A bottom-up art event gave birth to a process of community empowerment in an Italian village

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Abstract: Although community participation is a component of community empowerment, it often remains a theoretical exhortation. Reporting experiences which enable people to take control of their lives, can be useful to suggest practical elements for promoting empowerment. This article describes the experience of a Sardinian village (Ulassai), that developed into a community empowerment. The Laverack’s operational domains were used to measure the community empowerment process. The process started in 1979 ‘almost by chance’ with an art performance that was the entry point for community participation. This experience has been the foundation for the community empowerment. Citizens acquired the ‘ability of thinking and planning as a community and not mere individuals’. In the following 30 years citizens gave birth to several outcomes rooted in that event. The intermediate outcomes highlight the ‘ability of action by a group to mobilize existing resources, and act collectively against opposing forces’. The long-term outcomes demonstrate the ‘ability to integrate the cultural experiences that strengthened the community’s identification into a sustainable community asset’, and the ‘ability to cope with global environmental challenges and to collaborate on an equal basis with other stakeholders. The pathways to community empowerment, showed by the community of Ulassai, overlap with the ‘operational domains’. The Ulassai experience shows that the empowerment process can start from an event apparently unrelated to health promotion. This community experience illustrates the positive role arts can play in community development. Hence, the call for health promoters to look carefully into those situations that occur naturally in communities. (Global Health Promotion, 2012; 19(1): 05-13)

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Although community participation is a fundamental component of the community empowerment process, it often remains a theoretical exhortation which is difficult to apply in communities that are more and more heterogeneous.

Ideally health promotion efforts use effective strategies to enhance sustainable participatory attitudes within a community that will lead to the development of empowerment. Yet identifying these strategies is a challenge for professionals in the health promotion field and requires new ways of thinking and acting to challenge consolidated models (7).

Reporting experiences which enable people to take control of their lives can be useful to suggest practical elements for promoting community empowerment. Furthermore, it can illustrate the benefits of empowerment and thus serve as evidence of useful strategies. This evidence, over time, could orient the programme-funders towards adopting greater flexibility and allow empowerment to be an operational concept in health promotion programmes (3).

This article describes the experience of a Sardinian village which developed into a community empowerment process. The process started in 1979 with an art performance which so deeply affected each citizen that, even today, its effect is pronounced in the lives of community members. An interesting feature of the initial event is that it was simply designed to be an art performance, but it went beyond the typical aspects of art and assumed features of a health promotion action (9,10).

A report of the event and the outcomes that followed, 30 years later, offers the opportunity to use health promotion principles to evaluate the event’s efficacy in promoting community empowerment.

Methods

The idea of exploring the ‘Ulassai experience’ arose during the organization of the European Training Consortium in Public Health and Health Promotion XVIII Summer Course, held in Cagliari in 2009 (11). Ulassai was selected as an ideal site for the traditional field visit of the summer course because of its monument that is based on a Gramsci’s tale and because of other experiences unique to the community that exemplify health promotion processes (12). Ulassai, rather unconsciously, is a ‘health promotion laboratory’ since 1979 when the community implemented the art performance Legarsi alla montagna (Bound to the mountain). In the following years, community members gave birth to several activities, rooted in art performance, which demonstrate the progressive development of community empowerment.

To gather information about the art performance and the main events of the village, the researchers collected and analysed available documents: audio and video recordings, books, websites, and an interview with the artist Maria Lai (9,13–19).

A review of these materials allowed the researchers to identify the key informants of the community. These individuals were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires, in order to identify promoters of ideas, leaders, and stakeholders in the community. Moreover, the semi-structured format allowed interviewees to more freely express their thoughts, feelings, and emotions to allow the researchers to glean as many details as possible. Information from the interviewees contributed to an understanding of what has occurred in the community of Ullassi since the art performance to the present. The researchers visited Ullassi several times to confirm the accuracy of their recording of the events. Those events were documented using the same words as those used by interviewees or found in official documents.

The retrospective assessment of the Ullassai experience was conducted using Laverack’s operational domains as a framework that allowed for a methodical approach to view and measure community empowerment (3,20).

Results

The art performance ‘Legarsi alla montagna’

Ullassai is a village, with approximately 1600 inhabitants, located in the centre of Sardinia. In the past, the village was practically unknown to tourists and its economy was based exclusively on pastoral practices. Villagers have been described as ‘introverted, proud and diffident’ (9,16,17). Ullassai is situated in the mountains and is often threatened by landslides.

In 1979 the Mayor and the veterans’ association decided to build a monument in memory of soldiers who had died in World War II. They wished to have the monument built by a famous artist. They
contacted an artist born in Ulassai, Maria Lai, who was working in Rome at the time. They organized a public meeting that was attended by representatives from institutions, and the veterans’ association, as well as some citizens, and the artist. Upon hearing their request, Maria Lai replied that it was a ‘silly idea’ because a war memorial should not be identified with art, and that such a proposal requires innovation. Most of the meeting’s attendees were offended by this response, but ten citizens were intrigued by her viewpoint and continued the discussion. Their reflections flowed into a grassroots movement, that a year and a half later, caused the Mayor to recall Maria Lai. She wished to propose ‘something that would be rooted in the village culture, would not rely on solely one author, and would not need funding’. In the spring of 1981 she circulated through the village together with the grassroots movement. They talked with people and listened to them. A local legend was born out of these chats. The legend was about a girl who was sent to the mountain to bring bread to the shepherds. She was caught in a storm and found shelter in a cave with the shepherds. During the storm, a sky-blue ribbon that was carried along by the wind appeared. The girl ran after the ribbon, meanwhile the shepherds ignored it and remained in the cave only to be killed shortly after when the cave collapsed in a landslide. Maria Lai used the legend to present to the villagers a metaphor for an art performance. The blue ribbon symbolizes art, which can seem frivolous but provides directions for salvation. The artist proposed an action involving the entire village: the citizens should organize themselves and literally tie all the houses together with a sky-blue ribbon, as if they were all holding hands with each other. Then they would carry the ribbon up to the mountain and ask for peace. Her proposal aroused incredulity, and reaction of irony; people were divided into groups of those in favour of her idea and those against it. Reactions included:

She is crazy, it is not art

We had called her to make a monument and she can’t ask us to work on it

Some divisions also arouse at political and religious levels. The communist party did not support the artist because she was called by a Christian Democratic Mayor. The Mayor withdrew support because she did not want to attach a political meaning to the performance. The church had always interpreted the legend as the ribbon of salvation, the ribbon of the Virgin Mary; therefore the priest spoke of the idea as an act of desecration.

Only the grassroots movement believed in her idea. They encouraged her in spite of her reluctance to continue circulating from house to house and to account for the problem that had arisen from her proposal. She listened to everyone and many stories of grievances surfaced. People felt alone in this village, continuously fighting against each other and full of suspicions.

It was particularly difficult to convince people to accept the proposal because they did not wish to tie their houses to those of unfriendly neighbours. The main source of their resistance was their dignity: they feared being the object of laughter.

The grassroots movement took responsibility for the situation and became a driving force, the leaders.

After many discussions everyone overcame the problem by finding a creative solution. The ribbon would stay straight between houses where there was a grudge. The ribbon would be knotted where there was friendship. It would be tied into a bow where there was a great friendship; and where there was love, the traditional bread used for celebrations would be hung. Everyone participated by cutting 13 pieces of sky blue cloth, and producing 26 km of ribbon. Each family had its ribbon to tie.

The artist reconciled her proposal with the religious opposition by stating that she was borrowing the ribbon from the Virgin. On September 8, 1981, the day of the Virgin Mary, everyone tied his house with that of his neighbours. In one hour the entire village was tied up; no house was excluded. The following day three climbers carried the ribbon up the mountain. The ribbon then flew over the village, and the village burst with enthusiasm. Spontaneously, all citizens met in the main square of the village where they talked and danced throughout the night. That had not happened for many years.

The artist did not attend the performance. She remarked: ‘the community made its art performance’. The art performance was attended by art critics from Rome, regional media and people from other villages (9).
Short-Term Outcomes

The short-term outcomes are related directly to the implementation of the art event. The citizens unconsciously developed skills in advocating, communicating and mediating through the process that led to the art performance (9,10). They experienced ‘a sense of community’ and fostered an attitude towards participation. Advocating took the form of community mobilization. After the public meeting only ten citizens were in favour of the artist’s viewpoint. They reflected, discussed, and promoted the idea; and gradually, they gained social and political commitment from other community members. After a year and half, the idea of creating an innovative ‘monument’ was accepted by the community and the municipality.

The development of communication skills began when the artist and the grassroots movement circulated throughout the village to find support and inspiration for the art performance. Villagers talked and listened to people. Through talking, story telling, and presenting troubles and concerns, citizens began to identify and express their needs. They regained a willingness to talk and display their emotions, as highlighted by the spontaneous gathering at the end of the art performance.

Mediation was the key element required to ensure the participation of all citizens. The contrasting views that arose from the artist’s proposal was reconciled in a manner that promoted community participation. Citizens’ fears of losing dignity were not minimized, but instead they were taken into account. Resistance to participation was overcome with creativity. Citizens devised a ‘tie code’ and everyone was free to choose how they would use the ribbon to bind his or her house during the art performance.

Through these strategies the community became ready for the realization of the art performance, which represented an early stage of community participation. The process had a bottom up approach during which citizens expressed their needs and assumed equal power and voice in the decision-making process: they assumed control over the event that was implemented by the entire community without the presence of the artist.

The short-term outcomes can be summarized as the ‘ability of thinking and planning as a community and not mere individuals’.

Intermediate Outcomes

In the following three years the art performance served as input for other activities that were characterized by a strong link to art and by providing elements of community empowerment.

A sense of community and participatory attitude were stimulated by the art performance, and have since contributed to the cultural, social and economic growth of the village. The following examples illustrate its effects (16,18):

- For years the textile cooperative ‘Su Marmuri’ was suffering a crisis because of decreased demand for the traditional style of their products. The weavers took courage from the new atmosphere of mutual respect that had been generated by the art performance, and shared their concerns with Maria Lai. She designed a stylized picture of a goat which they could integrate into their products. The proposal did not persuade the weavers who were concerned with the idea of offering products that were too innovative. A member of the grassroots movement encouraged them to make a first carpet with the new design and promised that he would buy it himself. It was the beginning of collaboration with the artist who encouraged weavers to use their creativity. Over time their business has grown and now ‘it is becoming something greater than ourselves’.

- After the art performance, the village had at its disposal the money that was originally designated to construct the war monument. In the summer of 1982, women gathered together in the streets of the village to share their views with each other. They expressed a desire to have a public meeting place and asked to have an ancient wash-house restored. They gained the approval of political institutions and the community in general. The washhouse was decorated by Maria Lai, Costantino Nivola, and other artists, and since has become an attraction for tourists.

- At one point during that time, women self-mobilized in opposition to the religious institution regarding an issue concerning the main church of the village. The bishop ordered the priest to remove pictures of the ‘Via Crucis’ that had been created by Maria Lai, because he considered them to be inappropriate. Thus the pictures
were removed. The women did not accept this institutional imposition, and marched in procession bringing back the pictures, and hung them in the church. Since that moment the ‘Via Crucis’ continues to be exhibited in the Church, and now is a tourist attraction.

We can summarize these intermediate outcomes as an ‘ability of action by a group of not mere individuals to mobilize existing resources, involve partners, and act collectively against opposing forces’.

**Long-term Outcomes**

The long-term outcomes highlight that the attitude towards community participation that started with the art performance, continues to thrive leading to collaboration between citizens and other stakeholders, and allowing citizens to gain control of their village.

Examples are the establishment of the natural park *Parco dei Tacchi*, and of a wind farm (15,16,19,21):

- The community of Ulassai was the protagonist in the establishment of a park. The village served as a leader to reach an agreement with the five neighbouring municipalities. People from Ulassai assumed responsibilities for the implementation of the plan to protect and promote the area through the management of the financial resources. The park is now a destination of many hikers and contributes to the development of economically linked activities (restaurants, hotels, tourist guides).

- The community was one of the main stakeholders that worked to establish a wind farm. People from Ulassai discerned the advantages and disadvantages of the plan and reached a joint decision. Today the wind farm is an economic resource for the village. It employs 25 people; and the municipality earns about €780 000 annually which it directs towards social and cultural services.

The realization of the natural park and the wind farm by Ulassai represent unique events in Sardinia. Establishment of natural parks has always been hampered by citizens of the mountain communities who are accustomed to managing the land as if it were private property and are afraid of losing control over the territory. The installation of wind farms is welcomed by some, but often conflicts with the NIMBY (not in my back yard) syndrome for its impact on the landscape. Many institutions proposed such potentially profitable projects, yet fail to implement them because they always follow a top-down approach (21,22). These challenges regarding the environment and energy resources are priorities worldwide; they have been successfully managed in Ulassai.

We summarize these long-term outcomes as an ‘ability to cope with global environmental challenges and to collaborate on an equal basis with other communities, regional and national administrations and industrial companies’.

The process of community empowerment is also evident in the cultural life of the village. In the past education and traditions were considered important at an individual level, but were not mobilized as community assets. Social and cultural growth, which was activated by the art performance, flowed in initiatives through which the individual cultural background became a common heritage. The establishment of the cultural association *Sa Perda e su Entu*, and the art foundation *Stazione dell’Arte* are the main examples (9,13,15,16,17,23):

- The cultural association was established in 1995 with the goal of promoting broader cultural cooperation among all parts of the community. In 1993 one individual thought to create a library for collecting documents about the local culture. When the idea was shared with people involved in the grassroots movement, it became a reality and expanded. Today, *Sa Perda e su Entu* is more than a library; it is a cultural network that shares documents, photos, films, poetry, ideas, and an exchange of information about the traditions and history of the village. It helps to strengthen the sense of ownership and community cohesion, and also promotes local resources.

- The foundation *Stazione dell’Arte* was founded in 2004 by the will of the entire village of Ulassai. The grassroots movement was aware of the artist’s intention to create a museum for her work in another village and thus advocated the idea of establishing the museum in Ulassai. The Mayor and the community approved the idea and agreed to convert the premises of an old abandoned train station into a museum. The artist accepted the
proposal and donated her work to the community which in turn mobilized itself to seek the funds for the project. The foundation’s aim is to disseminate art as a vehicle for civil, social and cultural growth, not only in the village of Ulassai but also throughout the territory. The museum was inaugurated in 2006 and hosts international workshops, and artistic events that bridge the gap between Ulassai and the outside world.

We can summarize these long-term outcomes as the ability to integrate the cultural experiences that strengthened the community’s identification into a sustainable community asset that is oriented both to local and global levels.

Since 1980 the country’s economy has grown and tourism now represents one of the main resources. Various stakeholders of tourism over the years have learned to advertise their own business, but they have not yet succeeded in creating a cooperative to improve and strengthen the promotion of the natural and artistic heritage of the village. As the citizens said ‘the creation of the cooperative is the current challenge’.

The successful culmination of the ‘sense of community’, that developed in recent decades, was evident in 2009 for the celebration of the 90th birthday of Maria Lai. To her surprise, all citizens gathered spontaneously in the main square to celebrate, talk and share their history as a community.

Discussion

The events that occurred in Ulassai over the past 30 years can be considered as an example of community empowerment. These events are not the result of a health promotion program with definite aim and objectives, but rather the result of a natural path created by the community. Over time, community members acquired the skills to bring about social, economic, and political changes (9,16,24).

This process started ‘almost by chance’ with the mere proposal of building a monument. That proposal led to a debate and triggered the involvement of citizens. The synergy between the artist and the grassroots movement allowed for involvement of the community from the beginning, thus subverting the traditional ‘top-down’ approach. This process gave voice to citizens and allowed for identification of the real problem of the community: a lack of social cohesion (9,13,16,17). The art performance offered a symbolic way to ‘binding house to house, person to person’ by allowing people to experiment with a sense of identification, a sense of belonging, a sense of making a difference within a group (9).

This role of art in enhancing social relationships has been highlighted by several art critics. Nicolas Bourriaud states that:

art is the place that produces a specific sociability because it tightens the space of relations.

Claire Bishop points out that:

the creativity behind socially engaged art re-humanizes a society

emphasizing that the aesthetic component of this kind of art already inherently contains the ameliorative process of social change. Additionally she claims that:

there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. (25)

Through the art performance citizens realized that their ability to think and to plan as a community had the capacity to affect ‘decisions’. This experience of participation has been the foundation for the process of community empowerment. Over time Legarsi alla Montagna has produced many effects, like a pebble in water that spreads its effect through ripples.

The pathways to community empowerment, showed by the community of Ulassai, overlap with the ‘operational domains’ proposed by Laverack (2,3,20,26).

The improvement of community participation began during the art performance when all citizens participated and influenced the implementation of the event. Since then community members have gradually taken a leading role in decisions that affect them.

The development of leadership was born from the grassroots movement that, over time, has become a reference point for serving the needs of the community. The grassroots movement encourages
citizens’ participation, interacts with the municipality, and on several occasions, realizes the potential that different events could have on the entire community. By doing so, the grassroots movement provides a direction.

The birth of an equitable relationship with the outside agent promoted the development of the bottom-up approach. Maria Lai was the outside agent. The artist’s proposal was the trigger in the empowerment process. Her manner of listening and being invisible at times enabled the community to gain control over the events that shape its life.

The building of empowering organizational structures was best expressed by the establishment of the cultural association and the foundation Stazione dell’arte. These institutions have roles in fostering a sense of belonging and interpersonal relations. These institutions pursue their goals and make a contribution to solving the various challenges that arise in community life.

The increase of problem assessment capacities is evident in the ability of citizens who address challenges. Citizens devised a ‘tie code’ to make the art performance and they also established an intersectoral collaboration to realize the natural park and the wind farm.

The improvement of resource mobilization is evident in the radical economic conversion of Ulassai from a village devoted exclusively to pastoral practices to a community that can take advantage of all its available resources.

The strength of links to other organization and people is evident in the ability of the community to turn outwards and to develop relationships and partnerships with other institutions and villages.

Although there is no known hierarchy among these domains, the experience of Ulassai suggests that the combination of two domains triggered the process of participation and, consequently, that of empowerment.

The interplay between the two domains outside agent and leadership has been the key access for the community participation. The artist made a proposal but did not force the community to provide an answer. Rather, she waited for someone to take the idea and spread it through the community, thus enabling community members to gain a foundation of empowerment. This capacity is related to the freedom of the artist; she had no pressure, goals to be achieved, budget to follow, or pre-determined time-frame (9).

The grassroots movement acted as innovator that, according to Roger’s theory about the Diffusion of Innovation, was the quickest to adopt the artist’s proposal and launch it into the social system. Additionally, the grassroots movement dedicated time, attention, and sensitivity to ensure the sustainability of various initiatives implemented by the community (8,27).

Conversely, health promotion programmes are often bound by pre-determined goals, budgets and deadlines. These constraints are linked to the funding system and make it difficult for a community to be involved in the stages of mobilization and programming. This problem negatively affects the natural path to empowerment (1,8).

When community involvement is only used during the implementation phase of projects, citizens may influence the realization of the project, but this alone does not represent a process of community empowerment (20). When topics and activities are decided with a top-down approach, a programme may not meet the public’s needs, and may risk losing potential opportunity for empowerment such as the development of small groups, community organizations, partnerships, and ultimately social and political action (8,26).

The Ulassai experience shows that the empowerment process can start from an event apparently unrelated to health promotion and it may develop as an unplanned process. This aspect makes concrete the statement of the Ottawa Charter:

health promotion is not just the responsibility of the health sector.

According to this line, the health promoters should make room for those areas that enhance the development of empowerment through natural pathways, unstructured and not specifically directed to this objective. In these situations, the role of health promoters is to read the events according to health promotion principles, emphasizing the strengths that have enabled the development of empowerment. Placing these ‘natural processes’ within the framework of health promotion has two meanings. First it gives value to the path taken by the community, making people aware of the process of empowerment and helping to convey their experience to future generations. Second it helps to spread ways of thinking and acting that challenge
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