programme was made much easier by the appointment of Ivan, an experienced engagement expert who has lived in Messina for his whole life. Francesca said Ivan's insight was crucial to much of the work, helping to establish vital local connections for each of the activities the programme established.

Stakeholder mapping

A stakeholder mapping process was used to identify communities, individuals and groups throughout Messina, by creating a diagram and pinpointing who the significant local 'actors' were in Messina. This was supported by the interviewing of local people to inform the map. (See below.)



Creating a steering group

Francesca said: “It was a project that was born for citizens, by citizens and to really add value to this statement we decided to create a steering group committee – a group of citizens to reach, pro-create and co-decide the project and the activities on the ground.” Recruited from across Messina, the 20 steering group members were chosen to represent a full range of political views, location and other key characteristics. (See the report for more details.) There would be 10 meetings of the steering group during the project, with all members invited - but not expected to attend on each occasion. Meetings varied from emotive conversations about the local area and memories of the city, to discussing options for the final festival.

Part two: The activities

The steering group was invited to three workshops, placed throughout the nine months to establish a way of working together on a number of activities, all aiming to help the group explore citizen participation in Messina.

The work included:

- Community mapping - in order to understand where people live and carry out their lives in Messina and to identify areas for later 'urban explorations' (see below).
- Hopes and expectations for the future of Messina.
- Visiting different communities and other examples of community work - to learn more about what might be possible in Messina.
- Training for and carrying out of 'urban explorations'. The training informed steering group members on two explorations of abandoned areas of the city of Messina.
- Working together on a bid for funding for a community project through an open-voting process.

The Festival



Picture: The Democracy Festival in Messina

This culminated in the co-creation of a festival of participation, "Messina Partecipa" in June 2019. Steering group members were key in organising and promoting the Festival and were also the main actors of the event: running sessions, moderating discussions and helping with logistics.

Francesca and Ivan said that there were three workshops that were held concurrently - on three different subjects: urban spaces and regeneration, women and inclusion and how to innovate democratic processes. After the workshops, the whole group at the festival were brought together to discuss what they had learned. Together, they decided on 10 principles for democracy in Messina - which have subsequently been sent to steering group members for feedback.

They were:

1. Ascolto (listening)
2. Attivismo (activism)
3. Consapevolezza (awareness)
4. Educare e imparare (education and learning)
5. Cultura (culture)
6. Coraggio (courage)
7. Ecologia (ecology)
8. Accessibilità (accessibility)
9. Conoscenza (knowledge)
10. Cura (care)

Impact

The project has been successful in changing attitudes towards participation but it does need more time - considering the size of the population, there's a lot more work needed if we wanted to engage even 50 percent of people.

Nonetheless it did manage to do quite a lot:

- Creation of a close network of citizens that share similar values and skills towards engaging in their city.
- Democratising the bottom-up approach to regeneration.
- Greater involvement of local actors and a project adapted to local context. Wider understanding of citizen needs.
- Enrichment in the knowledge of participants.
- Closer links between the municipality and citizens (not achieved).
- More local-led participatory processes.

What was learned

Francesca and Ivan said that there were a series of challenges that they feel they would like to work on more to overcome. They included:

- **Establishing a presence:** There was much to learn from the experience of running the project. Francesca told us that it was difficult for Demsoc to engender trust with people and institutions in Italy that they would have liked - partly because The Democratic Society is relatively new to the country and not well established.
- **Working together:** Francesca said that partnership working was difficult. She said: "We see each other as enemies in some way, even if we work in the same area."
- **Hard to engage young people:** Sicily has an ageing population and is losing many of its young people for cities elsewhere in Italy and Europe. As a result, Francesca said it was hard to engage younger citizens - and while they had hoped to find ways to attract younger people to the democracy festival this proved impossible because school holidays had already started. "[An idea for the festival] was creating a parallel festival for children, they could work on participation in a more fun way," Francesca said. They hope, if they can, when the festival returns.



- **Time:** Time, both in terms of the project and for people's engagement, was a key challenge. Francesca said: "It's like the most important resource nowadays. It's hard to balance participation with people's lives. If they don't work they are mothers, and have children and can't leave them [for example]."
- **Building trust:** The length of the project meant it was hard to put down the roots needed to really build trust in Messina, and this is one of the reasons the project team - including the steering group - would like to continue with the project.

Find out more

About Public Square: Public Square is an action-research programme – run by mySociety and The Democratic Society, and funded by Luminare — to understand how citizens can be more involved in making local decisions. Find out more about the Public Square programme on our [website](#). You can contact us by emailing team@thepublicsquare.org.uk

Read more on Messina: You can read more about the Messina project on the Demsoc [website](#). And you can listen to Annie Cooke's interview podcast [here](#).