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YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: A STUDY WITH ITALIAN ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract: The present paper aims to stress the role that young people play as 'actual citizens', actively engaged in constructing the meaning-and-actions that define their own participation in the community. The case examined is the Chiampo Valley, in the North-East of Italy. This area is the most important tannery district in Europe and has serious problems concerning industrial waste management. By means of a questionnaire, we focus on the way 229 secondary school students perceive themselves as members of the local community, on what they see as being priorities in their own context, and on the contributions that they may make to addressing environmental issues. The results suggest that it is important for local institutions to give a voice to young people—as they themselves require—by developing participatory processes in institutional decision-making regarding environmental policies and—in general— the life of the community.

Key words: youth participation; environmental issues; sense of belonging; social well-being

Introduction

One of the main goals of national and international organizations is to involve young people in community life (participation). Youth involvement is often invoked when discussing citizenship and democracy: "The citizenship of young people is essential to the survival of our democracies; their participation at every level of society and their search for new prospects require […] democratic recognition of their status as fully-fledged citizens" (CLRAE 1999, 1-2). The present paper, through a case study conducted in the most important tannery region in Europe, aims to stress the role that young people may play as active citizens, through an exploration of their awareness of environmental threats, and by recognising their claims for wider involvement in environmental planning.

Environmental and sustainability education programs, which increasingly refer to broad pedagogical visions, also include the active participation of young people as pivotal elements:

An education that empowers people to exercise their rights while also builds [sic] a stronger sense of responsibility; an education that ensures that a person is educated to think critically, to solve problems, to work in teams, to be analytical, to be confident about facing situations of ambiguity and difficulty in the workplace or in their lives; and finally, an education that cultivates good citizenship locally, nationally and globally (Matsuura 2009, 14).

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Despite agreement on these goals and on the underlying democratic aims, different approaches in environmental intervention have been developed. Consequently, the goals vary from altering individual activities, to developing pro-environmental sensitivity and values, to modifying the way the relationships between human-beings and nature are socially constructed.

The main strands of environmental programs can be usefully summarised by the distinction between 'moralistic' and 'democratic' paradigms. The former paradigm is instrumental and aims at promoting sustainable lifestyles by changing individual behaviours and choices. By contrast, education programs that endorse the democratic paradigm aim to develop forms of critical thinking, the ability to identify and discuss environmental problems, and encourage the active participation of youth in the life of the communities (Schnack 2008).

Nevertheless, both these paradigms implicitly assume the paradigm of young people as 'citizens in the making': a metaphor that refers to the viewpoint that the role of educational agencies is essential in promoting active citizens in the transition towards adulthood (Condor 2011; Condor and Gibson 2007; Lister, Middleton and Smith 2001; Matthews 2001; Diana and Marra 2009). In this paper, we contend that education programs can be further extended by acknowledging the role of youth as 'actual citizens'. This second metaphor presents a different view of citizenship: being a full citizen "means actively seeking to engage, so as to realize one's rights, exercise one's responsibilities, have access to political institutions, be empowered and share a sense of belonging to the community—national as well as local" (Beauvais et al. 2001, 3). Within this perspective, young people are "actual citizens", who actively construct the meaning-and-actions that define their own participation in the community (Smith et al. 2005).

In the present paper we assume this second perspective and we aim to stress the role that youth may play as active citizens.

In this regard it is important to highlight that, in Italy, environmental threats are more salient for adolescents than adults (ISTAT 2009), and that many studies show that youth contributions to the promotion of real and consistent change in the local environment could be significant, as they may offer innovative resources to solve problems in the local area (cf. Tonucci and Rissotto 2001).

Nevertheless, the success of a participatory decision-making process on environmental issues—which requires the involvement of all social actors—is strongly dependent on citizens' perception of the chances they have to promote and effectively enact change. Therefore, in this paper we focus on the way young people perceive themselves as members of the local community, on what they see as being priorities in their own context, and on the contributions that they may make to address environmental issues.

Case study

Chiampo Valley and its tannery region

The case examined is the Chiampo Valley, an area of about 130 square kilometres in the North-East of Italy.

For centuries the economic development of the valley has been closely related to the leather tanning industry. Nowadays the area represents one of the most distinctive and prosperous industrial areas in Italy and the most important tannery region in Europe.

Despite its relevance, many concerns have forced a discussion about possible strategies for growth: technical innovation has been closely intertwined with the search for more ecologically sustainable solutions in an area exhausted by the extensive exploitation of natural resources.

In recent decades the recognized environmental criticalities of the valley have become unbearable, and infrastructure and highly complex and sizeable environmental services have been developed with well-documented improvements and up-grades.

However, nowadays the area still has serious problems concerning the management of the enormous amount of industrial waste produced by the water treatment plant, and it also suffers from air and water pollution.

The thirteen administrations of the Chiampo Valley have been committed to finding effective and shared solutions to these environmental problems and they started a participatory process aimed at managing them. This has involved public institutions, businesses, associations, and above all, the citizens. Nevertheless, public participation has become increasingly disengaged.

Aims and expected results

The present study focuses on young people and environmental issues in the Chiampo Valley.

In particular, we explored identification with the place, collective self-esteem, perceived social well-being, perceived threats, active participation in pro-environmental initiatives, and anticipated solutions to environmental problems in a convenience sample of young people living in an area characterized by a precarious balance between environmental sustainability and economic development.

First of all, the relationships between psychosocial constructs and social and personal characteristics were investigated. Then, the way in which these factors play a role in facilitating—or inhibiting—youth participation in environmental issues was explored.

A specific goal of the study concerned an investigation into the relationships between the psychosocial constructs under consideration (identification with the area, collective self-esteem and social well-being) and their impact on pro-environment activism and perceived environmental threats.

Another goal was to deepen the role of social and personal characteristics of the participants (e.g. school, class, gender, political orientation) in order to relate their experiences and perceptions to structural and sociological variables.

The final goal of the study was to explore the role of young people in promoting concrete and relevant changes in their local area, by focusing on youth capacity to propose effective solutions and make innovative recommendations for protecting the environment.

Method

Participants

The study involved 229 students enrolled in two local secondary schools: a secondary school specialising in science and a polytechnic school specialising in chemistry and the tannery industry (Table 1).

The percentage of students enrolled in the secondary school specialising in science was 60.3% and the remaining 39.7% attended the polytechnic school; 102 (44.6%) of them attended the 'two-year course' (first and second grades, age Mean = 14.50; *S.D.* = 0.66), whereas 127 (55.4%) of them attended the 'three-year course' (third, fourth and fifth grades, age Mean = 17.31; *S.D.* = 1.11). In particular, 58.5% of the respondents were male students (134) and the remaining 41.5% were female students (95). The differences in the distribution of students between the grades of the two schools reflect the variation in the number of students enrolled.

Table 1. Distribution of the participants by "School", "Class" and "Gender"

Class	School				Total
	Secondary School with Scientific Orientation		**Polytechnic School Chemistry and Tannery**		
	Male Students	**Female Students**	**Male Students**	**Female Students**	
Two-Years Course	27	35	32	8	102
Three-Years Course	32	44	43	8	127
Total	59	79	75	16	229

The participants were mainly Italian citizens (204, 96.2%); in order to prevent loss of information, the eight students who indicated other nationalities were considered as a single group: "other nationalities"; there were 17 (7.4%) missing responses.

Instrument

A questionnaire was built *ad-hoc* for this research and it was composed of several parts: 1. free association tasks (which is beyond the scope of this article); 2. quantitative measures on scales and closed-ended questions; 3. qualitative open-ended questions.

In order to obtain an overall assessment of the relationships between the individuals and their local area, we investigated the following psychosocial constructs: "Identification with the Place" (Brown *et al.*, 1995) with 10 items aimed at assessing the sense of belonging to a social group (in this case the community of the Chiampo Valley); "Collective Self-Esteem" (Luhtanen and Crocker 1992) with four items designed to explore what people believe others think of their social group; and "Social Well-Being" (Keyes 1998)—specifically its dimensions of "Social Integration" (seven items) and "Social Contribution" (six items), namely the assessment of one person relationship with the community and of one person social value. The level of agreement or disagreement with each item was obtained for these four scales through a five-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree (=1) to totally agree (=5).

Moreover, other aspects examined through closed- and open-ended questions were: "Pro-Environmental Activism"; "Perception of Environmental Threats"; "Envisaged Solutions to Environmental Threats".

"Pro-Environmental Activism" was explored by asking the participants the following question: "Have you ever taken part in events organized to discuss possible solutions to environmental problems in your area? If yes, what type of initiative was it? And if not, why not?"

"Perception of Environmental Threats" was investigated by means of the following closed-ended question: "What is the most urgent problem in the area where you live?" It was also adopted in an earlier survey called "Environment and Citizens" (A.T.O., 2007), which involved a representative sample of a thousand adult residents in the valley. This question was chosen in order to explore differences between the perception of environmental threats in adults and young people. There were eight choices: "unemployment", "crime", "no available housing", "pollution", "destruction of the landscape", "inadequate health service", "traffic", and "other".

"Envisaged Solutions to Environmental Threats" were explored by the following open-ended question: "If your task was to promote actions to improve the management of environmental threats in your area, what would you propose?"

Finally, in the last section respondents were asked for some social and personal information: "School" and attended "Class"; "Gender"; "Place of Birth" and "Place of Residence"; "Nationality"; "Political Orientation" (ranging from extreme left-wing (=0) to the extreme right-wing (=100)); and "Father's" and "Mother's Occupation".

Procedures and data analyses

Students were invited to gather during school hours in the auditorium of their institution, where the questionnaire was distributed and self-administered. No student refused to participate in the study.

Analyses of the collected data were conducted with the aid of different software: SPSS for quantitative analyses and Atlas.ti for the qualitative exploration of the open-ended responses.

For each of the four scales considered ("Identification with the Place", "Collective Self-Esteem", "Social Integration" and "Social Contribution") we calculated descriptive statistics and their internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha coefficient). Then, relationships between composite scores on each measure and the social and personal variables described above were assessed through univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) and *t*-tests.

The responses to the closed-ended question were analysed by considering their frequency and by comparing their percentages to those in the preceding survey (cf. A.T.O., 2007).

Responses to the open-ended questions were explored adopting a content analysis (Tuzzi 2003). The analysis focussed on explicit content with the aid of CAQDAS (Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis) software (Atlas-T). The *corpora* were composed respectively of all the responses to each question. Single answers were the chosen unit of analysis. First of all, a bottom-up coding system emerging from the data was developed by reading and re-reading the responses. Then, some codes were grouped together and classified into broader categories of meaning. The coding procedure was carried out by a single judge, and its reliability and heuristic capacity was improved by repeating the procedure twice and by discussing all the codes with the other authors so as to reach consensus.

Results

Personal information: local roots and political orientation

Participants were grouped according to a new variable, called "Local roots" that jointly took into account places of birth and places of residence. This showed that 83.6% (173) of the respondents (22 missing answers) were born in Chiampo Valley and 91.0% (193) were residents (17 missing). The four modalities of the "Local Roots" categorization are: "both born and resident in the Chiampo Valley"; "only born in the Chiampo Valley"; "only resident in the Chiampo Valley"; "neither born nor resident in the Chiampo Valley" (Table 2).

Table 2. Distribution of the participants by the four modalities of the "Local Roots"

Local Roots		Place of Residence		Total
		Chiampo Valley	Other	
Place of Birth	Chiampo Valley	162 (80.2%)	8 (4.0%)	170 (84.2%)
	Other	21 (10.4%)	11 (5.4%)	32 (15.8%)
Total		183 (90.6%)	19 (9.4%)	202* (100%)

*N=27 missing cases

Political orientation (42 missing) was to the right ($M = 68.44$; $SD = 28.74$), although the mode value was in the middle of the range (50 with 33 responses). Mean value significantly differed from the middle point ($t(186) = 8.777$; $p = .000$). The calculation of the tertiles strengthened the result of the imbalance of the mean value towards right-wing and indicated a distribution strongly polarized to the right: the first tertile (64, 34.2%) included the responses ranging from 0 to 50 of those participants who were 'extreme left-wing, left-wing and centre'; the second tertile (62, 33.2%) with responses ranging from 51 to 85 represented those students who defined themselves as "right-wing"; and, lastly, the third tertile (61, 32.6%) completed the distribution with responses ranging from 86 to 100 of those respondents who leaned towards 'extreme right-wing'.

The responses about father's and mother's occupation (193 respondents, 36 missing cases or 15.7%) were grouped into two categories: at least one parent employed in the "tanning industry" (33, 17.1%) and both parents employed in "other work/professions" (160).

Identification, collective self-esteem and social well-being

The descriptive statistics of the four scales under consideration are summarized in Table 3.

The four scales show good internal consistency; median and mean values were always above the neutral point (=3). Mean values vary according to gender, political orientation and parents' occupation (Table 4). In terms of "Gender", male students reported higher scores than their female classmates on the scale of "Identification with the Place" ($t(227) = 2.622$,

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for each of the four considered scales and one-sample *t*-tests

	Cronbach's Alpha	Median	Mean	SD	Test Value = 3	
					t	Sig.
Identification with the Territory	0.85	3.50	3.47	0.82	8.56	.000
Collective Self-Esteem	0.77	3.25	3.31	0.94	5.03	.000
Social Integration	0.79	3.29	3.19	0.81	3.62	.000
Social Contribution	0.67	3.33	3.34	0.76	6.76	.000
Range 1-5						

$p < .01$), as well as on those of "Social Integration" ($t(227) = 2.774$, $p < .01$) and "Social Contribution" ($t(227) = 2.136$, $p < .05$).

Taking into account "Political Orientation", participants who leaned to the 'extreme left-wing, left-wing or centre' showed a lower level of "Identification with the Place" ($F(2,184) = 6.318$, $p < .010$) than those who said they were "extreme right-wing" and—significantly lower—than those who defined themselves as "right-wing". The same trend was observed for the scales of "Collective Self-Esteem" ($F(2, 184) = 10.127$, $p < .001$) and "Social Integration" ($F(2, 184) = 9.325$, $p < .001$). The majority of our participants seem thus to endorse what is usually called 'social' right ideology: which stresses traditional values and belonging to the

Table 4. Mean values and standard deviation of the four scales along the considered social and personal variables

			Identification Territory	Collective Self-Esteem	Social Integration	Social Contribution
Gender	Male Students	Mean	3.58[a]	3.34	3.31[a]	3.43[a]
		SD	0.84	0.90	0.78	0.77
	Female Students	Mean	3.30[b]	3.27	3.02[b]	3.21[b]
		SD	0.76	0.98	0.81	0.74
Political Orientation	Extreme Left, Left, Centre	Mean	3.23[a]	3.00[a]	2.97[a]	3.25
		SD	0.79	0.91	0.63	0.66
	Right	Mean	3.74[b]	3.70[b]	3.53[b]	3.49
		SD	0.65	0.77	0.72	0.72
	Extreme Right	Mean	3.54[ab]	3.20[a]	3.19[a]	3.31
		SD	0.97	1.02	0.83	0.75
Parents Occupation	Tannery	Mean	3.83[a]	3.53	3.36	3.36
		SD	0.67	0.69	0.76	0.78
	Other	Mean	3.48[b]	3.35	3.18	3.36
		SD	0.75	0.89	0.79	0.74

Note: apex letters indicate significant differences (*t*-test or Scheffé Post-Hoc)

community. On the contrary, the minority who endorse a leftist ideology perceive themselves as less integrated in the community and in the area.

An analysis of variance showed that the effect of "Parents' Occupation" on the level of the "Identification with the Place" is significant: students whose father and/or mother were employed in the tanning industry showed higher levels of identification with the place ($t(191) = 2.476$, $p < .05$) when compared to those whose parents are both employed in other professional fields.

Contrary to our expectations, no differences emerged from the analyses on the other variables; "School", attended "Class", "Citizenship" and "Local Roots" had no significant effect on the psychosocial measures examined.

Pro-environmental activism

The question about "Pro-Environmental Activism" received 34 positive and 190 negative responses while 5 were missing (Figure 1).

In order to establish the relationship between this aspect and the psychosocial constructs under consideration, univariate analyses were conducted. Consistent with our expectations, a relationship between pro-environmental activism and the measure of "Social Contribution" emerged ($t(222) = 3.546$, $p < .001$): students who reported that they had participated in events related to environmental issues have a higher level of social contribution ($M = 3.76$; $SD = 0.69$) when compared to those who have never participated in such events ($M = 3.27$; $SD = 0.76$). This means that they positively evaluated their social worth by considering themselves an important member of the community.

If a positive answer was given, they were also asked to indicate which event they had participated in. The responses were explored by considering two aspects: the places (3 categories) and the themes (5) of the events. Environmental issues of the area, where addressed, were mainly discussed in schools (10 responses), but also in religious (1) and cultural (1) groups, although only in isolated cases. The themes mainly related to the problem of pollution (5 responses), protection of water resources (5) and the environment (4), energy saving (3) and sustainable development (2).
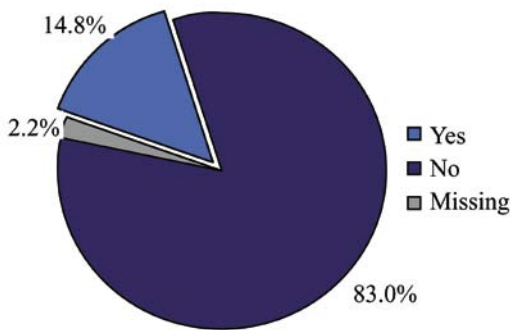

Figure 1. Pro-environmental activism

Students who responded negatively to the question were asked to explain the main reasons for their answer. There were 163 responses, which were grouped into 21 categories of reasons, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Categories of reasons for the refusal

No, why?	Frequency
No interest	24
No events	21
No opportunities	21
No time	14
No information	13
I do not want to	9
Sense of powerlessness	9
I am too young	8
No possibilities	7
Delegated to others (e.g. adults, experts)	6
I do not know	6
Denial of problems	5
Resignation	5
Waste of time	4
Too many commitments	3
I am not from here	2
Laziness	2
I should, but…	1
No inclusion in political groups	1
No involvement	1
No will	1

The most frequently given reason—"no interest" (along with the responses 'I do not want to', 'laziness' and 'no will')—was indicative that students felt detached from the environmental issues in their own area. The other reasons may be more informative for policy makers: first, our respondents perceived that no initiatives had been organized or that they were inadequately promoted, as indicated by responses such as 'no events', 'no opportunities' or 'no information'; second, a group of our participants think they are 'too young' to do anything and they chose to 'delegate to others (e.g. adults, experts)', which is also connected to a 'sense of powerlessness' and 'resignation' . Some participants also preferred to 'deny the problems'. Lastly, further reasons such as 'no time' and 'too many commitments' suggested that some students probably did not consider environmental issues a priority.

Perception of environmental threats

There were 350 responses to the closed-ended question about the "Perception of Environmental Threats".
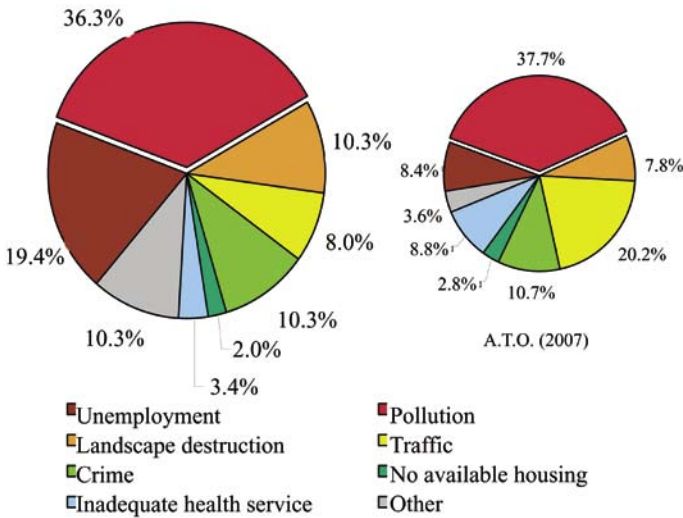

Figure 2. Perception of environmental threats

Table 6. Specifications supplied to the choice 'Other'

Other (specify ___)	Frequency
Immigrants	19
Corruption	2
Racism	2
Bad smell	2
Boredom	1
Busybodies	1
Cheaters	1
Discrimination	1
Justice	1
Money	1
No DSL and TV signal	1
Politicians	1
Scale of priority	1
Superficiality	1
Tax evasion	1

More than a third of the students (127) reported that 'pollution' is the most urgent problem of the valley and, when added to those who considered that it is 'the destruction of the landscape' (36), it is possible to conclude that almost half of the adolescents involved (46.6%) thought that environmental threats were the most important issue of those considered urgent in their area. Similar results, but slightly lower (45.5%), were also found in the A.T.O. survey with adults (A.T.O., 2007) (Figure 2).

It is also worth noting the further details supplied by those participants who indicated that the most urgent problem is 'other' (Table 6).

The high number of 'immigrants' in the area tops the list of other perceived threats.

By contrast the 'bad smell', which is probably the first obvious sign of the tanneries to a visitor entering the valley, is recognised as a problem by only two respondents.

Finally, participants who indicated that the most urgent problem is 'pollution' or 'the destruction of the landscape' and those who chose the other responses do not show significant differences as regards the psychosocial constructs under consideration.

Envisaged solutions to environmental threats

The 278 suggested responses to the open-ended question about the "Envisaged Solutions to Environmental Threats" in the area were grouped into 10 macro-categories (Table 7).

Table 7. Envisaged solutions to environmental threats

Envisaged Solutions	Frequency
Less industrial impact	51
Civic engagement	45
Traffic management	34
Protection of the green spaces	34
Public building	31
Administrative aspects	27
Less pollution	22
Disposal of urban waste	19
Renewable energies	8
Other	7

As shown in Figure 3, the most frequently envisaged solution was to reduce the impact of the industry—by upgrading water and air treatment plants and also by developing materials and manufacturing processes that are more environmentally friendly. Significantly, this macro-category of responses was immediately followed by one about 'civic engagement'.

In this regard, according to the students "civic engagement" mostly means 'youth involvement' (17.1%)—also promoting 'activities in schools' (7.6%)—as well as general 'commitment' (15.2%) and planning 'public meetings' (13.3%) and 'events' (11.4%). Table 8 shows in detail all the responses grouped within the macro-category "civic engagement".
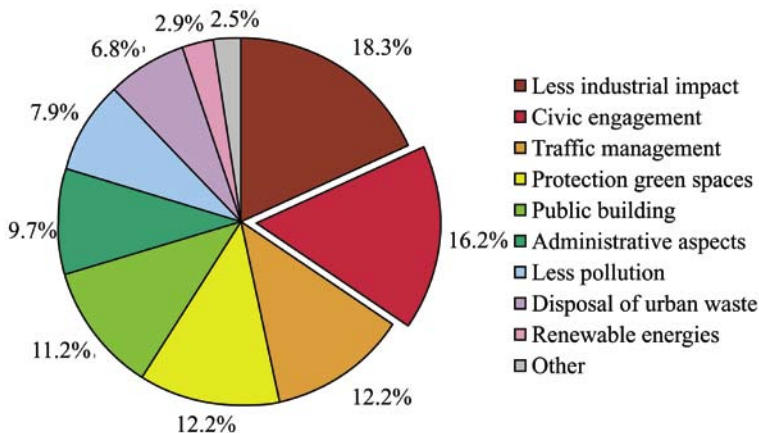
Figure 3. Envisaged solutions to environmental threats

Table 8. Responses grouped into the macro-category 'Civic Engagement'

Civic Engagement	Frequency
Youth involvement	9
Commitment	8
Public meeting	7
Events	6
Activities in schools	4
Awareness	3
Information	3
Demonstrations	3
Voluntary association	3
Charity events	2
Competitions	1
Leafleting	1
Talk with experts	1
Petitions	1
Propaganda	1

It is also worth noting that participants who suggested 'civic engagement' as an envisaged solution to environmental threats and those who ticked other solutions do not show significant differences as regards the psychosocial constructs.

These results indicate firstly that young people are able to provide the community with concrete and original proposals in terms of environmental protection, but also that in offering solutions to the problems of the area they ask to be involved in the decision-making processes.

Concluding remarks

This study was designed to give voice to adolescents as actual citizens who are already providing an important contribution to their communities (Condor and Gibson 2007). Although the importance of young people is largely recognised and their participation is often invoked at national and international levels (Schnack 2008; Jensen and Schnack 1997), this age-group still remained unheeded in the process of public participation organized by the local administrations.

The young people involved in this study showed a strong sense of belonging and ownership in their community. Gender and political orientation had statistically significant effects on the psychosocial dimensions under consideration, whereas—in contrast to our expectations—school, class, nationality and local roots did not. Interestingly, it is not 'identification with the place', 'collective self-esteem' nor 'social integration' that differentiates between active and less active respondents. A significant relationship emerged only between pro-environmental activism and the measure of "Social Contribution". This result is in line with a previous investigation (Bonauito, Breakwell and Cano 1996) showing that a higher level of identification with a place may moderate the perception of environmental threats and thus reduce the quest for change.

Our sample of adolescents had a generalized awareness of the delicate balance between environmental sustainability and economic development and—like adults—considered pollution as the most urgent problem in the area where they live. However, adolescents perceived environmental threats with greater sensitivity when compared with adults and they demonstrate an ability to enact forms of active citizenship in relation to these issues.

In this regard, although pro-environmental activism was not very popular mainly because of a lack of interest, other reasons for the disengagement seemed to be of great relevance: first of all, the perception that no initiatives had been organized or that they had been inadequately promoted; then, the perception that they are too young to do anything and would rather delegate to others (adults, experts etc); and finally, a sense of powerlessness and resignation.

These results suggest that the partial exclusion—or even simply insufficient consideration—of young people in the processes of collective participation does not just correspond to the delegation of decisions to other, more legitimate, citizens (institutional representatives, adult representatives of civic associations and organizations etc); rather, it represents an active exclusionary process that generates passive and disengaged forms of citizenships, in which participation is perceived as a limited domain of agency, with dysfunctional consequences for the current situation and the future of the whole community.

Fortunately, our results also show that young people had many interesting solutions to environmental threats. Both reducing the impact of industry and civic engagement were of great importance. According to the adolescents who responded to our questionnaire, civic engagement means mainly youth involvement as well as the promotion of activities to be carried out in schools. They demonstrate that they are able to contribute to solving problems in the area by promoting innovative resources; and—most importantly—they ask to be involved in events organized to discuss possible solutions to environmental problems.

Therefore it is important that local institutions give voice to young people, as they claim, by developing processes of public participation that include young people as well. And we

think that a closer interconnection between local institutions and schools could be a good tool for activating youth civic engagement and social well-being (Albanesi, Cicognani and Zani 2007).

We also suggest that it would be appropriate to organize awareness and information campaigns aimed at this age-group as it would be useful for adolescents themselves to manage these types of initiatives. Indeed, it is important to invest in them as potential protagonists of participatory processes in institutional decision-making regarding environmental policies and—in general— the life of the community.

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