



**30 - 31 October 2014**

*Milan, Fabbrica del Vapore*

*Via Procaccini, 4*



## **REGENERATING COMMUNITIES THROUGH PARTICIPATION. YOUTH AND CIVIC SERVICE IN A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE**

---

### **Premise and objectives**

This meeting springs from the indications provided by the President of the Council Matteo Renzi. The rotating Presidency of the European Union provides the context and opportunity for Italy to organise a much needed Forum dedicated to the Third Sector, to organised civil society and to public policies that incentivise and recognise the participation of young people – including through national civic service - in promoting peace, security and active citizenship in Europe.

The European space that we need to build is, in fact, not merely a political space for institutions; we need to create European spaces for civil society. The European identity is forged through multiple experiences diversified across different territories as well as by significant forms of personal – even individual – participation and contribution to a common body, the collaborative construction of a public and multifaceted space in which citizens are the protagonists of their present and their future. After all, organised civil society is today called upon to produce a more human and inclusive civilization that goes beyond the market and the State. Which is why national and European institutions must give space and recognition to social commitment and the ‘third way’ this world represents.

The Forum also comes at a relevant time as the government is defining a delegated bill in Parliament for the reform of the Third Sector and its parliamentary procedure; it seizes the opportunity of including a further element of value-driven leadership to the Presidency, that is to say presenting European partners with policy directives following an organised and open discussion of experiences created in the context of the European community.

Such an ambitious objective encourages us to focus our efforts – in terms of our organisation, shared experimentation among civil society organisations, the definition of agendas and calendars, our reasoning and our communication – in order to increase the relevance and impact of our policy outputs and to maximise the networking opportunities at the highest decisional levels.

The Forum will cover two thematic lines:

- 1) Social and civic participation
- 2) Civic service



1) The increase of “bridging social capital” (Putnam), that civic experience and participation contribute to producing also has an effect on the “fixed capital” of landscapes, works of art and cultural heritage that a European civic service could help to nurture and safeguard. Which, to return to the subject of social capital, means networks of shared experience, collective memory and consciousness, the activation of proactive citizenship. It is only through social capital that we can pass from a form of welfare in which the recipient of services is passive to a generative welfare system with active players. He who receives help must, in turn, directly give something back in the most suitable form on a case-by-case basis. A co-production of services, therefore, very distant to the state-led model that as well as wasting unsustainable resources also erodes people’s dignity.

This Forum is urgently needed also so that we may give life to a visible space during a new season of participative democracy, an innovation in merit as well as method but also an encouragement to the overall process and a communicational event *per se*. It is a means through which to give form and substance to the creation of a European public sphere, as proposed by the philosopher J. Habermas as a fundamental condition for the European project that we are still far from achieving. This work becomes even more urgent and necessary in the context of the crisis and the aforementioned risks of the weakening of Europe’s democratic cohesion.

2) The Universal Civic Service (that is to say a civic service open to all those who wish to participate in it) proposed by the government and promoted by the Italian European Presidency, is a specific means by which institutions can recognise the contribution provided by organised civic experience in its grassroots manifestations. In the experience of subsidiarity between the State and civil society it is thus a relevant innovation with respect to the National Civic Service.

Universal Civic Service is, therefore, a public policy choice aimed at valuing participative experiences and structuring initiatives with well-defined activities and objectives.

Such an approach calls on the beneficiaries of the Service to share responsibilities such as management and training. The starting point is the realisation that this represents a formidable tool that can enable the construction of an authentic community of European citizens. An innovative perspective on themes such as peace and security, respect for human and social rights and solidarity is based on the capacity to produce value and knowledge (which is also created through the exchange between different social realities within Europe) at the service of one’s own communities and institutions. A Universal European Civic Service must be rooted in such a context. After all, especially in Italy, our starting point is the positive outcome produced by our national civic service. We therefore must begin by enabling collaboration and cooperation among existing national civic service programmes in European countries – such as France and Germany. Existing experiences must, however, be re-visited from a more stringent perspective focusing on the common good. Universal Civic Service will always have “another” beneficiary, both in terms of the organisation that takes on the young people and in terms of the young people themselves. All projects must be directed towards a benefit for the community, as in the case of the European Civic Service, which has at its centre the desire to fulfil the “common good” for European citizens.



Universal Civic Service can be seen as an exercise in citizenship. The time spent carrying out civic service is educational because it enables adults who already safeguard the nation with their activities to transmit to young people not only their know how but also the spirit, the soul, the heart of what it means to be an active citizen. The young people who choose this kind of commitment are rewarded by the opportunity to learn, gain experience, take on their first responsibilities, collaborate with others while pursuing a common goal as well as experiencing emotions, discovering that working with others is more fulfilling than working alone. It also enables them to understand that “collaboration” is a richer experience than “competition” and that a shared defeat is easier to bear and is less traumatic than an individual defeat.

### Thematic focus

The different forms of active citizenship and the construction of community ties (territorial as well as thematic, for example families with adopted children) are placed at the centre of the event and young people are actively involved. Such ties are the imperative premise for socially impactful economic development. They generate openness towards the community as a source of cohesion and not as a criteria for self defence. We therefore want to the central role of reciprocity to emerge, of “contribution” as a source of balanced social capital both in its short term trust-building dimension (bonding) and in its long term inclusive capacity (bridging). Leveraging this grounding and its social potential also makes it possible to try and identify the DNA of the European Third Sector, which even in the multiplicity of the different national variations is connected to the functional-individualistic approach typical of the Anglo Saxon cultural tradition, an approach that derives from the two-stage logic: first you generate wealth, then you return a part of it.

Our ambition is therefore to value a “new” democratic attribute that from universal suffrage grows into mechanisms of universal participation, especially in the perception and the experience that young people can bring.

The theme is then declined across several emblematic lines of enquiry:

- 1) Participation and education
  - What role should civil society have in safeguarding the education as a common good
  - What role should participation play in the education of young people and the common good
- 2) Participation and volunteering
  - What role should civil society have in promoting volunteering
  - What role should volunteering play in producing common good for civil society, with a focus on the European Voluntary Service
- 3) Participation and network
  - What role should civil society have in giving life to participatory social networks (e.g. Social Street)
  - What technological and symbolic role should social networks play in generating social cohesion
- 4) Participation and civic service
  - What role should civil society have in building the civic service with institutions
  - What role should the civic service play in teaching a culture of peace and participative citizenship



The logical consequence of the experience of generating social value from the bottom up, which is to say the human dimension, and thus the origin, of every social economics hypothesis is to return dignity and value to the experience of civic service and thus to the European Civic Service. This can only happen with a determined restoration of the founding dimension of civic engagement, a more determined legitimisation, organisation and funding of the Service by member States and a more decisive investment in terms of collaborative models and resources - even different kinds of resources – into this initiative which so far has received insufficient funding. Contextually, a more efficient engagement is necessary including the participation of the productive sectors of society and the participation of all community players. There are many valuable European experiences that promote identity, such as the Erasmus programme for university students, which can provide inspiration both in terms of the ambitiousness of our goals and the sequentiality of the programmes.

The meeting, therefore, aims to address the issue of the outcomes and governance of the Civic Service, more generally of the potential cultural output of such an experience of engagement, while proposing a number of immediate goals:

1. Share the tried and tested European experiences of Civic Service, starting from the Italian experience;
2. Launch, sustain and accompany European Civic Service pilot programmes, including multilateral programmes, through a network of institutional structures and main organisations capable, among other things, of defining a legal framework for the Service;
3. Launch a policy proposal and introduce the “European Civic Service” into the European Community agenda and define its legal feasibility.