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3. Towards a reflexive model of collaborative urban governance: exploring the Italian 'shared administration of common goods'

Daniela Ciaffi, Giulia Marra and Emanuela Saporito

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, a remarkable and transformative movement has swept through numerous Italian municipalities via thousands of so-called 'collaboration pacts.' This chapter aims to contribute to the discussion on reflexive governance by delving into the Italian experience of the 'shared administration of common goods' (Arena, 1997). Originating in 2014 with the introduction of the first *Regulation of collaboration between citizens and the city for the care and regeneration of urban commons* in Bologna, this pioneering approach has since been embraced by nearly 380 municipalities across Italy, resulting in the implementation of close to 7000 collaboration pacts. These local legal agreements signify an unprecedented opportunity for citizens and public administrators to collaboratively address pressing societal challenges by co-creating means and rules for collective action. The main goals include the regeneration and co-management of 'common goods' such as abandoned buildings, gardens, rivers, parks, and cultural heritage assets, as well as the design and implementation of 'collaborative services,' such as establishing food redistribution networks and repurposing public schools into vibrant civic centers.

Framing this legal innovation within the context of Italian political and civic participation powerfully illustrates how this transition is part of an ongoing institutional learning process, prompting reflection for local administrators and engaged communities.

The progressive crisis of political parties, trade unions, and representation mechanisms in Italy has escalated to a democratic emergency, as highlighted by several scholars (Revelli, 2019). This urgency is further emphasized by the

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dramatic rise of poverty and inequalities (Istat, 2022) and a troubling trend of anti-intellectual reductionism in the public political discourse (Costa, 2016). In light of these issues, redefining spaces for political participation is crucial to address the current critical phase of Italian democracy.

While the number of citizens voting is decreasing,[1] there is a notable shift in civic engagement. More and more residents, regardless of location, are participating in bottom-up initiatives and mutualistic activities to directly contribute to the care and regeneration of collective resources (Arena, 2020; Venturi & Zandonai, 2022). Commoning practices have become the most prevalent forms of contemporary civic participation (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019). They are usually insurgent, self-organized, conceived independently from public authority, or even as an alternative to representative democracy processes. This shift not only reinforces the existing democratic structures but also offers alternative solutions. The 'active citizens' involved in these initiatives are experiencing a 'third way' of conceiving the democratic setting, 'seeking to remedy the shortcomings of the market and of command-and-control regulation' (Lenoble & Maesschalck, 2010).

We analyze this development through a lens of reflexivity. Can the modern liquid society – which is individualized, privatized, uncertain, flexible, insatiable, and vulnerable (Bauman, 2000) – reconstruct itself by learning from the bottom up? According to Feindt and Weiland (2018), the fundamental question is: Which governance arrangements encourage effective learning processes towards more sustainable societal development?

Our first thesis is that the 'shared administration of common goods' as a governance model, implemented through the Regulation mentioned above, is the first promising answer to this question. The integration of bottom-up participation with policymaking is not just a path but a necessary and urgent one to walk in the face of the lack of public resources and a progressive loss of effectiveness in dealing with ever more uncertain and 'wicked problems' (Coriat et al., 2024; Rittel & Webber, 1973).

The birth of the Regulation in Bologna results from a reflexive approach to urban governance. By leveraging the principle of 'horizontal subsidiarity' outlined in Article 118.4 of the Italian Constitution, the City of Bologna collaborated with Labsus, an association of jurists, sociologists, and urban planners. Together, they crafted an innovative administrative tool designed to recognize and actively support grassroots initiatives for the care of the urban environment that risked being labeled illegal without formal and public legitimization. This embodies the essence of Italian-style reflexive governance – the 'shared administration of common goods' – which introduces the new right to contribute to the care of common goods. The notion of 'contributory democracy' (Barbot, 2016) further strengthens this approach by advocating for the reduction of delegation mechanisms, the fortification of representation mechanisms,

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and the creation of new administrative law tools promoting 'doing democracy together.' This process can be framed under the concept of 'sharing democracy' (Ferguson, 2012) and boldly challenges the crisis of representative democracy, paving the way for a new wave of collaborative governance.

Nonetheless, Feindt and Weiland (2018) argue that 'key barriers to reflexive governance include unavoidable politics,' represented by those 'established players' who 'tend to dominate the agenda and the process.' In the Italian political context, the last 20 years have significantly exacerbated distrust in politics.

Our second thesis addresses this growing distrust by proposing that collaborative commoning practices have the potential to not only regenerate democracy but also to fundamentally reshape public institutions, spurring public administrations to reform laws, tools, regulations, and routines by incorporating innovations from the bottom up.

This text discusses the concept of 'reflexivity' as a normative-practical idea that defines a mode of governance leading to institutional learning. Feindt and Weiland (2018) refer to a 'dynamic learning process,' highlighting the active involvement of institutions and all other actors participating in the commoning practice. In this process, knowledge is not just a set of theoretical concepts but the result of continuous interactions (Lave & Wenger, 1990). Reflexivity is important not only for public administrations but also for the entire 'community in action' to regain urban rights and political awareness. Having reflexive arrangements in place is crucial to encourage all participants to adopt a reflexive approach when constructing governance objects through observation and feedback mechanisms, ultimately fostering reflexivity as a capacity-building process.

In the following paragraphs, we will present the 'shared administration of common goods' as a governance model designed to orchestrate the collective search for integrated solutions in the form of the commons, leading to more robust societal development paths (Feindt & Weiland, 2018). We will also argue that this model has the potential to reframe collaborative urban governance, bringing reflexivity to the fore as the key outcome of a continuous process of transactive (or reflexive) dialogue between public institutions and citizens.

We will discuss the theoretical reflections based on an empirical foundation of about 7000 collaboration pacts in progress (Labsus Report, 2021). However, we have chosen to focus on two experiences that vividly illustrate the national significance of the 'shared administration of common goods' as a reflexive model for governance. These experiences include a collaboration process for the care and regeneration of cultural heritage through the implementation of collaboration pacts and a network of public administrators who are deeply involved in practicing and supporting this innovative administrative approach.

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3.2 AN ADMINISTRATIVE INNOVATION AS A DRIVER FOR A NEW COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE

Gregorio Arena, a professor of Administrative Law at the University of Trento in Northern Italy, theorized the concept of 'shared administration of common goods.' He argued for the urgent need to overcome power imbalances between the State and citizens by championing a creative alliance based on joint action to tackle modern societies' complexities.

In a context marked by limited economic and financial resources, distrust, and a legitimacy crisis, local authorities have encountered numerous difficulties in responding to diverse societal demands. Conversely, society has demonstrated its ability not only to articulate its needs but also to mobilize significant creative, financial, and technical resources. Thus, in response to neglected urban spaces and services in decay, an increasing number of citizens have taken action to care for them and make them accessible to the community as 'common goods.' Private citizens are attempting to reclaim urban spaces and assets, not for personal gain but to donate them to society (Cortese, 2016).

In this sense, community activation requires public administrations to step outside the traditional legal paradigms and embrace innovation (Giglioni, 2018). Arena has coined this new cooperative governance model that challenges the authoritative bipolar paradigm based on a hierarchical division between the State and individuals, 'shared administration' (Arena, 2020). This model supports the growth of a society of autonomous, responsible, and supportive citizens who join forces with public administration to take care of common goods together.

Drawing on the theories of the Italian sociologist Carlo Donolo[2] (2005, 2010), within the shared administration framework, we define as 'common goods' those tangible, intangible, and digital resources that citizens, in collaboration with the administration, recognize as essential for individual and collective well-being. This definition aligns with the 'general interest' notion outlined in the Italian Constitution (particularly Articles 2 and 3[3]).

At the basis of the 'shared administration model,' the principle of 'horizontal subsidiarity,' introduced in the Italian Constitution in Article 118, Section 4, in 2001, states: 'State, regions, counties, metropolitan cities and municipalities foster citizens to autonomously take individual or collective initiatives in order to achieve activities of general interest.' This constitutional principle outlines the enabling role of the State, at all levels, towards these spontaneous citizens' initiatives (by both individuals and associated groups) aimed at the 'general interest' and, thus, the 'common good.' Whether in the international debate, 'common goods' are usually the objects of collective action and

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'commoning' refers to the process. In Italy, we draw from the constitutional principle of horizontal subsidiarity to effectively define 'common goods' as the activities of general interest. In the wide range of collaboration pacts, general interest activities refer to the processes of taking care of common goods and the spaces and services reinterpreted as common goods.

The line between the process and the object is often difficult to distinguish. The pacts on schools as common goods, for instance, include the co-management of a space accessible to all (a common good) and the process of caring for education as a responsibility of a wider educational community (a commoning initiative).

From our perspective, this theorization was innovative for two main reasons. First, it was grounded in the law, drawn from the Italian Constitution, and shows that rules can be designed to act as transformative (reflexive) tools capable of supporting the 'intelligence of democracy' (Lindblom, 1965). Second, it intensely challenged a well-established paradigm in Italian administrative law, in which the State and citizens are naturally in a conflicting relationship, representing competing interests (the public and the private interest). The 'horizontal subsidiarity' principle fundamentally altered the relationship between citizens and institutions. It introduced a fundamental shift from a vertical paradigm, in which institutions unilaterally exercise authority and power, to a collaborative paradigm, where the relationship between the State and individuals occurs on horizontal ground. In this new scenario, it is considered legitimate for a private entity to act for a collective interest and, thus, be supported, even if not organized in specific political or representative formations.

The shared administration model is not a solitary endeavor but a continuous negotiation process between different interests. The general interest is no longer solely the responsibility of the State but is seen as a 'common' interest. This collaborative approach forms the basis of the shared administration model, reinterpreting the 'sharing city' concept from a subsidiary perspective. According to this interpretation, sharing is not limited to the private sector or exclusively to peer-to-peer interactions. Instead, it implies the direct involvement of public institutions, which are called to act in an open and participatory manner.

3.2.1 Local Regulations: The Necessary Junctions at the Local Level between the Constitutional Principle of Subsidiarity and the Field of Practice

Drawing on the constitutional principle of horizontal subsidiarity, the Municipality of Bologna collaborated with Labsus, a cultural association founded by Professor Arena in 2005, to promote the implementation of the

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collaborative governance model. This collaboration led to the creation of a new municipal regulation in 2014.

The *Regulation of collaboration between citizens and the city for the care and regeneration of urban commons* is more than just a legal framework. It serves as a beacon of empowerment for urban communities. By providing informal social practices with a robust legal foundation, it transcends the logic of the 'special project' or the 'best practice,' engaging with the very operational structure of the municipal organization.

The decision to work with the bureaucrats and provide them with a practical tool to reconnect with their beneficiaries (citizens) and experiment with tangible cooperation was very successful. First, it proved to be sustainable and future-oriented, not necessarily dependent on the political agenda of a temporary government (once adopted, the Regulation stays operational as any other administrative tool). Second, it has been designed to be adaptable to every local context and grounded in each local administrative culture, instilling confidence in its effectiveness and adaptability.

Over the last ten years, almost 380 Italian municipalities have adopted this Regulation, experimenting with local forms of 'shared administration of common goods' (Arena, 1997). It has become a nationwide innovation and an increasingly reflexive model of urban governance.

The reflexivity is closely tied to a radical cultural change within public administration. This change requires ongoing reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) and a move away from a traditional 'command and control' approach to a more collaborative model focused on 'active listening and co-design.' By implementing the Regulation, public officials are called to: (i) carefully listen to ideas and proposals coming from active citizens; (ii) open up a space for co-design, as well as mediate and include others who might be interested in taking part in the project of care or regeneration; and (iii) adapt established procedures to support these groups in putting into practice their proposals. For example, in the case of community-based care of a public garden, this includes providing the necessary resources, such as technical equipment and insurance, to carry out this activity.

3.2.2 Collaboration Pacts as a Trigger for a Reflexive Dialogue between Active Communities and Public Institutions

The concept of 'shared administration of common goods' emphasizes the importance of collective and cooperative action. It highlights the interdependent relationships and relational dynamics among various actors, such as municipalities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), entrepreneurs, citizens, and other civic actors, including informal groups. These actors work

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together towards common goals, sharing the responsibility and benefits of co-managing common resources.

The shared administration model actually represents a pragmatic approach to: (i) adjusting dominant norms and logic in urban governance policies by shifting the authoritative model of public administration; (ii) building horizontal alliances with civic actors who have ideas, energy, and resources (such as time and competencies); and (iii) taking action for the general interest.

As all the Regulations on the Commons state in Article 1: 'Collaboration is expressed through the adoption of administrative acts of an egalitarian and non-authoritarian nature.' These acts are embodied in a practical and action-oriented institutional arrangement called the 'collaboration pact.' This collaboration agreement formally enables the co-management of urban commons, providing a formal space for public administration (represented by the public officers responsible for implementing the Regulation) and 'active citizens' to come together at the same table. They collectively decide what is at the heart of their collaboration (i.e., the general interest, in the form of the common good to be addressed) and their mutual responsibilities and commitments to make this joint action effective. This process, governed by the Regulation, is open to all, before and after the pact is signed, ensuring the inclusivity and importance of every participant.

If we consider reflexive governance as a model that 'challenges normalized assumptions, practices, and actions through the integration of perspectives, values, and norms of multiple actors involved in governance processes' (Hendriks & Grin, 2007; Voß et al., 2006), our chapter aligns with the reflexive governance theory as both communities and public administrations are involved in a 'reflexive dialogue' (Healey, 1997), where reflexivity is explained as a relational concept.

The collaboration pacts are a policy tool that generates two main kinds of reflexivity:

- The first type of reflexivity focuses on 'what matters' and relates to the themes and issues the communities prioritize, regardless of political agendas. Public administrations should acknowledge and support the tangible and intangible commons that citizens are willing to take care of, even if they differ from the usual priorities local authorities usually prioritize.
- The second type of reflexivity focuses on 'how to work together.' In this context, citizens and public administrators seek ways to collaborate on an equal footing to co-design rules and procedures that enable active local communities to care for common goods.

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Practicing the 'shared administration of common goods' can lead to significant changes within local bureaucracies. This process encourages public officials to think and act in new ways outside their usual routines. Importantly, it also empowers citizens, giving them a greater sense of their rights as participants in public life. This can occur through voting, engaging with representative organizations, or directly contributing to the general interest with their actions.

3.3 COLLABORATION PACTS AT WORK: TWO EMPIRICAL CASES OF REFLEXIVITY IN THE 'SHARED ADMINISTRATION OF COMMON GOODS' FRAMEWORK

Beyond theory, collaboration pacts tell very concrete stories[4] of communities, consisting of individuals from civil society and public institutions, coming together to take action to solve common problems and enhance their quality of life through local practices of micro-urban regeneration or, more broadly, social innovations (Moulaert et al., 2013).

Looking at the typology of urban commons at the center of the numerous collaboration pacts established in Italy[5] is crucial to understanding the phenomenon. Every two years, the Labsus Reports examine how the city councils in Italy promote collaboration by analyzing the available collaboration pacts on their websites. Most are related to ecological matters: almost 46 percent of the commons regenerated are parks and urban gardens, followed by public spaces in general, such as squares and streets (almost 18 percent), and buildings, like cultural heritage assets (7.5 percent) but also schools (7 percent).[6]

Cultural activities are crucial in the 'intangible commons' category, making up 15 percent of the total when combined with educational initiatives and projects for social inclusion (7 percent). Regarding the participants involved in the initiatives, the third sector has moved from a traditionally marginal role compared to the public and private sectors to a leading position: nearly 40 percent of the collaboration pacts involve cultural associations. Additionally, individual citizens (21 percent) and informal groups (13.3 percent) are also significantly represented as the main co-signatories of the pacts. Among these alliances, public administrations are mainly involved in supporting these civic initiatives by providing material equipment (23 percent), communication campaigns (19.3 percent), tax deductions (10.5 percent), and technical support (10 percent).

Behind these measurable features, other qualitative aspects become visible only when unpacking the 'black boxes' (Latour, 1991) of the administrative processes related to the quality of competencies, interactions, languages, attitudes, and trust developed through collaborations.

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To explain how reflexivity emerges when the 'shared administration of common goods' is put into practice, we have examined two main paradigmatic case studies in depth. Both pertain to collaboration between local communities and public institutions for the care of cultural heritage, being experiences of co-management of cultural heritage assets understood as common goods.

The recent study carried out in 2021 by the Cultural Heritage Activities School Foundation (Ferrighi & Pelosi, 2024), a research organization of the Italian Ministry of Culture, maps 260 local communities across Italy actively involved in preserving material cultural heritage. Most of these community-led initiatives have been established in the last 20 years, with a particular growth from 2015 to the present. Surprisingly, the results of this research show that collaboration pacts are the most preferred legal means used by owners of material cultural heritage to entrust the estate to 'heritage communities' for co-management in over a fifth of the cases. Notably, there has been an over 8 percent increase in the use of collaboration pacts for managing buildings, including ex-industrial buildings and barracks, representing 0.5 percent and 0.2 percent, respectively. These findings indicate a shift towards shared care and management of real estate assets (mainly publicly owned), reflecting a growing willingness to collectively redefine the functions of these spaces (the 'former-somethings'), which have stopped serving one specific purpose and are open to welcoming others.

We present here two ongoing pacts and experiences on cultural heritage. The first is a paradigmatic example of how municipalities, superintendencies, informal associations, and active groups can collaboratively manage a UNESCO heritage asset, as shown in the Pact of Collaboration for the Care of the Walls of Siena. The second pact involves a former industrial building in Turin's northern quadrant, aiming to transform it into a community cultural hub. This area has the most fragile socio-economic data and the youngest and most multi-ethnic population. These two examples differ significantly in complexity, and their reflexivity is expressed in various ways.

These cases help elaborate on the typologies of reflexivity produced throughout the collaborative practices: on the one hand, on 'what matters,' and on the other, on 'how we work together.' The impact of this reflexivity can be transformative and challenging, influencing language, procedures, and even organizational structures, especially on the institutional side. It also contributes to developing soft skills, such as relational and communicative abilities, through capacity-building and self-awareness aimed at both bureaucrats and citizens. We aim to explain how reflexivity may be triggered in the 'shared administration of common goods' model and where and when it could occur along the collaborative process.

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3.3.1 The Walls of Siena

The first case study is in Siena, whose historic center has been defined by UNESCO as 'the embodiment of the medieval city.' The center is surrounded by walls built between the 14th and 15th centuries, which were later abandoned and infested by climbing plants. When the city of Siena adopted the Regulation on Urban Commons, one of the first collaboration pacts focused on the co-management of medieval walls. This pact sparked a change within the public administration, leading to a shift in attitude within the municipal department responsible for participation. The direct cooperation with associations and citizens in caring for the medieval walls became a learning experience and helped build trust within the local administration. Over the past ten years (from 2014, when the Regulation on the Commons was adopted, to today), the administration has moved from skepticism towards shared administration to active and exemplary use of collaboration pacts. The ancient walls, considered common goods, became an example of how historically valuable objects can be managed, bringing private owners together with environmental volunteers and informal groups, sharing competencies, responsibilities, and resources.

In the shared administration model, the co-design phase is the official place for reflexivity. Here, public administrators and 'active citizens' sit together to decide the focus of their joint action: what is the general interest (i.e., what is the common good to take care of) and what are the mutual responsibilities and commitments. In Siena's case, the ancient walls serve as 'the reflexivity object,' representing the common good at the center of different particular interests. The co-design process was functional in building a shared strategy to meet various needs and aspirations. This included the public interest in showcasing a forgotten cultural heritage and supporting citizens who privately owned sections of those ancient walls in their management. Additionally, a third position was that of environmental volunteers and cultural associations, who advocated for improved accessibility and integration of the cultural heritage with the local public park. The confrontation among 'multiple perspectives' (Alvesson et al., 2008; Holland, 1999) helped to solve the tensions among different viewpoints and establish a shared understanding within the collaborative frame (Alvesson et al., 2008).

As trigger points of reflexive governance, it is essential to mention that the collaboration pact is designed to be open to new citizens or social groups interested in joining the collective action at any time throughout the urban governance process. As a result, the co-design phase continues to be an ongoing, interactive, and open-ended process even after the pact is signed.

Reflexivity in the collaborative urban governance model is not static but a continuous and dynamic process. All participants, whether from the public,

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private, or third sectors, drive this process. They get involved when they join the collaborative action, during the co-design or the implementation phase. The process is 'in a constant state of becoming' (Demir & Lychnell, 2015), reflecting the dynamic nature and collective strength of reflexive governance, allowing all participants to contribute to a common vision and set of values.

The collaboration between the community and the City of Siena has exceeded expectations. Not only have the ancient city walls been cleared of weeds, but the spontaneous growth of hops on the walls has allowed for beer production. Residents actively collect these hops, contributing to a micro-economy that benefits the entire community. The case of Siena provides an example of how collaboration pacts can facilitate mutual understanding, active listening, and productive relationships, prompting informal and reflexive dialogue and ultimately fostering social capital and relational values such as reciprocity and trust (Innes & Booher, 2004).

3.3.2 Beeozanam Community Hub

The second case study, known as beeozanam community hub, is a collaboration pact signed as the result of a successful co-design process involving visionary architects, a social entrepreneur, a group of cultural associations, and the Turin municipality to revitalize a dismissed foundry. In 2017, this group started meeting with the intention of reinhabiting the almost abandoned building and transforming it into a community hub for social and cultural purposes. At the same time, the public administration was working on a proposal to gain European funding for urban regeneration projects. The City of Turin chose to collaborate with a group of 'commoners,' leading to a negotiating phase, sometimes conflictual but creative, that resulted in the physical refurbishment of the building (thanks to European funding[7]) and the establishment of a new cultural and social center, mainly run by the community, in one of the most deprived areas of Turin. The collaboration pact signed at the end of this phase not only accepted the proposal by the proponents, defining as the general interest the common good to be taken care of but also set mutual responsibilities and commitments, such as how local administrators had to support the future management of the building by covering part of the management costs and recognizing the autonomy of the commoners in planning the cultural activities for the space.

In this case, the co-design table, which is an essential part of the collaboration pact process, serves as a 'reflexive space' for open discussion about both 'what matters' and 'how to work together' effectively. The people at the table come from different backgrounds and cultures, which may lead to differing and even conflicting opinions on 'what the general interest is' and 'what should be done collectively.' They are engaged in a productive discussion around a

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specific urban good. As Pesch and Wals suggest (Pesch, 2015; Wals, 2007), we could define these 'places of reflexivity' as 'discursive spaces' or relatively 'safe environments in which people feel free to learn, question and revisit one's beliefs, perspectives and values in dialogue with group members or stakeholders in the network.'

Unlike other collaborative initiatives, where spaces for deliberation, dialogue, and communication are often 'free' from institutionalized logic and procedures but risk remaining on the margins of political-institutional processes, in this case, the co-design process is guided by the Regulation on the Commons itself. This process provides a discursive space for all stakeholders to freely express their concerns, ideas, and views on the collaborative action. It constitutes 'the' place designed to favor reflexivity.

The biggest challenge in the collaborative process is overcoming differences by engaging in dialogue and negotiation to reach a common understanding of the general interest at stake. As Gray mentions (2004, p. 166): 'the way stakeholders' frames evolve throughout governance trajectories, and converge or align (or do not) into a joint interpretation is critical to understanding how collaborative processes in the urban realm evolve and whether they will eventually succeed or fail.'

The outcomes of the co-design phase may differ from what was initially anticipated. However, we can grasp its added value by embracing the process's adaptability and recognizing the collective knowledge produced as the primary achievement.

The co-design phase leads to a 'reflective practice' engaging all participants in continuous adaptation and mutual learning (Leitch & Day, 2000; Schön, 1983). Reciprocal reflexivity only occurs in processes of interaction among actors.

In the Regulation on the Commons context, both bureaucrats and communities experience relational reflexivity. The concept of 'reflexive communities-in-action' involves relational learning, thus learning through relationships, which is distinct from individual reflection (Schön, 1983) and institutional (only) learning because it involves citizens and public officers together. This process could potentially lead to the creation of 'new institutions.' When there is space for learning and reflexivity, it reaches the whole hybrid community that forms part of the collaboration pact. This benefit is the primary impact of this reflexive governance approach.

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3.4 RELATIONAL REFLEXIVITY AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL: A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE OF REFLECTIVE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATORS

Public administrations implementing the Regulation on the Commons through collaboration pacts are encountering various challenges, as they need to innovate traditional authoritative languages, tools, and procedures to develop more relational and dialogical approaches. These administrations are realizing the collaborative model's potential for transformative change. This structural change can impact established routines, the distribution of resources and power, and the reorganization of governance structures and public institutions. Addressing this transformation requires not only adapting norms but also updating skills within the administrative organization and acquiring relational capabilities.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the administration technicians usually sign the collaboration pacts. The idea is to transfer the vision behind the shared administration model from politicians to public administrators so that they can easily incorporate it into public administration. Through this process, the technicians involved can develop new inter-relational capacities to interact with social actors through dialogue and active listening (Sclavi, 2003), ultimately becoming reflective professionals (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Schön, 1983). Pacts are influencing the role of local governments in the way they involve technicians in this cultural shift. Reflexive governance requires self-critical public administrators to evaluate whether (and to what extent) these strategies achieve expected outcomes (Feindt & Weiland, 2018).

As researchers in action who have worked with numerous cities across Italy to implement the Regulation on Urban Commons, we conducted a paradigmatic case study that exemplifies relational reflexivity. This case study demonstrates the learning and exchange that takes place among public administrators from various municipalities involved in shared administration practices.

The *benicommunity* (from the Italian *beni comuni,* meaning 'common goods,' and the English word 'community') is a network of public administrators specifically from the Northwestern part of Italy, covering three regions: Piedmont, Liguria, and Valle d'Aosta. The *benicommunity* comprises over 40 municipalities, including ten 'large' municipalities, a third of municipalities ranging from 15,000 to 45,000 inhabitants, and a majority with fewer than 15,000 inhabitants. While some have adopted the Regulation six to eight years ago, others participate without having it as they are interested in the shared administration model.

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The *benicommunity* was established during the pandemic and has continued to grow online through regular meetings, each focusing on different issues. Every meeting delves into several topics, of which the following ones are the most recurrent: internal and external communication, organizational aspects, and impact assessment. Multiple perspectives are shared, engaging both politicians (municipal councilors and assessors) and technicians (executives and technical and administrative officials) in co-designing the agenda based on their needs and areas of interest.

It functions as a 'reflexive' community of practice (Wenger, 1998): 'a group of people who share an interest in something they do and learn to do it better while interacting regularly.' This community of practice is defined by three characteristics: first, a shared interest in a common subject (the shared administration model) that gathers and fascinates all its members; second, a continuous peer-to-peer learning model based on the sharing of good practices, tools, and problem-solving methods; and finally, an ultimate goal of mutual aid and collective improvement.

Introducing innovations in public administration can be challenging, and public officials often feel isolated and skeptical of the process. The *benicommunity* aims to acknowledge and address the emotions associated with the practical experience (from enthusiasm to frustration), fostering a sense of community among officials from various municipalities. We view it as a practical approach that encourages a reflexive and collaborative form of governance, aiming to generate an even more fertile environment for collaboration pacts to thrive and reach further.

Therefore, we understand 'reflexivity' as a normative-practical mode of governance that helps specialized organizations and public institutions to overcome their structurally embedded ignorance about the external effects of their operations (Feindt & Weiland, 2018), generating a process of institutional learning.

3.5 CONCLUSION AND OPEN QUESTIONS

Addressing complex societal challenges in the urban environment means confronting the different groups who form the urban socio-political system through intersubjective negotiation. All governance network theories (Edelenbos & van Meerkerk, 2016; Sørensen & Torfing, 2007; Vandenbussche et al., 2018) stress the importance of moving from traditional political control to more interactive governance, focusing on participation and negotiation as crucial elements to deal with complex networks.

The thesis presented in this chapter is that the Italian Regulation on the Commons and the collaboration pacts serve not only as a legal framework to support citizens' autonomous initiatives (thus promoting a bottom-up

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perspective of commons) but also as a new cooperative model of urban governance that fosters an environment of collaboration and reflexivity.

This argument is based on two branches of literature: first, the international studies offering a sociological interpretation of the role played by the so-called 'caring society' in the production and reproduction of commons (Ciaffi et al., 2020; Donolo, 2005, 2010; Gallent & Ciaffi, 2014; Mela, 2020); second, the legal studies drawing from the rules, laws, regulations, and administrative provisions related to the creativity of Italian jurisprudence (Arena, 1997; Giglioni, 2018).

The shared administration model is an urban governance model characterized by the reciprocal interdependence among stakeholders 'operating with private and shared interests, values and viewpoints' (Jessop, 1998). Urban actors implementing collaboration pacts are involved in dynamic and multilayered (social, spatial, and institutional) transformation processes. The clash and confrontation among 'multiple perspectives' (Alvesson et al., 2008; Holland, 1999) leads to reflexivity while helping resolve tensions among different viewpoints and reach a shared understanding (Alvesson et al., 2008).

At the practical level, the collaboration pact is governed 'by rules of the game negotiated and supported by the multitude of actors involved in the process' (Klijn et al., 2010). The stakeholders discuss and decide on the collective actions within the collaborative agreement, focusing on how they interact ('how we work together') and how to achieve common goals ('what really matters'). Reflexivity is a continuous process rather than a specific moment. The governance network constantly evolves, implying that the collective knowledge produced and the 'mutual adjustment' achieved are also transient, situational, and provisional.

Therefore, being set up as a continuous 'reflexive' dialogue (Healey, 1997) between citizens and institutions, we could say that the collaboration pacts seem to have been intentionally designed to promote reflexivity. In this context, the policy instrument serves as the input for reflexivity, with the legal framework legitimizing this mechanism as an administrative act based on the constitutional principle of horizontal subsidiarity.

Reflexivity is a learning process within public administrations which are called to develop rules, tools, routines, and norms innovations, drawing from the 'intelligence of democracy' (Lindblom, 1965). At the same time, reflexivity only occurs when citizens contribute to the general interest through active citizenship.

Furthermore, our thesis suggests that the 'shared administration of common goods' as a governance model has the potential not only to foster reflexivity but also to initiate the process of rebuilding trust between citizens and public institutions.

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Both hypotheses only represent a partial reality. Only some collaboration pacts effectively build personal relationships and ultimately create social capital and relational values such as reciprocity and trust (Innes & Booher, 2004). Reflexivity is highly context-specific, as it is embedded within the existing relational dynamics among the actors involved in the co-design process.

We have been asked to reflect on why this national laboratory of horizontal subsidiarity has thrived (Coriat et al., 2024). For example, are the collaboration pacts successful due to a general absence of the State in the daily life of inhabitants?[8] In general terms, we can say that in the 'shared administration of common goods' framework, the administration must always be involved. Every collaboration agreement includes the formal commitment of the local government, which provides a reassuring anchor in this type of alliance. This ensures the horizontality of the relationship, which is not only legal but also behavioral.

Many stories of failures could be told about co-design processes that did not result in reflection or collaborative agreement. By failures, we mean situations where dynamics changed in name only but not substantially: the language remained old and authoritative, relationships did not generate other relationships, power remained entrenched, and access to participation was blocked. Therefore, we have been encouraged to reflect on the failures of the shared administration of common goods.

The interactions among citizens, organizations, and institutions are unpredictable. The outcomes of the co-design phase may differ from what was expected. In this sense, the shared administration model is a mode of urban governance that cannot be fully controlled. However, if we view the collective knowledge produced as the main result achieved, we can appreciate its added value.

In Italy, collaboration pacts enable citizens to exercise the right 'to contribute' to social life, actively taking care of tangible and intangible common goods. Whether we believe that autonomous action is a suitable response to the representation crisis or that it is the duty of the State to take care of society, collaboration pacts demonstrate that we can regenerate democracy collectively by reshaping public institutions (or co-designing new institutions) in a participative manner.

NOTES

1. In Italy, historically, there has been high participation in elections; however, in the most recent political elections, which took place in September 2022, nearly 17 million Italians did not vote. Some citizens supported the delegation mechanism of representative democracy, voting for a powerful State that could bring order and leading to the most right-wing government since World War II. On

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the other hand, one-third of eligible voters considered it pointless to exercise their right to vote, as they no longer believe in the delegation.

2. 'A common good is a good that is recognized as such by the society itself. Moreover, it is recognized as an asset more than an economic resource. Common goods are shared goods with the peculiarity of founding the social bond itself. … From this perspective, commons are primarily recognized for their general function in social processes and for how they contribute directly or indirectly to the production of social order, social ties, conditions of well-being, and justice. In this sense, they hold each other as linked, intertwined, and interconnected goods, with the possibility of mutual help in certain cases' (Donolo, 2010).
3. Article 2: 'The Republic recognizes and guarantees the inviolable rights of the person, both as an individual and in the social groups where human personality is expressed. The Republic expects that the fundamental duties of political, economic, and social solidarity be fulfilled.' Article 3: 'All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. The Republic must remove those economic or social obstacles that constrain citizens' freedom and equality, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the country's political, economic, and social organization.'
4. Since 2004, these stories have been collected in the online magazine of the association Labsus – Laboratory of Subsidiarity (www.labsus.org). It has become a rich archive of examples of active citizenship in Italy, showing the practical ways in which citizens and public administration can cooperate to tackle urban problems and societal challenges.
5. According to a recent survey by Labsus, there are nearly 7000 collaboration pacts across Italy. Each year, Labsus publishes an annual report on the spread of the regulations and their implementation in Italy. The 2021 survey, based on a sample of 1000 collaboration pacts, provides interesting data about this national phenomenon. While the distribution of the Regulations on the Commons is widespread throughout Italy, it is primarily concentrated in the Northern and Central areas of the country, with an equal distribution among cities, towns, and villages (including those in more remote areas). In terms of the number of collaboration pacts, large cities such as Milan, Turin, Bologna, and Genoa have the highest number of collaboration agreements, indicating that urban communities are more equipped than others to engage in such contributive and sharing practices.
6. Source is '*Rapporto Labsus 2021*'.
7. In 2017, Turin was funded by the Urban Innovative Action program to implement a project called 'Co-City' about the collaborative management of urban commons to counteract poverty and socio-spatial polarization. A large part of this European funding was spent refurbishing public buildings.
8. Collaboration pacts are more commonly used in cities and regions that have a long-standing tradition of active participation than in areas with a less

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participatory culture. However, they have also been adopted in some cities and contexts where collaborative dynamics between public, private, and third-sector stakeholders are emerging for the first time.

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