



Article

A Model of Urban and Socio-Technical Participation: Between Deliberative Democracy and Strong Governance—The Case of the City of Messina

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Abstract: This paper deals with transformation processes in an area of Messina where post-earthquake (1908) slums still exist. Over the last few years, the area has undergone important changes, resulting in a new, rather complex neighborhood scenario, but one that has highlighted its importance as an example for the urban regeneration of the whole city. This essay focuses on the participatory processes adopted by an NGO to involve the residents and some of the more vulnerable occupants in a new model for socio-technical change regarding energy and eco-sustainability.

Keywords: participation; governance; energy transition; slums; Messina; Southern Italy



Citation: Musolino, M.; Viganò, F. A Model of Urban and Socio-Technical Participation: Between Deliberative Democracy and Strong Governance—The Case of the City of Messina. *Land* **2023**, *12*, 602. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land12030602>

Academic Editors: Luís Mendes, Anna Trono and Teresa Tapada-Berteli

Received: 31 January 2023

Revised: 1 March 2023

Accepted: 2 March 2023

Published: 3 March 2023



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1. Introduction

The following essay analyzes an urban transformation process in a marginalized area of the city of Messina (Southern Italy), focusing in particular on the participatory mechanisms used to involve the residents in a new model of neighborhood regeneration and socio-technical change. The urban regeneration process in this area is based on a model of welfare policies regarding vision and practice and strongly geared towards participation, as well as ecological and energy transition. These latter issues are interesting not only in relation to the current scientific debate, but also due to their growing importance within the public sphere in Italy. Indeed, it is important to remember that ecological and energy best practices and the adoption of new connected technologies are more effective the more socially acceptable they become [1,2], creating greater participation in choice-making [3] and policy-making processes [4]. The main objective of this contribution consists in analyzing the participation model adopted and implemented as part of these targeted actions in the context of an urban regeneration process.

On a general level, the theoretical framework used to support the analysis of the observed participatory practices is the constructivist approach associated with the relational STS [4,5]. Using this perspective, we analyze two closely related social dynamics within the urban regeneration process. The first is the participatory model adopted by the NGO (Fondazione di Comunità/Community Foundation of Messina) that carried out the regeneration process throughout the TSR[®] or Socially Responsible Territories research. This participatory method is the operational expression of the NGO's vision regarding participation aimed at involving citizens in the policy-making processes concerning their neighborhood. This vision takes inspiration from Amartya Sen's theory of capabilities [6–10], which aims to empower citizens, i.e., a sort of social pedagogy that should also ensure that the interventions receive a degree of social acceptance [11]. The second research object is represented by the collection of the residents' representations regarding the shortcomings and conditions within their territory, as well as the actions and changes that might lead to improvements. In this way, the social representations of those proposing the interventions for socio-urban regeneration are intertwined with the TSR[®] participatory research method, with the visions

of the same social actors considered as a community of residents. It follows that, in general terms, this meeting of narratives generates a third new social construction that results from the NGO's work of transforming the results of the empirical research into social and urban policies.

As mentioned above, regarding citizen involvement in ecological and energy choices [12,13], the analysis is based on the constructivist approach associated with the relational STS [4,5], strongly related to the theoretical actor–network theory (ANT) framework [14–17]. The first assumption from this constructivist relational ecology [4] is that there is a variety and diversity of forms of participation, which are co-produced in different articulations (social representations, political visions, procedural forms, value systems, discursive practices, etc.). In our case, the question is to understand how the supporting elements for the forms of participation in a series of urban, social, and environmental re-development actions are co-produced. Furthermore, the eco-sustainable nature of these interventions for the implementation of bio-architecture outcomes, as well as their tendency to apply new systems of energy production, consumption, and storage from renewables, draw attention to the relationship between the social actors and the technologies supporting the ecological and energy transitions—hence, the need to use the STS relational theory, which makes it possible to identify the construction of socio-technical systems starting from empirical analysis. From this perspective, what seems to be of great interest in this experimental case study is the intertwining between the highly innovative advances in the energy and technological fields and the experimentation of a mediation and educational accompaniment process in relation to both the wider population of the area and a more specific group of vulnerable people. Essentially, our analysis considers this emerging socio-technical configuration as an actor network, an attant [14,16], with its specific features and agency [18]. Faced with such experimentation, we wondered what kind of involvement or participation in choice-making for social and technical change was considered and implemented.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces the area of the case analyzed; Section 3 exposes the methodology adopted, the research action perspective, by the FdC; Section 4 presents the results, and Section 5 discusses the main results of the participation process. Section 6 concludes.

2. Urban Regeneration and Energy Transition in a Marginalized Area of Southern Italy: The Case Study of Messina

We analyze the case study concerning the process of social and urban regeneration in a highly marginalized area of the city of Messina, in Sicily in Southern Italy (Figure 1).

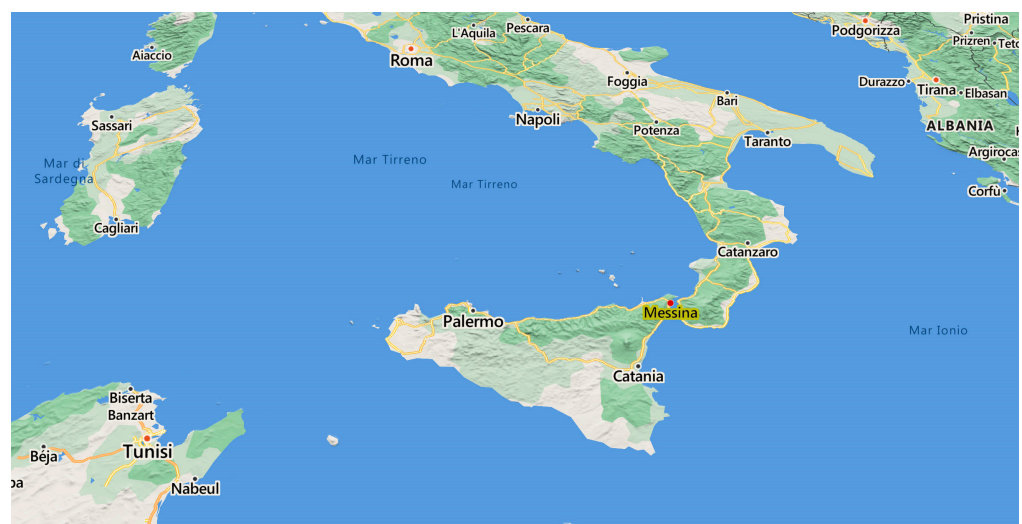


Figure 1. The city of Messina, in Sicily.

More precisely, it regards an area of shanties dating back to the post-earthquake period, which re-formed after the Second World War.

In 1908, Messina was razed to the ground by an earthquake, and the estimated number of deaths varied from 60,000 to 100,000 of a resident population of 180,000 inhabitants, while its building stock was almost destroyed. The systematic reconstruction process began only in 1932 under the fascist regime, but it was interrupted before completion by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. The shantytown, which is the object of our analysis, is one of the fourteen slum areas remaining in the city in a context of never-ending reconstruction [19], even though they were built as emergency housing after the destruction of the city in 1908. However, over the decades, the slums have also been the subject of speculation by the inhabitants themselves. Indeed, until around a decade ago, the mechanism of sub-renting or selling of shanties was still active. In these cases, it sometimes happened that those given access to public housing owned by the Municipality, following regular housing assignment based on official and recognized parameters, sold their shack after they had vacated it, or even rented it out. This kind of mechanism, which has led to the social reproduction of marginalized groups, has clearly resulted also from the context of very slow, complex, and ineffective urban and housing policies [20]. All the shanty areas in Messina are still characterized by strong spatial segregation, and often by very high material and socio-economic degradation and a greater concentration of subjects involved in deviance and crime at different levels (from the micro- to macro-scale of illegality). In the social perception of the city population as a whole, these slums represent the areas of greatest danger for personal safety, as well as the highest poverty levels, although some of them are located near central or residential districts. Indeed, from their origins and according to the rationale of the fascist reconstruction [21], they are not concentrated in a specific area of the city but spread out in different districts, resembling small “ghettos” (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2. A detail of the slums (2015).

The slum of Fondo Saccà is the marginal area of concern in the socio-urban interventions carried out by the FdC and the involvement of citizens based on the TSR[®] or Socially

Responsible Territories research method. This slum is close to the city center and many basic services (hospital, transport, schools, etc.) and is situated between entertainment and live music venues on the one hand, and shopping centers and supermarkets on the other [22].



Figure 3. An image of the shanties before the urban regeneration intervention (2015).

Until approximately 2021, 70 families lived there, while, as of today, 20 have received houses assigned by the Municipality and 49 families have been given access to help to purchase a house. Essentially, this slum area has, over time, been the subject of that process of marginalization that is the “product of the structuring of public space” [19,23] from the post-earthquake period up to now. At the same time, it is also the result of the process of building speculation and a lack of targeted public policies. The population of this slum, as well as those from the other thirteen marginal areas of the city, has been the subject of strong social [24,25] and territorial [26,27] stigma and its related “concentration effect” [28] for over a century. This process of stigmatization has contributed to making it a place of strong spatial segregation, even though it seems that the “ghetto” is quickly and quietly disappearing, giving way to the creation of many diverse interventions intended to redesign the architectural, landscape, and social features of the area.

Albeit paradoxical, we can say that there has been a sort of “commodification of the stigma” [29], which has the effect of nullifying it. In other words, the territorial stigma has been used to obtain large amounts of funding in order to regenerate the area from a social and material point of view. In particular, these are two operations, which are distinct but interconnected. The first intervention is a pilot project for social and ecological cohousing of an experimental nature, which has been under construction on two different lots since 2015. The second operation, named “Capacity”, which started in 2017, is a much broader and more articulated urban regeneration project in the suburbs, scaled up from the pilot intervention in that it is essentially a continuation, but on a larger scale. The conception and implementation of these two projects is specifically the work of the Messina Community Foundation (FdC). This NGO has a particular mission to develop a solidarity-based and social economy in favor of local communities, to increase social cohesion, and to implement

community welfare in order to raise the capabilities of vulnerable people, and collective actions in the fields of ecological and energy transitions [12,13,30]. On a practical level, these two projects try to reach these broader goals by involving civic society, local communities, and various networks of public and private actors coordinated by the FdC, as is discussed in greater detail later on.

First of all, since it is the main object of our analysis, it is important to consider the social and ecological cohousing project and its planning and implementation. We will focus on the participatory process concerning this pilot project because it allowed us to scale up the model of social and urban regeneration that it is based on so as to build up the Capacity project; this was possible thanks to the results achieved by the pilot project from the social, economic, and urban perspectives, explained in Section 4 (Results).

The social and ecological project consists of six finished apartments, with a further two still under construction. It is evident that this is a small project as far as dimensions are concerned, but this is justified by the fact that it is experimental and innovative. Indeed, the adjective “social” is used to describe the cohousing as it is a priority destination designed to welcome and support the individuals and families with various difficulties (socio-economic, psychological) who will live in the four apartments, towards housing autonomy. Two further apartments are already occupied by a Civic and Educational Center (CeCE), recently renamed as the socio-educational center “Il Melograno” (“The Pomegranate”), where the activities are intended for both infants and school-age children and therefore all families with children living in the neighborhood. Some of the activities provided by the socio-educational center also take place in the cohousing garden (called “Giardino delle Zagare”/“Orange Blossom Garden”), which was designed as a space to be shared with the wider local community. The final apartment is destined for an FdC service. In reality, an additional project will soon be implemented in order to increase the number of apartments and allocate them to people with different lifestyles and behaviors in relation to energy consumption. Consequently, this will allow the hybridization of the composition of cohousing members and, to some extent, will complement the profile of the envisaged energy community [12]. We can define an energy community as a group of citizens, local authorities, and/or businesses who share in the production and consumption of renewable energies from a participatory perspective and in practice (energy citizenship [12,31]). In fact, as far as the ecological connotation of the project is concerned, it should be emphasized that it derives from the application of bio-architectural materials and innovative energy systems. It is therefore already evident to what extent the innovative nature concerns both the social field, with medium–long-term targeted project interventions on the neighborhood population, and the technological aspects. These not only involve adopting energy production and consumption systems linked to the latest generation of photovoltaic systems, but also applying a storage system that will allow them to accumulate energy in order to make it available even in the absence of sunlight. The FdC conceived the general idea of this pilot project by developing a partnership with some important local, national, and internal partners. Each of them played a specific role according to its mission or skills: funding has come from banking foundations such as the CARIPO Foundation, Fondazione con il Sud (Foundation with the South), ENEL Foundation, and Caritas Foundation; the Municipality of Messina carried out the cleaning of the slums and the relocation of the inhabitants for this small area; the Housing Agency (formerly, former IACP), having specific competences and powers regarding the urban area concerned, allowed the intervention; Solidarity & Energy E.S.Co. (a spin-off of the FdC) has elaborated and is implementing the model of a solidarity-based energy community from the technical, organizational, and economic points of view; the CNR ITAE (the Advanced Energy Technology Institute “Nicola Giordano” of the National Research Council) carried out the technological research focused on the energy storage and mutualization; the Engineering Department of the University of Messina has been involved concerning the elaboration of domotics systems; and the National Institute of Bioarchitecture collaborated with the foundation’s architects on the design of the thermal insulation materials of the social cohousing.

Another, perhaps more crucial, element of socio-technical innovation in this experimentation is a “social algorithm”, a mathematical model that allows the redistribution of energy costs among cohousers/consumers [32]. The main principle of this algorithm concerns its regulation, which depends not only on the amount of energy consumption per user but also on the social and health characteristics of each member. For instance, if one of the EC members needs to consume more energy than the others in operating machinery (i.e., life support machinery), the rationale of the social algorithm will not require payment that corresponds to the amount of energy consumed, but this will be partly redistributed among all members according to their possibilities.

This kind of regulation will be possible thanks to an internal pact among the inhabitants of the social cohousing, which is being formulated with them by the FdC social workers and educators in order to strengthen internal cohesion, awareness, and participation in the decision-making process regarding the rules and principles that the sharing practices are based on. This difficult but necessary process, therefore, will help to outline the profile of a real energy community [33,34].

The houses were built back in 2016 (Figure 4), following the complete removal of the shacks that occupied the redevelopment area. Today, three flats are inhabited by three single people in a socially fragile condition, while two other flats house the activities of the socio-educational center (Figure 5), which works with local families in close synergy with a number of institutions in the area—in particular, the school and the parish. The planned energy community is being implemented (the photovoltaic panels and storage system have been installed, and the by-laws regulating it have been drawn up) and is a case of great interest to experts in the energy field [12,13].



Figure 4. A view of the current status of the ecological and social housing in Fondo Saccà (2023).

Secondly, we analyzed an initial participatory phase of the regeneration project named “Capacity”: it concerns a wider area of intervention, was conducted between 2017 and 2020, and was funded by the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers (the total amount of funding is EUR 18,000). This project consists of a set of interlinked actions in the fields of housing, labor, sociality, and knowledge in two marginal areas of Messina, including the entire Fondo Saccà slum, while the second one is named “Fondo Fucile”. The lead partner of the Capacity project was the Municipality of Messina, which embraced the Community Foundation’s strategic vision of intervention, which served as the rationale for the urban and social regeneration actions implemented by the entire project. The partnership put in place in this project was even greater than the pilot project and included a consortium of cooperatives for social work, the ASP (Provincial Sanitary Department) of Messina, the Municipality, the university, and the stakeholders of the territory (schools, associations, parish).



Figure 5. A detail of the interior of the socio-educational center (2023).

3. Materials and Methods

The methodological approach used to collect data and information from the research field is strongly connected to the action research perspective [35], in accordance with the rationale of the TSR[®] method of participatory research. Indeed, the FdC asked the Department of Human and Social Sciences of the University of Messina to appoint a researcher to lead the TSR[®] process in the Fondo Saccà area, in order to analyze the principles/desires of the resident population of the area in which the slum fell. This research, based on participatory methods, would have allowed the FdC to redesign its planned project idea for the area to be redeveloped according to the results of the TSR[®] itself. One of the authors was thus able to co-ordinate a group of five surveyors according to the above-mentioned method, contributing to the mapping of the principles/desires that would guide the NGO's intervention policies, but also becoming active agents of change in the process as mediators of the research results. Indeed, the findings of the empirical research inspired some of the choices that helped to shape and transform the initial idea of the project. More precisely, this result was achieved through the participation process activated between 2014 and 2016. In relation to this, the first point that we focused on was the enrolment of the actors [4,5,17]. In this case, enrolment was carried out by way of a social survey involving the wider population in the territory where the slum is located. This practice of citizen involvement can be considered as a version of the deliberative participation model. In fact, the survey method followed was the one normally used and patented by the Fondazione di Comunità (FdC): the TSR[®] or Socially Responsible Territories research. The objective of this method of investigation consists in mapping the principles/desires of the population inhabiting the concerned area to understand what their social and material priorities are and how they want to change the physiognomy of the territory [36]. Then, the results obtained and elaborated from the TSR[®] research become the main components for redefining and re-planning the interventions to be carried out. The TSR[®] method, as it was conceived, is divided into four phases: (1) context analysis; (2) elaboration and decoding of principles/desires; (3) measurement of the current situation and the impact of possible alternative scenarios; (4) policy, planning, and reprogramming [36]. The main protagonists

of the TSR[®] method are the “communities of inhabitants” through which the intervention or policy can be developed in relation to its specific context. Our social research in the selected area focused on the first two phases of the TSR[®] and began with a socio-demographic analysis of the area (Figure 6) based on the 2011 Istat¹ census data. Based on this statistical overview, we conducted the survey on a sample of inhabitants (437 residents out of 8000, a group composed of 110 people between the ages of 8 and 14 years, and 326 between 15 and 85) from a research action perspective. This methodological choice was motivated by the idea that research action was the most consistent approach for our survey, as it involves participation as well as the most useful perspective for collecting data and information about the inhabitants in the area, helping to build trusting relationships with the main actors involved in the process.

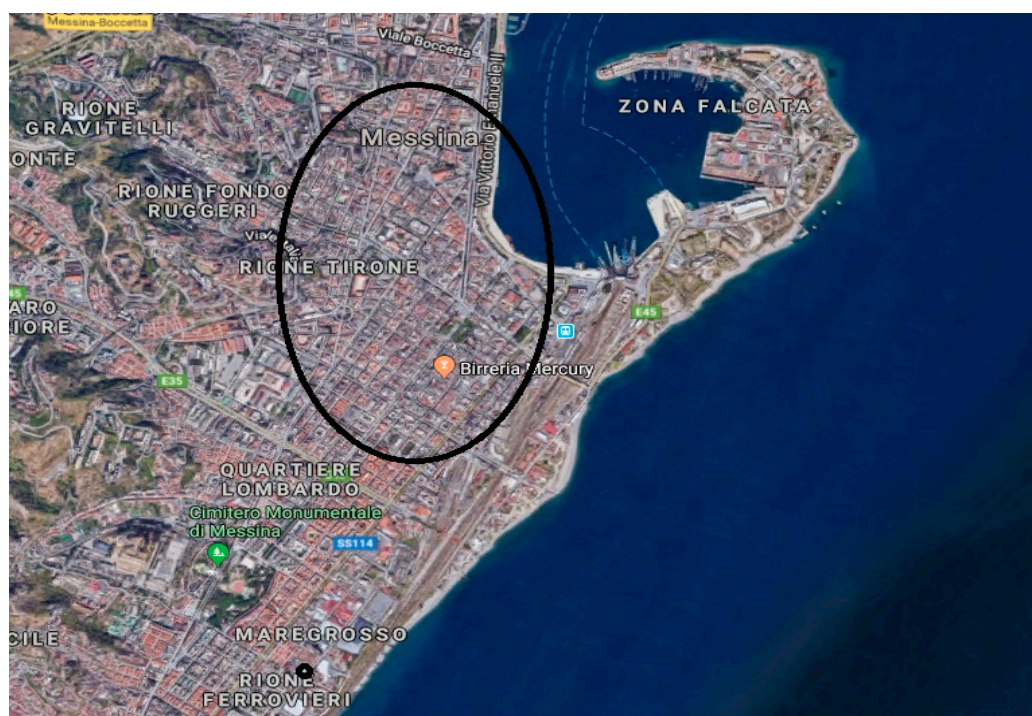


Figure 6. The map shows the area of the city of Messina considered in the TSR[®] research (2014–2016).

In accordance with the methodological approach and the aims of the TSR[®], as well as with the broad range of the sample, a variety of survey techniques were used, such as semi-open interviews, cognitive maps [37], and laboratory-type interventions in local schools and in the neighborhood parish; socio-ethnographic observation; and QGis (Quantum Gis) mapping of spatial perception. The use of this variety of tools is founded on the TSR[®] method rationale, which requires the collection and analysis of information about the wishes of a wide range of inhabitants and their related social representations. The purpose of the survey was to reconstruct a profile of daily life in the neighborhood that was as broad as possible, addressing all population groups (by age, gender, socio-economic conditions, education levels, etc.). To achieve this objective, it was therefore essential to use different tools that were suitable for the different types of subjects involved. The surveys were accompanied and completed by an ethnographic diary, which provided the opportunity to counter-test some of the information collected, as well as to enrich the overall knowledge about the socio-spatial dynamics of the context. This first phase of research essentially permitted the reconstruction of a wide-scale but detailed social and spatial profile of the dynamics and tensions that characterize the wider neighborhood where the slum is located, as well as the complex relationship between the consumer and resident populations.

Within this general framework, we decided to focus the second phase of the research (7 months between 2017 and 2018) on the analysis of the reactions and the adaptation

process of the Fondo Saccà residents in relation to the launch of a large urban regeneration project, named “Capacity”. In this phase, we mainly used the ethnographic observation approach to focus on the process of social mediation, which was so crucial to the success of the project. More specifically, observations were carried out on some of the important steps in this second intervention, again led by social mediators and workers: various interlocutory and propositional meetings with the local school (with some of the teachers and the principal); street parties in the slums for the children and their families; and meetings at the residents’ homes to present the project proposals on the housing issues. The perspective of observation was also useful to highlight the participatory dynamics involving the inhabitants and the creation of alliances with the practitioners.

This second phase is more focused on the participation of citizens in housing emergencies, i.e., only slum dwellers, in order to allow them a choice to emancipate themselves in terms of housing. Our analysis is still related to the participatory model promoted by the NGO, but more restricted to the way in which the slum dwellers were able to influence certain choices related to the process of getting out of housing poverty. In all cases, this second phase of the research, as well as the Capacity project, was possible thanks also to the results achieved through the TSR[®] process, which remains the focus of our analysis as the participatory model of the FdC.

4. Results

In the context outlined in the previous sections and the action research conducted, we try to test the analytical model represented by the relational STS, applying the main steps to a particular case study involving a complexity of actors, and consequently the networks created between them, and a variety of levels in relation to the alliance between (humans) actors and technologies (non-human actors).

The analytical model mentioned above is based on three main assumptions, corresponding to three dimensions that are always present in every form of participation: the subjects (participants/public: “who”); the objects (the questions: “what”); and participation or procedural models (or political philosophies: “how”) [5]. These elements or dimensions are co-produced through the implementation of forms of participation: “The who (public), what (issues), and how (procedural formats) of participation do not externally exist in a natural state but are actively constructed through the performance of collective participatory practices” [5] and “through the assembling of particular material settings, knowledge, devices, meanings, and configurations of human and non-human actors that make up collective participatory practice” [4]. In particular, the approach has explored two central aspects in relation to participatory processes related to the energy transition: “enrolment” and “mediation”. The first concerns the way in which recruitment is organized: “Enrollment refers to the way in which different (human and non-human) actors are drawn into a particular form of participatory collective practice and definition of the issue at stake” [5,17]. Mediation refers to the forms or technologies that mediate the relationships between the actors: “Mediation refers to the way in which a participatory collective is held together by different devices, processes, skills, or ‘technologies of participation’” [5,12,31]. As regards our case study, we focus on the first step (enrolment) to highlight the process of building the actor network through the attribution of different roles to the different actors, but we analyze the strategies for involving a wider population, as well as more fragile people, in the process of socio-technical changes. In this sense, we can talk about “mediation”, which is currently closer to social rather than technical dimensions [8,10].

These regulatory principles of the theoretical–methodological perspective make it possible to consider a multiplicity of forms of participation, as they are concretely realized in social and political practices. However, the authors of the relational STS [5] mainly identify four major strands of participatory models of collective actions, which can be found in the literature: 1—the theory of deliberative democracy of Habermasian inspiration; 2—the practical theory (“social practice theory”); 3—the theory of political movements; 4—the theory of bottom-up innovation (“grassroots innovation”). The theory of deliberative

democracy [38,39] identifies the public sphere as the place dedicated to the decision and discussion of issues relevant to the community, which citizens can access and thus deliberate directly on the issues at hand, especially by elaborating discursive practices [11]. From this, the vision of the “deliberative citizen” is built. Social practice theory, specific to the sociology of consumption, investigates those consumption practices that make it possible to reproduce certain economic, energy systems, etc., creating a vision of the consumer in terms of an active and politically influential subject (for example, “political consumerism” [40]). The theory of political movements, in turn, deals with the phenomena of participation in terms of collective organizations that can perform different direct functions: denouncement, political or awareness-raising campaigns, activities or protest events, training, etc. [41]. Finally, the grassroots innovation theory focuses on those groups in civil society that, according to formal or informal modalities, actively implement innovations on the technological, social, organizational, economic, and other scales, to influence the processes of change, above all those concerning environmental, energy and lifestyle issues [42]. These strands of participatory models are the main examples considered by the relational STS to map a wide range of means of participation in the socio-technical field. In addition to these four models, we analyzed the capabilities approach linked to our case study and the vision of participatory democracy followed by the FdC as a further important example of the idea and practice of participation in the socio-technical sphere [10,43]. Indeed, the possibility provided by the relational STS approach of understanding participation in such a broad range allows us to analyze a very particular case study, which also sets itself the short-term goal of its replication on a wider territorial scale. This makes it even more interesting, precisely because it becomes an innovative model for the urban redevelopment of marginalized contexts through participatory processes, with a strong orientation towards ecological and energy transition.

In the next section, we will discuss the TSR process, especially concerning the model of factual participatory practice deriving from this process and the enrolment and mediation phases of human and non-human actants, according to the relational STS.

The enrolment process took place in different uneven phases, as is often highlighted by the actor–network theory [17] and further taken over by the relational STS. The actors called on to create the network and to cooperate with the other allies negotiated their role over the course of time and according to the progress of the actions carried out, initially through the TSR[®] process and then through the work of social mediators. By using semi-structured interviews, the researchers conducting the first phase of the research addressed the residents as the first interface for the social and ecological cohousing project. In this phase, therefore, the construction of an alliance with the neighborhood population was structured around attributing them the role of co-builders of the project for urban and ecological regeneration. In other words, the residents were invited to play the role of promoting certain perspectives and priorities for their area, also regarding sustainable technologies, as shown in Table 1. These non-human actors were thus introduced into the process of negotiating the roles and connected meanings as useful tools for socio-urban redevelopment and to help increase citizens’ well-being. As Table 1 shows in greater detail, this topic is strongly linked to the social cohousing project and underlines the real possibility of this kind of implementation within the neighborhood to monitor any possible reactions to it.

As far as mediation [5] was concerned, the process involved a set of interview/survey techniques that traced the polarity of exclusion/inclusion. Indeed, on the one hand, mediation only managed to intercept some of the inhabitants, although a reputational sampling method for areas was adopted, which was relatively representative. On the other hand, it also has an inclusive capacity in terms of social diversity, since these survey techniques allow for the involvement of a wide range of inhabitants, as mentioned above. The survey aimed to collect the wishes or principles for the community of residents who simply described or explained their opinions. We show the full results of this survey in Table 2.

Table 1. List of TSR[®] topics.

Topics	Description
Biographical elements	Age, gender, job, level of education, length of residence in the neighborhood, nationality.
Relationship with public space	What do you mean by public space (street, square, courtyard, etc.)? Is it just about open spaces? How is the presence of the public institution perceived through the space? Do you feel safe? Why?
Relationship with private or inhabited space	How do you experience your home dimension? Have you adopted safety/security systems? If you could, would you live somewhere else? Why?
Neighborhood relationships	What do you mean by neighbor (those living in your condominium, in the neighboring buildings or in the area)? What is the neighborhood boundary? How do neighborly relations develop? Is there a network of reciprocal help and what does it concern (e.g., looking after children, shopping, sharing spaces, etc.)? Has the size of the neighborhood changed over time? If so, how and why?
Most frequented places	Which places are most frequented in the neighborhood on a daily basis?
Relationship with institutions	Things lacking within the territory: What this territory lacks, in terms of services, social possibilities, landscape value, safety etc. Resources within the territory: What are the positive or useful things available in this area (activities, sea, people, associations, etc.)? How could they be developed to improve the way people live? Trust: in the possibility of change; in the agents (institutional and otherwise) of change.
Perception of and relationships with migrant people	Perception of the presence of foreign people (numbers, practices in the area, way of life, level of integration). Vice versa: perception of the indigenous inhabitants, level and types of relationship with them.
Care and beauty of territory	What does the neighborhood look like: is it beautiful, well-kept, accessible, welcoming? Why? Is it important that the territory is beautiful, both in public spaces and in relation to private homes? Sustainable planning needs.
Perception of and interest in social cohousing project	Is it suitable to build with materials such as wood? Is it interesting and useful to learn how to manage consumption in order to reduce it from a spending point of view? Is it useful to think about the impact these have on the environment? Is it useful to have spaces to manage in a shared and autonomous way (i.e., common gardens)? Who would invest the time to take care of a garden, children's spaces, craft workshops, etc.? Perceived coherence between the project and the current living and housing dimensions.

Table 2. List of principle/wishes of the community of residents.

Principle/Wish	%
Care of the territory	86.3
Socialization (places for)	54.5
Safety	44.5
Efficiency of public services	36.4
Social justice	12.8
Beauty of the landscape	12.8
Systemic urban vision	5

To provide a summary of the key findings that will be discussed in the following paragraph, we recall that the study tested an analytical model based on three dimensions—subjects, objects, and participation/procedural models—which are co-produced through collective participatory practices. Two key aspects of participatory processes—enrolment and mediation—were explored in relation to the energy transition. The enrolment process of the case study involved negotiating the roles of the different actors over time and through the TSR[®] process and social mediators. The neighborhood residents were given the role of co-builders in the project for urban and ecological regeneration, which aimed to create an innovative model for the urban redevelopment of marginalized contexts through participatory processes with a focus on ecological and energy transition.

Our analysis specifically focuses on the dynamics of the participation process, which will be discussed in the next section.

5. Discussion

Most of the results from this research were expected, in that they are consistent with the main features relative to the community of residents previously analyzed. Indeed, the first wish/principle to become clear is related to “care of the territory”, which concerns basic public maintenance, such as the cleanliness of the streets and local park, the maintenance of public lighting, etc. We might consider the most unexpected result to be the second principle, “socialization”, which is related to the need for increasing the number of places where people can socialize, especially children, teenagers, and older people. Moreover, if we connect this result to the third principle, “safety”, we can better understand that the desire for socialization in places created for this very purpose is also related to the perception of safety. In other words, if the residents can meet in specific places, which are clean and well-maintained, this is a guarantee for increasing their safety, or at least their perception of it. The other principles evidenced by the research show that the beauty of the landscape and social justice are less important, not because the respondents do not perceive their value, but rather because they consider them as secondary to other basic priorities. As far as low-impact and renewable technologies are concerned, the sample of respondents is divided between those who think that these kinds of technology can improve their area and create added value—not only to the buildings, but also to the neighborhood—and the perception of its quality as a living space. On a general level, we can draw a sort of common representation of the selected area focused on the wishes that we have called “basic principles for the care and maintenance of the territory”. This collective representation is consistent with the neglect present in this area, but it is also open to the possibility of introducing some relevant technological and environmental innovations, especially if they integrate with the social ones to increase the overall livability. Regarding the focus of our contribution, this representation has been used as the main criterion for revising the plan for interventions by the Messina FdC. Consequently, we can consider the type of citizen who is co-constructed by this form of participation as a “deliberative citizen”, with broad and diverse characteristics, as inhabitants of the neighborhood or area, both in the residential sense of the term and in relation to their constant presence as a daily or habitual visitor (for work, for the use of public spaces, services, etc.). The issue considered in this initial research and elaborated by the researchers and the FdC is the redevelopment of a marginal area and its contiguous territory with a view to ecological and energy transition. The NGO that was responsible for the involvement of the local citizens (the wider population of the area) also included another type of involvement, which was more specifically brought into play depending on the particular target represented by the future inhabitants of the social cohousing. The resulting vision oscillates between two poles: one is linked to the socio-economic and cultural factors that characterize the population; the other is represented by a strong centrality attributed to technological and management factors. These two poles are interconnected, as the political–social dimension of the vision is conceived and used in the practice of participation as a constraint to be taken into consideration due to the fact that the intervention is to be introduced into this reality. Moreover, it is deemed the independent variable that indicates how the inhabitants themselves can intervene in an effective and considered way.

For its part, the technological (energy) innovation dimension has an educational role for the population, who are called on to commit themselves on the basis of the approach adopted by the FdC—that is, according to the capabilities theory approach [6–10]. From this perspective, technological, and, more specifically, energy poverty, is an important obstacle to human activities [44]. In other words, energy is a mandatory condition to achieving certain crucial functions, such as good health, learning, or having a job, etc. [30,45]. Consequently, this vision requires that knowledge of new technologies regarding ecological and energy transition should be passed on and be consciously and actively used by citizens [12,13,32]. In fact, the cohousing, which has already been built but is as yet uninhabited, will begin the experimental use of three different technologies. The first relates to the bio-architecture materials used for the construction of the six residential units, which have a specific function

of thermal inertia. This technology has clearly already been applied to the construction of the apartments. The second technology is linked to energy saving and involves the installation of photovoltaic panels, but also a system for storing unused energy produced by the plant. The distribution of costs will also be largely entrusted to a “social algorithm”, which considers not only the income availability of cohousing members but also their ability to use and understand the technology. To achieve this goal, a participation pathway for the more vulnerable residents will be launched, in order to define the rules for programming the social algorithm [32]. Finally, a mechanism for the recovery and recycling of gray water will be applied for the irrigation of the garden and urban vegetable gardens, and to set up neighborhood workshops with children, in line with what has been devised regarding the presence of the CeCE (socio-educational center “Il Melograno”).

As a whole, therefore, the cohousing, which is designed and intended for people with social and psychiatric vulnerabilities, presents new characteristics for innovation that intertwine social needs with environmental needs to create a very interesting blend. In fact, a circular movement emerges between the social/population dimension and the technological and innovative dimension. This allows us to add another characteristic to the profile of the deliberative citizen already presented: he is a citizen who must take action so as to become more informed and aware [5,43], but also to become more autonomous as regards the practical use of technological innovations and the adoption of consumption behaviors that have an ecological impact. In this respect, since many cohousing projects and energy communities are set up by exclusive groups, one of most interesting features of this project/process is related to the vulnerable people taking part. They will have to adapt and even improve their capabilities in relation to this kind of technology, taking part in the enrolment phase [8–10].

From this point of view, the participation process entrusts the citizen with the role of the consumer, and therefore his deliberative profile is hybridized with that of the citizen/consumer. On this front, greater considerations and more effective observation in the field can be made once the photovoltaic system has been built and put into operation with the associated systems for the accumulation and distribution of internal costs. At present, however, what can be seen is that the design of this specific technology is destined for a momentarily specific and limited target: a small number of individuals and families who present conditions of difficulty from a socio-economic and psychological point of view. Consequently, these people will be accompanied by experts such as educators and social workers in order to help them to understand and learn how to use the technology more consciously.

From an analytical perspective, it will certainly be very interesting to verify whether and how the participation relationship mediated by the technological devices [46] used by residents will change over time and will progressively take place with greater awareness and autonomy, considering that the accompaniment of these people will be maintained and calibrated according to their situation and responsiveness. This dimension is of great interest because, normally, the most advanced energy technologies, and also cohousing projects, are more accessible to medium–high population groups, who, with higher economic and cultural capital, together with strong ecological and environmental sensitivity, are more inclined to invest money for the purchase of renewable energy technologies, and also to invest time in increasing their knowledge of these issues and areas [31,32].

The Messina case study, on the other hand, is a valuable experiment in economic and social sustainability since it is aimed at a more marginal type of citizen, one who would not normally have access to these types of energy systems due to their socio-economic condition. This condition mainly forces them to satisfy their primary needs, avoiding other kind of interests (environmental, intellectual, social engagement, etc.) and hindering their development of an awareness oriented towards ecological and economic sustainability. On the other hand, the fact that it is difficult to relate to these technologies does not necessarily help us to change our behavior regarding energy consumption, although this is not an automatic or certain consequence for everyone to the same degree. Rather, these

differences increase the technological and cultural gap between the various segments of the population in this area. Moreover, in this case, the vulnerable residents can take part in the enrolment phase, making decisions to help negotiate their own role as well as the role of the technologies, with the aim of cooperating with them.

The type of participation established for the social cohousing project has been taken up on a larger scale in the “Capacity” project, which was primarily intended to complete the clearance of Fondo Saccà and provide housing emancipation for its residents. This intervention, as mentioned in Section 2, was conducted between 2017 and 2018, although the whole project ended in 2020. The research focused on citizens’ engagement in the housing emancipation project, supporting them to increase their awareness about the possibility of actively participating in the decision-making process on housing.

It is certainly worth underlining how the continuity of this approach has resulted in social mediation work with the residents, which has helped them to achieve greater housing autonomy. The social research developed by the authors focuses on the analysis and monitoring of processes activated by social mediators with the inhabitants of the slum and the wider neighborhood. In fact, it was found that social workers and mediators managed to build a support role with the families living in the area, to help them in fundamental choice-making, using some of the options previously developed in the project. More specifically, the Capacity project envisaged a form of housing emancipation that evolved from becoming more aware of economic and social responsibility, and to the possibility of choosing between three options presented to the beneficiary families, who were helped at all times to evaluate and then make a final choice. The first option was to buy a house with the “Capacity capital”; a second option was the assignment of a house by the Municipality; the third was the assignment of a house in a small condominium to be built in place of the slum [47]. It is possible to see, therefore, the deliberative logic in involving citizens in the decision-making process, but also the attention to a segment of the population that is normally excluded from most choices in relation to regeneration processes.

6. Conclusions

The model of intervention analyzed here has specific and almost unique characteristics as far as the implementation of social and technological innovations in favor of more vulnerable subjects is concerned. These subjects were involved and supported in the choices they needed to make, from the perspective of capability, based on Sen’s theory [8,11,43], which the Messina FdC indicates as being its philosophy of reference. In fact, the FdC asserts that it is inspired by the theory of capabilities elaborated by Amartya Sen [6,7] and the participatory methods theorized and experimented by Danilo Dolci [48]. Both in various texts published by the same foundation [36,49] and during press conferences, project presentations, public seminars, etc., the exponents of the foundation—in particular, the secretary—highlighted that their welfare vision and policy is based on a non-economic concept (in opposition to the *homo oeconomicus*) of the human being. Its human paradigm is based on those structures that Sen defines as functionings and on which the enabling action of welfare conducted by the same FdC can activate mechanisms of progression and development. However, such a complex and ambitious process, as well as operating on different levels (social, economic, cultural, environmental, energy, construction, etc.), entails the equally complex elaboration and management of the activities and skills involved. Indeed, the complexity of the intervention as a whole required very strong governance. In other words, the coordination and management of the activities to be accomplished and the actors involved were directed by the centralized leadership of the FdC.

As pointed out in Section 2, the partnership networks put in place were numerous and diverse, and they were effective under careful coordination action carried out over time. In fact, both projects are built around a very wide and diversified network of subjects and collaborations, composed of actors called on to perform specific functions or to play different roles. For example, the construction of the social cohousing was carried out thanks to a network of private investors who financed the project: the Messina FdC, but also

the Foundation with the South (Fondazione con il Sud) and the Cariplo Foundation (a banking foundation based in Lombardy), as well as the Enel Foundation for the energy component. Moreover, a research group from the University of Messina was involved in conducting the TSR[®] research. For the elaboration and implementation of technological innovations, the FdC has built a partnership that affects both public and private entities: again, the University of Messina but also the CNR ITAE (for energy storage and cost mutualization systems) and Solidarity & Energy—ESCO, which is a spin-off of the FdC and the sole legal entity for the energy of the cohousing. Coordination with the Municipality of Messina and the Housing Agency (formerly IACP), which have specific competences and powers regarding the urban area concerned, should also not be overlooked. If, then, the complexity of this partnership extends to the larger Capacity project, the further increase in the volume of the number of actors involved (consortium of cooperatives for social work, ASP, Municipality, university, stakeholders of the territory) makes it possible to understand how the management of such a wide network of actors working in different fields, and therefore bearers of specific skills and purposes, requires a decisive orientation and centralized governance. This experimental model, still under development, suggests that in the face of complex social and environmental challenges, unprecedented forms of participation can be put in place, which move along the inclusion/exclusion polarity according to non-trivial and, above all, dichotomous strategies.

Even if the analysis proposed is not an evaluation exercise of public policies, it is worthy to highlight some important goals resulting from the implementation of these two regeneration projects based on the specific participatory model. Indeed, the Fondo Saccà slum, as well as the other slum considered by the Capacity project, have been entirely cleaned and the populations who inhabited these marginal areas (corresponding to 205 families) have been relocated into municipality-owned houses or have been able purchase a house through one of the economic participatory mechanisms put in place by the Capacity project (the “capability capital”).

More specifically, the Fondo Saccà area is currently occupied by the houses of the ecological and social housing inhabited by three vulnerable target groups, supported in their social and housing integration path by the social workers of the FdC. Two apartments, as already mentioned, are devoted to the activities of the socio-educational center “Il Melograno”, which continues its task of presiding over and accompanying the most fragile children and families, although many of the families that used to live in the slum have moved to other parts of the city, according to their wishes and needs. Alongside the socio-educational center, an important project is being developed, that of a Park of Beauty and Science (PBS), which intends to consolidate the community participation process initiated with the TSR[®] process in 2014. The PBS of Fondo Saccà will be focused on the development of environmental issues and practices strongly connected with the emergence of the energy community built up among the inhabitants of the ecological and social cohousing, but also with the public usage of the garden and reuse of rainwater to irrigate plants in the same Orange Blossom Garden/Giardino delle Zagare.

A final consideration on the participatory process built up during the last nine years in this marginal area leads to the following fundamental achievement: this participatory model, based on the capabilities approach hybridized with the vision of consumers/citizens and the deliberative citizen model, undoubtedly achieved some important goals in terms of the actual participation in the decision-making process related to the guiding principles of intervention policies and also in the choices related to emancipation from the housing emergency. Nevertheless, this participatory model must be continuously consolidated and supported by solid action promoting social cohesion among the different and fragmented populations of this area.

Furthermore, the study presented shows how urban redevelopment actions today can be used at very different levels and fields of intervention, even when the recipients and co-builders of the interventions themselves are very disadvantaged sections of the population. This framework therefore suggests, overall, the need for a new vision of research, which

takes on more and more complex interpretative categories that are adequate for the new forms of social action. In this regard, it seems to us that the interpretative key of relational STS [4,5] can be used in these cases in a convincing way due to its flexibility as a function of the understanding of phenomena in which social processes of a participatory nature develop in relation to processes for introducing technological and energy innovations, which have a great impact on people's daily lives and which potentially significantly influence their value heritage and consumption styles. In fact, their perspective of analysis leads us to consider the possibility that in cases such as the one considered, we are already projecting towards a new, albeit experimental, socio-technical system. It is not only a modification of behaviors oriented towards energy saving—so as to economize—or for a sort of ethical value satisfaction. In fact, the well-established strategies of the Messina FdC, regarding the way in which it intervenes within the territory, focus here on the use of technological innovations connected to a micro social ecosystem (cohousing) through a constrained participatory scheme: it has a set of pre-established rules, but without predetermining the outcomes. However, the ecology of transition approach does not allow a more detailed analysis of the processes of building alliances between humans and non-humans and their critical but crucial way of cooperating. For this kind of analysis, the use of the ANT, especially according to the phases established by Callon [17], is still more appropriate to highlight the emergence of a network, its specific features or shape, and the spokes—actors (the Messina FdC)—which makes it possible to successfully mobilize the whole actor network.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.M. and F.V.; methodology, M.M.; investigation, resources, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, M.M.; writing—review and editing, F.V.; supervision, F.V. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The APC was funded by the Open Access Publishing Fund of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica/National Institute of Statistics) is the main national Institute for collecting statistical data in Italy.

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