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An innovative participatory policymaking approach using Open Studios: the creation of “Ecosystems of Care”

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Abstract

This paper explores an innovative policymaking tool known as “Open Studios”. This is a participatory, multi-disciplinary two-day workshop which allows open discussion, interaction, and solution development between end users, researchers, and experts in a field. Taking into consideration issues on accessibility, equity, and scarcity of green spaces in urban centres, we developed and applied a new model of community building which is bottom-up, locally managed, and adaptable to the needs of its users: the “Ecosystems of Care”. We present the main features of this new way of organizing and structuring green urban areas, as well as our observations from two pilot projects which were created to understand the feasibility and applicability of this idea. We conclude by reflecting on our lessons learned from these applied experiments, the potential of Ecosystems of Care for improving the wellbeing of the population and look at issues related to their replicability and long-term sustainability.

Science highlights

- Open Studios are an innovative policymaking tool focused on co-creation and the interaction between experts, end-users, and researchers on a common issue.
- Through an Open Studio we developed the idea of Ecosystems of care, focused on creating more inclusive green spaces that are managed by the community and quick to implement in a variety of different settings.
- We present evidence to show that Ecosystems of care have the potential to tackle inequalities in access to green spaces, ultimately improving the wellbeing of people who live in cities.

Policy and practice recommendations

- Ecosystems of care are effective social innovations that are fast to organize, bottom-up, and centered around a holistic definition of inclusiveness that considers social and structural barriers.
- These initiatives are based on a democratic space development, focused on the programmability of a space that involves all potential users.
- To be effective, a stakeholder mapping is necessary to understand the various users and communities cohabiting in this space.



- Sustainability of these initiatives is favored by the support of local government and authorities; however, it is important that their management and organization remains within the hands of local organizers.

Keywords Green urban areas, Social policy, Ecosystem, Cities, Social innovation, Urban environment

Background

RESISTIRÉ (RESpondIng to outbreakS through co-creaTive inclusive equality stRatEgies) was a Horizon 2020 research and innovation project interested in investigating inequalities exacerbated by the COVID-19 public health emergency and aimed at developing solutions centered around equity. Movement restrictions and non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the key role which access to green spaces had on the wellbeing of people, as well as the socio-economic inequalities in accessing them. Through a scoping review and stakeholder consultations, RESISTIRÉ decided to focus one of its policy proposals on the development of new ways of using public green spaces. This paper aims to present the conceptualization and delivery of the “Ecosystems of Care” pilot project, which was the result of an innovative participatory approach of policymaking called Open Studio (OS) that took place on the 12th and 13th of October 2021.

Methods

OS are two-days, thematic, policymaking workshops that invite people with different backgrounds (artists, community leaders, architects, and public servants) as well as people directly affected by the issues discussed, to come up with innovative solutions to potentially apply to their own, local setting. Ultimately, they aim to develop ideas and interventions with a concrete vision of their possible future impact, following the core value of fulfilling the vision of all stakeholders involved in the resolution of a problem (López Belloso et al. 2024; Street 1997).

OS were the central policymaking tool used by RESISTIRÉ, with topics first drafted by the team based on consultation with experts and stakeholders, as well as quick literature reviews on themes that seemed to be of central importance to the wellbeing of communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Green areas and the inequalities related to their access and use consistently appeared as important topics in the literature, both in general and in the context of the wellbeing of individuals during the pandemic (Hugo Poelman 2016; Kardan et al. 2015; Milner et al. 2021; Poortinga et al. 2021), moving the team to dedicate an OS and policy proposal of the project to this topic.

Three central questions were then drafted by RESISTIRÉ as necessary outcomes of the “Solutions for Inclusive Access to Green Commons” OS:

1. how to create new green spaces and reform grey areas to solve the problem of unequal availability in cities;
2. how can existing green areas be reshaped to be accessible to all;
3. how can these areas become safe, free and inclusive spaces for all diverse individuals within a community.

The workshops are designed to make people from different perspectives and fields work together on a common solution, enabling a conversation between very different experts

without having to fall back onto the necessity of speaking a common technical language (Robertson and Simonsen 2012). Invited participants to the “Solutions for Inclusive Access to Green Commons” OS included: artists, architects, community organizers, public servants, members serving on common housing associations, environmental scientists, botanists, as well as real estate developers from different parts of Europe. This was done to ensure that the policy solutions discussed were inclusive of a wide range of perspectives.

Policy discussions in OS are centered around better stories and personas, two tools created ad hoc for each workshop. The first are positive narratives and promising practices of how communities or governments have come together to solve a problem, or have found resilience during times of hardship (Georgis 2014). These narratives are created through a prior research phase conducted by the RESISTIRÉ team in preparation of each workshop. These tools are necessary to help frame the development of solutions from a positive perspective and inspire the participants. Personas are instead descriptions of hypothetical individuals who might be affected by the policies discussed during the OS. These fictional characters, inspired by interviews with real people (carried out by the RESISTIRÉ team) who reported some kind of hardship or form of discrimination. They are a tool to help empathize with the wide range of possible situations which a targeted policy needs to take into consideration (López Belloso et al. 2024). Personas are created using a variety of different types of users, to make policy solutions as inclusive and sensitive to the needs of all potential people. This also helps to ground the conversation around concrete situations and structuring the development of a policy blueprint which is centered around users (Fig 1).

In practice, these exercises are carried out as small group open discussions and develop in the following steps:

1. Each group was assigned three better stories and was asked to highlight which elements they found innovative in the solution and what were their shortcomings. A list of caveats and strengths was drawn up and enumerated for each group.

Better Story

CAMMINO DI SAN ROCCO
TRENTINO-SOUTH TYROL REGION, ITALY

Societal response

CONTEXT

This initiative was started during the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting the increased importance of spending time and doing activities in green spaces. The initiative was started by two local residents and has since involved a variety of different stakeholders and users through its participatory methodology.

DESCRIPTION

The Cammino di San Rocco (Path of San Rocco) is a community project between the citizens, associations and institutions of three neighbouring villages, with the aim of rebuilding the local community, making use of the surrounding natural areas, and involving active citizens, people with a foreign background and people with a low socioeconomic status. The project entails a 70km route dedicated to environmental sustainability and the local cultural heritage that hikers can complete in a couple of days (the path is divided into five distinct stops). The motivation and reasons behind the project are multiple: enhancing the general area in order to improve the sense of belonging of the people living there, promoting walks as a way of connecting and strengthening bonds (including between people of different backgrounds), using green spaces as a respite during COVID-19, and promoting walks in nature as a way to foster social cohesion and improve people's general wellbeing.

IMPACT

The use of participatory survey and planning methods in the development process encourages community ownership of the project, allows for information to flow between both the community and the coordinating organisation, and enhances accountability between the organisation and the community. At the moment of writing, the project had involved about fifty individuals, six institutional bodies, three schools, and about twenty associations in its workings.

ACTORS

The initiative is coordinated by the civil society organisation ATAS onlus, based in the Trentino region, and funded by the Fondazione Caritro.

LEARN MORE

<https://camminoosarocco.it/>

Persona

LENA
Age: 38
Family situation:
Married, with one child

CURRENT SITUATION

Lena lives in Warsaw's city center. She is a human rights activist who has recently been involved in the ecology movement. She is an advocate for the right to access fair, ecological, and healthy food. She founded a food cooperative in the neighborhood with the support of her activist friends. Their aim is to support urban garden initiatives in lower-class neighborhoods by offering training, helping with applications to municipality and other bureaucratic tasks, and generating income for them by selling their products in their neighborhood store. However, almost a year after she opened the food cooperative and store, she realized that the majority of urban gardens in Warsaw are in middle and upper middle class neighborhoods and that more vulnerable communities are not engaged in urban gardening - also because they get no support from the municipality and other levels of government. Nor can they purchase the products in her store. It was her main aim to reach vulnerable groups, specifically those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, including migrants and to create a solidarity network around the store. Moreover, she wanted to encourage the development of gardening spaces where people would connect with soil, as well as have access to healthy food. She is quite concerned that this initiative, with its limitations, is now exacerbating the existing inequalities in the sense that the economic crisis makes access to fair and ecological food impossible for the majority of people in Warsaw.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Lena is proud of herself. She has been dreaming of creating such an initiative for years and the pandemic lockdowns provided her with an excellent opportunity to put her plans into action. Thanks to several online meetings with her activist friends, they were able to put together a detailed plan. Although she takes on most of the responsibility for this initiative, this group of activist friends has evolved into a collective along the process. They also started paying regular visits to the urban gardens with their children to feel connected to the soil and do some work there, thanks to the opening of Lena's store and collaboration with the urban gardens. However, since the outbreak, most of their children have lost interest in going out. Even in the garden, they are immersed in their phones and tablets, and as parents, they are unsure how to encourage their kids to break this habit.

IMMEDIATE NEEDS & AMBITION

She wants to keep this initiative sustainable, but also able to reach more vulnerable groups and neighborhoods to create a larger social impact that is in line with her initial dreams. For these purposes, she wants to improve the business plan and get legal/financial advice on how to decrease costs and eventually the prices of the products sold at the store. She also wants to reach other neighborhoods and encourage people in such neighborhood to turn vacant spaces into urban gardens. She made an attempt and went to a disadvantaged neighborhood with a mobile vehicle, also distributing information on urban gardening, however, it did not work out, as residents of the neighborhood did not show much interest. Nor did officials in the local government offices. She needs support to spread the word, get organized in other neighborhoods, and mobilize government officials to support urban gardening in the areas where vulnerable communities live.

SOCIAL NETWORK

Lena feels very lucky to be part of a collective consisting of a group of activist friends who share the same ambitions and support the initiative on a voluntary basis. Even though she shoulders the majority of the tasks for the initiative, the solidarity, constant deliberation, and emotional support among the members of the collective increase her resilience and dedication. It would be impossible for her to continue alone. Furthermore, she does not feel alone as a parent either, as they support each other on parental issues as well. For instance, they have been discussing ways to strengthen their children's relationship with nature and shape their activities with this purpose in mind.

TELLING QUOTES

"I truly believe in the impact this food initiative can create. Yet, I still could not figure out a way to lower the prices, keep the initiative financially sustainable, and reach more disadvantaged people."

"It is so hard to break children's addiction to digital devices. My friends and I sometimes feel desperate about it. We want to strengthen their bond with nature."

Fig. 1 Example of better stories and personas used during the Open Studios

2. Next, personas were introduced as potential users of any urban green area. Participants were asked to empathize with these users and comment on possible solutions to resolve their specific conflicts and problems presented. These solutions can include both physical changes to the environment, as well as initiatives which could help create a more welcoming space. Core concepts and ideas from these descriptions were then distilled and enumerated.
3. A list of common characteristics, problems and solutions that were described by each group was created. This list constituted the foundations upon which each group would then develop their policy proposals. This is where the OS methodology is at its most innovative: the brainstorming process which brings together people from very different professional backgrounds gives light to policy ideas which consider all aspects central to possible solutions.
4. After a deliberation period for each group, every idea was presented and the selection of the pilot project was based on a group vote from all participants, organizers of the OS included.

Policy solutions created by the OS are required to follow the principles of design justice (Costanza-Chock 2020; López Belloso et al. 2024), putting under the limelight the voice of those directly impacted by a policy and prioritizing the effect that the policy will have on its community.

Results

Ecosystems of care: a pilot project by RESISTIRÉ

The group who participated in the “Solutions for Inclusive Access to Green Commons” OS drafted four core principles to make green areas more inclusive in their utilization and development:

1. Decisions based on a bottom-up participatory approach, centered around users.
2. Focused on the problem of gentrification around green areas, mindful of mitigating this process.
3. Creating a space which is psychologically and physically safe for all users.
4. And finally, programmable, defined by the OS as the ability of a space to host and organize activities which users can contribute to.

Based on these principles, the development of green spaces as “ecosystems of care” emerged. These represent a way of designing and organizing communities within public green spaces considering the direct participation and inputs of local users, who are usually left out of decision-making process for the spaces which they utilize.

A call for interest open to any organization or individual in Europe was published online, offering funds for kick-starting an initiative that would need to include in its proposal concrete ways of addressing the above-mentioned principals to access the funds. The call was published on the RESISTIRÉ website and promoted through professional networks of the participants. It offered full funding for a period of up to 6 months. Two sites for pilot projects were selected. One project, based in Barcelona, Spain, was developed by a local grassroots organization (aqui) and focused to bring together different, isolated communities of a same place (Parc de l'Espanya Industrial) by organizing events and offering a space to discuss ideas on their shared public space. The other project was based in Graz, Austria, and managed by two local community organizations

(respectively, Transition Graz and Illusions), which were interested in requalifying a green space through a participatory, democratic process with the residents of the Triester Neighborhood in the city. (López Belloso et al. 2024).

Discussion

Ecosystems of care and their potential for improving wellbeing

Ecosystems of care propose the creation of a “programmable” green space, which means:

1. galvanize users to interact with each other and promote their involvement in the decision-making processes of a public space;
2. promote the creation of new green areas where there aren't any by bringing together communities around a solution;
3. create an opportunity for interaction, respectful confrontation, and discussion between users, residents, and policymakers;
4. act as a protector of the right of everyone to access these public domains;
5. reduce inequalities in access and use of green areas by involving and hearing from all users or communities;

Ecosystems of care are grounded in social, rather than technical or environmental innovation, making them malleable to the community, relatively cost-free, and easy to implement at any level. They represent an effective tool for making green spaces more inclusive of all users by encouraging them to be actively involved in decision-making processes used by them. While they cannot provide a solution to the structural inequalities found in urban green areas, they can tackle the unequal utilization and development of them, which often fail to take into consideration the diverse communities which coexist in a space, and underestimate the importance of green areas for the wellbeing of all users.

Conclusions

Replicability

A year after the beginning of the two pilots, the organizers, and a team from RESISTIRÉ joined together again for a roundtable discussion to understand the future of these projects and what features of each could help the replicability of these elsewhere. The lessons we learned from this meeting are summarized in Fig. 2, which represents the methodological framework for the application of ecosystems of care.

The creation of this project in two very different contexts, and with substantially different objectives, gives good hope to believe that ecosystems of care can easily adapt to a variety of environments.

Strengths of Open Studios as tools for policymaking

Open Studios are an innovative policymaking tool combining a variety of participation and design techniques which makes them a strong method of confronting problems and developing solutions. They offer the opportunity to openly discuss complex, intersectional issues which affect people's everyday lives, giving them the opportunity to participate in the formulation of concrete solutions. The format allows for a confrontation between bureaucratic realities, end users' needs, structural problems, and real-life applications. Additionally, the workshop tools used in OS are effective in framing

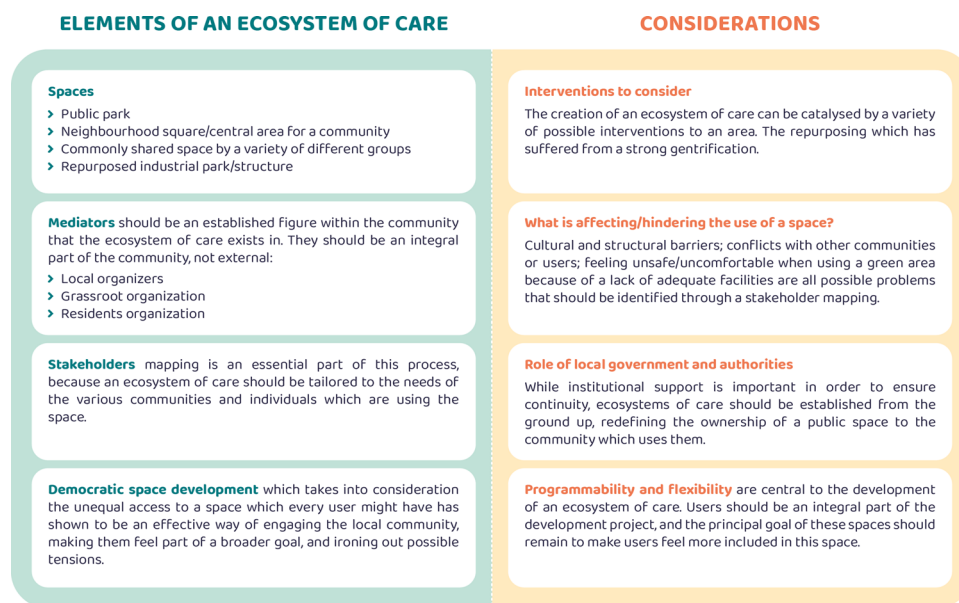


Fig. 2 Methodological framework of an ecosystem of care

problems and solutions around a common narrative, making policy proposals centered around users and real-life situations, as well as easier to implement and propose to local realities.

Limitations

We encountered some limitations in this policymaking mechanism. Firstly, there is no method to assure a representative participation to these events, and OS are likely to attract a share of stakeholders that is better off and not necessarily representative of the most marginalized. While we have tried to codify a set of good practices which could help in shaping and creating these projects elsewhere, we cannot account for the myriad of complex social, bureaucratic, and structural issues that a community might run into: the local context remains the strongest determinant of success of these projects.

Abbreviations

OS Open Studios
RESISTIRÉ Responding to outbreaks through co-creative inclusive equality strategies

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s42854-025-00073-x>.

Supplementary Material 1

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Author contributions

All authors substantially contributed to the conception and design of the work. LL and RC formulated the idea and the concept of the manuscript. LL wrote and structured the manuscript, conducted the principal investigation, and carried out the literature review relevant for the work. FR, AD, AK, and RC carefully reviewed the contents and critically improved its text. AD and AK designed and conducted the Open Studios.

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Data availability

All materials and data used in this paper are publicly available.

Declarations**Ethical approval**

not applicable to the research presented in this manuscript.

Consent to participate

Every contributing author has given their written consent to participate and is aware of the submission.

Consent for publication

Every contributing author has given their written consent for the publication of this manuscript. All necessary steps have been taken to consent the publication of this data and manuscript.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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