

From theory to practice: evaluating civic participation in Naples' remunicipalised water service

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This article examines the remunicipalisation of Naples' water service to explain the outcomes of participatory governance experiments inspired by commons theory. Using process tracing and Fung's Democracy Cube, it analyses how participatory mechanisms were designed, contested and reconfigured within ABC Napoli. Based on interviews, documents and media, the findings show how legal constraints, political tensions, financial fragility and civil society–institution relationships shaped outcomes. Participatory forums evolved from open deliberation to consultative bodies with limited influence, failing to institutionalise civic participation. The study argues that both remunicipalisation and its participatory practices are hyper-local phenomena, shaped by specific contextual configurations rather than by theoretical models.

Keywords: remunicipalisation, water governance, participatory governance, civic participation, commons, public services

JEL Classifications: D73, H41, H83, Z13

Introduction

Remunicipalisation, the return of privatised or marketised services to public control (McDonald, 2024), has attracted growing interest as a complex response to the global spread of market-oriented public service models. Within the European Union (EU), remunicipalisation has become particularly widespread, driven by dissatisfaction with private operators (Muehlebach, 2023). It has also been promoted by civic coalitions and social movements to respond to neoliberal reforms and to reassert democratic control over essential services as common goods. Bieler (2021) frames remunicipalisation as part of a broader struggle against neoliberalism, where social actors mobilise not only to reverse privatisation but to reclaim democratic control over essential resources, and redefine the meaning of participation and public accountability. Although local water remunicipalisation is particularly common in the EU, its outcomes remain highly contingent on multilevel contextual factors, including le-

gal frameworks, administrative capacities, political coalitions and local histories of public service provision (Turri, 2022a).

This article examines Naples' remunicipalisation, where a decade-long experiment in participatory water governance has sought to implement the “democracy of the commons” theorised by a broad national movement against water privatisation. Notable for its symbolic and ideological ambition, it aimed to establish a radically participatory and commons-based governance model. However, its implementation faced persistent structural and political obstacles.

Drawing on qualitative data, process tracing and Fung's Democracy Cube, this article examines how participatory mechanisms in ABC Napoli were designed, contested and evolved over time. It highlights the limits of participatory remunicipalisation and how local socio-political, institutional, infrastructural and civic contingencies shaped its forms and outcomes.

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Table 1. Interpretations of the commons within the Italian Water Movement.

Aspects	Water as a commons of humankind (universality)	Water as a commons of the local territory (locality)	Water as a commons beyond state and market (participation)
Main actors	Development NGOs, Catholic missionaries, alter-globalisation groups	Local authorities, trade unions, consumer associations, civic movements	Radical social movements, left-wing jurists from the Rodotà Committee
Political claims	Promotion of water culture and international solidarity against water commodification	Defence of local governance of water services and opposition to privatisation	Experimentation with new forms of participatory democracy
Theoretical references	Human rights, representative democracy	Local democracy, decentralisation, subsidiarity	Direct and post-representative democracy
Initiatives	Awareness campaigns, solidarity projects for water access in the Global South, international advocacy	Legal disputes against national and regional laws promoting privatisation, campaigns to protect local water resources	Participatory water management in the context of re-municipalisation (Naples), civil disobedience campaigns for self-determined tariffs
Impact on the movement	Participation in transnational networks and international events	Strengthening the autonomy of local committees	Networking with other commons movements, horizontal organisation and consensus decision-making

Source: author's elaboration based on [Carrozza and Fantini \(2016, 104\)](#).

The Italian public water movement and the “democracy of the commons”

Over the past two decades, Europe has seen a wave of water remunicipalisation, driven by both popular mobilisation and policy responses to the failures of private management, such as rising tariffs, service degradation, lack of transparency, social exclusion and reduced democratic accountability ([McDonald and Swyngedouw, 2019](#); [Bieler, 2021](#); [Muehlebach, 2023](#)). In the EU, this reflects a deeper tension between private-sector logics and water's historic role as a public good serving collective wellbeing ([Turri, 2022a](#)).

The term “remunicipalisation” refers to returning essential services to public control at all levels of government ([McDonald and Swyngedouw, 2019](#)). In Europe, however, it has occurred mainly at the municipal level, reflecting the long-standing tradition of organising Services of General Economic Interest (SGEI), such as water, through municipal governance ([Wollmann and Marçou, 2010](#); [Wollmann et al., 2016](#)). In several cities — including Paris, Berlin and Barcelona — remunicipalisation was accompanied by the introduction of participatory governance mechanisms ([Turri, 2022a](#)).

The Italian movement for public water, “the largest and most articulated commons movement in Europe,” was characterised by its broad, heterogeneous, cross-cutting composition ([Carrozza and Fantini, 2013, 12](#)). The movement emerged through local committees opposing water privatisation, rooted in specific territories. These converged into the Italian Forum of Water Movements, a networked, heterogeneous structure of activists, associations, trade

unions, leftist and green parties, parish groups and first-time political participants ([Fantini, 2013](#)).

Such a movement was not only a vehicle of protest, but also a laboratory of democratic innovation. It acted as a constituent force, capable of renewing democracy “from below” through referenda, participatory structures and institutional experimentation ([della Porta, 2020](#)). Like all commons-oriented movements, it was characterised by a prefigurative dimension: it not only advocated for inclusive and sustainable institutions, but also practised them in the present, experimenting with open deliberative arenas and horizontal decision-making ([della Porta, 2023](#)).

The movement formulated the “politics of the commons” model that asserts the autonomy of essential goods from both the market and the state in order to ensure the social and environmental sustainability of their use ([Rodotà, 2012](#); [Lucarelli, 2013](#)). On this basis, a “democracy of the commons” also emerged, understood as a model of governance grounded in the direct participation of citizens in the collective management of common resources, aimed at addressing the crises of representation ([Lucarelli, 2013](#); [Dardot and Laval, 2015](#)).

The Forum's theoretical framework articulates the concept of water as a commons in three senses (as summarised in [Table 1](#)):

- Water as a source of life and a universal human right, violated by processes of privatisation — a stance influenced by critiques of neoliberal globalisation ([Klein, 1999](#); [Shiva, 2002](#));
- Water as a local territorial commons to be defended from appropriation and commodification by external

economic actors. This perspective enabled the movement to shift the conflict from the traditional left–right axis to one between centre and periphery (Fantini, 2013);

- Water as a commons is to be managed through direct citizen participation, in continuity with experiences documented by Elinor Ostrom (1990). While inspired by commons theory, which emphasises exclusive use rights for local communities in resource management (Rose, 2020), the Forum reinterpreted it more openly, grounded in universal access and rejecting exclusive rights over water (Rodotà, 2012). Unlike Ostrom’s model, which assigns management to autonomous communities distinct from institutions, the Forum promotes collaboration between citizens and institutions to build an alternative democratic framework. This model critiques distortions of representative democracy and seeks to overcome them through permanent direct participation and civic oversight of public action.

While awareness-raising initiatives to promote water as a common good multiplied locally through the committees, the Forum simultaneously organised national campaigns that secured its recognition as an autonomous political actor with its own theoretical framework.

- In 2003, the Forum organised the first World Alternative Water Forum in Florence, opposing the World Water Forum.
- In 2006, it promoted a popular legislative initiative for the public and participatory management of water, supported by more than 400,000 signatures.
- In 2007, the Rodotà Commission drafted a reform of the Civil Code to legally recognise the commons.
- In 2010, the Forum launched a referendum campaign against water privatisation, collecting over 1.4 million signatures to repeal competitive tendering and guaranteed capital returns in water tariffs. On 11–12 June 2011, more than 27 million Italians voted against privatisation, thanks to the campaign’s inclusiveness and the symbolic power of the commons vision (Diamanti, 2011; Moroni, 2024).

The Forum effectively raised awareness and pressured local, national and EU institutions through a respected, plural epistemic community. This has included legal scholars like Stefano Rodotà, Alberto Lucarelli, Ugo Mattei and Luca Nivarra, alongside NGO activists, associations and Catholic figures such as Father Zanotelli. After the 2011 referendum, the Forum focused on remunicipalising local water companies by promoting their transformation into public Local Authority Special-Purpose Entities (LASPE). Only Naples completed such a process, becoming the sole significant urban experiment in commons-inspired governance

and the most advanced attempt to implement the Forum’s demands.

Methodology

Table 2 presents the anonymised list of interviewees, including date, format and role of each participant.

In line with the objectives of this special issue, this study hypothesises that models for the management of public services, even when imposed from above or designed to be standardised, are profoundly reconfigured by local contexts. Motivations, practices and outcomes are shaped by historical, social and institutional variables, both in models inspired by privatisation and in those challenging it.

From this perspective, the study offers an in-depth analysis of the remunicipalisation process of the water service in Naples, from the early 2000s to the present day, focusing on the emergence, development and outcomes of various forms of civic participation in the governance of the remunicipalised utility. Despite the formal transformation of the company from a joint-stock company (JSC) to LASPE in 2013, the process is still considered ongoing, due to the absence of a stable governance model. This approach reflects public policy as a dynamic, continuously evolving process (Capano and Woo, 2017, 2018).

Although the literature favours comparative approaches (McDonald, 2024), the Neapolitan case warrants a monographic analysis because it is unique in the European context and a monograph enables an in-depth understanding of the locally embedded processes shaping its outcomes. Unlike other European water remunicipalisation experiences, such as Paris or Berlin — where the process was mainly driven by contract expiration or dissatisfaction with private management — in Naples it arose from a deliberate political project rooted in the commons paradigm (Bianchi, 2023). In those cases, remunicipalisation typically restored traditional public management models. By contrast, the Neapolitan process has resulted from a conscious mobilisation to test a unique experiment in commons-based water governance (Muehlebach, 2023). The remunicipalised utility was deliberately established as a LAPSE to implement the “commons democracy” model theorised by the Forum. To find a mobilisation against water privatisation of comparable scale and ideological coherence, one must look beyond Europe, notably to Bolivia in the early 2000s (Dwinell and Olivera, 2014; Razavi, 2022).

This study draws on qualitative data from institutional documents, newspaper articles, academic publications and eleven anonymised semi-structured interviews. The interviews, conducted in late 2018–early 2019 and again in 2025, integrated initial findings with updated insights on water governance in Naples. Interviewees reflected diverse perspectives on the remunicipalisation process, including workers, managers, administrators and activists. Special attention was given to long-standing mem-

Table 2. Anonymised list of interviewees.

Interviewee	Date and place of interview	Description
Interviewee 1	10 December 2018, phone	A long-standing activist and a prominent figure within the Italian Forum of Water Movements since its inception.
Interviewee 2	20 December 2018, phone	A key figure in the Naples Committees for Public Water since their formation. Following divisions with the De Magistris administration in 2014 and 2016, they remained active in the committees and continued collaborating with both the De Magistris and Manfredi administrations.
Interviewee 3	24 October 2019, phone	A long-standing activist and a prominent figure within the Italian Forum of Water Movements since its inception.
Interviewee 4	7 January 2019, phone	Held a governance role in ABC from 29 October 2014 to 14 September 2016.
Interviewee 5	18 January 2019, email	A leading figure in the Naples Committees for Public Water since their formation. After the rupture with the De Magistris administration in 2014, they continued collaborating with the administration but left the Committees following the 2016 division.
Interviewee 6	31 January 2019, Naples	Held a governance role in ABC from 15 September 2016 to 25 June 2021.
Interviewee 7	31 January 2019, Naples	Has been employed by the Naples water utility since 2004, holding managerial roles and undertaking trade union responsibilities.
Interviewee 8	15 February 2019, Milan	Worked in the Naples water utility from 1999 to 2017, occupying technical positions.
Interviewee 9	28 February 2025, online	Held senior managerial roles in the Naples water utility from 1990 to 2024.
Interviewee 10	12 February 2025, online	Held a governance role in ABC from 25 June 2021 to 18 June 2024.
Interviewee 11	19 February 2025, online	A long-standing figure in the Naples Committees for Public Water. After the 2014 division with the De Magistris administration, they continued collaboration with the administration but departed from the Committees following the 2016 split.
Interviewee 12	27 February 2025, phone	Held a governance role in ABC from 29 October 2014 to 14 September 2016.

bers of the Naples Public Water Committees, both those who remained engaged after the conflict with the de Magistris administration and those who withdrew. Table 2 presents the anonymised list of interviewees, including the date, format and role of each participant.

The governance history of ABC was divided into four periods, defined by both the official dates of appointments (ABC Napoli, 2025) and the political characteristics of the administrators (Board of Directors members or extraordinary commissioners). The four periods considered are:

- 20 June 2013–28 October 2014
- 29 October 2014–14 September 2016
- 15 September 2016–25 June 2021
- 25 June 2021–18 June 2024

Direct testimonies from BoD members from the first remunicipalisation phase were unavailable, as they declined to participate. These gaps were mitigated through triangulation with academic sources, interviews and local press coverage. Their refusal itself reflected the intense conflict between the Italian Forum of Water Movements and the city administration at the time.

Contemporary academic literature conceptualises remunicipalisation as a multidimensional, ongoing process rather than a simple reversal of privatisation. It is defined as a “state-led or community-led reclaiming of previously privatised services” (Cumbers and Paul, 2022, 2) and un-

derstood as a transformative response to the limitations of market-based governance. Far from being a mere administrative correction, it represents a political project to reconfigure service provision through democratic innovation and civic empowerment. Cumbers and Paul (2022) stress its potential to foster economic democracy and reimagine the public sphere through collective control over essential resources. Lobina and Wegmann (2021) highlight how it generates new institutional practices that enhance transparency, accountability and participation. From a more radical perspective, Bieler (2021) frames it as an effort to restructure social and economic relations around the commons, building solidarity and collective agency. As argued by Turri (2022a) and McDonald (2024), remunicipalisation processes entail complex, multi-level institutional, social and ideological transformations.

Given the multidimensional nature of remunicipalisation, this study uses process-tracing to uncover the causal mechanisms behind Naples’ participatory governance, explaining its outcomes and deriving lessons applicable to other contexts. Process-tracing is “commonly defined as a strategy to trace causal mechanisms” in the social sciences (Bennett, 2007, 2008; Checkel, 2006), and involves identifying the intervening causal chain between independent variables and observed outcomes (George and Bennett, 2005, 206–7). Specifically, the study applies the “explaining-outcome” variant, which seeks to construct a minimally

sufficient explanation for a particular historical outcome, in order to generate context-specific insights that may inform broader understandings.

To analyse the outcomes of the remunicipalisation process traced through process-tracing, this study applies Archon Fung's (2006) theoretical framework, designed to explore institutional configurations of public participation. This framework suits cases like Naples as it systematically assesses the quality and intensity of participation — examining who participates, how, and with what effect. It links participatory forms to governance outcomes, including their impact on legitimacy, justice and administrative effectiveness, and shows how participation interacts with institutional structures, either complementing or challenging representation. Centred on the “Democracy Cube,” it evaluates arrangements across three dimensions: participant selection, modes of deliberation and decision-making influence. Its graphical representation also enables immediate comparison between cases and assessment of democratic and institutional innovation.

Who participates?

Fung (2006) identifies five main mechanisms for selecting participants in participatory processes. The first is open participation, based on self-selection, allowing anyone to join. While highly inclusive, it may favour those with more resources or time, undermining representativeness. The second is random selection by lottery within a target population, ensuring fair statistical representation but requiring training and substantial resources. The third is stakeholder selection, involving representatives of organised interests. This guarantees key actors' presence but can lead to conflict among groups and marginalise less structured ones. The fourth is expert authority, limiting participation to specialists. This enhances technical quality but reduces inclusiveness and can alienate the public. Lastly, electoral designation selects participants via democratic elections, providing strong legitimacy but favouring those already advantaged in terms of resources and power.

How do participants communicate and make decisions?

Fung (2006) outlines six modes of interaction among participants in participatory arenas. The simplest is informative communication, where authorities provide information without receiving feedback. Consultation allows citizens to express opinions that, while non-binding, may inform decisions. In deliberative forums, participants engage in reciprocal discussion without necessarily altering their views. True deliberation, by contrast, involves rational debate aimed at transforming preferences and building consensus. Often considered the democratic ideal (Chambers, 2003), it promotes more informed and broadly supported outcomes, though it demands considerable time and re-

sources. Negotiation brings together actors with divergent interests to seek compromise, while aggregation reduces participation to voting or polling. Although efficient, aggregation limits engagement and the development of shared understanding. Each mode reflects different levels of civic involvement and potential influence, shaping the depth and quality of democratic participation.

What is the impact of participation?

Fung (2006) identifies five categories of influence that define the degree of power citizens may exercise in decision-making. The weakest is participation without influence, where citizens are informed or consulted but have no impact on outcomes. This may raise awareness but lacks policy consequences. Communicative influence follows, where citizens try to persuade authorities through recommendations or testimonies, potentially shaping decisions indirectly. Consultation and advisory processes involve more formal input, with institutions actively soliciting citizen views, though final authority remains with officials. In co-governance, power is shared, with citizens and institutions jointly developing and implementing policies. At the highest level, direct authority gives citizens binding decision-making power, as seen in citizen assemblies with control over budgets or local initiatives.

The three dimensions outlined above generate the Democracy Cube, a three-dimensional space capable of representing various forms of participatory mechanisms.

Legitimacy, justice and effectiveness

Fung evaluates the configurations of the Democracy Cube based on three criteria: legitimacy, justice and effectiveness. Legitimacy depends on whether the process is seen as representative and inclusive by citizens and institutions. Open or representative deliberation enhances legitimacy, though broad participation can reduce technical quality in complex contexts. Justice relates to inclusiveness: processes that ensure access for marginalised groups or address social and economic imbalances tend to yield fairer outcomes. Tools like random selection or stakeholder representation promote equity, while expert-dominated or self-selected models may exclude vulnerable voices. Effectiveness refers to producing high-quality decisions in a limited time. Expert involvement improves speed and rigour but may undermine legitimacy and justice by marginalising citizen input. Although deliberation best supports legitimacy and justice, Fung notes it is often complex and slow, making it less suitable for contexts requiring swift action.

Participatory experimentation in Naples

This section analyses Naples' remunicipalisation, outlining Italy's national and local contexts and examining par-

participatory models developed across four phases, interpreted through Fung's (2006) Democracy Cube to assess their democratic dynamics and innovative potential.

National context

The management of water services in Italy has historically been in the hands of municipalities, following a municipal model established since the nineteenth century (Turri, 2022a). Prior to the 1990s, municipalities managed local water services directly or through LASPE, public bodies subordinated to local political decisions and lacking real financial autonomy. This arrangement fostered an intense politicisation of the sector, with tariffs often set on electoral grounds and staff management influenced by clientelistic dynamics, where clientelism is understood as the exchange of material resources for political support (Stokes, 2011). These practices had significant structural consequences: growing local authority debt, underinvestment, poor-quality materials, staff overload in public companies and both economic and environmental inefficiencies.

In an attempt to improve the efficiency of local public service management, Law no. 142 of 1990 introduced reforms aimed at ensuring greater legal and financial autonomy for LASPE. However, municipalities continue to register their profits and losses in their budgets and retain control over strategic decisions, while ordinary management can be delegated to technical offices (Galgano, 2020). Although configured as an alternative to companies governed by private law, LASPE remain structurally slow, poorly competitive compared JSC, and often characterised by clientelistic logic (Massarutto, 2011); moreover, the law stipulates that BoD members are not to be remunerated, exacerbating difficulties in selecting competent candidates.

According to interviewees, the proposal advanced by the Forum to transform JSC into LASPE did not ignore these structural limitations, but was based on the awareness that, in Italy, no other legal form exists under public law. LASPE thus represent the only legal structure allowing for the introduction of civic participation in corporate governance. Furthermore, since they cannot generate profit for private gain, they must reinvest any financial surplus into service improvements (Interviews 1, 2).

From the 1990s onwards, Italy has undergone various waves of decentralisation that transferred increased responsibilities to local governments regarding the regulation and management of public services, without accompanying them with sufficient fiscal resources. This imbalance produced what Ferrera and Keating call a "decentralisation of scarcity," where municipalities gain responsibilities without adequate means to exercise them (Ferrera, 2008; Keating, 2008). The worsening of territorial inequalities, coupled with auster-

ity policies following the 2008 crisis, has further restricted local administrations' spending and intervention capacity.

Systemic inefficiency and financial constraints have left a legacy of degraded infrastructure. In 2022, water leakage nationwide reached 42.4%, with peaks as high as 71% in some areas (ISTAT, 2024). In this scenario, repeated EU sanctions for non-compliance with wastewater treatment directives must be added (Utilitatis, 2023).

Instead of addressing the inefficiencies of the water sector pragmatically, Italian political parties capitalised on its politicisation, triggered by the Forum's opposition to EU-driven water SGEI privatisation policies in the early 2000s. Centre-left parties defended public management, co-opting — that is, adopting the movements' innovative practices without embracing their principles (della Porta, 2020) — the claim of water as a common good in their programmes, yet never supporting the Forum's proposals to make the public option viable. Centre-right parties, by contrast, endorsed privatisation reforms without reforming the legal framework to facilitate outsourcing.

This politicisation has fuelled a dichotomised debate, idealising the public option for its social and environmental fairness and low tariffs, while presenting the private as more efficient managerially and economically. This polarised framing obscured the complexity and limits of both models (Massarutto, 2008, 2011), producing an inconsistent legislative framework that has failed to address structural weaknesses (Caporale, 2017). On the public side, investment is constrained by public debt, EU balanced-budget rules and a legal framework that disadvantages LASPE, which limits access to credit and embeds managerial inefficiencies. Direct municipal management, often in marginal areas, recorded very low investment — about €8 per inhabitant (2016–2021) — insufficient even for basic maintenance (Utilitatis, 2023). On the private side, outsourcing has proved unattractive due to low margins, high costs for renewing infrastructure and meeting environmental standards, and difficulties accessing credit due to slow profitability and regulatory uncertainty (Utilitatis, 2023; ARERA, 2024).

This dichotomisation also prevented public debate from addressing the actual characteristics of Italy's water sector, dominated by hybrid forms combining public and private logics. In particular, agencification — the transformation of public operations into fully publicly owned joint-stock companies governed by private law — has become the most widespread model (Wollmann, 2018; Verhoest, 2018). This allows municipalities to retain control over a politically strategic sector, keep open the option of remunicipalisation or privatisation (Lobina and Wegmann, 2021), overcome LASPE's limits, comply with EU rules, access financial markets and attract investment (Utilitatis, 2023). By 2023, agencification accounted for 50.4% of water management, followed by listed companies (18.3%), mixed com-

panies (12.5%), direct management or LASPE (9.4%), and third-party concessions (9.3%) (Utilitatis, 2023).

The Neapolitan context

Naples, despite being one of the oldest cities in the Western world, differs from other major European cities due to structurally disadvantaged conditions: high unemployment and informal labour (Comune di Napoli, 2023; Roberti, 2023), tax evasion (Mazzone, 2023), low educational attainment, youth emigration (ISTAT, 2023) and difficulties in accessing social rights (Savitch and Kantor, 2002; Frascani, 2017). To this must be added a public debt of approximately €4.2 billion in 2023 (Comune di Napoli, 2023). Low incomes and limited education have contributed to the persistence of political clientelism (Allum, 1973; Brancaccio, 2018).

The city's water system is fragmented and poorly functioning: the Municipality is responsible for water distribution and, since 2019, also for sewerage and public fountains; the Campania Region is responsible for wastewater treatment. Infrastructure is degraded: water leakage stood at 33.7% in 2024 (ISTAT, 2024); the sewer system is in poor condition (ANSA, 2024); most public fountains are out of service (Frattasi, 2024a); outdated and poorly maintained wastewater treatment plants have led to EU sanctions for environmental violations (Utilitatis, 2023).

Alongside clientelism, however, Naples has developed strong self-organised civic networks, both secular and Catholic, active in community services and social cohesion (Di Nicola, 2006). These networks mobilised in 2003 against the decision of the assembly of mayors of ATO2 Napoli-Volturno (the public body that governs water services for 136 municipalities) to entrust the Integrated Water Service to a private operator linked to Suez Environnement. This gave rise to the Naples Public Water Committees (Committees) and the Campania Coordination for the Public Management of Water, two of the most active components of the Italian Forum of Water Movements, with operations at both regional and city level (Interviews 2, 11).

The mobilisation was sparked by Father Alex Zanotelli, a Comboni missionary long critical of neoliberalism, who helped unite a broad front of civil society (Interviews 1, 2, 5).

“The Naples movement was born directly thanks to him and to his worldview.” (Interview 2)

In 2004, during a public event, Zanotelli was prevented from speaking publicly against water privatisation (Zanotelli, 2019). The incident caused public uproar and further strengthened the mobilisation, leading in 2006 to the unanimous cancellation of the 2004 resolution by ATO2.

The Committees initiated self-education on water management, collaborated with administrations and promoted

remunicipalisation through the “Naples like Paris” campaign (Interviews 3, 5).

In 2011, mayoral candidate Luigi de Magistris, independent of major parties, built his campaign around the public management of commons, focusing on water and waste services. He promised to remunicipalise the urban water utility and to manage it according to the democracy of the commons model. Supported by the Committees and the national referendum campaign, he won without the backing of major parties, securing broad, cross-cutting electoral support (Macry, 2018).

Remunicipalisation

The water service in Naples was managed from 1885 to 1959 by an Anglo-French company, after which it was transferred to municipal control through a LASPE, later converted in 2001 into a JSC: Azienda Risorse Idriche Napoli (ARIN). At the time of the transformation, ARIN was in a state of severe financial crisis, with €40 million in debt, an oversized workforce, and the management of two loss-making companies (ARIN, 2012; ABC Napoli, 2013)).

“The company was a real white elephant (...) we truly led a rebirth of the company. ARIN became the Municipality's flagship (...) it was the only company with a positive balance sheet (...) the first in Italy to publish water quality data online.” (Interview 8)

Between 2007 and 2010, ARIN increased profits and cut its workforce to 385 (ARIN, 2008, 2009, 2010). Through debt recovery, service internalisation and gradual tariff increases, it repaid pre-2001 debts and funded projects, including modernising the Serino Aqueduct and launching wastewater treatment and renewable energy initiatives.

However, the Municipality's failure to pay service fees prevented projects such as the rehabilitation of water networks and the construction of 42 planned photovoltaic plants. Its debt to the company rose from €51 million in 2019 to €91.5 million in 2020, €96.4 million in 2021, and peaked at €107.6 million in 2022 (ABC Napoli, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). After lengthy negotiations, a 2023 agreement reduced the recognised debt to €83.4 million, enabling partial recovery (ABC Napoli, 2024). Debts to the Campania Region for sewerage and wastewater treatment fees ranged between €25 and €45 million (ABC Napoli, 2023).

Therefore, ARIN management did not present operational shortcomings severe enough to necessitate remunicipalisation. According to some interviewees, it was instead a political choice to capitalise electorally on the popular support generated by the 2011 referendum on public water (Interviews 7, 8).

As soon as elected, the de Magistris administration launched the process of transforming ARIN into a LASPE. It appointed Alberto Lucarelli as Councillor for the Commons, Public Water and Participatory Democracy, who led

the transformation from 2011 to 2013 (Interviews 1, 2), and Ugo Mattei, a representative of the Italian Forum of Water Movements, as president BoD's president.

“The first BoD was aligned with Lucarelli: it included Ugo Mattei and other people from that academic sphere who were working on (...) a broader theoretical framework on the commons.” (Interview 2)

ARIN's legal transformation into the LASPE Acqua Bene Comune Napoli (ABC) was completed in February 2013, with its Statute (ABC Napoli, 2012) approved in December 2012.

The Statute of ABC establishes a formally participatory governance structure, composed of a BoD, a Director, and a Board of Auditors. The Municipality retains decision-making power over strategic choices, while institutionalised forms of civic participation are envisioned through the inclusion of civil society representatives on the BoD and the establishment of a Supervisory Committee with oversight powers over corporate governance, modelled on the *Observatoire de l'Eau* of Eau de Paris (Gasseau, 2024).

The BoD consists of five members appointed by the mayor: three must be selected from individuals with experience in the management of local public services or public administration (Statute, art. 6, para. 3); the remaining two are designated by environmental associations recognised by the Ministry of the Environment, with random selection applied in the event of excessive candidacies.

The Supervisory Committee was intended to comprise 20 members — including municipal councillors, ABC employees, consumer representatives and representatives of environmental associations — and was designed to provide recommendations and oversight on the actions of the Board of Directors.

It is important to note that the participatory model outlined in the Statute has never been fully implemented, as the Supervisory Committee was never formally established. Between 2013 and 2015, the committee met only twice, and only with the participation of employee representatives; the other designated members never attended, and the committee was not convened again thereafter (Interviews 8, 12).

Thus, it can be stated that although the commons-based policy model theorised by the Forum envisaged participatory mechanisms founded on open participation, deliberative practices and co-governance between citizens and institutions, ABC's Statute adopts a different framework. The participatory model outlined in the Statute is based on stakeholder selection, limited to environmental associations, but endowed with internal deliberative capacity and engaging in subsequent negotiation with the City Council. According to Fung (2006), such a design privileges efficiency and a certain degree of legitimacy, at the expense of participatory justice, reflecting one of the trade-offs he identifies: a participatory mechanism aimed at integrating

specific expertise and organised interests rather than radically broadening participation or addressing inequalities.

Participatory experiments

In light of this, the following sections will examine only those civic participation processes activated within the BoD or by the respective extraordinary commissioner, as these represent the only instances where civic participation was effectively put into practice.

Implementing the participatory model in ABC's Statute proved complex, with frequent structural changes and shifts between ordinary and extraordinary management. The members of the BoD were appointed and dismissed multiple times through unilateral decisions by the City Council, and the Neapolitan administration often opted instead for the appointment of extraordinary commissioners.

In Italy, an extraordinary commissioner is an official appointed for exceptional situations, with centralised, temporary powers. However, from 2013 to the present day, ABC has been governed for extended periods by commissioners, effectively turning what was meant to be an exceptional measure into standard practice. This figure's persistence is tied to a direct relationship of trust with the mayor and to practical considerations. Unlike BoD members, the commissioner is remunerated and is therefore in a better position to meet the day-to-day demands of managing an industrial enterprise with a multi-million-euro turnover. Interviewees confirmed that the role of BoD member entails a heavy workload and considerable responsibility, not only in managerial but also in legal terms. Although unpaid, members of the BoD were required to personally arrange civil liability insurance and cover legal expenses in the event of disputes (Interviews 10, 12). As noted (Interview 12), it was not uncommon for them to be summoned by the Court of Auditors to clarify management activities, having to bear the legal costs out of their own pockets.

In light of this development, the governance of ABC can be divided into four phases, each characterised by different forms of civic participation.

From 20/06/2013 to 28/10/2014

The first BoD of ABC, chaired by Ugo Mattei — a key figure of the Water Forum — was appointed by the de Magistris administration to implement the principles of the 2011 referendum. The two members designated by the mayor were legal scholars close to Mattei, though not directly representative of the Forum (Interview 9). The representatives of the environmental associations were initially selected through random selection, conducted during a public session of the City Council, but resigned shortly afterwards upon realising the level of commitment required and the unpaid nature of the role (Interview 7). The associations were then

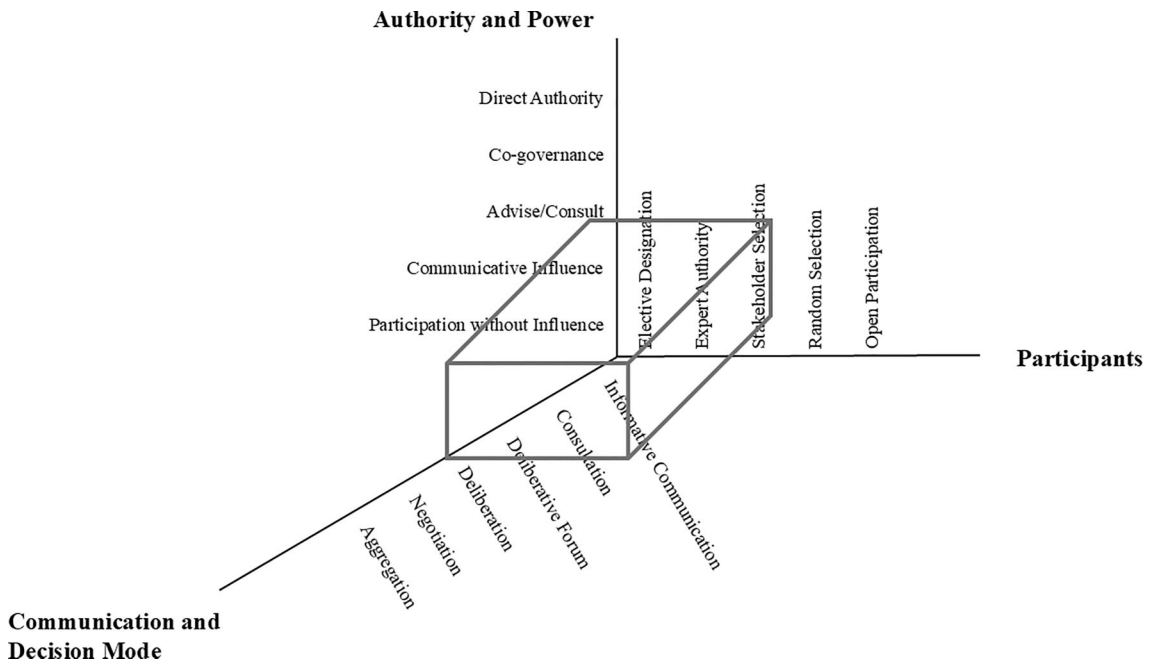


Figure 1. First participatory configuration of ABC within Fung's Democracy Cube (2006) (Author's elaboration).

asked to identify individuals with the necessary expertise and without financial constraints.

Mattei attempted to implement the participatory mechanisms envisaged by the Statute “But he never really took off, if I’m being honest (...) And besides, he was a president from Turin; a relationship with the city has to be built.” (Interview 9)

The two environmental association representatives on the BoD had no real connection with civil society:

“They were able to grasp the company’s operational issues thanks to their own personal skills (...) not as representatives of the associations.” (Interview 9)

By contrast, the Committees were very active in the city and engaged in managing ABC through their ongoing relationships with Mattei and Councillor Lucarelli. Their exclusion from the BoD — effectively sanctioned by ABC’s Statute, which reserved the selection to environmental associations only — generated conflict with the very individuals who had drafted the Statute, who were accused of excluding the Committees from its development and the definition of participation criteria (Interviews 4, 11). This phase ended in October 2014 with the dismissal of the BoD by the de Magistris administration (NapoliToday, 2014).

This BoD managed the company in complete continuity with the previous practice.

Figure 1 illustrates, through Fung’s (2006) Democracy Cube, the participatory configuration implemented at ABC Napoli. Participation was structured through stakeholder

selection, while the BoD’s members communicated and made decisions through deliberation. Influence on governmental decisions was limited to a consultative mode. This configuration exhibited limited inclusiveness and questionable legitimacy, as it excluded actors historically involved in the remunicipalisation process. Its effectiveness proved modest: although it allowed the municipal administration to preserve continuity in water service management during the governance transition, it also delayed decision-making and constrained the transformative potential of civic engagement. Figure 1 highlights the challenge of balancing legitimacy, justice and effectiveness.

From 29/10/2014 to 14/09/2016

During this period, Maurizio Montalto, an environmental lawyer and long-standing representative of the Committees, came to the fore. He initially served as chair of the BoD and was later appointed as ABC’s extraordinary commissioner. He was joined on the BoD by technical and academic profiles, in a composition that reflected a desire to balance the political momentum of the movement with a more technical-professional managerial approach.

Montalto initiated a participatory governance model inspired by that theorised by the Forum, based on open participation and deliberation as a strategy for decision-making, through establishing the Civic Council (Bianchi, 2023). This was conceived as a public assembly open to all residents, convened at ABC premises and announced via the water bill and the company website (Interview 12).

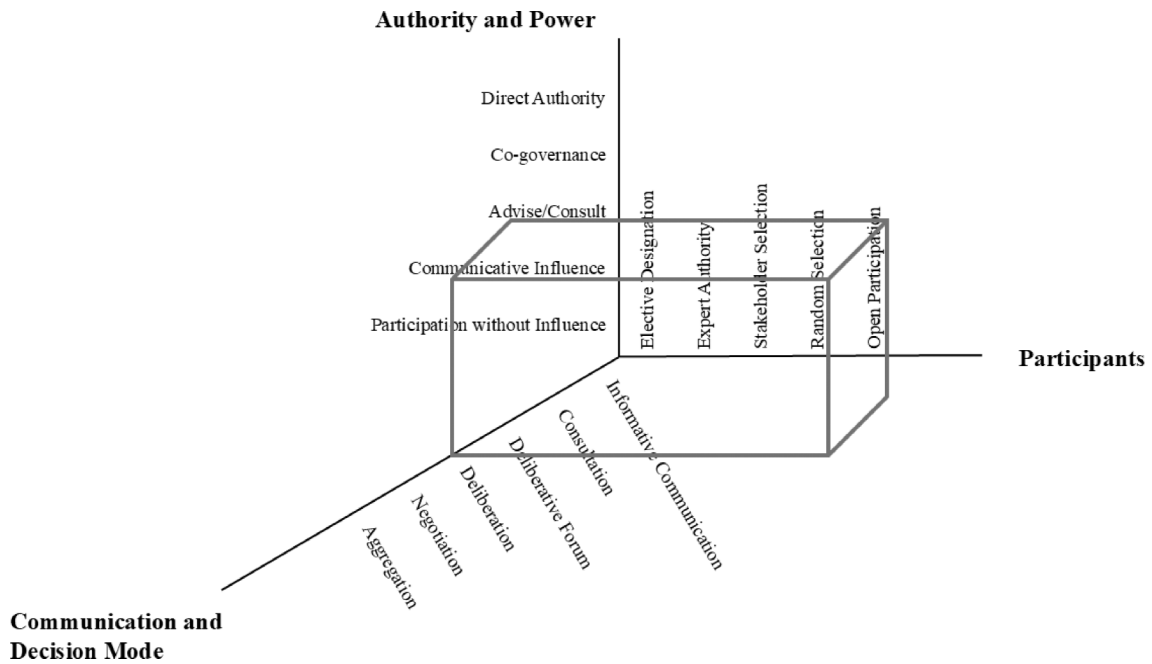


Figure 2. Second participatory configuration of ABC within Fung's Democracy Cube (2006) (Author's elaboration).

Many people participated in the meetings, including ABC workers (Interviews 7, 11). During these sessions, Montalto shared information and data relating to matters on which the BoD was required to deliberate, launching a collective discussion. The Civic Council decided the emerging positions should be represented in the BoD by a variable number of delegates, selected from among the participants. These roles were regularly filled by members of the Committees, recognised for their expertise. These representatives took part in BoD sessions, directly engaging with board members (Interviews 2, 3, 4, 5, 11, 12).

“There was never any conflict. Because when citizens are informed—even if you tell them that we need to raise tariffs by 5% to cover company costs—they don't oppose those decisions (...) People came from abroad—from Uruguay, from Poland, and other countries—to study the phenomenon and participated in the BoD.” (Interview 12)

At the time, the Municipality of Naples had decided to have ABC employ around 100 workers from a municipal company on the brink of bankruptcy (Landriani et al., 2019; Agovino et al., 2021; Turri, 2022b). With the support of ABC workers and legal advisors, the Civic Council drew up a three-year financial recovery plan to allow the hires without compromising the company's financial health (Interview 4). It also requested that the Municipality finance maintenance of the severely deteriorated sewerage facilities to ensure workers' safety (Interviews 4, 7).

A further proposal concerned revising the method used to calculate water tariffs, since the activities of the 100 new hires were not yet covered by the current pricing model (Interview 12). A conflict arose with the Municipality, which was pushing for immediate recruitment. According to one interviewee, the hirings would have secured de Magistris the support of public employees for his 2016 re-election (Interview 4) and represented an opportunity to break ties with the Committees, a relationship viewed unfavourably by several city councillors (Interview 10).

The episode concluded with Montalto's removal by a unilateral decision of Mayor de Magistris. The event also led to a split within the Committees, divided between those advocating continued dialogue with the administration and those calling for a clean break. Following the breakdown of relations between the Board of Directors led by Montalto and the municipality, the Committees gradually lost most of their civic participation, remaining active almost exclusively through highly militant actors or individuals affiliated with political parties (Interview 11).

The conflicts and problems that emerged during the Neapolitan participatory experiment have prompted critical reflection within the Forum on the contradictions emerging from the transition from theory to practice. The debate centred on the appropriate forms of participation within a publicly owned company like ABC, particularly the role of civil society: mere watchdog or genuine co-manager? It also addressed the constraints of the legal framework, the structural weaknesses of the LASPE

model, and the increasing professionalisation of some Forum members, which coincided with declining engagement after 2011 (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 5, 11).

The Civic Council represented the participatory configuration most closely aligned with the model initially proposed by the Forum. However, final decision-making authority remained with the City Council. The model combined open participation, a deliberative process within the Civic Council and BoD, and influence on governmental decisions in the form of consultation (Fung, 2006). Although the configuration achieved high legitimacy and justice in terms of inclusiveness, its effectiveness remained limited. As shown in Figure 2, the model highlights a clear disproportion between the openness of participatory mechanisms and the minimal decision-making power granted to civil society, reflecting structural constraints on the transformative potential of civic engagement.

From 15/09/2016 to 25/06/2021

This period is marked by the appointment of Sergio D'Angelo as extraordinary commissioner, signalling a shift from militant to more institutional and administrative management, facilitated by his political proximity to the de Magistris administration and his experience in cooperation and social services.

Under his leadership, ABC hired over 200 workers from bankrupt public companies, including those at the centre

of the previous conflict between the Municipality and Montalto, investing almost the entirety of the company's annual profits for this purpose (ABC Napoli, 2019). In 2019, ABC took over the management of the urban sewerage system, but without transferring maintenance staff — essential personnel with deep knowledge of the critical infrastructure (Interview 12). D'Angelo initiated negotiations with the Campania Region and the Municipality to reach an agreement to settle the former's debts and recover credits from the latter (Interview 6). This led to tensions with the Municipality, contributing to the failure to approve ABC's budgets between 2014 and 2020, which blocked recruitment and investment (Fanpage.it, 2023).

The Civic Council officially resumed its activities in November 2018, but in a limited and non-transparent form: communications were not issued via official channels, and convocations — managed informally by the commissioner — only involved the more institutionalised wing of the Committees (Interviews 2, 6).

An analysis of participatory practices during this period, through Fung's (2006) model (see Figure 3), reveals a stakeholder selection mechanism with a consultative role in meetings with the extraordinary commissioner and influence on local government decisions in the form of consultation. While this configuration ensured formal legitimacy by involving recognised actors, it lacked justice by excluding unorganised citizens. Its effectiveness was also limited, given its limited impact on public policy.

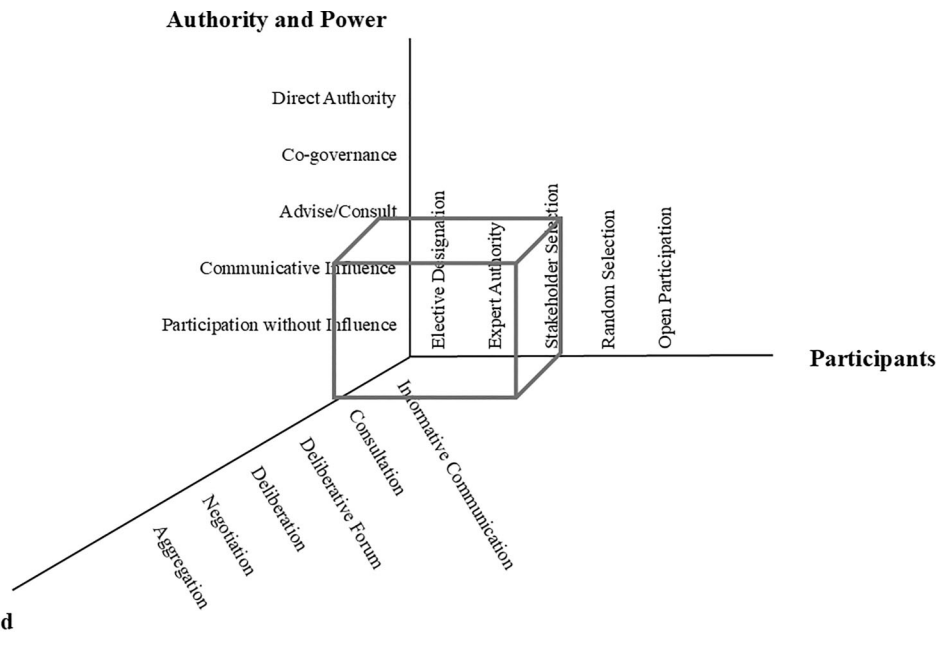


Figure 3. Third participatory configuration of ABC within Fung's Democracy Cube (2006) (Author's elaboration).

From 25/06/2021 to 18/06/2024

In this phase, ABC entered into a regime of ordinary management with a BoD composed of three high-profile technical experts, including the president, affiliated with the political sphere of de Magistris, and two representatives of environmental associations. One of these was able to assume the role only because their association decided to cover the expenses required to carry out the position (Interview 10). When the BoD took office, it encountered a critical financial situation: two unapproved budgets prevented access to bank credit and the possibility of making investments; staff numbers were insufficient relative to the workload, and disputes with both the Region and the Municipality were ongoing.

“The paradox is that we found a company with positive budgets, but it couldn’t invest, so the company couldn’t do what it was set up to do: it couldn’t monitor losses, couldn’t track malfunctioning in the infrastructure, and couldn’t address all the structural and infrastructural issues of the water systems.” (Interview 10)

The two environmentalists actively contributed to the work of the BoD, bringing an expert perspective and collaborating effectively with the other members in the recovery of the company. The BoD managed to reach an agreement with the Municipality on outstanding credits, thereby unlocking the approval of budgets; to reach a settlement with the Region on debts; to set up a recruitment plan; and

to restart maintenance work on the water networks (ABC Napoli, 2022).

In 2021, with the transition from the de Magistris administration to that of Manfredi, the BoD came under significant pressure from City Council members to resign, “Precisely because we weren’t part of the spoil system that normally comes into play.” (Interview 10)

Regarding civic participation, the Civic Council no longer formally existed. The president maintained personal relationships with some members of the Committees and participated in a few protests they organised, but “I never once heard anyone mention the Civic Council during my term.” (Interview 10)

In October 2024, the Manfredi administration proposed a resolution to amend ABC’s statute, introducing remuneration for BoD members and excluding representatives of environmental associations. The Committees, led by Father Alex Zanotelli and Alberto Lucarelli, opposed the resolution, arguing it signalled a move towards turning ABC into a JSC (Frattasi, 2024b). According to one interviewee (Interview 12), these changes aimed to improve the BoD’s functioning rather than to privatise the company.

This configuration reflects ABC’s initial participatory model (see Figure 4), where BoD’s members from environmental associations were formally tasked with representing civil society but remained disconnected from it. It involved stakeholder selection and deliberation within the BoD, with a consultative relationship to the City Council (Fung, 2006). The model showed low legitimacy and equity,

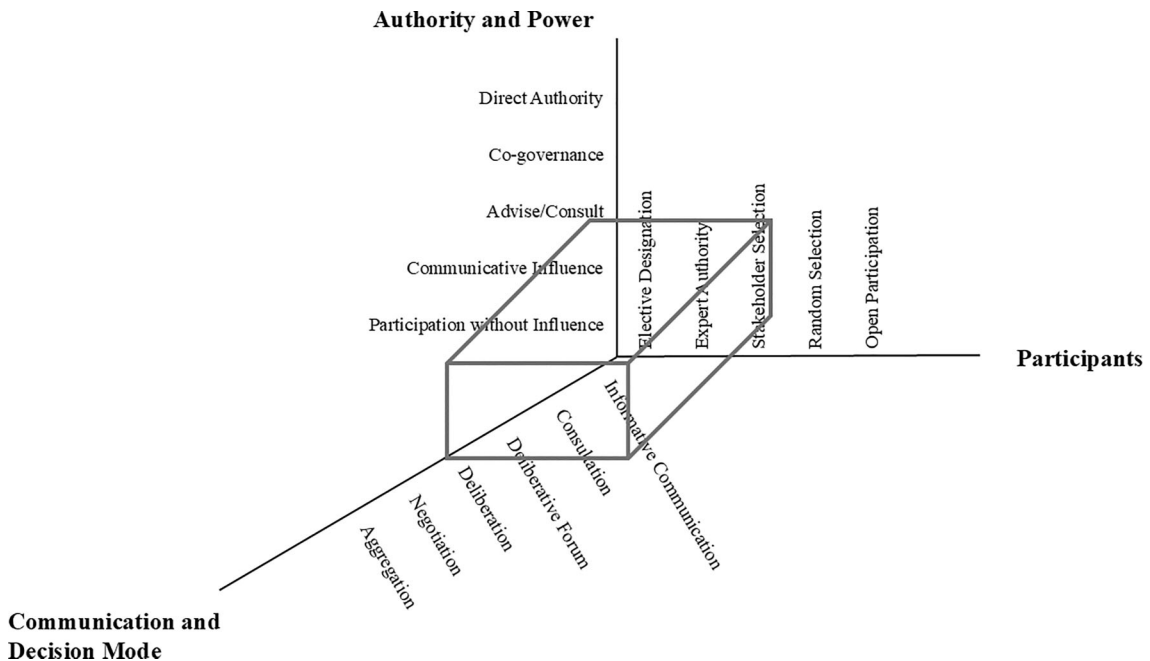


Figure 4. Fourth participatory configuration of ABC within Fung’s Democracy Cube (2006) (Author’s elaboration).

and modest effectiveness, with slow decision-making and limited contribution to long-term service quality and sustainability.

Discussion

The application of the Democracy Cube (Fung, 2006) to the case of ABC highlights how the institutional and regulatory design profoundly conditioned the participatory experiment. Fung's framework allows for an immediate graphical comparison of the four configurations tested, showing how they are distributed within the three-dimensional space of participants, communicative and decision-making modalities, and degree of authority. Notably, the authority axis never exceeds the consultative level, due to constraints imposed by the national legal framework governing LASPE and by ABC's Statute, which reserved full control over strategic decisions to the Municipality from the outset, structurally blocking the dimension of power and authority.

The configuration closest to a regular cube was that of the third period (2016–2021), when civic participation was practically absent. In this phase, the dimensions of the Democracy Cube appeared more balanced because, in the absence of participation and deliberation, the contradiction with the rigid authority axis did not surface. By contrast, in the phases when participation and deliberative forms increased, the Cube appeared “flattened” along the authority axis, producing more distorted and less balanced configurations. The phase with less civic participation thus appeared balanced only superficially, because it did not challenge the original design imposed by the regulatory framework.

When this third configuration is considered in light of the three objectives that, according to Fung (2006), participatory mechanisms should pursue a problematic picture emerges. Limiting participation to consultation makes decisions less likely to be perceived as fair and recognised by diverse actors (legitimacy). Limited inclusion of less-represented groups and concentrated authority conflict with addressing inequalities and amplifying diverse voices (justice). Full municipal control reduces the ability to mobilise local knowledge and resources to improve decisions (effectiveness). Thus, the Neapolitan case illustrates how a rigidly consultative choice, though producing a formally balanced Cube, fails to realise these three objectives (Fung, 2006).

From a political perspective, ABC highlighted the tight interdependence of political and economic dynamics in remunicipalisation. The Municipality exercised its veto power primarily over the participatory BoD's proposals concerning the allocation of corporate resources, within a context of high public debt, struggling public companies and clientelism (Brancaccio, 2018). Even under public ownership, infrastructures can remain instruments of politi-

cal control and clientelist redistribution rather than genuine commons (Muehlebach, 2023), reflecting a contradictory scenario: public takeover as a crisis response without dismantling existing power structures (Cumbers and Paul, 2022).

In Naples, municipal control over resource and job allocation undermined democratic governance, confirming how the “public” can operate as a vehicle for political-economic mediation more than for the common good (Lobina and Wegmann, 2021; Turri, 2022b). Similar patterns appeared in Bolivia: despite Cochabamba's Water War victory, municipal remunicipalisation did not deliver true democratic water governance, as ethnographic research reveals persistent inequalities and appropriation by dominant actors (Dwinell and Olivera, 2014; Razavi, 2022). Both cases prompt critical questions about remunicipalisation's transformative potential when the public sphere remains bound to entrenched control and accumulation logics.

A comparison with reflections emerging within the Italian Forum for Public Water, in light of the Neapolitan experience, offers important theoretical implications about the relationship between commons governance, the regulatory framework, and the role of civil society. First, the awareness emerged that implementing a true commons democracy model would have required a substantial change in the national regulatory context. The Italian regulatory setup, based on full cost recovery and the exclusion of LASPE from subsidised financing, made it difficult to govern ABC efficiently and to guarantee real decision-making power to civil society (Interview 1). Another interviewee noted that the lack of a favourable framework forced the movement into a “struggle of resistance” rather than real transformation (Interview 2).

A second crucial question concerns the role of civil society within a remunicipalised entity: co-manager or controller? ABC's experience showed that direct involvement of Committees in managerial processes generated tensions and ambiguities. One interviewee described how moving from external oversight to co-management created a conflict of interest and eroded political autonomy, with Committees becoming “super-specialists” aligned with corporate logic and losing the ability to mobilise a broad base (Interview 2). Excessive involvement flattened the critical dimension of civil society, which should have maintained independent oversight (Interview 11). Professionalisation made communication more technical and less accessible, reducing civic participation (Interview 2), while participation in the BoD demanded technical skills and time incompatible with broad inclusion, to the point that “it was no longer possible to find BoD members from environmental associations,” as unpaid commitment and legal responsibilities discouraged participation (Interview 11).

Finally, the Neapolitan case confirms that the primary condition for democratisation through remunicipalisation

is the political will to share power with citizens (Interview 3). As one interviewee noted, had the Municipality systematically approved BoD proposals and compensated members (as attempted in 2024; Frattasi, 2024b), it could have overcome many practical limits to participation and avoided much of the political conflict (Interviews 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 12).

In addition to the Forum's reflections, the Neapolitan experience raised further tensions already discussed in the literature: the cyclical and intermittent nature of civic participation, shaped by scarce resources and pressures to conform (Polizzi and Vitale, 2017; Caltabiano et al., 2024; della Porta, 2023). Discussions also questioned whether horizontal participation and effective leadership can coexist, as managerial roles seemed to undermine inclusiveness and generate internal tensions (della Porta, 2020). Some noted how movements risk becoming depoliticised and aligned with dominant logics, reducing conflictual potential (della Porta, 2023). These contradictions remain central to understanding the challenges of sustaining transformative civic action.

Conclusion

The analysis of the participatory arrangements experimented within the remunicipalised water utility in Naples demonstrates that remunicipalisation is a hyper-localised process, profoundly shaped by the historical, social and political variables of the context in which it unfolds (Turri, 2022a; Bieler, 2021; McDonald, 2024). It is therefore not a uniform model capable of producing the same outcomes everywhere. In the Neapolitan case, the model of commons-based democracy, grounded in genuine co-governance between citizens and institutions (Lucarelli, 2011; Lucarelli, 2013; Mattei, 2011; Rodotà, 2013), was never fully realised in any of the participatory configurations tested.

This failure stems from a combination of external constraints and local political choices, the latter more decisive. Although the European and national regulatory frameworks imposed significant limitations on the experiment of commons democracy, the local government could have adopted more courageous political strategies to overcome these constraints and move closer to the commons paradigm, as suggested by literature emphasising the capacity of local authorities to shape processes despite external constraints (Cumbers and Paul, 2022; Lobina and Wegmann, 2021). Instead, the Neapolitan administration, while claiming to implement the commons democracy, oriented the management of the remunicipalised utility to local factors — high public debt, unemployment, clientelistic culture and infrastructural fragility — merely co-opting the language and practices of the commons for electoral purposes without substantively adopting their principles (Brancaccio, 2018; Muehlebach, 2023).

In light of this, the question remains whether any government will challenge the global capitalist paradigm, which monetises all resources, by adopting a commons logic removing essential goods from market dynamics (Moroni, 2024).

Finally, this experience shows how civil society risks losing its critical role when absorbed into corporate governance, adopting internal logics and weakening its capacity to represent collective interests and mobilise citizens (Muehlebach, 2023; Cumbers and Paul, 2022; Lobina and Wegmann, 2021). The dilemma between co-management and oversight therefore remains open, but the Neapolitan case suggests that a model of external oversight — able to exert pressure and influence decisions without being absorbed into managerial dynamics — may better preserve the autonomy, legitimacy and aggregative capacity of movements (Bieler, 2021; McDonald, 2024).

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