

# Commoning Beyond the Crisis: Urban Civic Uses and the Democratization of the Urban Transformation and the Ecological Transition

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## Abstract

The austerity policies imposed in Southern Europe have weakened welfare systems and exacerbated the crisis of social reproduction. In response, since 2011, commoning movements have spread, creating autonomous care infrastructures and regenerating abandoned urban areas. Policies such as Next Generation EU and the European Green Deal have ushered in a phase of public investment aimed at ecological transition and economic recovery, allocating significant resources to Southern European countries. However, these policies remain constrained by neoliberal logic, with conditionalities that risk limiting their transformative impact. Our article analyzes three case studies in Naples, where urban commons – Lido Pola, Ex OPG – Je so' pazzo, and Scugnizzo Liberato – are engaged in participatory design processes for urban regeneration policies. We demonstrate how commoning movements can democratize the management of public investments, fostering more inclusive urban environments and advancing environmental justice claims from deprived and contaminated territories. Nevertheless, tensions arise between the top-down governance of new European investments and demands for democratic management of resources.

Le politiche austere imposte nel Sud Europa hanno indebolito i sistemi di welfare e aggravato la crisi della riproduzione sociale. In risposta, dal 2011 si sono diffusi movimenti di *commoning*, che hanno creato infrastrutture autonome di cura e rigenerato aree urbane abbandonate. Politiche come Next Generation EU e il Green Deal Europeo hanno inaugurato una fase di investimenti pubblici per la transizione ecologica e la ripresa economica, riservando risorse significative ai paesi del Sud Europa. Tuttavia, tali politiche rimangono vincolate da logiche neoliberali, con condizionalità che rischiano di limitare il loro impatto trasformativo. L'articolo analizza tre casi studio a Napoli, in cui dei beni comuni urbani – il Lido Pola, l'Ex OPG – Je so' pazzo e lo Scugnizzo Liberato – sono protagonisti di processi di design partecipato nell'ambito di politiche di rigenerazione urbana. Mostriamo come i movimenti di commoning possano rendere più democratica la gestione degli investimenti pubblici, favorendo la creazione di ambienti urbani più solidali e le istanze di giustizia ambientale che emergono da territori deprivati e inquinati. Tuttavia, emergono tensioni tra la governance top-down dei nuovi investimenti europei e le richieste di gestione democratica delle risorse.

<sup>1</sup> The work is the result of research shared by the authors, listed here in alphabetical order. However, paragraphs 1, 2, 3.2, 4.1, 5.2 can be attributed to Roberto Sciarelli and 3.1, 4.2, 5.1, 5.3, 6 to Maria Francesca De Tullio.



**Keywords:** Commons; Next Generation EU; co-design.

**Parole chiave:** Beni comuni; Next Generation EU; coprogettazione.

## Introduction

The application of austerity policies and conditionalities in Southern European countries weakened their already frail welfare systems and further impoverished vulnerable social groups, aggravating the condition which feminist literature defined as a crisis of social reproduction (Serapioni and Hespanha, 2019; De Falco, 2019; Dowling, 2021). In response, large and long-standing anti-austerity mobilizations emerged in countries like Spain, Greece or Italy, opposing the budget cuts to welfare services and demanding ‘real democracy’ against the hegemony of the European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund (Pirone, 2019).

From 2011 onwards, in the major Southern European cities, these demands were expressed in the form of durable occupations of public squares, universities, and other urban spaces which, in turn, became the proving ground for *commoning* practices (Varvarousis and Kallis, 2016; Asara, 2025), such as self-managed clinics, workers’ cooperatives, housing projects, urban gardens, and innumerable other mutual aid activities, giving life to autonomous networks of caring infrastructures (Arampatzi, 2017; Gutierrez-Sanchez, 2023; Sciarelli, 2024a). In Italy, a fundamental push towards the emergence of new urban commons came from artists’ and cultural workers’ mobilizations (Cirillo, 2014; Acosta Alvarado, 2020) as well as the movement for water as a commons and other connections with ecological movements thematising the need for sustainable socionatural relations (Sciarelli, 2023).

In the city of Naples, a new legal arrangement was elaborated by commoners themselves since 2012: the ‘urban civic and collective use’. This tool allows the legal recognition of community self-government within the public spaces – often abandoned or underused – that people reclaimed and reopened for public use (Capone, 2021; Micciarelli, 2022). There are currently eight recognized urban commons in Naples, whose rules of governance are established by a ‘Declaration’, autonomously drafted by each community and recognized by

the city government<sup>2</sup>. All declarations are based on the principle of democratic and horizontal self-government, based on periodic assemblies, open to all, and autonomous from external influences. The acknowledgement of commons' social value was then the basis for the recognition of municipal financial support for their accessibility – as an anti-austerity device, recognising the City Hall's social duties (De Tullio, 2018) – as well as for the dialogue regarding the use of public funds for their restoration. We consider this practice-based knowledge – produced by urban commons – not only as a 'fact' to be observed, but also as a part of our theoretical framework on urban commons, guiding the discussion of our field data.

Now, these commons face a rapidly changing European political landscape. In response to the pandemic, the worsening effects of the climate crisis, and the war in Eastern Europe, EU institutions inaugurated a new phase of economic intervention, initiated by the post-pandemic recovery and culminating in the recent report by Mario Draghi, *The future of European competitiveness – A competitiveness strategy for Europe* (9/9/2024, henceforth Draghi report). The policies promoted by Next Generation EU (NGEU) and the European Green Deal seem to reverse the austerity paradigm, aiming to realize the ecological transition while improving the levels of employment and welfare, reserving the greatest shares of funding to Southern European countries. On the other hand, these plans are still based on solid neoliberal foundations.

This change is also impacting the local level, raising the question about the evolution of the political dialectic between top down governance and democratic management of public resources in Southern European cities. This observation leads us to raise the main questions of this research. Can the interaction between communities of commoners and European investments produce more caring relationships among humans and between humans and the urban environment? Or the neoliberal framework which orients NGEU will prevent such outcomes?

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<sup>2</sup> All declarations and the deliberations regarding the urban civic use of Neapolitan commons can be accessed here: <https://commonsnapoli.org/archivio/documenti-giuridici/>. In particular, concerning the declarations of Ex OPG – Je so' pazzo, Lido Pola, and Scugnizzo Liberato, see: Ex OPG – Je so' pazzo, 2021; Lido Pola, 2021b; Scugnizzo Liberato, 2021. More documentation and literature on the matter is at: <https://www.exasilofilangieri.it/approfondimenti-e-reportage/>.

We develop our analysis by observing the commoning movement of Naples, due to the above peculiarities of this movement concerning the community management of urban resources. Firstly, we depict the theoretical basis of our framework, by framing urban commons and their social-ecological struggles in the context of the economic governance of the European Union. Secondly, we delve into the results of our field work, showing how local experiments and EU policies relate to each other in practice. Namely, we analyze two case studies where three urban commons – the Lido Pola, the ex OPG Je so' Pazzo and the Scugnizzo Liberato – have interacted with urban regeneration projects funded by the PNRR (Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza), the Italian program funded by NGEU, and by similar public investments.

### **Case studies and research methodology**

Here we present a brief description of the Neapolitan urban commons whose processes of participatory design became the case studies for our research and our methodological approach. These are the following:

- Lido Pola – Bene Comune<sup>3</sup> is a commoning experience started the 17th of May 2013 with the occupation and reopening of the historical beach club and then the restaurant Lido Pola, located in the district of Bagnoli. Lido Pola's community participated in the application to a PNRR funding program aimed at allocating 14 million euros, proposing a project called Po.L.A.R.S. ('Coastal innovation hub for the marine environment and social resilience'), elaborated in cooperation with different Neapolitan research institutes belonging to the National Research Council (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche - CNR) and other research and academic bodies. The partnership, although a winner in the first round, ultimately did not secure the funding. However, they later participated in another public call with their project 'LP – Lido Pola Laboratorio Permanente' and successfully obtained funding for its implementation.
- The second case study is provided by Je so' pazzo<sup>4</sup>, a commoning

3 Further information about the Lido Pola can be accessed here: <https://commonsnapoli.org/gli-spazi/lido-pola/#:~:text=Ubicato%20in%20via%20Nisida%2024,massima%20industrializzazione%20dell'Area%20Flegrea>.

4 Further information regarding the Ex OPG - Je so' Pazzo can be accessed here: <https://commonsnapoli.org/gli-spazi/ex-opg-je-so-pazzo/>

experience born in 2015 from the occupation of a former judicial psychiatric hospital, located in the district of Materdei, close to the city center of Naples. From 2022, the community of inhabitants which self-governs Je so' pazzo has been involved in a participatory process of co-design for the restoration of the building, a project worth 16 million euros financed by the PNRR. - The third case of urban commoning we analyze is Scugnizzo Liberato<sup>5</sup>, born from the occupation of a former juvenile prison in September 2015, also located in close proximity to the city center of Naples. Scugnizzo's community too, since 2022, is involved in a process of co-design for the restoration of the building, whose funding amounts to 7,5 million euros.

Scugnizzo Liberato's and Je so Pazzo's communities have been involved together in a unique process of co-design of the restoration works, 'Ad Uso Civico e Collettivo', guided by a team of experts in social innovation and participatory design belonging to the cooperative 'SOS - La Scuola Open Source' ('SOS - Open Source School'). Before the process started, the communities obtained the right to nominate additional six experts which became part of the facilitation team put together by SOS (henceforth, 'SOS team').

Our methodological approach for the analysis of these case studies is based on a combination of participant observation (Musante, 2015) and participatory action research (Cornish *et al.*, 2023; Saija, 2016; Freire, 1970), made possible by our direct involvement within the commoning movement of Naples, including our active participation within the co-design processes. We consider our direct implication in the processes we describe as «a powerful incentive and a useful tool» for social science research regarding processes of grassroots political participation (Font *et al.*, 2012). By presenting our research, indeed, our aim is not simply to analyze the events we witnessed, but to contribute to the collective process of self-reflection and political elaboration carried out by the Neapolitan communities of commoners regarding their interaction with public institutions and their policies of urban regeneration. Action research is an approach that actively involves participants in the study rather than treating them as mere subjects of analysis. This

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<sup>5</sup> And regarding the Scugnizzo Liberato: <https://commonsnapoli.org/gli-spazi/scugnizzo-liberato/>

principle fosters a more inclusive and participatory research process, offering transformative potential while addressing issues of power and hierarchy inherent in traditional positivist methodologies. As a result, those involved in the research can benefit from a more equitable and shared experience (Jacobs, 2018). Unlike traditional research, participatory action research can only be carried out in a democratic and politically engaged environment. This approach also enables research that is directly relevant to a particular community (Bergold and Thomas, 2012), which is precisely our intention.

Our understanding and engagement within these processes has been further deepened by the fact that we are also members of the Permanent Observatory on the Commons of Naples<sup>6</sup> and one author is member of the Audit Council on Resources and Debt of the City of Naples<sup>7</sup>. Both these new institutions are participatory consultative bodies instituted by the City Government of Naples, in accordance with the demands expressed by the network of urban commons, to facilitate the interaction between the local institutions and the community of commoners. The Observatory has been involved by both the administration and the communities in all phases of the co-design processes.

Regarding the process 'Ad uso civico e collettivo', the first author is activist in the Neapolitan commons network and was one of the experts nominated by the Je So' Pazzo community, and the second author is an active member of Scugnizzo's community, so we could actively participate in the co-design process from its start to its end: we participated in the internal assemblies of the commons dedicated to discuss and organize the co-design process; as members of the Permanent Observatory on the commons of Naples, we were informed by the city government on the characteristics of the co-design process and we could discuss it with the administration; we took part to all the activities, workshops, mapping laboratories and focus groups organized by 'SOS - La Scuola Open Source', which composed the co-design process itself, together with the communities of the commons; finally, we participated in the realization of a survey aimed to collect data regarding the opinions and aspirations of the inhabitants and the commoners regarding the process of

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<sup>6</sup> <https://commonsnapoli.org/nuove-istituzioni/osservatorio-beni-comuni/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://commonsnapoli.org/nuove-istituzioni/consulta-audit/>

renovation of the commons and their future<sup>8</sup>.

In addition, we carried out a semi-structured interview (following Della Porta, 2010) with a key activist of Je So' Pazzo (Interview #6). Regarding the co-design processes involving Lido Pola's community, we participated in key moments of discussion promoted by the movement within the Neapolitan commons network, and we could follow the development of both Po.L.A.R.S. and LP<sup>2</sup> projects as members of the Observatory. In addition, we carried out a semi-structured interview with a key activist of Lido Pola (I#1), a focus group with four CNR researchers who participated in the promotion and elaboration of the Po.L.A.R.S. project (I#2, #3, #4, #5) and a final semi-structured interview with another activist of the Neapolitan commoning movement and expert of co-design who was nominated by Scugnizzo Liberato's community to become a member of the team who guided the participatory design, and who also had a key role in the elaboration and conduction of the LP<sup>2</sup> project (I#7).

We want to clarify that, notwithstanding the authors' direct involvement in the commons of Naples, all positions, statements, and ideas expressed in this article are solely their own and do not in any way represent the collective opinions of the movement.

## **Urban Commons, Care, and Ecology in the EU Economic Governance**

### *Spending Conditionalities and Democracy in the Post-Pandemic EU*

The context of our case studies highlights a tension between the spending conditionalities imposed by the EU to Member States and the democratic claims of collective control on resources. In this section, we will observe how these tensions evolved over the post-pandemic recovery and with which impact on commons' ability to experiment in practice with democratic, ecological, and caring ways of managing public resources.

In principle, spending conditionalities are used by funding authorities to impose certain disciplines to spending authorities, other than technical monitoring obligations and compliance

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<sup>8</sup> All the information regarding the activities which composed the process of co-design 'Ad uso civico e collettivo' can be accessed in its Final Report: <https://lascuolaopensource.notion.site/Ad-Uso-Civico-e-Collettivo-Report-finale-e0eaffe96a1e465496bdfdbdc78352d7>

with overarching legal rules (Vita, 2017). For example, they can be useful for federal States to steer sectors where there is no federal jurisdiction to enact binding provisions (Daintith, 1994). Hence, conditionalities effectively influence spending decisions, even though the strict enforcement of the condition – i.e., cutting funds in case of non-compliance – is rarely implemented, as it would create tensions with the autonomy of the spending authority (Bagenstof, 2008).

Outside of a federal framework, the EU has applied conditionalities to reinforce austerity rules through funding programs (Barca, 2009) and even ‘bailout funds’ during crises. These measures have been criticised in both indebted States – for limiting fundamental rights while proving ineffective for the economic emancipation (Toussaint, 2017; Dollar and Svensson, 2000; Haggard, 1985; Ivanova *et al.*, 2001) – and the financially ‘virtuous’ ones, for hindering State support to ‘good’ investments like digital innovation and environmental protection (on the debate, see Gill 2020; Friends of Cohesion, 2020).

The latter need – to spend for EU priorities – explains the current revival of the ‘partner State’ doctrine (Mazzucato, 2020) that justifies and promotes public investment to leverage and steer private investments towards general interest. Covid-19 provided the alibi for the EU to take action in that sense, by using an emergency narrative and not openly contradicting its austerity ideology (CADTM, 2021). On that basis, the Commission approved a reinforced Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027<sup>9</sup> and created the *Next Generation EU* (NGEU) instrument for recovery, disciplined by Regulation 2021/241<sup>10</sup>. To establish the latter, the EU – benefiting from its higher credit rating – borrowed funds on financial markets that could be spent by Member States according to their National Recovery

9 COUNCIL REGULATION (EU, Euratom) 2020/2093 of 17 December 2020 laying down the multiannual financial framework for the years 2021 to 2027, OJ L 433l, 22.12.2020, in <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2020/2093/oj>.

10 REGULATION (EU) 2021/241 OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility, OJ L 57 of 18.2.2021, in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R0241&qid=1619107328414>. The instituting regulation is: COUNCIL REGULATION (EU) 2020/2094 of 14 December 2020 establishing a European Union Recovery Instrument to support the recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis, OJ L 433l of 22.12.2020, in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32020R2094>

and Resilience Plans, approved by the EU itself.

Arguably, these novelties were a mitigation and not an abolition of the debt system. Additionally, Reg. 2024/241 still imposes both content and financial conditions. Concerning the former, Art. 6 and 16 require the enactment of EU priorities and particularly green and digital ones, that have to amount to respectively 37% and 20% of the expenses. As for the latter, States have to respect the Country Recommendations linked to the European Semester, with the additional provision of an 'emergency break', capable of impeding the irrigation of funds in case of non-compliance with budget rules. The absence of detailed indicators for social and economic impact – other than quantitative indicators based on the amount of resources invested – reveals the rationality of the regulation: leveraging investments in new market sectors, with a better reputation, rather than effectively fulfilling social rights. For the same reasons, NGEU spending is also conditioned by time constraints, because its purpose is to pursue recovery of the EU economical fabric by injecting big amounts of resources in a short time.

In the Italian context, the PNRR – not unlike austerity measures – saw the Executive (then led by Mario Draghi) as the main decision-maker, with reduced parliamentary debate (De Minico, 2021) and almost no agency for local entities (Civitarese Matteucci, 2021). Additionally, redistribution mechanisms were made aleatory, as the allocation of resources was only partially predetermined and mostly entrusted to competitive procedures. Due to the amount of resources received by Italy, along with the EU criteria, the planning and implementation of the PNRR created a special regime that did in fact mobilise a budget close to an annual financial law. This regime was based on enforceable financial conditionalities and clumsier ecological and social objectives, as further demonstrated by the fact that the subsequent government, led by Giorgia Meloni, successfully negotiated a less rigorous implementation of PNRR objectives. It is worth noticing that these conclusions shed light on the future economic governance of the EU, as the instrument is also conceived as a laboratory for long-standing policies. Indeed, NGEU inspired the permanent revision of the Growth and Stability Pact that now provides flexibilities to ensure certain investments – like the green and digital ones, but also

the defense sector – without renouncing austerity regulations. Hence – while we focus on environmental policies, that are more relevant to this paper – it is worth noting that this new kind of conditional funding is susceptible of being used for different political priorities, including the creation of ‘war debts’ (De Lellis, 2024) along with the Draghi report, considering Defense as a pivotal sector for the competitiveness of EU economy.

*Social and environmental care: the transformative potential of civic uses*

NGEU is also one of the main sources of funding for the European Green Deal (EGD), together with the Just Transition Mechanism, the Innovation and Modernization Funds, financed by revenues from the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS), and the EU ordinary budget (European Parliament and Council of the European Union, 2021; European Commission, 2020). On the one hand, the elaboration of the EGD, with its objective of the complete decarbonization of the continent by 2050 and its connection to the paradigm of the just transition (Wang and Lo, 2021), represents an epochal step change for European institutions. On the other hand, the implementation of the EGD also presents critical issues which can be attributed to the permanence of the neoliberal austerity paradigm.

First of all, the EGD relies on liberalization policies and market mechanisms, which showed a very limited efficiency in reducing carbon emissions (Leonardi, 2017), and actually produced an intensification of resource extraction and energy consumption (Dunlappe and Laratte, 2022). Secondly, the juridical framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which plays a crucial role in financing the EGD, shows clear limits in the level of involvement of social actors in the formulation of the recovery policies, also creating a problem of legitimacy (Munta *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, while the inclusion of a policy framework elaborated by unions and environmental justice organizations such as the Just Transition can be deemed as very positive, the dimension of care work is still relegated at the margins of EU transition strategy, even though the inadequacy of the care infrastructures – aggravated by the austerity regime – became increasingly clear during the pandemic (Dowling, 2021; Barca *et al.*, 2024).

Precisely because of these critical issues, the interaction of

EU programs focused on urban regeneration and ecological transition with commoning movements may have a great transformative potential. Recent literature on Southern European commoning movements – often inspired by feminist perspectives on commoning processes (Federici, 2004; 2018) – highlighted the close connection between the creation of new commons, often originating from abandoned urban spaces, reclaimed and self-governed by communities of inhabitants, and the collective organization of caring activities for subaltern social groups and vulnerable territories. While the austerity regime aggravated the contradiction between neoliberal economic management and sphere of social reproduction (Dowling, 2021), grassroots mobilizations emerged in countries like Greece, Spain or Italy attempted to safeguard the social fabric by infrastructuring just, collective and sustainable forms of social provision (Gutierrez-Sanchez, 2023). In all major Southern European cities, for the last fifteen years, it has been possible to observe more or less developed commoning processes aimed at supporting education, access to housing, public health, basing the creation of new care spaces on direct political involvement (Arampatzi, 2017; Cannavò, 2018).

The caring value of commoning processes is not limited to the social fabric but extends to the realm of environmental regeneration (Barca, 2020; 2024). This is particularly evident in the case of natural commons, such as forests or fisheries, where communities that manage them as commons tend to protect them from overexploitation and contamination (Bollier and Helfrich, 2013). However, the same is also true in urban environments, where commoning movements can foster the creation of urban gardens and alternative food networks (Moreira and Morell, 2020), regenerate and revitalize neglected or polluted areas (Capone, 2019), and defend the public management and accessibility of common resources such as water (Bianchi, 2022), ultimately contributing to the emergence of new ecological imaginaries (Asara, 2025).

Finally, it is important to stress that the work of socio-environmental regeneration conducted within commoning experiences, even if it is based on autonomy and self-organization, can also intertwine with the delivery of welfare services and connect with the application of urban policies (Sciarelli, 2024a).

Progressive administrations, like it happened in the case of Barcelona (Kussy *et al.*, 2022), have attempted to implement policies of democratization social provision by organizing welfare services by the principle of the commons, that is, supporting the self-management of care workers and internalizing care services through municipal cooperatives. This type of collaborative arrangement for the delivery of care is an important element of municipalist policies (Bianchi, 2024), and can be considered as a form of “public-commons partnerships” which can include several other forms of cooperation between local administrations and organized communities of inhabitants in the management of public spaces, buildings or infrastructures. Such partnerships do not merely resist privatization of public goods and services, but actively prefigure new democratic forms of collective ownership and governance (Russell *et al.*, 2023).

In a similar fashion, the urban civic and collective uses established by the commoning movement of Naples, originally conceived as a local response to the broader European demand for ‘real democracy’ against austerity, contributed to support the creation of new infrastructures of care (Sciarelli, 2024a), and now provide the tools to rethink and democratize the governance of the public policies resulting from European investments too.

First, the framework of the urban civic uses guarantees the communities’ right to participate in any process of urban regeneration involving the structures that the city government of Naples recognized as urban commons. Scugnizzo Liberato’s Declaration, for instance, states that «the community has the right to participate in institutional processes regarding the extraordinary renovation, valorization, restoration or transformation of the structure», and that «the interventions to be carried out within the structure of the *Scugnizzo Liberato* [...] are guided by the principles of shared care for places and self-rehabilitation» (art. 16). All the other declarations contain similar provisions that address the regeneration process. Besides safeguarding the civic use of the common spaces, these provisions open the door to concrete processes of democratization of public works, as they potentially allow – and indeed allowed – the participation of large communities of inhabitants into the administration of public policies.

Second, communities of commoners are bearers of different

values and political priorities than those present in the NGEU policy framework. The collective organization of care work, in particular, increasingly became a central political value within Neapolitan commons, which along the course of the years hosted a vast array of solidarity initiatives and mutual help activities (Ex OPG - Je so' pazzo, 2019), fostering the creation of authentic caring communities within the self-governed spaces (Sciarelli, 2024a; see also The Care Collective, 2020). Moreover, for the commons of Naples, the question of social reproduction is also connected to the ecological health of their territories (Sciarelli, 2024b). Among our case studies, this is especially true for the Lido Pola, whose reclamation was brought about by the socioenvironmental movement of Bagnoli, and whose community actively participates in the local mobilization for the environmental remediation of the district and the realization of a public beach (Laboratorio Bancarotta and Cantiere Sociale Quarto Mondo, 2014). The political centrality of environmental care practices is reflected in the Declarations as well, which gives them a juridical basis formally recognized by the municipality of Naples (Lido Pola, 2021b). This, of course, became an important basis for the effort of embedding these values within the processes of co-design which involved the communities.

### **The co-design processes**

#### *Lido Pola*

The co-design process from which the Po.L.A.R.S. project emerged shall be contextualized in the political and environmental history of the area of Bagnoli. The district, its grounds, shores and waters have been polluted by a century-long activity of steel production, which developed after the application of the Law for the Economic Resurgence of Naples of 1904, which turned Bagnoli into a special economic zone to attract northern investors (Marmo, 1978). The steel plants, which after the Second World War had become property of the national company Italsider, then ILVA, finally concluded their activity in 1992, leaving the area in the grip of environmental contamination and sudden absence of job opportunities (Laboratorio Bancarotta and Cantiere Sociale Quarto Mondo, 2014).

The question of environmental remediation remained unresolved for decades, and still is. Bagnoli SPA and Bagnoli Futura, the

two public firms created to take charge of the remediation and the urban regeneration, only achieved minimal results (Gardini, 2016). The decree law n. 133 of the 12th of September 2014 put these duties in the hands of a special commissioner nominated directly by the government, a decision that was met with the fierce opposition of local social movements, who criticized the situation of 'permanent emergency' (Laboratorio Bancarotta and Cantiere Sociale Quarto Mondo, 2014) lived by the district. They saw it as a strategy aimed at centralizing the decision-making process, favoring the interests of few investors and speculators. The reclamation of Lido Pola itself, which prevented the privatization of the structure, and its process of autonomous revitalization, expressed the will to reappropriate physical and political spaces of democracy from the grassroots (I#1).

The Po.L.A.R.S. project was born from the initiative of several CNR research institutes<sup>11</sup> which contacted the municipality of Naples, communicating the willingness to apply to a PNRR funding call for initiatives of urban regeneration, 'Ecosystems of Innovation in the Mezzogiorno', with a project worth 14 million euros, which would have included the regeneration of the Lido Pola and the surrounding area. The city government communicated that, given the status of Lido Pola as a civic use common, it would have been impossible to apply without the assent of the community. Instead of selecting another area, the researchers decided to involve the community in the elaboration of the project, presenting their proposal to Lido Pola's assembly of inhabitants (I#1; I#5). Lido Pola's community decided to accept the proposal and enthusiastically participated in the drafting of the project, also involving local associations into the consortium (I#1, #5). The IRIS institute of the CNR, whose researchers had already carried out activities of co-research in the area, and one of whose members, also had a central role in facilitating the dialogue between the community and the CNR (I#1, #2, #3, #4; Vittoria *et al.*, 2023). The

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11 These include IRIS, ISASI, ISMAR, INM, IBBRM, and INO. The project partnership was later joined by the following entities: the National Interuniversity Consortium for Marine Sciences (CoNISMa); the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology (INGV); the Municipality of Naples; the local community of 'Lido Pola - Bene Comune', represented by the social cooperative Quadrifoglio, the association Caracol, and Jolie Rouge APS; and the IDIS Foundation - City of Science (Città della Scienza). Further information about them is accessible here: <https://www.cnr.it/istituti>

final project elaborated by the public-civic consortium foresaw the complete regeneration of the premises of Lido Pola and a partial restoration of the surrounding area, for the realization of research laboratories of natural and social sciences. The most innovative part of the project was the recognition of the civic use of the parts of the structure that the inhabitants reclaimed as commons, which would have continued to be dedicated to social and cultural activities organized in a regime of self-government (Vittoria *et al.*, 2023; I#1, #2, #3, #4, #5).

For the activists and the researchers who promoted the project, Po.L.A.R.S. represented the occasion to realize a research infrastructure dedicated to environmental monitoring, science dissemination and empowerment of the local community, based on a constant dialogue between inhabitants, grassroots organizations and research activities, possibly opening a long path of citizen science (Vittoria *et al.*, 2023). The final project proposal was also coherent and compatible with the demands expressed by Lido Pola's community and the wider socioenvironmental movement of Bagnoli along the course of the years, like the environmental restoration of the area, the regeneration of the seashore, the safeguard of its free accessibility and, in particular, the inhabitants' participation in the process of urban transformation (Lido Pola, 2021a).

Po.L.A.R.S. passed the first selection phase of the funding call. Another success for the consortium came from the city government of Naples, which chose to officially embrace the project, recognizing its value as well as its connection with the civic use of the structure<sup>12</sup>. In the end, the project did not pass the final selection, but its realization remains a long-term objective for the network of organizations and inhabitants which contributed to realize it, and the cooperation between the commoners and CNR researchers continues to be active (I#1, #2, #3, #4).

Indeed, Lido Pola's involvement in processes of co-design of public policies continued. By the end of 2022, a consortium composed of associations connected to Lido Pola's community and the IRISS research institute was among the winners of a funding call promoted by the Italian Ministry of Culture, 'Creative Living Lab IV'<sup>13</sup>. The project, 'LP<sup>2</sup> – Lido Pola Laboratorio

<sup>12</sup> Press release of the City Government of the 16th of November 2021, accessible at: <https://www.comune.napoli.it/giunta/comunicatistampa?id=23671>.

<sup>13</sup> The website of the call can be accessed here: <https://creativitacontemporanea>

Permanente', involved the activation of a participatory process of urban regeneration and collective organization of sociocultural activities in the district. Each activity was discussed and organized through widely participated assemblies, which consolidated the role of Lido Pola as pole of democratic participation in the Bagnoli (I#1, #7). The outputs of the project included the collaborative mapping, the production of songs realized by young local artists, the realization of a mural and, most importantly, the financing of a process of restoration and self-construction in the terraces of Lido Pola (I#7).

*Scugnizzo Liberato and ex-OPG: the Ad Uso Civico e Collettivo Process*

The second case study concerns the use of public resources to refurbish two commons: Scugnizzo Liberato and ex-OPG.

Ex OPG and Scugnizzo Liberato had been transferred from the State to the City under the framework of Law 85/2010 (Federalismo Demaniale - public property federalism). The law allowed the transfer of goods to 'valorise' them. While its general rationality was austeritarian - to valorise them economically and feed local budgets - in this case it was used by the then municipalist city government for a cultural and social 'valorisation': the two buildings were transferred and then recognised as commons. Using this legal path also implied the obligation for the city government to find funding to ensure the valorisation of the goods, according to specific plans. In the case of Scugnizzo Liberato, this fund was granted in 2019 by the Contratto Istituzionale di Sviluppo 'Napoli - Centro Storico' (Institutional Contract for Development 'Naples - historical city centre'); as for ex-OPG, the funding came from the PNRR.

The beginning of the implementation by the new city government - born after 2021 elections - was characterised by at least two choices of discontinuity with respect to the previous policies on commons. The first one was procedural: the facilitation of the participatory processes on the constructions was entrusted to a private actor, SOS, instead of the community itself. The second choice was the mandate given to SOS, requiring to identify a governance model for the spaces - not necessarily corresponding to the existing civic uses - and to ensure the

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[cultura.gov.it/creativelivinglab/](http://cultura.gov.it/creativelivinglab/).

economic self-sufficiency of commons, against the idea of public support required by the anti-austerity roots of these experiences. Additionally, since ex-OPG funds were granted via the PNRR, the process for both commons had to follow the tight deadlines of this programme which – according to the process designers and facilitators (La Scuola Open Source, 2023) – did not leave enough space for a good quality participatory process (three months, extended to four).

Commons communities eventually accepted this imposition because of the huge stakes of the funding: demonstrating communities' ability to attract and co-manage public resources for general interests. The tensions around the same choices were navigated through an agreement between SOS experts and the commoners of Scugnizzo Liberato and ex-OPG, together with the Neapolitan Commons Network and the Observatory on Commons. Indeed, the two commons involved managed to appoint their own experts from the Network itself among the members of the 'SOS team'. SOS had its own professionals in the Team, who contributed with their own methodologies, but could also take advantage of the local experts' specific knowledge on commons.

Interviews and participatory observation highlighted multiple risks, especially lying in the possible legitimisation – through the presence of commoners-experts in the process – of experts-activists hierarchies (I#7) and of weak participatory outputs, inevitably compromised by PNRR deadlines. However, the 'SOS Team' also worked to realign the process with the previous policies of civic uses, obtaining a press release of the new government recognising civic uses as the base of the process; consequently, the city also approved a coherent revision of the original mandate. As an output of the participatory processes, the 'SOS team' developed some key recommendations to implement the constructions along with the recognition and enhancement of commons: the principle of an 'open construction site', where future renovation work would be made modular, taking place without the community having to fully leave the space; a participatory steering committee to coordinate different administrations and commoners; an 'explained time schedule', as a way to clarify the roadmap of work in progress and its political meaning for commoners and city residents.

## Discussion

### *Ethical-Political Frameworks in the Participatory Processes on PNRR Funding*

Our case studies highlight commoners' attempt to make PNRR projects 'social and environmental by design', thus complementing institutional frameworks that were not providing for such design choices at any level of government. Similar issues were also raised by actors positioning themselves as professionals – CNR and SOS – that could experiment their innovative views on participation on the testbed of their field practice with commoners. These actors took a clear position stating that participatory design processes are inherently non-neutral and always enforcing specific ethical-value frameworks (I#5). Indeed, while participatory design is supposed to redistribute power and enable stakeholders' direct participation in decision-making, authorities' framework and methodology choices determine the concrete access and weight of each social actor (Arnstein, 1969).

Obviously, the conditional regulation of funding programmes plays a crucial role here. To that regard, our case studies show in practice what we have argued about the NGEU. EU imposed timing and effectiveness as strict requirements for the local administration; oppositely, it left commoners' and inhabitants' self-determination to local authorities' political discretion.

Local authorities, in turn, did not explicitly recognise the commons-based urban policies and broadly relied on the mediation of 'expert' bodies. In both cases, the administration's stance was not openly hostile to the commons; however, the absence of a clear political positioning in favour of them had the effect of implicitly strengthening the above EU priorities. In principle, the local government did not intend to use PNRR projects to foster civic uses in commons, but these ideas came from commoning processes themselves. In Po.L.A.R.S., the joint will of CNR and Lido Pola triggered the initiative; in the 'Ad Uso Civico e Collettivo', it was the need to implement the 'public property federalism'. Additionally, in the latter, the original mandate did not involve preserving and improving civic uses. This approach generated dangers for these social-ecological experiments, that by design need self-government to fulfill their political purposes; additionally, the City hall's initial behaviour was probably neglecting efficiency purposes themselves, as

civic uses had proven to produce valuable effects on the local communities (Pascapè, 2017), had been previously awarded with international prizes (like the Urbact good practice<sup>14</sup>), and – in the case of Scugnizzo Liberato and ex-OPG – were the reason why funding has originally been granted for the restoration of the buildings.

Hence, the local implementation of PNRR was coherent with the more general policy of the new government of withdrawing from supporting civic uses financially, to the extent that currently some commons find themselves deprived of essential resources, such as electricity. Hence, we can observe that PNRR constraints – because of their lack of attention to participation and self-determination – ended up serving the priorities of the local government, even generating an inconsistency in local policies which is against the own technical rationality of NGEU, which is to create long-lasting virtuous policies.

The same dynamics can be observed in the relationship of the local administration with the PNRR time constraints. Indeed, PNRR deadlines were the reason to impose pressures on the processes, with potential contradiction with commons' values that require broad and consensus-based procedures. At the same time – while the 'Ad Uso Civico e Collettivo' participatory process benefited from just one month extension, with a significant community effort – the beginning of the works was delayed several months. A delay that would have been possibly reduced by the implementation of the recommendations coming from the participatory process itself which included concrete tools to ensure a smooth coordination between the administrations involved, with the supporting and expert role of the communities of reference.

### *The expansion of the civic uses*

Besides these critical issues, we consider these processes also as a significant opportunity for the communities of commoners, enabling them to grow by navigating new political frameworks, acquiring tools to enhance their democratic practices both internally and externally, extending the reach of the civic uses from the self-government of urban spaces to the development of public policies.

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14 <https://urbact.eu/good-practices/civic-estate>

In particular, the commoners successfully addressed the inconsistencies between the PNRR's value framework and their own principles of democratic governance. With the support of the Observatory (I#4), the activists managed to use the co-design process to actually strengthen the political foundations of the civic use: the innovative aspect of Po.L.A.R.S. lay precisely in the dialogue between science and the local community, as the self-government process was preserved within the project. At the start of 'Ad uso civico e collettivo', Scugnizzo Liberato's and Je so' Pazzo's communities obtained that strengthening the civic use of the commons and the process of self-government already active within them would explicitly be listed among the desired outcomes of the entire process<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the collaboration between communities, co-researchers in the Observatory, and university consortia helped to recalibrate public policies.

Interestingly, the opposite dynamic also holds true: the interaction with the knowledge of communities of inhabitants and activists has become a strong driver for research activities, as evidenced particularly by the members of the IRISS institute, which came to regard commoners as "research colleagues" (I#2). Members of the Po.L.A.R.S. research consortium also expressed their appreciation for participating in a regeneration process that, when started with the reclamation of Lido Pola in 2013, prevented real estate speculation in the area (I#5).

These positive outcomes highlight how the social and intellectual networks activated by the commons not only attracted funding into neglected territories but also imbued such funds with a strong political orientation, redirecting them toward processes of social cooperation, community-based welfare, cultivation of multicultural communities, and environmental justice struggles. The value-driven nature of these processes directly challenges prevailing political trends in both continental and local policies, and allows them to produce civic values besides favoring economic investments.

These participatory processes of co-design are also particularly significant because they took place in Southern Italy, a region at the margins of the European economy. The commons have mobilized diverse collectives, including marginalized groups

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15 'Ad uso civico e collettivo' - Final Report: <https://lascuolaopensource.notion.site/Ad-Uso-Civico-e-Collettivo-Report-finale-e0eaffe96a1e465496bdfdbdc78352d7>

and migrant communities that often struggle to participate in local politics. This reflects the deliberate efforts of the activists to create inclusive and solidaristic communities with subaltern social groups.

The pivotal importance of the Po.L.A.R.S. case, in particular, lies in overturning a century -long tradition of top-down decision-making in the area of Bagnoli. What stands out is the critical connection between ecological concerns, autonomous regeneration, and community self-government – a link absent in European policies and unprecedented in past territorial policies. This is also reflected in the outputs of the LP<sup>2</sup> project, which were elaborated to have a precise ecological value (I#7), as they included phases of investigation, collective discussion and cultural production regarding the relationship between the neighbourhood and the local environment and the sea, besides the works for the regeneration of Lido Pola. These outputs were coherent with the objectives of reappropriating public spaces and reopening the seashores of Bagnoli to the public, something that the local movements demanded for more than a decade. However, these achievements remain insufficient. The Bagnoli case underscores the persistence of a political limitation to this democratic expansion.

### *A new understanding of democratic accountability in public spending*

As a final remark, we can observe that accountability plays a crucial role in commons' participatory proposal on public spending. The NGEU understands accountability on the basis of predetermined milestones, tasks, and time schedules. Additionally, the Italian PNRR largely grounds the same values in the implementation of competitive processes, allegedly capable of ensuring equity in the distribution of funds. From our observation of commons, a different concept emerged, based on their long-standing practice. Since their birth, commons have always considered themselves as new institutions and experimented with their own accountability as a laboratory for an accountable management of public (immobile) resources. A basic example is the fundamental principle of an open assembly, allowing everyone to not only oversee, but also participate in the management of the good with the method of consensus or other methods respecting minorities.

Similar examples exist in our case studies. Interviews (I#5) report that the collaboration between Lido Pola and CNR started from a key question, mutually posed by the two actors: «How can I trust you?». The fact that both institutions accepted to 'stay' in that question is an indicator of their commitment to be accountable to the other and to the city in general and to each other. Concerning the second case study, the experience of ex-OPG (I#6) reports the practice of *controllo popolare* (popular control), based on spotting and denouncing misdemeanours of the public administration and/or private actors. When it came to managing themselves a public resource as a commons, the path led to an effort of narrating their own activities in order to be transparent about their use of resources and involve inhabitants themselves. These stories narrate a process-based understanding of accountability, rooted in a nest of heterogeneous territorial relationships. Moreover, this notion of participation does not pretend neutrality and does not aim to be equally responsive to any beneficiary, but welcomes the need of being specifically responsive to the needs of people who are in a disadvantaged position.

The same topic of trust and accountability is crucial in the relationship with the Municipality of Naples in the 'Ad Uso Civico e Collettivo' process. Interview #7 reports that the effectiveness of the participatory process was hindered by the City Government's decision of not explicitly supporting the civic uses as the governance model for the commons, raising the need for an official press release, granting a minimum of shared values orienting participation.

These circumstances allow us to outline at least two elements about how commons see their own accountability in managing public resources.

Firstly, the communities demonstrated an ability to adopt a policymaker perspective (I#7), thereby taking on responsibility for the general interest. Equally, the ex-OPG interviewee (I#6) highlighted the difference between the ex-OPG community's co-design and the design tools commonly used in different contexts: the way commons deal with social needs is based on the purpose of not necessarily responding all of them – which is often not even possible – but also and especially orienting the people bearing the needs towards revindictive and transformative actions. This shows a complex and relational understanding of accountability,

characterised by the awareness of commoners' and public sectors' responsibilities.

Secondly, activists-experts, unlike in a technocratic paradigm, made an effort of being themselves accountable to the community and explicitly defined their expertise as being politically rooted and open to community input. The process of internal hierarchization based on expertise, emerged in the interviews, was problematized and addressed by experts themselves through exposure in dozens of assemblies where experts' positioning, and their proposed choices were explained and discussed. Similarly, the CNR exposed itself to multiple assembly processes and opened itself up to the territory. Interviews (I#5) highlight a reversal of the peer review logic, declaring that the project would either be developed with the community or not at all, effectively prioritising accountability towards community over other concerns.

Thus, commoning experiments challenged austerity and competitive tools, deploying different mechanisms based on non-neutrality. An issue for further research is therefore if and how these mechanisms could be recognized and proposed as conditionalities or constraints for co-design processes, in order to promote transparency and democracy in a substantial equality meaning.

## **Conclusions**

This study highlights the persistence of austerity logics in NGEU and the transformative potential of commons-based approaches in rethinking public spending and participatory governance within the framework EU funding. The case studies demonstrate how commoners have successfully introduced ethical-political frameworks into participatory processes, challenging the technocratic and efficiency-driven paradigms imposed by EU and national regulations. The collaboration between commoners and experts highlights the potential for co-design processes to foster innovation and redefine expertise as a politically rooted and community-driven practice.

The study underscores persistent challenges related to NGEU and its local implementation. The tension between the rigid constraints of PNRR timelines and the participatory values of commons-based governance often resulted in severe contradictions. Furthermore, the lack of explicit political

recognition and support for commons-based approaches by local authorities exposed these initiatives to vulnerabilities, including resource deprivation and inconsistent policy implementation.

Facing these challenges, the findings reveal a new understanding of accountability in public spending. Namely, commons propose a relational and process-oriented accountability that prioritizes responsiveness to disadvantaged communities, transparency, and collective decision-making. These practices challenge the neutrality of conventional participatory tools and emphasize the importance of trust and mutual responsibility between institutions and communities.

Future research should explore how these alternative mechanisms of accountability and participation can be recognised and safeguarded in legal frameworks at all levels, as a condition to ensure transparency, democracy, and substantial equality in the governance of public resources.

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