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## Making Social Work More Socially Sustainable Through Participation: Rhetoric or Innovation?

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to explore the connection between social sustainability and participatory processes in the realm of social work, through a theoretical reflection. The guiding research questions for the work are: a) How can user participation enhance the social sustainability of social work? b) What should be the dynamic of participation between institutions and users to ensure the social sustainability of social work? In an effort to address these inquiries, we will initially conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current state of social sustainability literature to underscore the significance of user participation in social work. Subsequently, our focus will shift towards examining various forms and dynamics associated with user participation at the meso level of social work practice within the domain of welfare services in Italy. Our aim is to advocate for the adoption of co-creation processes, characterised by a bottom-linked dynamic, as an innovative approach with the potential to enhance the social sustainability of social work.

**Keywords:** participation, social sustainability, social work, welfare services.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability has become a prominent topic in academic debate and political discourse, providing an opportunity to connect social justice concerns with environmental issues (Becker *et al.* 1999). Traditionally, sustainability is depicted as the point of convergence among the three pillars of the economy, environment, and society, which are commonly represented as intersecting circles (Khan 1995, Kunz 2006, Pope *et al.* 2004, Schoolman *et al.* 2012, Vogt and Weber 2019). The representation of sustainability as tripartite and intersecting highlights the interdependence of the economic, environmental, and social aspects.

While the economic dimension pertains to a production process geared towards capital maintenance (Khan 1995) and the environmental dimension involves managing waste emissions in the environment without causing harm (Goodland 1996), the social dimension lacks a universally agreed-upon definition in the literature (Vallance *et al.* 2010, Cuthill 2010, Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017, Purvis *et al.* 2019).

Nevertheless, the importance of the social pillar in sustainability discussions has risen, driven by the recognition that economic and environmental

crises disproportionately impact vulnerable individuals and communities (Moldan *et al.* 2012). Indeed, central to the concept of social sustainability is the emphasis on fostering inclusive and equitable societal structures that empower individuals and communities (Bramley and Power 2009, Dempsey *et al.* 2011, Murphy 2012, Åhman 2013, Eizenberg and Jabareenè 2017).

In this context, participation is defined as a methodology (Cuthill 2010) to achieve social sustainability, as it enables the active involvement of individuals and communities in decision-making processes that affect their lives, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and taken into account. This dimension of social sustainability recognises the intrinsic link between social well-being and the involvement of all stakeholders in the development and implementation of policies, projects and initiatives.

In the realm of welfare services and social work, the literature on user participation has a long tradition (*inter alia*: Beresford 2001, Carr 2007, Loeffler and Bovaird 2021), while the sustainability debate, especially in the social work literature, focuses mainly on the environmental and economic dimensions. Although participation is encouraged in theory and by law, pieces of empirical evidence show that it is often limited to single projects (Bifulco 2018, Fazzi 2021). This highlights a discrepancy in which institutions struggle to involve citizens in continuous and lasting participatory processes. It shows that participation has not yet been systematically incorporated into the widespread approach to the implementation of welfare policies.

Therefore, this paper specifically focuses on the social dimension of sustainability and aims to address the following questions through theoretical reflection: a) How can user participation enhance the social sustainability of social work? b) What should be the dynamic of participation between institutions and users to ensure the social sustainability of social work?

In an effort to address these inquiries, we will initially conduct a comprehensive analysis of the current state of social sustainability literature to underscore the significance of user participation in social work. Subsequently, our focus will shift towards examining various forms and dynamics associated with user participation at the meso level of social work practice within the domain of welfare services in Italy. Our aim is to advocate for the adoption of co-creation processes, characterised by a bottom-linked dynamic, as an innovative approach with the potential to enhance the social sustainability of social work.

## 2. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY, PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL WORK

Economic crises, characterised by rising unemployment, inflation, and financial instability, have a disproportionate impact on those who depend on precarious and poorly secured sources of income. Similarly, environmental crises such as climate change and pollution have a disproportionate impact on low-income communities, who often live in vulnerable areas or work in sectors with high environmental exposure. The social pillar has emerged because it is now clear from the sustainability debate that those who suffer most from the consequences of economic and environmental crises are the most vulnerable individuals, groups and communities in our societies (Moldan *et al.* 2012).

The purpose of social sustainability is not limited to addressing the environmental impact of human activities. Instead of restricting the social dimension to poverty alleviation and environmental justice, which oversimplifies the sustainability discourse into a mere competition between economic and environmental perspectives, the broader goal is to protect and promote social justice (Parra 2013).

However, the social dimension remains the most elusive aspect in the academic debate, often mentioned in relation to other concepts such as social capital, social justice and equity. Participation emerges as a cornerstone of social sustainability, acting as the pivot that binds together various conceptual elements. As Goodland (1996) argues, achieving social sustainability requires systematic community engagement and the development of civil society. This multiplicity of concepts has generated confusion and disorder in the debate, as several authors have pointed out, making its definition and measurement arduous (Vallance *et al.* 2010, Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017, Purvis *et al.* 2019, Vogt and Weber 2019). Although social sustainability is a concept that can be difficult to grasp, there have been efforts in the literature to clarify it.

Cuthill (2010) proposes an interpretation of social sustainability that distinguishes itself from others and aims to organise the various associated concepts. Indeed, social sustainability is often linked to the concepts of social justice, social capital, and communities. However, the utility of these social concepts and their role in the discourse on sustainability is limited by definitional debates, a lack of clear operational direction, and a lack of consensus on monitoring them as noted by the author. Cuthill argues that there is a pressing need to develop a more robust conceptual understanding of the social dimension of sustainability, which is closely

linked to and rooted in everyday life policies and practices. The author based his reflections on two fundamental premises: a) environmental issues are primarily social problems, and addressing these concerns must begin with holding individuals responsible for the impact they have on the environment; b) economy should serve people by prioritising individuals rather than viewing them as serving economic interests.

To provide a theoretical framework for studying and conducting research on social sustainability, Cuthill suggests considering a) social capital as a starting point, b) social infrastructure as an operational perspective, c) social justice and equity as an ethical imperative, and d) participation as a methodology that renders processes socially sustainable. Although Cuthill's contribution is rooted in urban studies, it suggests that welfare services and social work can be socially sustainable when they foster the development of social capital through participatory processes guided by social justice and equity.

It is crucial to recognise that these factors are not new in social work, even if they are not directly related to the concept of social sustainability. The subsequent section aims to provide a critical analysis of participation in the field of social work.

### 2.1. Participation in social work between rhetoric and critical approach

First of all, citizen participation has been at the centre of the debate since the origins of the profession. Indeed, as early as 1902, Jane Addams urged social workers to involve residents of the neighbourhoods in which they operated in defining their needs, devising solutions, and participating in programs aimed at improving their community. Similarly, Mary Richmond (1917) advocated for active collaboration between social workers and service recipients, aiming to identify suitable solutions and develop intervention plans that respected the individual's desires and needs.

Although both authors were criticised for prioritising control and paternalism over care and aid, Addams and Richmond suggested that citizen participation can serve two functions: advocacy and empowerment. The advocacy function involves actions that raise awareness about the processes that create conditions of disadvantage and influence the decisions behind interventions, projects, or policies that affect these processes (*inter alia*: Henderson and Pochin 2001). Empowerment refers to individual and collective processes that provide people with the confidence, skills, and awareness necessary to regain control of their lives and actively participate in society (*inter alia*: Rappaport 1981).

In addition, social work upholds the dignity of the individual as one of its core values, which is often operationalized as self-determination (Fargion 2009). Self-determination is a prominent value in social work, as the discipline and profession adopt a care model, which differs from the cure model. In the medical and healthcare context, the professional (doctor) involves the patient in the diagnosis process by listening to them and prescribing the best possible therapy/drug to treat the presented symptoms. Nevertheless, in the realm of social work, the professional (social worker) cannot technically solve the life problem, since these are troubles that affect the entire existence and require a comprehensive reorganisation of the current lifestyle at the moment the problem arises in order to be managed or resolved (Folgheraiter 2011). In the care model, professionals observe and accompany the development of coping actions, which are resilient responses to internal and external mechanisms that impact people's lives.

Moreover, numerous citizen-user movements have been mobilised across various domains, advocating for equal involvement in both the assistance processes directed towards them and the formulation of social and healthcare policies. In a nutshell, service users have asserted their experiential knowledge and demanded increased participation in decisions affecting them (Beresford and Boxall 2012). Especially notable is the acknowledgment of service users as experts by experience, particularly in the field of social work education. In this context, they actively participate as trainers for the next generation of social workers, establishing themselves as crucial contributors to social work degree programs worldwide (Ramon *et al.* 2019).

Additionally, service users are recognised as key stakeholders in the research processes, as it is recognised that it is important to build theory from practice and not just from academia. This approach, known as practice research (Uggerhøj 2011), combines research methodology, field research, and practical experience. In this context, participation serves to co-create the knowledge, developing practice while validating different types of expertise within the partnership between service users, social workers and researchers.

At the same time, critical theories have played a pivotal role in shaping social work theories and practice, developing a significant awareness of user participation. Arising from the fundamental concept of social justice (*inter alia*: Fraser 2013), these theories have offered a critical perspective to comprehend and tackle structural inequalities in society, diverging from the notion that social issues stem solely from individual origins. The anti-oppressive social work approach promotes precise-

ly that (Dominelli 2022, Baines 2011). It provides social workers with cognitive tools and intervention strategies not only to understand and analyse the structural origins of social issues but also to prevent the replication of oppressions faced by individuals within the context of the dynamics of organisations and the helping relationships (Allegrì *et al.* 2022). The foundational premise is that individuals who experience oppression must take on active roles as agents of personal, cultural, and societal change. To facilitate this process, individuals may require an initial intervention phase in which the social worker assists them in reconstructing their personal narratives. This provides a framework for acknowledging the negative emotions they may be experiencing. Once these objectives are achieved, anti-oppressive social work places significant emphasis on collaborative group efforts, including community engagement. The practice encourages oppressed individuals within a group to openly discuss the challenges they face and offers support in critically analysing their shared experiences.

Eventually, especially in Finland, since the late 1990s, the ecosocial work approach has developed which is «understood as a holistic way of viewing living environments, and as a concrete way of involving people in local policy and city planning, as well as an attempt to achieve theoretical conceptions of social work which would be compatible with sustainability» (Matthies *et al.* 2000: 46). Ecosocial work highlights the imperative for social workers to actively participate in the ‘round table negotiations of sustainability’ (Närhi 2004) where diverse actors and perspectives converge, giving new lens to the social work practice. In addressing current multifaceted challenges, social work must consider the potential adverse effects of environmental policies, such as the emergence of energy poverty, particularly impacting marginalised and vulnerable groups. Ecosocial work aims to take a profound and transformative approach to sustainability within social work practice (Boetto 2017). This involves critically assessing its own worldviews and subsequently reconfiguring the role of humans within the broader natural world. In this case, user participation ensures that social work practices are both relevant, sustainable and responsive to the specific needs of the communities involved. Simultaneously, it takes into consideration the relationship between humans, the environment and non-human animals living in it (Bozalek and Pease 2022).

While the social work literature doesn’t explicitly connect participation with social sustainability, it seems that all the necessary elements are in place to embrace Cuthill’s perspective, which positions participation as the methodology for ensuring that processes and ser-

vices are socially sustainable. To summarise, from the academic debate emerges that participation comes up as core element of social work theory and practice that allow to:

- a) Coping people’s life problems, by making them more empowered;
- b) Influencing decision-making processes;
- c) Contributing to the creation of social work knowledge;
- d) Giving an active role to marginalised groups in the ecosocial transition.

Whereas user participation seems intrinsically necessary in casework, which is about working with people at the micro level, one of the most challenging aspects of social work is facilitating user participation at the meso level of intervention. When an institution is responsible for planning and organising a (new) welfare service, how can user participation be effectively pursued? What are the current options available? The following section aims to answer these questions by reconstructing the possible dynamics that participation processes can activate, giving some examples from the Italian context.

### 3. USER PARTICIPATION IN ITALIAN WELFARE SERVICES

When examining participation, Arnstein’s ladder of citizen participation (1969) is frequently cited, serving as a crucial reference in academic literature on the subject. Arnstein emphasised that citizen participation is fundamental to democracy because it should result in the sharing and redistribution of power. This allows even the less privileged individuals to participate in determining methods of sharing information, defining goals and policies, allocating economic resources, managing programs, and distributing benefits. However, it is important to note that this does not occur in every participation process.

Arnstein’s participation ladder graphically represents eight levels of citizen involvement, corresponding to the degree of power they hold in determining the final outcome of the participatory process. From bottom to top, the levels are as follows: a) Non-participation; b) Tokenism; c) Informing; d) Consultation; e) Collaboration; f) User Involvement; g) User-Initiated Empowerment; h) Citizen Control. Arnstein defines the first two levels as “non-participation,” as they do not imply a genuine sharing of power. The levels at the centre (c, d, f) are referred to as “tokenism” because they permit restricted participation without guaranteeing any real change in the status quo, thereby leaving power in the

hands of those who already have it. In the final levels (f, g, h), participation approaches an empowerment process, wherein citizens have a real opportunity to influence decisions that affect them.

Notwithstanding its criticism for being inflexible and inadequately contextualised (Connor 1988), and recognizing that power-sharing with citizens may not always be advisable (Fung 2003), this scale remains a useful instrument for examining the diverse dynamics that characterise participatory processes. In particular, concerning citizen participation in the planning and implementation of welfare services, the literature describes two main dynamics: the top-down and the bottom-up. Below we will reconstruct the top-down dynamic, using the area plans and the administrative tools of co-programming and co-design to observe this dynamic. Then, we will return to the overall bottom-up dynamic to see it materialise through the care leavers network.

The European Commission has acknowledged the importance of the top-down participation dynamic in its publication of the “Plan D for Democracy” (2005). The plan envisions the establishment of institutional connections to strengthen citizen participation associated with civic organisations, which is considered crucial to meet the evolving expectations of citizens (Paci 2009). The top-down dynamic involves an institution deciding to involve citizens in decision-making processes, as seen in participatory budgets where citizens are engaged in decisions regarding expenditure forecasts and investments.

One form of participation that has developed over time, based on Habermas’ studies, is deliberative democracy, which has taken various forms such as participatory budgets, deliberative committees, surveys, territorial agreements, and more. According to Habermas (1992), citizen participation in decision-making processes, defined as discursive practices, contributes to the improvement and strengthening of the representative democratic model based on citizen voting. In the Habermasian perspective, public decisions must be made through a process that involves the creation of a network for communicating information and viewpoints, which provides a space for public discussion. Deliberative democracy entrusts citizens with the pursuit of the best solution to social problems through their participation in a public discourse where the best argument prevails. In Italian welfare services, this form of participation can be attributed to local plans and administrative tools of co-programming and co-design. It should be noted that local plans represent a more structured and systematic approach, while the latter are isolated and occasional experiences.

The local plans (*Piani di zona*) are introduced by Law 328/2000 and bring about at least four changes in the traditional practice of planning welfare services (Bifulco and Facchini 2013): a) interventions and policies within the same sector are synthesised, bringing together planning traditions and funding sources that are traditionally separate and autonomous; b) there is a shift from government-led planning (exclusively public governance) to a governance perspective, involving the mobilisation of various public entities, social private entities, and civil society; c) planning is approached with a focus on promoting local development; d) joint planning with local health companies is carried out to promote true socio-health integration. Extensive research on the topic have revealed that local plans often fail to transcend existing structures and refrain from evolving into a comprehensive and community-driven public policy (Bosco *et al.* 2012). They tend to rationalise the existing framework, losing sight of social change and the emerging needs it presents (Ranci 2005). The local plans may be at risk of becoming a “hollow shell” (Giddens 1999), characterised by formal compliance and procedures that lack genuine participation, as Piga (2016) notes. Additionally, users and families are not actively engaged in designing the measures within the local plans, according to Bifulco and Centemeri (2007). Lastly, it’s important to mention that in several Italian regions, despite Law 328/2000 still being in force, local plans are no longer implemented.

On the other hand, both in welfare services and in literature, there is significant interest in the administrative tools of co-programming and co-design, introduced by the third sector reform of 2017. The former is “aimed at identifying, by the relevant public administration, the needs to be addressed, the necessary interventions for this purpose, the methods of implementation, and the available resources” (art. 55, Legislative Decree 3/2017), while co-design aims at defining and possibly implementing specific service projects or interventions aimed at satisfying the needs defined in the planning phase. Similarly, in this case, despite incorporating the ‘co-’ prefix, these tools are positioned as the principal alternative to the conventional tendering process. This approach precludes the involvement of service users in the planning and design of services, as these tools were specifically crafted to define the relationship between the State and the third sector.

For these reasons, regarding Arnstein’s scale, one criticism of top-down participation is that it places forms of participation with such dynamics in the lower section of the scale, specifically, that of non-participation. It is important to note that various levels of partici-

pation are possible and situations commonly considered participatory may actually constitute forms of false participation. This suggests that citizens can either play an instrumental role or be limited to non-participation. Is it for this reason that these top-down processes are periodically presented by institutions to citizens but ultimately prove unsustainable in the long run?

Moini (2012) stands out among authors who are highly critical of the theme of participation. Moini's thesis revolves around the capacity of participatory processes to stabilise neoliberal policies through functions such as conflict de-escalation, co-responsibilization, depoliticization, and compensation. According to the author, neoliberalism is a discursive institution, playing a significant role in shaping how ideas, concepts, and values are formulated, transmitted, and understood at various levels of society. Moini's critique of participatory processes is grounded in the awareness that participation can have positive effects on social interaction, the creation of social capital, and the quality of decision-making and transparency. However, the author highlights "the dark side of participation", namely, the uncertainty regarding the impact of such processes on public choices. In other words, the author emphasises that participatory processes may not significantly influence the content of public decisions. It is important to underline that the empirical research on which the author's reflections are based comes from an analysis of participation processes with a top-down dynamic. It is important to note that these processes cannot be considered authentic participatory endeavours. Therefore, Moini's conclusions may be limited by the choice to focus on a dynamic not fully representative of participatory processes.

Another form of participation that has developed over time, also influenced by the crisis of representative democracy, can be attributed to grassroots participation initiatives. This form does not involve direct engagement by institutions but pertains to individuals or groups coming together, requesting institutions to involve them in or allow them to influence decision-making processes (Della Porta 1996). Within the context of Italian welfare services, one very interesting example of the movement that is gaining considerable success in terms of memberships and outcomes is the care leavers network (Belotti *et al.* 2021), led by the Agevolando Association. The first aim of this movement is to unite individuals known as "care leavers". These are young adults who transition out of care in foster families or educational facilities and may lack the opportunity or desire to return to their original families. Moreover, the association supports care leavers in building their future by working at various institutional levels to advocate for the rights

and equal opportunities of care leavers. This is achieved through the establishment of stable networks with public, private, and third-sector entities. In the Italian context, this movement has successfully raised public awareness and secured the formation of ministerial structural funds to support autonomy projects for care leavers. Furthermore, it is playing an increasingly active role in training future professionals in the field of child protection (Fargion *et al.* 2021) and in research activities as co-researchers (Long 2023).

As highlighted in the literature, participation in social movements is characterised by three main features (Diani 1992): a) conflict, which translates into protest actions; b) collective identity, which unites people and groups around collective feelings of belonging; and c) the network between actors, which facilitates the organisation of protest actions. Similar to the care leavers network, these actions aim to influence political structures and authorities, improve the status quo, promote change, or resist undesirable changes. This form of bottom-up participation has opened avenues for listening and consultation processes by institutions. However, in reference to Arnstein, it does not ensure a genuine sharing of power or a sincere commitment by institutions to consider citizens' demands. These forms of participation, therefore, exhibit a high level of tokenism, enabling those without power to express themselves while retaining the decision-making privilege for those already in power. What occurs when movements lack the strength to make their voices heard and influence the decisions that impact them?

As a result, we argue that both forms of participation, whether they manifest a top-down or bottom-up dynamic, cannot be fully attributed to the description of user participation in social work given in the previous paragraph. It does not appear that these forms of participation enable individuals to cope with life problems by enhancing their empowerment or influencing decision-making processes. Furthermore, these forms of participation do not contribute to the generation of social work knowledge or afford an active role to marginalised groups in the ecosocial transition. Therefore, they cannot make social work socially sustainable. The question then arises, how can socially sustainable social work be achieved through user participation?

#### 4. BOTTOM-LINKED DYNAMIC AND CO-CREATION PROCESSES

Addressing this inquiry, we need to take a step back and deal with the concept of governance, as user par-

ticipation at the meso level pertains to how institutions manage the *res publica*. Indeed, governance is often contrasted with government: the latter refers to the exercise of public power, implying a vertical and hierarchical process, whereas governance is a broad term that deserves some clarification.

First and foremost, there is a plurality of meanings in the literature, among which stands out the position of Segatori, who suggests that governance has emerged due to the impossibility of managing and addressing collective problems solely with public resources. According to the author, globalisation has cracked the supremacy of the political sphere over the economic one (Segatori 2012), favouring, among other things, the decline of the welfare state. Governance is thus defined as «the process of elaboration, determination, and implementation of policy actions, conducted according to criteria of consultation and partnership between public and private or third-sector entities, in which all participants contribute resources, assume responsibilities, exercise powers, and consequently, enjoy to some extent the benefits expected from the outcomes of these policies» (*Ibidem*: 235). From Mayntz's perspective, on the other hand, governance refers to a «new style of government, distinct from the hierarchical control model and characterised by a greater degree of cooperation and interaction between the state and non-state actors within mixed public/private decision-making networks» (Mayntz 1999: 3).

The term governance has been applied in different areas, including institutional, political, and economic, indicating significant changes in how public policies are managed and implemented in democratic contexts. Governance promotes mechanisms for decision-making through a network of actors that engage in multilateral exchange and mutual adaptation based on negotiation, consultation, and social dialogue. This ensures that decisions are not solely made by the public actor, who is recognized as the sole source of authority, but rather through a collaborative effort (Belligni 2004).

In the literature, there is an additional perspective suggesting that governance accommodates the complexity of society, which has encountered economic, environmental, and health crises over the past two decades. This is achieved by promoting forms of participation that present a third dynamic, defined in the literature as «bottom-linked» (Moulaert and MacCallum 2019). The bottom-linked dynamic is characteristic of participatory processes that advocate for openness and flexibility on the part of institutions in embracing diverse perspectives, creating new practices with the aim of developing and promoting a more cohesive and democratic society. In practice, this dynamic involves the institutionalisation

of grassroots initiatives through institutional activities that promote and support them, for example by providing formal and financial support (*Ibidem*). Actually, the term bottom-linked originates from the literature on social innovation (Moulaert *et al.* 2013), which identifies as socially innovative those processes that aim to address social problems by redefining the relationships between the State, civil society, and the market through changes in the actions of individuals and institutions. Social innovation is based on the belief that contemporary society's complexity cannot be managed solely by the State. The State should not uncritically integrate or adopt grassroots demands in its decision-making (*Ibidem*).

The form of user participation that can exhibit a bottom-linked dynamic can be attributed to co-creation and co-production processes. As highlighted in the systematic literature review conducted by Voorberg and colleagues (2015), there is no distinction between co-production and co-creation processes. Therefore, the use of co-creation in this paper is entirely arbitrary. Co-creation processes involve «public service organisations and citizens making better use of each other's assets, resources and contributions to achieve better outcomes or improved efficiency» (Loeffler and Bovaird 2021: 41).

The inclusion of the comparative adjective 'better' in this definition implies a more nuanced specification within the broader concept of participation, potentially suggesting a form of engagement that goes beyond mere active involvement to also encompass passive participation.

Thus, co-creation is a broad concept that involves citizens in some or all of the stages necessary for the activation of a service. It encompasses the 'Four Co-' approach proposed by Bovaird and Loeffler (2013): a) Co-commissioning: defining priorities; b) Co-design: designing services; c) Co-delivery: Collaboratively working in service delivery; d) Co-assessment: Evaluating the provided service. At the core of co-creation processes, therefore, is the assumption that citizens are recognized as experts by experience (Russell 2021) and not merely as recipients and beneficiaries of a service. For this reason, in co-creation processes, citizenship is seen as an essential collaborator in activities necessary for the implementation of a welfare service.

According to this theoretical perspective, co-creation processes, when characterised by a bottom-linked dynamic, occupy higher levels in Arnstein's participation scale, involving citizens in a systematic relationship with institutions. These relationships are promoted by institutions themselves, acknowledging the inability to govern the complexity of the contemporary world in isolation, aiming to create and implement public services.

The crucial element of processes defined as bottom-linked lies in the connections built between various public, private, and citizen actors at different levels of governance, as social innovation involves transforming context-specific relationships. For a co-creation process to be considered within the bottom-linked dynamic, governance must play a dual role: as a framework and as a field.

The framework refers to the governance context shaping relationships in the co-creation process, encompassing institutions, rules, and practices defining responsibilities and relationships among involved actors. On the other hand, governance also functions as the field where co-creation processes unfold, influencing and altering governance structures and dynamics through the process itself. This can lead to the creation of new decision-making mechanisms, collaboration forms, and solutions addressing specific social issues in the given context. In summary, governance acts as a framework outlining the context of the co-creation process and as a field where interactions and transformations within governance itself occur.

Consequently, co-creation processes seem to trigger collaborative and inclusive transformation in welfare services aimed at promoting models where different stakeholders – first and foremost service users – find representation, space to be heard and space to act. This aligns co-creation processes with participation as – a methodology proposed by Cuthill (2010), which would make social work and welfare services more socially sustainable.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we focused on two central questions: a) How can user participation enhance the social sustainability of social work? b) What should be the dynamic of participation between institutions and users to ensure the social sustainability of social work?

According to the literature, user participation is crucial in social work. It enables individuals to address life challenges by enhancing their empowerment, influencing decision-making processes, contributing to the generation of knowledge in social work, and granting an active role to marginalised groups in the ecosocial transition. In other words, user participation improves the social sustainability of social work by avoiding the design of welfare services that promote a passive state of dependency. This dependency creates an unsustainable situation, as it places individuals in a passive waiting position, consuming both human and economic resources. User participation empowers individuals, encouraging them to proactively engage in overcoming life's

challenges. However, it is important to acknowledge the potential risks, such as contractualization and individual responsibility, as witnessed in the case of Italy's *Reddito di Cittadinanza* (Gori 2023).

Connecting this issue to the theme of social sustainability, it can be argued that top-down participation is often just rhetoric, failing to generate genuine engagement. Conversely, bottom-up participation processes are often marked by conflict and advocacy, raising the question of what happens when grassroots movements lack the tools or strength to influence decision-making processes. The co-creation process emerges as an innovative pathway, when characterised by a bottom-linked dynamic, holding the potential to make social work more socially sustainable. In essence, co-creation processes appear well-positioned to foster welfare services driven by social justice, contributing to the creation of social capital (Cuthill 2010).

As co-creation processes do not yet seem to be fully implemented in the field of social work (Voorberg *et al.* 2015), this work theoretically highlights how co-creation processes can be a valuable resource for social work practice at the meso level. Indeed, these processes enable the creation of welfare services embracing a critical and anti-oppressive model of care, while also possessing the elements to make social work more socially sustainable.

What comes next? Two considerations emerge.

Firstly, research is needed into the 'doing' of co-creation at the meso level in welfare services. This effort can uncover important themes, best practices, and critical issues in social work. Social work research (Allegrì 2022) initiates by tackling the challenges encountered in social work practice, with the objective of enhancing practice, albeit without a prescriptive nature (Sicora and Fargion 2023). The aim is to articulate and establish theories in the field of social work.

Secondly, it is essential to broaden the scope of research at the macro/structural level because, as also highlighted in other studies (Boetto *et al.* 2020), this level is challenging to discern. Therefore, a theoretical and empirical commitment is required to better understand the role and the impact of user participation at the macro level and how it contributes to making society more socially sustainable.

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