

Inside the social ‘dark matter’. Civic participation, hybrid networks and the question of self-produced democracy in Rome¹.

Luca Brignone

Dipartimento di Ingegneria Civile, Edile e Ambientale
(DICEA), Sapienza Università di Roma
luca.brignone@uniroma1.it
[orcid.org/ 0009-0005-9577-490X](https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9577-490X)

Carlo Cellamare

Dipartimento di Ingegneria Civile, Edile e Ambientale
(DICEA), Sapienza Università di Roma
carlo.cellamare@uniroma1.it
[orcid.org/ 0000-0002-5550-4324](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5550-4324)

Stefano Simoncini

Dipartimento di Ingegneria Civile, Edile e Ambientale
(DICEA), Sapienza Università di Roma
stefano.simoncini@uniroma1.it
[orcid.org/ 0000-0002-2188-7603](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2188-7603)

Received: January 2026 / Accepted: June 2026 | © 2026 Author(s).
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Firenze University Press.
DOI: 10.36253/contest-17089

keywords

civic participation
self-organisation
social networks
socio-spatial inequalities

1. Introduction: inside the ‘dark matter’ of self-organisation

At least since the global financial crisis, social and territorial inequalities have grown even in advanced capitalist systems, coinciding with declining public capacity for social protection and a broader depoliticisation of urban life (de Leonardis, Giorgi, 2013; D’Albergo, Moini, 2019; De Nardis, 2020). However, in many marginalised contexts, counter-trends are emerging: socio-spatial practices that revitalise collective action at a local level, often framed as ‘social innovation’ or ‘co-management of the commons’, which some analysts regard as ambivalent due to their more political dimensions (Cognetti, 2014; Simoncini, 2020; Campagnari and Ranzini, 2022).

Welfare State withdrawal and depoliticisation of society coexist with a proliferation of grassroots initiatives and civic activation in marginalised urban contexts. This paper investigates this social ‘dark matter’: civic participation organised relationally, yet largely invisible to registers. Across four large Italian cities, we relate Third Sector Entity (ETS) density to ISTAT’s composite distress index

(IDISE): in Milan and Turin, density falls sharply as distress rises; the association is weaker in Naples, and almost flat in Rome. This deviant signal is consistent with a hypothesised formal-to-informal translation of participation. To test this, we turn to Rome and develop 'new maps' of civic participation, mapping grassroots initiatives and the inter-organisational networks connecting them. These relational maps reveal a markedly different configuration from that of registered organisations: civic infrastructures emerge, concentrated in marginal areas, combining formality with informality and conflict with collaboration. This hybridity is politically significant only insofar as it resists reduction to mere subsidiarity or destitute informality; whether it amounts to a self-produced territorial democracy remains an open, analytically demanding question. We therefore propose a replicable protocol to evaluate these civic infrastructures' inclusiveness and transformative capacity, and discuss implications for planning policies capable of supporting them without absorbing or standardising their forms of action.

These are only partially captured by traditional indicators of civic participation, although they form part of a longer-term trend in which participation is shifting from political parties to society itself (Melucci, 1994; Fonović, 2021).

Scholars have long hypothesised an expanding basin of 'active citizenship' beyond the non-profit sector – commons care, mutual support, hybrid advocacy-service repertoires (Moro, 2022) – increasingly difficult to separate from social movements, whose recent evolution has been described as a "politicisation of everyday life" in which society itself takes responsibility for change (Bosi, Zamponi, 2019; della Porta, 2020; De Nardis, 2020).

Two concepts require clarification at the outset. 'Civic participation' here refers to citizens' engagement in public action in pursuit of collective interest (Lichterhan, Eliasoph, 2014; Millefiorini, 2017), across the material and immaterial dimensions through which it manifests in the urban environment: the care of common spaces and resources, claim-making, access to culture and services, and mediation between communities and institutions (Marchetti, Millefiorini, 2017; Bosi, Zamponi, 2019). The definition is deliberately broad, encompassing both institutionally promoted and grassroots, autonomously initiated forms of participation, which are often not completely separable.

This breadth, however, carries significant tensions. As Pellizzoni (2005) argues, the bound-

ary between mere cooperation and participation carrying a genuine political stake cannot be defined in the abstract, but must be derived from how actors behave within the specific situations they inhabit. Moini (2011) converts this caution into a radical warning: participatory practices, especially those promoted by institutions, have often functioned to defuse conflict, depoliticise competing interests, and offset social costs of neoliberalism, stabilising existing power relations rather than transforming them – a recurring pattern that suggests the risk of heterodirected participation is not merely accidental, but one to which its prevalent institutional forms remain structurally exposed. It is this combination of definitional indeterminacy and structural exposure to heterodirection that motivates the narrower category of ‘self-organisation’: collective action initiated and sustained by civic actors themselves, anchored in local needs and proximity, often outside institutional sponsorship, and sometimes in tension – or even conflict – with “instituted society” (Castoriadis, 1975) and established regulatory frameworks, ranging from informal practices to partially formalised configurations adopted for pragmatic reasons (Cellamare, 2018; 2019; Cognetti, 2014). Operating predominantly at the boundary between formality and informality, self-organisation is structurally less exposed to external direction than more institutionalised or top-down forms of participation. In its most developed forms

– when actors normally excluded from formal political voice come to coordinate territorial projects around a shared, general-interest perspective – self-organisation can give rise to a substantive informal democracy: a form of self-produced territorial democracy operating precisely where formal political channels prove inadequate to urban democratic life (Cellamare, 2023). For these reasons, we will try to connect and articulate both these concepts – civic participation and self-organization – rather than collapse one into the other: precisely to simultaneously take into account different scales of action and different forms of civic subjectivity.

Regarding highly structured civic participation, data from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) census on nonprofit institutions indicate a decline in volunteering over the last decade (2011-2021), especially among medium- and large-sized organisations, coupled with dynamics of fragmentation and specialisation. Taken in isolation, this data would suggest an overall weakening of civic participation, but some recent analyses have sought to attribute it to a more complex and ambivalent process (Caltabiano et al., 2024): a partial translation of civic participation from the formal to the informal dimension¹, recomposing social capital into new proximity-based ‘associative worlds’ that combine formal and informal elements and that are organised through relational infrastructures largely invisible to registries.

From this perspective, the call for 'new maps' (Caltabiano e Zucca, 2024: 27) is not just a methodological refinement but an epistemic necessity: standard proxies privilege what is formally registered and organisationally stabilised, while remaining blind to socially consequential but organisationally elusive forms of civic action.

The translation hypothesis runs against a classic expectation in the field: that civic participation is socially and spatially stratified, with higher education and well-being – typically associated with the cultural and social capital of the new middle classes² – translating into higher rates of volunteering and structured associational participation (Biorcio e Vitale, 2016; Pratschke, De Falco, 2024). This thesis, commonly referred to as the 'social centrality' of civic participation, provides the baseline against which we read the spatial distribution of Third Sector Entities (ETS) registered in the National Single Register of the Third Sector (RUNTS). International literature interprets this baseline in a complex way: organisational density can diverge from socio-economic need, producing 'charity deserts' and 'hotspots' depending on supply factors, subsectors, and institutional context (Grønbjerg, Paarlberg, 2001; Joassart-Marcelli, Wolch, 2003; Mohan, 2015; McDonnell et al., 2020), and registers can systematically underestimate informal, locally rooted volunteering – particularly in disadvantaged areas, where formal organisations tend

to be smaller and more fragile (Clifford, 2012; Galway et al., 2012; McDonnell et al., 2020).

Taken together, these two strands – an apparent decline that is plausibly a translation, and registers that systematically miss informal activation in the very areas where it may matter most – point to the same blind spot. We follow Smith (2000) and Cnaan, Milofsky and Hunter (2008) in naming it through the metaphor of 'dark matter': grassroots associations and informal civic infrastructures resemble matter that neither emits, absorbs, nor reflects light, yet – like its astrophysical counterpart – can be quantitatively prevalent and structurally decisive.

Naming the problem, however, does not resolve how to study it – and existing research approaches are not well equipped to do so. Quantitative approaches map formally registered organisations and yield comparable spatial data, but remain blind to whatever escapes administrative visibility; qualitative approaches investigate single practices in depth, but rarely scale into systematic, comparable evidence of civic participation's actual extent or transformative reach. This article, which draws on and expands upon the findings of the 2022 PRIN PNRR project 'Urban co-production and inclusive planning in marginalised contexts' (Brignone et al., 2026), aims to bridge this gap, using inter-organisational networks as a bridging concept (Simoncini, 2020). Network ties are at once extensive - mappable

and comparable across large territories – and relational, revealing which issues combine, at which scales, and through which configurations³. Placing networks at the centre of the analysis shifts the object of observation from individual practices to trans-scalar processes: the sedimentation of ties encodes information about which civic configurations are consolidating, emerging, or remaining fragile, even where direct temporal depth is lacking. Indeed, the question shifts, accordingly, from where civic participation is present to how civic formations organise, coordinate, and extend across contexts, issues, and scales. It is this architecture that sustains the critical aim of the paper: not merely to document the distribution of civic participation, but to ask whether the configurations it reveals are inclusive and capable of generating lasting socio-spatial change, or remain confined to compensatory arenas that leave existing inequalities untouched.

These questions are not merely empirical and methodological; they have direct implications for planning. Contemporary spatial planning is under increasing pressure from two interconnected dynamics: the progressive erosion of public capacity to guide urban and territorial transformations and the reduction of public participation to an ancillary tool in market-driven processes or projects, disconnected from any vision of systemic socio-spatial change (Cellamare, Montillo, 2020: 323-341; Brignone

et al., 2022b). Place-based experiments can generate inclusive outcomes locally, yet rarely extend beyond their specific contexts; among the reasons why this does not happen, there is first of all the lack of analysis tools capable of integrating dark matter into innovative planning processes (Brignone, Simoncini, 2024). Whether a systematic, recursive reading of this civic potential can provide planning with such a knowledge base is a question we return to in the final discussion (Section 5).

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 outlines the multi-layered research design. Section 3 (Findings I) builds a comparative baseline on Third Sector Entities and socio-economic distress across four Italian cities, identifying Rome as an apparent deviant case. Section 4 (Findings II) introduces ‘new maps’ of self-organisation and inter-organisational networks in Rome. Section 5 discusses their implications for the spatial distribution of civic participation and for inclusive planning, and concludes by summarising the paper’s contribution, limits, and directions for further research.

2. Data and methods

Methodologically, the paper develops a sequential research design across three mapping layers: the National Single Register of the Third Sector (RUNTS) as a baseline for formalised civic participation; a multi-source mapping of self-organisation beyond reg-

isters; and a relational mapping of inter-organisational networks. We begin by treating administrative visibility as a necessary but partial proxy for civic participation, mapping ETS density in RUNTS across the four largest Italian cities (Milan, Turin, Rome, Naples) – calculating ETS per 10,000 residents⁴ – and correlating density with two complementary measures of socio-spatial conditions: the Index of Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IDISE) and average income – this one for Rome only. This operationalises the ‘social centrality’ hypothesis and supports a comparative reading of patterns and city-specific deviations that motivates the second mapping layer. RUNTS is thus treated not as an exhaustive representation of civic participation, but as a selective baseline, capturing its administratively legible component while flagging what remains outside its field of observation – consistent with spatial scholarship relating nonprofit/charity density to social need while accounting for register-related biases such as “headquarters effects” and missing local branches (Grønbjerg, Paarlberg, 2001; Galway et al., 2012; McDonnell et al., 2020). We treat the ETS-IDISE slope as a comparative diagnostic tool rather than evidence of a causal link⁵.

On this basis, we consider Rome as a privileged observatory and proceed to construct ‘new maps’ of social capital. Going beyond the RUNTS, we have collected data from multiple sources, codifying a taxonomy and a collection

method conceived as recursive. The objective is twofold. First, we map self-organisation (grassroots initiatives), which tend to remain outside of administrative registers. We understand ‘self-organisation’ – a definition derived here inductively from this fieldwork rather than fixed a priori, consistent with how it is used in the Introduction – as a heterogeneous field in which associations, active citizenship practices, and social movements tend to hybridise, and where two partially overlapping interpretative strands converge: the management of common goods and social innovation, i.e., collective uses of shared resources and new responses to emerging needs. In this sense, we emphasise the key concept of (grassroots) ‘initiatives’⁶, more informal and rooted in local practices, rather than the more ‘subjective’ concept of ‘organisations’.

In this regard, we reconstruct inter-organisational links to understand how initiatives relate to each other, but also to more formalised actors and institutions, and how network structures are configured in different urban contexts. Because initiatives are fluid and boundaries are blurred, the mapping is based on iterative updates and cross-checks across sources, guided by minimum inclusion criteria: an inclusive orientation of social capital⁷, local roots, and continuity over time.

The research was conducted incrementally over the past five years through (LabSU-DICEA, Fairwatch 2022): (1) reorganisation of

Research design and data with the three mapping layers: RUNTS → self-organisation (grassroots initiatives) → inter-organisational networks.

Tab.1

datasets from self-mapping of practices; (2) documentary research and mapping of committees, disputes, and civic hubs; and (3) iterative fieldwork and firsthand knowledge of actors and networks. This mapping is not strictly separate from RUNTS – some initiatives are registered there too – but mainly expands observation into the ‘dark matter’ that eludes administrative registers. Importantly, it is not limited to ‘units’ (organisations/initiatives) but incorporates relationships: inter-organisational links through which co-production, mobilisation, and resource circulation occur. This follows Diani’s (2015) central thesis that organizational attributes and relational position are empirically distinct, and sometimes divergent, properties of civic actors – the methodological premise for reading networks as the layer where civic participation can reveal its actual centre of gravity, as determined by ‘dark matter’. Network-layer links are conservatively reconstructed from documentary evidence of co-membership and co-signature (2021–present), verified by cross-referencing traces of active participation (e.g., co-organisation and co-authorship for public events, collective actions and political statements). This supports an initial understanding of the combinations of issues, scales of intervention, and conflict/collaboration attitudes. At this stage, the mapping captures the structure of the networks more than the intensity of the ties, but in this way already qualifies nodes

and networks by showing how they overlap, intertwine, contract, and extend depending on the issues, practices, and visions that inform them⁸.

For this reason, extensive mapping also provides the basis for the subsequent intensive phase. Currently in its launch phase, the latter, instead of case studies on individual entities, selects, based on the multilevel mapping itself, contexts and network configurations to compare, to understand how context type and process interact. While the levels of extensive mapping are constructed through documentary research and fieldwork, the intensive phase relies on surveys and interviews. A structured survey instrument assesses networks and their contexts along two evaluative macro-criteria, each composite of more specific components. Inclusiveness comprises social composition, target of action, and governance and permeability (how decision-making power is distributed internally, and how open it remains to new or marginal voices). Transformative capacity comprises operational efficacy, trans-scalarity (the cognitive and operational capacity to engage higher scales, escaping the ‘local trap’: D’Albergo, Moini, 2011; Purcell, 2006), and hybridisation (multi-issue range and conflictual/collaborative repertoire). Durability, finally, is a longitudinal property contingent on both criteria, assessable only through recursive observation⁹.

The following Table 1 therefore specifies the

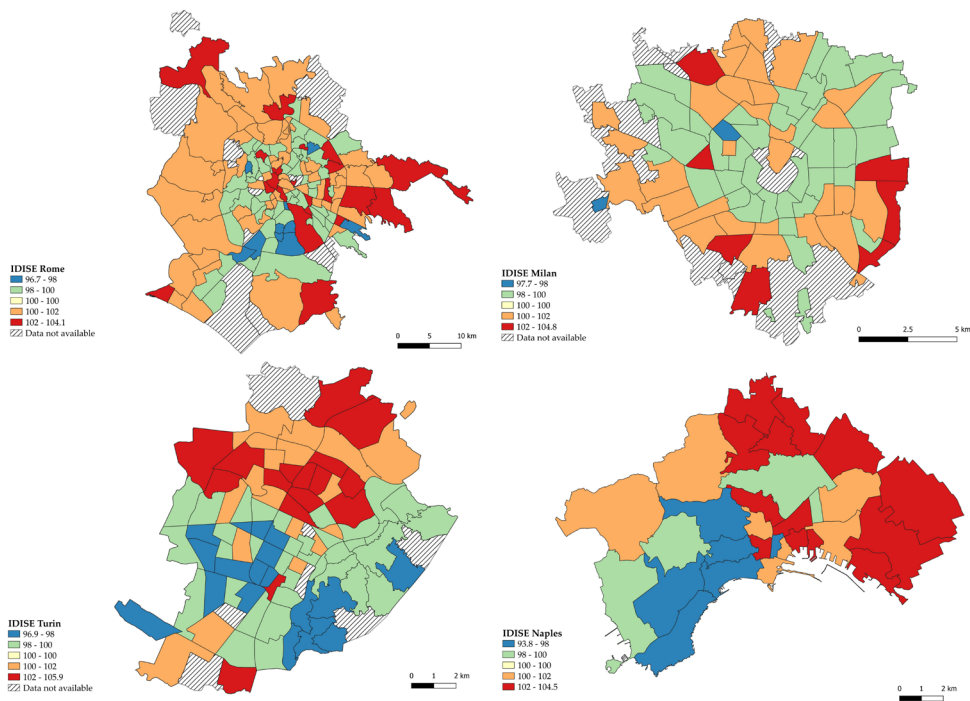
Object	Sources / data	Density indicator	Spatial analysis	Output
RUNTS map (formalised social capital)	ETS registered in RUNTS (geo-referenced); sub-municipal boundaries; income (mean per-capita); composite distress indicator (IDISE); contextual institutional information	ETS per 10,000 residents	Cross-city comparison (Milan, Turin, Rome, Naples); correlations and regression lines with income and IDISE	Selective geography of formalised participation; baseline test of social centrality; identification of 'apparent deviance' in Rome under IDISE
Map of self-organisation (grassroots initiatives)	Multi-source dataset beyond registers: LabSU reconnaissance (committees, self-managed social centres, civic hubs, mutual aid networks, urban gardens, energy communities); administrative acts; web and media research; in situ observation; iterative cross-validation	Initiatives per 10,000 residents	Correlation/regression with income; hotspot and clustering analyses; comparison with RUNTS geographies	Geography of civic engagement beyond RUNTS; detection of proximity-based civic infrastructures and arenas of self-organisation; first comparative assessment of whether spatial patterns diverge from RUNTS gradients
Inter-organisational networks	Reconstruction of territorial/thematic networks (~30) from documentary and online sources (websites, social media/local media, public documents) and field reconnaissance; linkages among mapped actors; ties defined through co-membership and co-signature (2021-present) with explicit boundary rules and cross-checks on active participation.	Preliminary attributes (issues, scale, repertoires of action, conflict/mediation positions); full relational metrics (degree, centrality, brokerage) to follow from the intensive phase	Mapping of ties and cores; comparison across areas; trans-scalar reading; identification of territorial/network patterns and outliers	Relational reading of civic infrastructures 'in action'; identification of network architectures and brokerage; hypothesis on recomposition into heterogeneous constellations ("new as-sociative worlds") to be further tested; implications for planning and policy

data sources, units of analysis, and procedures adopted for each mapping level, to support clearer presentation of the results that follow.

3. Findings I – Third sector and socio-economic inequalities across Italy's four main cities

This section provides a comparative analysis of formalised participation with patterns of socio-economic inequality distribution in the four main Italian cities: Milan, Turin, Rome and Naples. Formalised participation is represented, as mentioned above, by Third Sector

Entities (ETS) registered in the RUNTS, considering administrative visibility as a necessary but partial basis for observing civic participation. To analyse this form of participation from a socio-spatial perspective, we proceed in three steps: we introduce the Socio-Economic Distress Index (IDISE), recently developed by ISTAT; we present the RUNTS datasets and the distribution of Third Sector Entities; and we correlate the two, testing the 'social centrality' thesis, across all four cities.



IDISE in Rome, Milan, Turin, Naples (ISTAT census enumeration sections aggregated to harmonised sub-municipal units).

Source: ISTAT ; authors' elaboration.

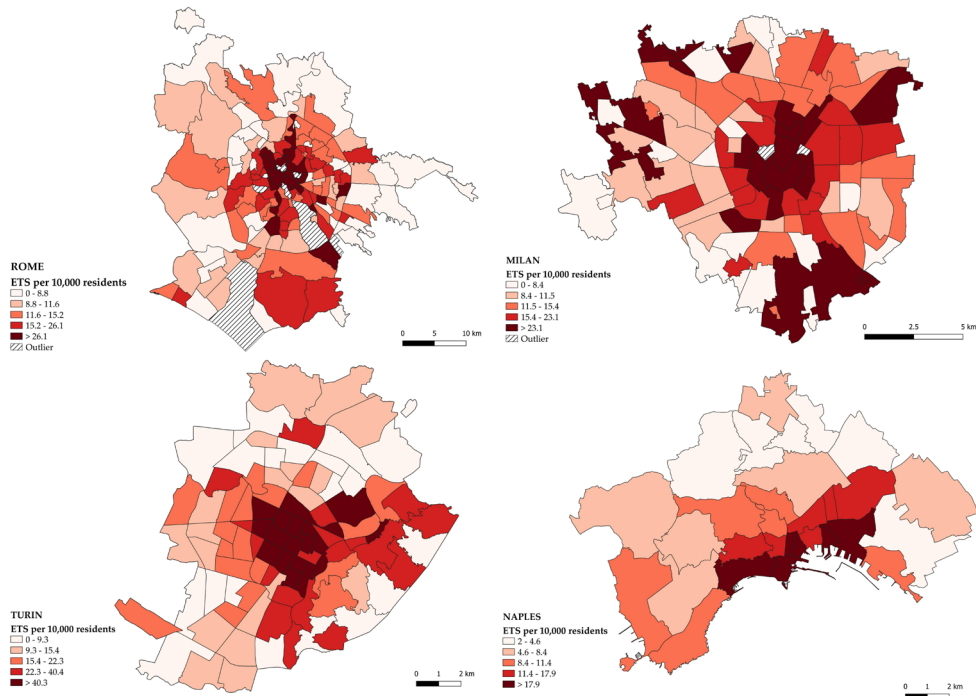
Fig.1

3.1 The socio-economic inequalities

The aim of this section is to answer this question: what is the relationship between formalised civic participation and socio-spatial inequalities? First of all, it is necessary to explain the criteria and data we use to interpret socio-spatial inequalities. In recent years, there have been numerous attempts to map inequalities (Andreoli et al. 2017; De Vidovich, 2018; Cognetti, Gambino, Larena Faccini 2020; Lelo, Monni, Tomassi, 2021), each valid in its own way. However, in this analysis, to allow recursive updates, we have chosen to use the most official and formal source possible, namely ISTAT, which recently published the

results of an experimental project aimed at measuring the socio-economic territorial inequalities of individuals¹⁰.

ISTAT's composite index (IDISE, built using the Adjusted Mazziotta-Pareto Index methodology) combines nine indicators with a high degree of territorial disaggregation: elderly housing vulnerability; jobless households; low equivalent income; employment rate; low work intensity; unstable employment; low educational attainment; NEET status; and early school leaving or grade repetition. The municipal average is set at 100; IDISE values are therefore comparable only across areas within the same municipality, not between different municipalities.



ETS (RUNTS) density (ETS per 10,000 residents) in Rome, Milan, Turin, Naples (harmonised sub-municipal units).

Source: authors' elaboration.

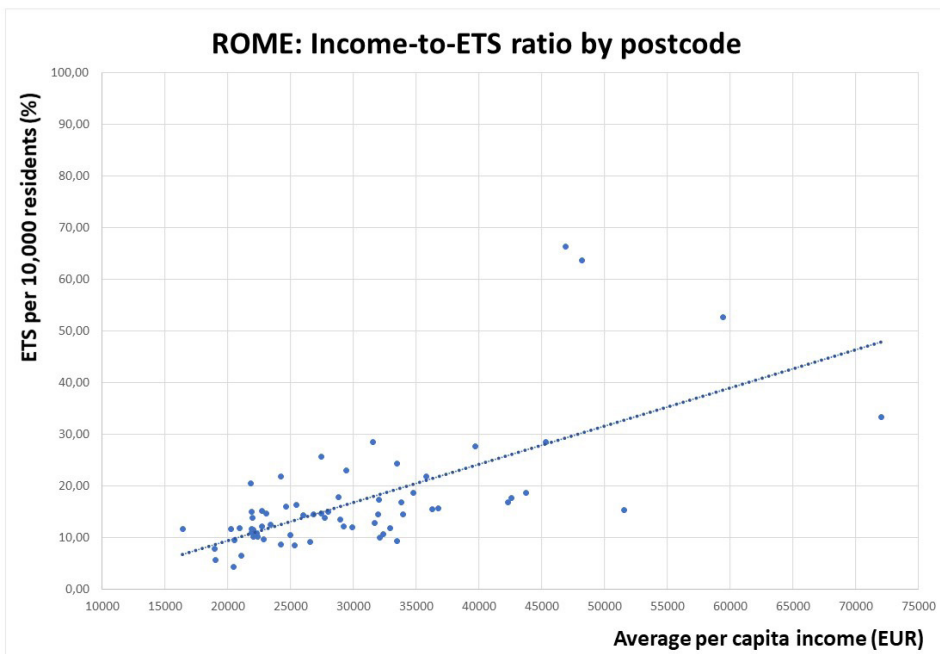
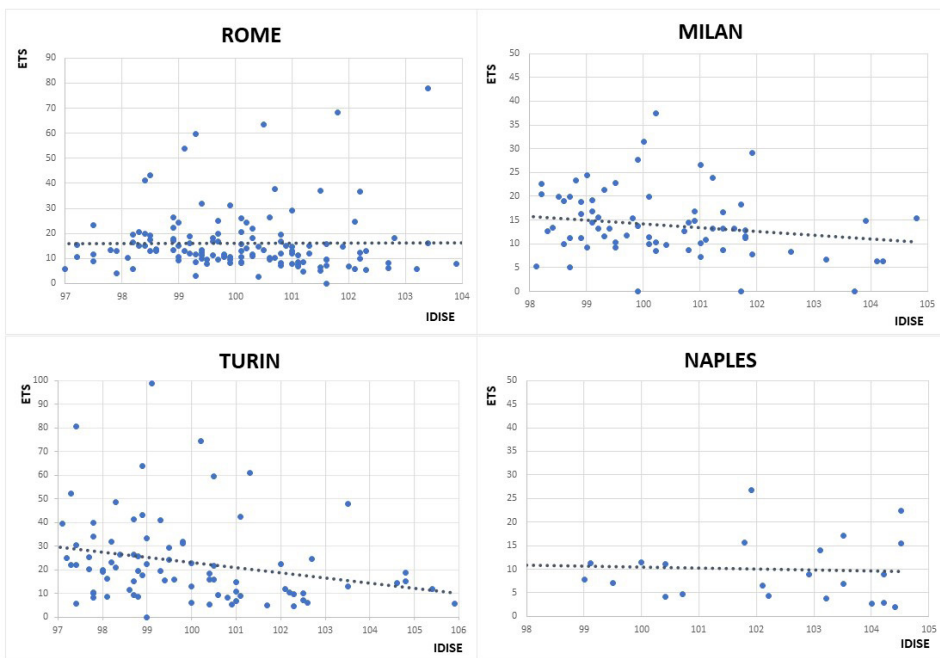
Fig. 2

The indicator distribution (Fig. 1) presents some data coverage limits, but allows us to recognize different patterns¹¹. Milan shows a fairly concentric distribution, from a near-average core towards the periphery. Turin and Naples are instead split along directional lines rather than concentric ones: in Turin the discomfort is higher in the Northern quadrant (Barriera, Valletta, Falchera), lower in the South, going up towards Lingotto and Mirafiori; in Naples the advantage is concentrated in the south-western and central areas, while the disadvantage mainly dominates the northern (Piscinola, Scampia, Secondigliano) and eastern (Ponticelli, Barra, Teduccio) suburbs. Rome

shows a more complex pattern: a weak concentric tendency is unsettled by a discontinuous, island-like distribution, skewed eastward and concentrated in specific public-housing estates (Acilia, San Basilio, Ottavia, Corviale, etc.; Lelo, Monni, Tomassi, 2021) and in pockets of the historic centre, where elderly residents living alone and charitable organisations providing fictitious residence to homeless people raise the index.

3.2 The distribution of Third Sector Entities (ETS) and its social centrality

The indicator that most can provide an apparently objective account of the geographical



Scatterplots: ETS (RUNTS) per 10,000 residents vs IDISE (Rome, Milan, Turin, Naples).

Source: authors' elaboration.

Fig. 3

Scatterplots: ETS (RUNTS) per 10,000 residents vs Average income per capita in Rome.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Fig. 4

distribution of social capital is the presence of Third Sector Entities (ETS). These are rather diverse entities, in terms of their values, size, sectors of activity and the actual significance of the participation.¹² In any case, all ETS today share the fact of being registered in RUNTS. Building on this administrative infrastructure, we rely on automated queries of the RUNTS database to reconstruct geo-referenced ETS datasets and compute a standardised measure of ETS density (ETS per 10,000 residents) for comparable sub-municipal units¹³.

Methodological caution is needed: RUNTS density can be distorted by legal-headquarters concentration in central areas, by anchor institutions (universities, hospitals, foundations, parishes), by 'edge effects' where infrastructural discontinuities (highways, railways) split statistically aggregated but socially differentiated areas, and by internal heterogeneity that smooths real contrasts. We therefore treat outliers as signals warranting qualitative interpretation, not noise to remove.

In absolute terms, the figures are as follows: 2,762 organisations are based in Milan, 1,887 in Turin, 4,845 in Rome, and 1,613 in Naples. Relative to the resident population, these values correspond to approximately 20.3 ETS per 10,000 inhabitants in Milan (≈ 1 ETS per 492 residents), 22.3 in Turin (≈ 1 per 449), and 17.6 in both Rome and Naples (≈ 1 per 569 for both). But the most significant aspect is the distribution within cities in relation to population. In

the maps in Figure 2, the population-weighted data show a generally concentric distribution, decreasing towards the periphery, of ETS density in all four cities, with the partial exceptions of Milan – partly due to the low density of peripheral parks (Lambro) or large areas of very recent real estate development (Montecity), and Rome, with widespread islands also with regard to the high density of ETS.

Building on this RUNTS-based dataset, we then establish a comparative baseline by relating ETS density to socio-economic distress (IDISE) across the four cities (Fig. 3). Milan and Turin show a consistently negative slope: higher distress is associated with lower ETS density. Naples exhibits a weak relationship, while Rome displays an almost flat line, suggesting that formalised participation is more evenly distributed across distress levels. This deviant pattern does not invalidate the baseline but indicates that the socio-spatial organisation of formally registered participation may be articulated differently in Rome – thus motivating the Roman deepening that follows. Crucially, Rome appears as an 'apparent deviant case' not in absolute terms but depending on how disadvantage is operationalised.

Interpreting this pattern requires considering what RUNTS tends to stabilise and make visible: associations that register are often medium-to-large, embedded in associational groups, active in 'classic' third-sector fields, and characterised by denser relations (Bassi,

Map	Layer	Source
Grassroots initiatives	Housing Squattings	Brignone, Cacciotti, 2018; Reter.info; Romattiva wordpress
	Self-managed Occupied Social Centers (CSOA) and mutualism	Reter.info; Romattiva wordpress
	Popular sport	Reter.info
	Educating communities	Fairwatch
	Civic Hubs	LabSU
	CERS (Solidarity Energy Communities)	NeXt Economia
	Self-managed social gardens	Zappataromana
	Neighbourhood committees	LabSU
	Food council	Roma Capitale

Summary of data used for the mappings

Source: authors' elaboration
Tab. 2

Lori, 2024: 56–58). This profile favours a concentration of legal headquarters and organisational presences in central areas; the historic centre also intercepts extreme vulnerabilities, since it concentrates services and support dispositifs (often run by large organisations) that intensify the distress captured by IDISE. The overlap between high administrative visibility of ETS and high observable vulnerability can therefore partly flatten the ETS–IDISE gradient – a compositional effect that warrants caution in interpretation, but does not fully explain the divergence.

For this reason, alongside the ETS–IDISE baseline we introduce a robustness check consistent with the ‘social centrality’ hypothesis (Biorcio e Vitale, 2016; Pratschke, De Falco, 2024): we relate ETS density (per 10,000 residents) to average per-capita income in 2021 (MEF) at postal-code (CAP) level. The shift to a more aggregated spatial unit is treated as a robustness test for macro-trends; excluding central areas that function as outliers, the ETS–income regression is positive (Fig. 4), bringing the Roman case back within the expectation

that formalised participation – at least for the organisational profiles most visible in RUNTS – is denser where well-being and socio-cultural capital are higher.

These results broadly support the consolidated ‘social centrality’ thesis on the role of new middle classes in formalised civic participation: acting as both ‘repairing’ agents vis-à-vis social fractures and ‘supplementary’ actors compensating for state shortcomings, thanks to a greater capacity to mobilise social capital in structured forms (Biorcio e Vitale, 2016; Pratschke, De Falco, 2024). However, recent analyses (Caltabiano et al., 2024) also point to a crisis of this ‘centrality’, driven by the combined effects of depoliticisation and socio-economic polarisation: associational life – especially its voluntary component – appears to be contracting and increasingly fragmented, with a territorially less interconnected ‘civic archipelago’ in which competition often prevails over cooperation. This is consistent with the translation hypothesis already outlined in the Introduction.

The Roman case, treated as ‘apparently devi-

ant' from the 'social centrality' thesis, could nevertheless provide fertile ground for testing the theory of the shift from formal to informal, given the evidence of a greater distribution of more structured civic participation. To this end, we pursued two mapping efforts in turn: first a protocol for mapping less structured civic participation (self-organisation), and then a mapping of civic networks that could represent a bridge between the two dimensions and thus a vehicle for that translation. We conceptualize these networks – introduced below, after self-organisation is presented – as 'civic infrastructures' (such as civic hubs, councils, committee or movement coordination bodies) which, from initial findings, appear to combine a triple hybridization: at the organizational level, they connect formal organizations and informal initiatives (sometimes within the same group); at the operational level, they adopt multi-issue approaches to multidimensional local needs; at the mobilization level, they combine advocacy and conflict-based approaches with proactive and collaborative postures.

4. Findings II – Self-organisation between commons and social innovation (Rome)

Rome is affected by a widespread peripheralisation (Keil, 2018; Brignone, 2024) taking different forms: hyper-touristification in the centre (Esposito, 2022), extractivism and gentrification in the historical periphery (Brignone, 2024), concentrated distress in public-housing neighbourhoods (Cellamare, Montillo, 2020),

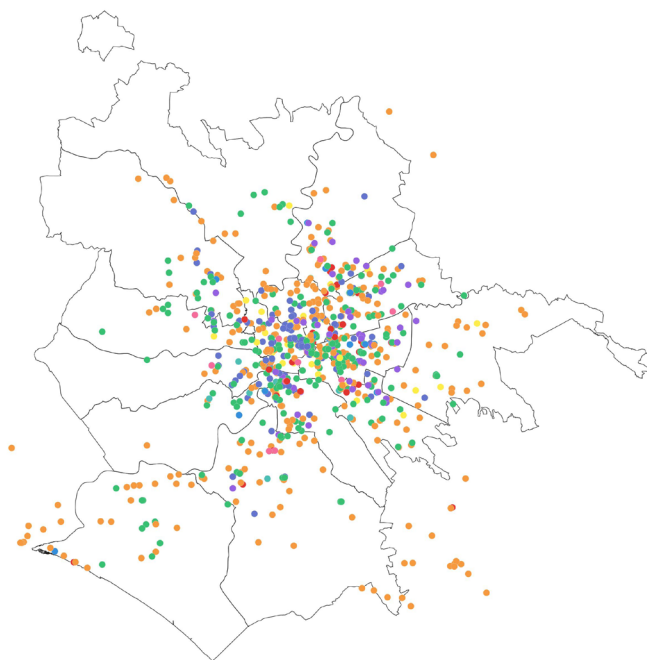
and physical distance, weak transport, and service deficits in the "GRA ring road city" (Cellamare, 2016) and urban sprawl outside the GRA. In this heterogeneous, hierarchical, and fragmented context, the spatial component is undoubtedly crucial both for the reproduction of inequalities and the development of civic participation. Exploring this correlation in Rome therefore requires broadening the scope of observation to include informality. We pursued this objective by mapping grassroots initiatives within the world of self-organization as a second level of mapping, targeting grassroots initiatives that can be weakly structured, volatile, and difficult or impossible to trace through administrative records. To outline an interpretative framework for these initiatives, as already mentioned, they can be viewed through two main lenses: common goods and social innovation, that is, collective uses and practices oriented towards the care and protection of common goods (tangible and intangible) and the experimentation of new solutions to emerging needs – whether in actors, tools, or objectives. It should be noted, however, that both categories contain ambivalences – social change vs. compensatory subsidiarity – which are debated but still lack adequate assessment tools (Brignone et al., 2022a; 2022b).

The dataset underlying this map (Table 2; Fig. 5) is assembled from existing self-mappings and 'good practices' maps, desk research across multiple sources (administrative bulletins and registers, local media, social-media

ROME

Grassroots initiatives

- Self-managed Occupied Social Centers
- Neighbourhood committees
- Educating communities
- Self-managed social gardens
- CERS (Solidarity Energy Communities)
- Popular sport
- Food Council
- Housing squattings
- Civic hubs



Grassroots initiatives in Rome.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Fig. 5

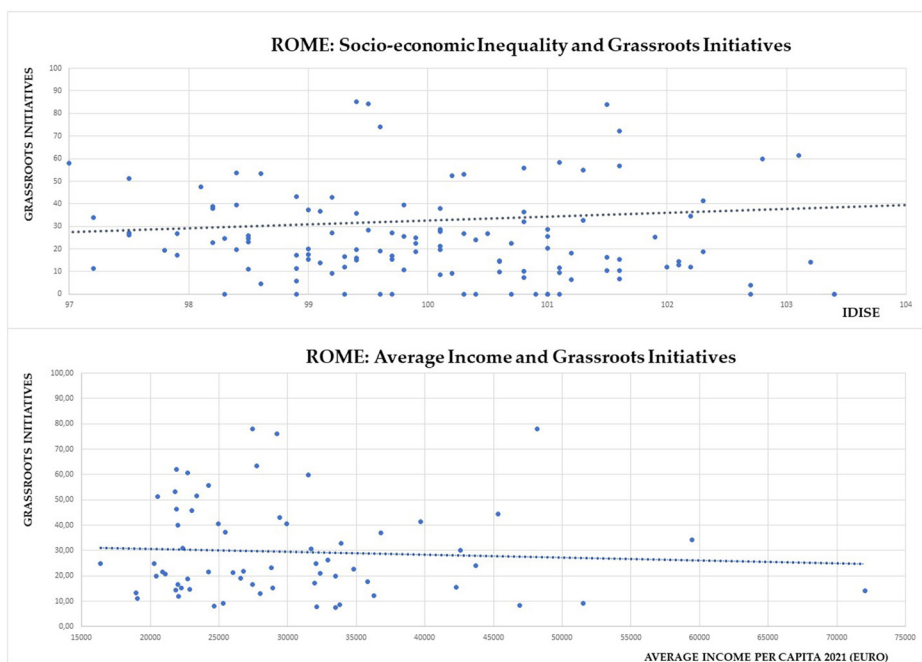
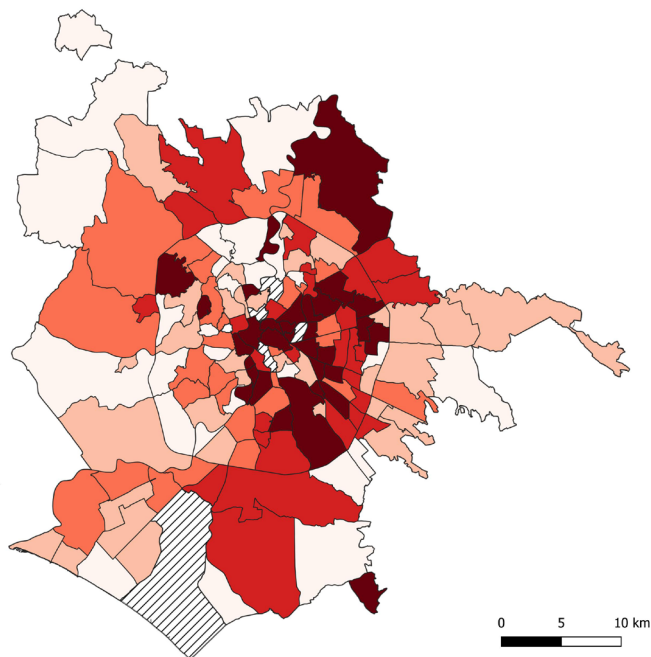
pages), and field investigations (LabSU-DI-CEA, Fairwatch 2022).

We are speaking of around eight hundred initiatives¹⁴, some registered in RUNTS, others in lighter formations, and others still entirely informal (lacking any recognised legal form) – a mix that means the comparisons with RUNTS below should be read as indicative rather than strictly rigorous. Unlike RUNTS, these initiatives are distributed far more evenly across the city (Fig. 6), and their relationship with income and IDISE follows a substantially different pattern (Fig. 7): a weak, slightly negative association with income, and a positive – rather than negative – one with IDISE. This does not simply 'invert' the RUNTS picture; rather, once

the field expands to include self-organisation, participation is redistributed in ways not reducible to the 'social centrality' gradient captured by registers. These remain map-based signals, however: moving beyond the question of *where* civic formations are present to *how* they collaborate and connect requires shifting from point-based to relational mapping – testing whether clusters correspond to genuine processes of recomposition, and revealing how initiatives connect across issues, scales, and institutional interfaces.

Network mapping allows for an analysis of connections, spatial patterns, scales, repertoires of action, thematic fields, and conflictual or collaborative attitudes. This relational

ROME
Grassroots initiatives density



Grassroots initiatives density in Rome.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Fig. 6

Scatterplots: Initiatives per 10,000 residents vs Average income per capita and IDISE in Rome.

Fig. 7

reading is particularly relevant for the two evaluative macro-criteria we believe are essential for an in-depth assessment of the value of civic participation. For inclusiveness, network heterogeneity is indicative of its structural component – social composition and target of action – though governance and permeability, and whether actors themselves experience the network as inclusive, remain accessible only through the intensive phase. For transformative capacity, multi-issue approaches and the combination of conflictual and collaborative repertoires are significant indicators of hybridisation, while trans-scalar is observable in how actors mediate between local and supra-local scales – its cognitive dimension, again, requiring direct engagement with actors. Durability is less directly observable at this stage, except through the stratification of different network ties between the same nodes, which offers only a first, indirect indication.

To systematically classify this variation and to make the networks comparable with one another and across different territories, we have developed a taxonomy of network types (Table 3), based on a key typological criterion: the predominant attitude towards institutions, treated as a three-valued variable – conflictual, collaborative or a mix of both. Networks of committees combine conflictual and collaborative repertoires; antagonistic networks occupy the conflictual pole; purpose-built networks occupy the collaborative pole. The predominant repertoire of actions adopted by each category closely follows this attitude, rather than varying independently: networks of com-

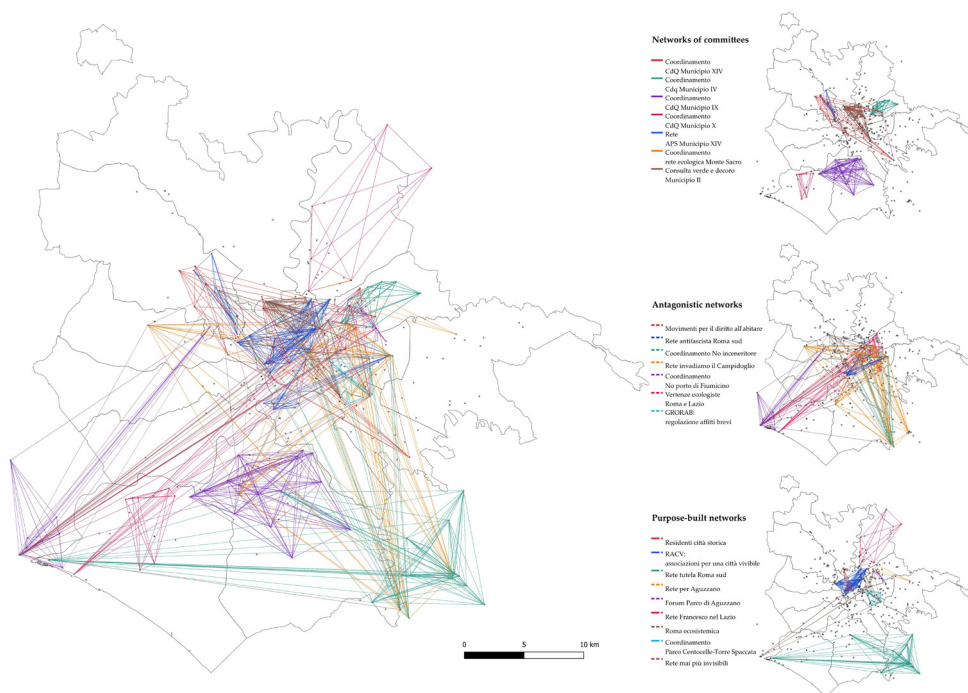
mittees cluster around active local citizenship, antagonism networks around advocacy and campaigning, and purpose-built networks around services and co-production. The scale is more variable but nonetheless highly recognisable: networks of committees tend more towards the micro-local, antagonism networks tend strongly towards trans-scalar, whilst purpose-built networks have an intermediate scalar centre of gravity. This structure allows us, as will be seen from the spatialisation, to visualise quite clearly how repertoire, attitude, and scale interrelate: through territorial co-presence and cross-membership, networks exchange experiences and visions, hybridising and linking, for example, support practices with advocacy, or project-based coalitions with conflict-driven mobilisations, and forming trans-scalar connections. The taxonomy, in this sense, does not do full justice to the hybridisation networks themselves produce through this territorial interweaving: the three categories are best read as background tendencies that overlap in practice, rather than as mutually exclusive classes.

The spatial distribution by network typology (Fig. 8) makes these characteristics and dynamics immediately appreciable: the arcs suggest that these civic groups, depending on the network type, cluster in proximity or expand to the municipal or city scale, transcending not only administrative but also socioeconomic boundaries. However, they are interconnected around nodes that act as a hinge, generating, as mentioned, hybridisation between the networks themselves. The

Networks type	Sub-type	Repertoire	Attitude towards institutions	Scale
Networks of committees	Municipal Advisory Committees	Active citizenship	Conflict / Collaboration	Sub-municipal / Neighbourhood
	Local coordination bodies			
Antagonism networks	Dispute networks	Advocacy and campaigning	Conflict	Supra-local / City-wide / Sub-municipal
	Environmental networks			
	Social Movement networks			
Purpose-built networks	Thematic networks	Services and co-production	Collaboration	City-wide / Sub-municipal
	Project networks			

Taxonomy of committee, antagonism, and purpose-built Networks.

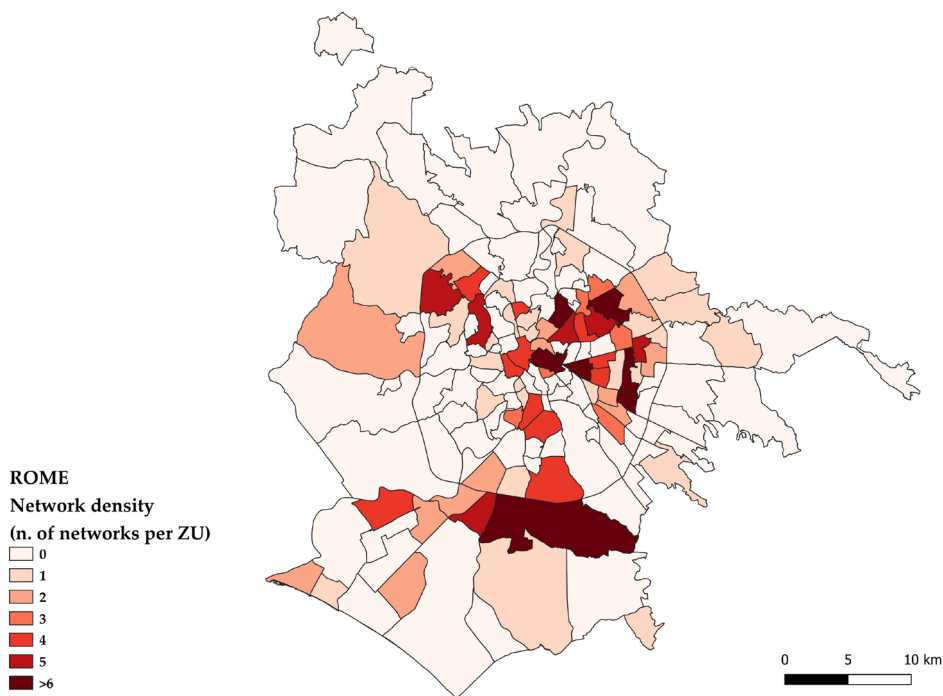
Tab. 3



Rome civic networks.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Fig. 8



density by sub-municipal units (Fig. 9) shows networks concentrated between the historic centre and lower-income areas, with a centre of gravity shifted towards the GRA ring road city and the urban sprawl – particularly along four main axes: East (Alessandrino-Quarticcio), North-East (Casal de' Pazzi-Aguzzano), North-West (Trionfale-Ottavia), and South/South-West (Spinaceto-Acilia-Ostia). Network density is calculated by accounting not only for the number of entities present but also for their membership in multiple networks – identifying nodes that act as connectors between different environments and, by virtue of their position, may facilitate scalar transitions and the circulation of resources. This relational framework for participation certainly tends towards trans-scalar and towards including marginalised areas, but it also serves to hybridise the repertoires of action within inter-

connected civic infrastructures. If confirmed, it would take on a markedly transformative significance.

5. Final discussion and conclusions

The paper's central finding is that the mismatch between register-visible civic infrastructures and socio-spatial distress is not only quantitative – fewer formal organisations where need is greatest – but qualitative: what eludes registers in deprived contexts is not the absence of civic participation but its different form, governed by a relational and proximity-based logic that administrative records structurally cannot capture. The RUNTS baseline confirms that formalised participation in large Italian cities largely follows a “social centrality” gradient, with Rome as a partial deviant case. Once the field of observation is broadened, however, the picture changes

Rome civic networks density.

Source: authors' elaboration.

Fig. 9

substantially: self-organisation is distributed more evenly across the city and correlates positively with social hardship, whilst the mapping of networks reveals how these widespread formations are organised relationally through inter-organisational infrastructures that link initiatives across dimensions (formal and informal), issues (mutualism, ecology, housing, alternative economies), scales (city-wide to neighbourhood), and repertoires of action (advocacy and services, conflict and collaboration).

Taken together, these three levels reinforce the translation hypothesis introduced at the outset: formalized participation may be contracting into a few measurable segments, while recomposing itself into hybrid and locally rooted associative worlds that the registers fail to capture.

We do not consider this proven; we take the actual findings as evidence that this relational approach is a productive way to address a genuine gap in civic-participation research.

These findings position the paper within the international debate on the spatial distribution of nonprofits and charities, which documents lower organisational density precisely where need is greatest – the “charity deserts” (Mohan, 2015; McDonnell et al., 2020) – and shows that commissioning and project-based funding tends to follow existing infrastructures rather than acute need (Allard, 2008; Eikenberry, Kluver, 2004). That literature, however,

reads the mismatch largely through registered organisations, and so measures the very deficit our findings suggest is misleading: where formal density is lowest, civic participation is not absent but differently organised. Our contribution consists in broadening this debate by proposing a model for the classification, mapping and qualitative-quantitative analysis of this ‘dark matter’, which is investigated from the perspective of proximity but within a relational and trans-scalar framework. Rome lends itself particularly well to developing and testing this methodology, for a combination of reasons: the density and dynamism of its grassroots initiatives, a strong tradition of social movements and self-management, and a weak public government that has left time and space for informality to take root. The protocol developed here (recursive multi-source and relational mapping) is designed for replication in other contexts, so as to establish whether this recompositive tendency is a broader phenomenon or one largely confined to cases such as Rome.

The paper’s evidence also speaks to the theoretical question at the heart of this issue’s debate: whether the ‘dark matter’ we have mapped, and the networks we have mapped and classified, represent a step toward a recomposition of the civic fabric – and thus toward a form of self-produced territorial democracy. The network mapping and taxonomy – distinguishing networks of commit-

tees, antagonist networks, and purpose-built networks – offer an empirical purchase on this question: they reveal that the collaboration-conflict dichotomy, through which the relationships between civil society and institutions are usually read, is empirically insufficient. The same territorial areas frequently host simultaneously networks operating in openly conflictual modes and networks mobilising cooperative and propositional capacities; even within single networks, repertoires tend to oscillate between claim-making and collaboration depending on issue, scale, and institutional counterpart. The ‘dark matter’ of civic participation is therefore not legible as either civic collaboration or civic conflict: it is structurally hybrid. We take this transcending of the conflict/collaboration dichotomy as a possible empirical proxy of the recomposition process itself. It is precisely this hybridity – rather than conflict or collaboration alone – that, in Cellamare’s (2023) terms, can constitute a self-produced territorial democracy: an informal, substantive democratic culture emerging where formal political channels are inadequate, and depending on the continued centrality of actors and practices normally excluded from legitimate political voice. Whether this potential is realised, however, is not guaranteed by hybridity alone. Following Rancière’s (1999) distinction between police and politics, we read hybrid civic infrastructures as retaining political significance only in-

sofar as they preserve the capacity to contest and transform the police order – the prevailing distribution of who is recognised, heard, and granted political voice – a capacity that, as van de Pas et al. (2022) show for urban informality more broadly, can be neutralised through formalisation into existing institutional channels, mobilisation for policy ends (including as a substitute for a retrenching welfare state), or reframing as a problem to be administratively managed. A further, distinct caution follows from Wacquant’s (1998) work on the relationship between formal and informal social capital – developed for the extreme case of institutional collapse in the American ghettos: where public institutions withdraw or turn hostile, the informal organisational fabric that remains can shrink and concentrate its most dispossessed members, depreciating rather than strengthening the resources it can mobilise – a decline Wacquant terms ‘negative’ social capital. We take this as grounds for a caution of our own. Just as trans-scalarly challenges the assumption that ‘smaller’ is inherently more democratic – Purcell’s (2006) ‘local trap’ – hybridity avoids a parallel ‘informal trap’: in both cases, the risk lies in essentialising one pole – the local or the purely informal – as inherently more democratic, regardless of how it actually functions. Concretely, this means assuming that only unmixed, purely oppositional configurations retain genuine political potential, and that any admixture of collaboration or for-

mal engagement is evidence of co-optation. Escaping this trap, however, merely defines hybridity – alongside trans-scalarity – as an indicator of the presence of transformative potential; it does not yet establish whether this capacity is inclusive, and therefore actually transformative of the ‘police order’. This is why hybridity cannot be read in isolation as an indicator of recomposition: whether the networks analyzed here move towards a self-produced territorial democracy or towards a desolate and negative informality depends jointly on their transformative capacity (hybrid and trans-scalar) and their inclusive character – a question that the structural evidence of this study can only partially answer.

With regard to planning, these findings sharpen the question already raised in the Introduction: can place-based experiments generate inclusive outcomes and be sustained beyond their specific contexts? Wacquant’s thesis, according to which “state structures and policies play a decisive role in the formation and distribution of both formal and informal social capital” (1998: 35), suggests a partial answer, read here in reverse as a counterweight to the ‘informal trap’: if institutional withdrawal can transform informal social capital into a destitute and negative form, targeted institutional support might conversely be able to shift it towards an inclusive one – but only to the extent that such support preserves the autonomy of self-organisation, rather than absorbing it into

the same modes of neutralisation discussed above, through formalisation, politically dictated goals, or standardisation.

The maps of self-organization and networks, read together, reveal the distribution of relational infrastructures across the less affluent urban contexts, along with the related co-produced knowledge, capacity for action, and the deliberative arenas embedded within them. If made systematic and comparable over time, this reading could provide planners and administrations with the knowledge base needed to move beyond isolated experiments and towards place-sensitive policies calibrated to where civic infrastructures already exist, where they are fragile, and how they connect across territories and scales. This requires addressing a structural problem in how public resources are currently allocated: procurement schemes and project-based instruments that tend to follow formal organisations and fragment support into short-term cycles. Redirecting these flows – toward civic infrastructures as tools for co-creation, toward the recognition of skills developed at the boundary between formal and informal action, toward multi-year time horizons that allow nascent civic infrastructures to consolidate – is a prerequisite for transforming civic potential into a lever for lasting and inclusive territorial transformation, without delegating public responsibility to fragile civic networks or standardising the forms of action that support them.

What mapping alone cannot address is how ties operate in practice: how coordination and mediation unfold, who is included or excluded, and whether the configurations identified are consolidating or remain fragile. Resolving this requires intensive deepening – observing actual relational dynamics – and recursivity: protocols updatable enough to track consolidation and fragmentation. This is where the sub-dimensions we have defined as proxies of the two evaluative macro-criteria – inclusiveness and transformative capacity – can finally be observed, rather than inferred from structure alone.

This article's contribution is to treat register-based participation as the starting point for a quali-quantitative model that extends multilevel mapping to the informal dimension. The 'dark matter' metaphor captures both a methodological necessity – civic action that is structurally relevant but organisationally elusive must be made observable – and an interpretive limit: the centrality we attribute to these formations remains, like its astrophysical counterpart, a working hypothesis only partially supported by the structural mapping presented here. What seems ascertained is the deeper point this design makes possible: territorial networks were chosen as the bridge between extensive and intensive analysis, and between quantitative mapping and qualitative interpretation, precisely because they sit at the boundary between formality and informality,

where the translation hypothesis predicts this recomposition is occurring – an articulation for which the intensive phase, its instrument and sampling design already set out in Section 2, is now ready to be deployed. A further step is needed to establish whether networks are not merely a useful analytical lens, but the actual pivot of civic participation's recomposition – and, if so, whether that recomposition moves toward a self-produced territorial democracy or falls short of it, through co-optation into existing institutional channels, or through a hybridity that resists co-optation without being inclusive. The outcome could depend on whether institutions can engage with these networks without triggering either risk – working with them as equals, rather than alongside, above, or in their place, to build policies on the space-society nexus that these networks already inhabit.

Notes

¹ As Bassi and Lori (2024: 48) point out, the findings should be treated with caution: there is evidence of a confirmed reduction in the number of volunteers in non-profit organisations over the decade of almost 97,330 volunteers, which may be partly linked to the effects of the pandemic. However, as they note, «the shift in unpaid voluntary work in the service of others from structured settings to more informal contexts is a phenomenon that was already evident in the 1990s and the first decade of this century».

² Here, we use “new middle classes” as an analytical shorthand for cultural-professional strata emerging in post-Fordist, tertiarised urban economies, whose social and cultural capital supports structured associational participation and volunteering; the term is used as a socio-spatial proxy rather than as a strict class taxonomy (Biorcio e Vitale 2016).

³ This move follows a relational tradition inaugurated by Diani’s definition of social movements as networks of informal interaction – rather than formal organisations (Diani, 1995). Two of its methodological pillars remain current in Diani’s later work on civic networks (2015): ties are established through documented exchange rather than inferred from organisational attributes; and influence is not read off formal position, since civic networks lack bureaucratic hierarchy yet remain unequal, with political skill predicting centrality more than resources. Luxton and Sbicca (2021) make this qualitative dimension methodologically explicit, pairing network measures with interviews to recover actors’ own meanings. The broader STS reflection on qualitative-quantitative methods reads network mapping as “the pursuit of the qualitative by other means” (Venturini, 2024). Our design remains sequential in Venturini’s stricter sense, with the network layer performing this qualitative-within-quantitative function.

⁴ By conducting a further robustness check on Rome using a map based on the number of volunteers (volunteers per 10,000 residents), we obtain a spatial pattern that is essentially similar, demonstrating the validity of the density of organisations as a proxy for formalized civic participation.

⁵ Similar GIS-based approaches show that register-based density measures provide useful benchmarks but cannot be equated with effective territorial coverage (Galway et al., 2012). Under this interpretation, the observed slope does not imply that organisational density directly causes or mitigates deprivation outcomes.

⁶ We prefer ‘grassroots’ to ‘community-based’ since initiatives often span multiple, diverse communities rather than a single homogeneous one (Celata, Sanna, 2014; Celata et al., 2018).

⁷ Following Putnam (2000: 22), bridging social capital denotes outward-looking networks across diverse social cleavages, as opposed to bonding capital, which reinforces exclusive, inward-looking identities. The underlying definition of social capital draws on Bourdieu (1980: 2): the resources linked to a durable network of relations of mutual acquaintance and recognition.

⁸ This formal network analysis focuses on how networks are configured and distributed, and is distinct from actual network analysis, which is conducted in the intensive phase explained below, where validated tie data support full relational metrics (degree, centrality, brokerage) and their interpretation (Diani, 1992; 1995; Luxton & Sbicca, 2021).

⁹ The intensive phase relies on a purposive, stratified sampling design: areas are selected within the two low-income quadrants of the four-quadrant income/participation matrix by crossing network type, settlement type, density of social capital, and the presence or absence of specific urban processes (conflict, regeneration, gentrification) – a maximum-variation logic aimed at capturing the heterogeneity of the phenomenon rather than statistical representativeness. Within each selected area, three organisations/initiatives are sampled according to a fixed typology – neighbourhood committees, ETS/APS, and self-managed, movement-based organisations – yielding a matched triad per area and allowing comparison both within and across types. In this phase, the unit of analysis is the network – not the individual organisations it comprises. Data collection combines a structured questionnaire, adapted from the ISTAT survey of non-profit institutions and reworked as a network-analysis instrument, with semi-structured in-depth interviews.

¹⁰ Inequality is understood as “a condition in which individuals experience difficulties in adequately meeting their basic needs due to a lack or insufficiency of social, economic, employment and educational resources and opportunities”: ISTAT (2025), “Il disagio socio-economico degli individui e delle famiglie a livello sub-comunale: primi risultati. Anno 2021”, available at: <https://www.istat.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/nota-informativa-disagio-2021-1.pdf>.

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- ¹¹ Although this indicator in principle supports a finer spatial resolution than the sub-municipal units adopted here, the geography it provides at this aggregate scale remains a reliable reference, as demonstrated by its partial spatial concordance with the “poverty maps” developed in the NUVAP report (Andreoli et al., 2017).
- ¹² A finer classification by activity sector – health, social assistance, culture, sport, environment – would refine this picture, but exceeds the scope of the present analysis, which focuses on aggregate density.
- ¹³ The data used is sourced from the ministry’s portal for the RUNTS (<https://servizi.lavoro.gov.it/runts>). The information, which is freely accessible and required by law (Legislative Decree 117/2017, Art. 53), was collected through automated queries in accordance with the conditions governing public access. The complete ‘list of organisations’ dataset, which can be downloaded from the website, does not include the addresses of the organisations’ offices; however, these can be obtained from queries made via the search engine (<https://servizi.lavoro.gov.it/runts/it-it/Ricerca-enti>). To incorporate this and other information into the available dataset, we have therefore automated queries on every record in the list. The dataset was created in July 2024.
- ¹⁴ 836 to be precise. Of these, 342 can be classified as self-organisation in the strict sense (housing squatting, self-managed social centres and popular sports, self-managed social gardens); 157 are hybrid practices (civic hubs, Solidarity energy communities, food council, educating communities), 337 are neighbourhood committees.
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