

Q & A from the NPBO Autumn webinar 28 November 2025

How does Italy facilitate citizen initiatives?

Question Anne Loeber:

Thank you for sharing the experiences with Shared Administration'; highly interesting. For the discussion, two questions: a) can such a sharing of tasks, responsibilities and resources also be implemented within current administrative law in the Netherlands (a Q to Tom Schuurmans?); and b) (a Q to the Italian speakers): How within the 'Collaboration' Pact' - agreement do Public Authorities deal with disagreement among citizens over the content or implications of agreed efforts? That is, how is conflict resolution under Shared Administration organized, both practically and legally?

Answer to the second question of Ann Loeber by Gregorio Arena: all the *Regulations for shared administration* contain provisions regarding the resolution of potential conflicts between citizens or between citizens and the public administration.

I reproduce below Article 20 of the prototype Regulation published on the Labsus website, the one we propose to municipalities when they tell us they want to use pacts. Here is the [link](#) to the English version of the Regulation.

As you can see, conflict resolution is consistent with the entire shared administration approach, whereby solutions to problems are found together, not imposed by the administration or by a judge.

Article 20 - Conciliation attempt

1. *If disputes arise between the parties to the collaboration pact or between them and any third parties, a conciliation attempt can be made before a Committee made up of three members, one of which is designated by the active citizens, one by the administration and one by the municipality or, in case of disputes concerning third parties, by the latter.*
2. *The Conciliation Committee, within thirty days of the request, submits a non-binding conciliation proposal to the parties.*

Question Antonella Maiello:

Morning everyone and thank you for all the input so far. I have a question for Fabio: What do you mean by general interest and how does it work in practice that citizens, who are diverse, can recognize such a thing like a "general interest"? And the second question is for Lisa: Aren't there risks also in the personification of the relationship? When there is turnover the relationships can break and isn't better to set these relationships between institutions rather than between people?

Answer Antonella by Fabio Giglioni

Thank you, Antonella, for your question. 'General interest' demands that the citizens' initiative is not a mere solution for 'own' problems. For example, if they take care of gardens to improve the ability of free access, they should not gate public spaces. Public spaces must remain open for everybody.



Question Monica:

I am an active citizen in Gouda and am wondering how citizens are organized around this approach of shared administration. Are they also learning and sharing, are they organized in and above cities?

Answer Monica by Gregorio Arena:

Active citizens are typically organized into associations, committees, or informal groups of residents of a neighborhood or town. These are local groups, within which there is a great amount of learning and of exchanging experiences and informations. Active citizens typically don't have direct contact with other groups of active citizens in other areas of the city or beyond, but they do have contacts with them through Labsus.

Question Monica:

Are the elected people in the city council always allies? I see sometimes the same attitude as with public administration.

Answer Monica by Gregorio Arena:

Labsus's experience with elected officials, over the past 12 years of promoting shared administration in hundreds of Italian municipalities, has been generally positive. Most of Italy's 8,000 municipalities are small, with just a few thousand inhabitants, and elected officials in these municipalities are not professional politicians, but ordinary citizens, often from the world of volunteering. They are therefore people who fully understand the value of the help offered by active citizens through collaboration pacts, which they see as a very valuable tool.

In larger cities, such as Rome, Milan, Palermo, etc., elected officials are often professional politicians, therefore sometimes with a more conservative attitude. But when they see the results produced by collaboration pacts, both in terms of improving the material quality of urban commons and of strengthening community ties, these administrators also become allies of Labsus.

Question Alison Lam:

Hi, thank you so much for the very interesting reflections. I am not very familiar with Labsus, so please ignore my question if it has already been answered. Are the citizens engaged in the contract compensated in any way, for their work and time that they put in? In France, there is an increasing interest in the concept of "retribution", which is often done through paying meals, accommodation, offering training programs, or simple things like tickets to a local cinema or museum. This helps citizens feel appreciated for their effort.

Answer Lam by Gregorio Arena:

In the theory of shared administration, citizens take care of tangible and intangible common goods for a very practical reason, that is, to improve the quality of their lives. Since this is the main motivation that drives them to propose the administration that they subscribe a collaboration pact, we never considered including in such pacts a provision to reward active citizens with meal vouchers or free tickets or other similar "prizes". Citizens who participate



in collaboration pacts are not doing it to do administration a favor (and therefore should not be rewarded) but rather they are striving to solve problems affecting their community. This is their incentive to take care of common goods. Besides, in this way they feel that they are participating in the life of their community, creating social cohesion, a sense of belonging and fighting loneliness. No "retribution" could equal their satisfaction for obtaining such results.

Reaction Monica:

This insurance is "solved" in the Netherlands, through a collective insurance with the VNG.

More information

Add more information & websites here

Guiding Questions from David

What was shared administration a response to?

Answer David by Gregorio Arena

Actually, the essay on shared administration that I published in 1997 was not so much a response to something, but rather the result of reflections I had made in the 1990s, spurred by an administrative experience I had made in Trentino, where I taught Administrative Law at the University of Trento. These reflections, supported by an analysis of several cases, led me to formulate for the first time the theory of shared administration. In this theory, I pointed out that public administrations increasingly needed citizen collaboration. This was not because they were inefficient or lacking resources, but because the world had become too complicated to be managed with the old models and tools.

I chose the name shared administration to indicate that it wasn't about involving citizens in the public decision-making process, as in participating in administrative procedures, or in deliberative democracy, but rather about sharing public and private resources and responsibilities to solve community problems.

What did it aspire to?

Answer David by Gregorio Arena

Essentially, the new theory aimed to raise awareness among scholars and public officials that collaboration between citizens and public administrations should not be viewed as a pathology or a failure of the dominant paradigm in Administrative law, but rather as a sign of the emergence of a new paradigm. And indeed, almost 30 years later, it can be said that this was in fact the case. Today shared administration can represent an invaluable tool for addressing the major problems of our time, systemic issues such as climate change, global warming, resource scarcity, pandemics, mass migrations, etc. These and other problems can only be solved if millions of people collaborate with public administrations, modifying their daily behaviours.



How did it get started and how has it spread to more than 300 different cities?

Answer David by Gregorio Arena

There have been three turning points in the process of spreading shared administration. The first, as mentioned above, was the 1997 publication of my essay, "*Introduction to Shared Administration*". The second was the introduction of the principle of subsidiarity into the Italian Constitution in 2001, in the following wording: "State, Regions, Metropolitan Cities, Provinces, and Municipalities shall encourage the autonomous initiative of citizens, both individually and in associations, to carry out activities of general interest, based on the principle of subsidiarity" (Article 118, final paragraph). Finally, the third turning point was the presentation in Bologna in February 2014 of the first *Regulation for the Shared Administration of Common Goods*, which until now has been adopted by over 300 Italian cities. These three events also represent the three pillars on which shared administration is founded: the theory, the constitutional principle and the tools for implementing the theory and the constitutional principle (Regulations and Collaboration Pacts).

The Regulation played a fundamental role in spreading the shared administration model, providing active citizens and public administrations with simple, easy-to-use tools to regulate their collaboration. Labsus' strategy for spreading shared administration consisted mainly of supporting municipalities and associations in various ways, such as through training, meetings with citizens and officials, responding to requests for clarification via the Labsus website, and so on, so as not to leave citizens and officials alone in implementing shared administration. This support strategy worked because it allowed for the signing of numerous collaboration pacts in different municipalities and across the country, concretely demonstrating the positive effects of using pacts to solve community problems. And these positive effects, in turn, communicated the existence of a new way of governing.

What kinds of things do collaboration pacts address?

Answer David by Gregorio Arena

According to our estimates, at this time there are over 10,000 pacts signed in Italy. The Labsus website contains hundreds of collaboration pacts, collected over approximately 20 years. Of these, approximately half concern the care of parks, public gardens, and small neighborhood green spaces, often cleaned of waste by neighborhood residents themselves thanks to a collaboration pact. Public spaces are also covered by collaboration pacts: squares, streets, traffic islands, roundabouts, etc. Many other pacts concern primary schools, which are taken care of by associations of the parents of the young students. There are also pacts regarding cultural or archaeological heritage, which is all over Italy, as well as pacts regarding trails, beaches, woods, and other natural areas.

In essence, pacts are very simple and effective tools that can be used to care for any common good, whether tangible or intangible. Furthermore, we have seen that caring for a material asset usually produces an indirect effect on caring for intangible assets such as social cohesion, integration, collective memory, and other similar intangible assets.

What have you learned about what it takes to make shared administration work in practice?

Answer David by Gregorio Arena

Our 20-year experience with Labsus, particularly the last 11 years, have taught us that citizens are absolutely willing to collaborate with local administrations to take care, together with them, of the public assets of their communities. The problem lies in the culture of public officials, who have been trained to operate the traditional administrative model, which envisions a sort of monopoly of the public interest by the administration and therefore views citizens solely as users and subjects, not as potential allies, providers of valuable resources. Therefore, to make shared administration work, public officials must be convinced, overcoming their resistance, motivated on the one hand by fear of taking on new responsibilities, and on the other hand by laziness at having to use new tools like collaboration pacts.

But in these years of fieldwork, we've seen that to convince them, you have to get them to make at least one pact, thanks to the intervention of the councilor or the mayor. Once they see how well pacts work, how easy they are to implement, and how well they solve their problems, there are no more resistances.

Another way to convince them is to have them talk to their colleagues who already use the pacts. After more than 10,000 pacts signed throughout Italy in over 300 cities, involving hundreds of thousands of active citizens, it's difficult to continue opposing the pacts, especially when your colleagues are enthusiastic of them!

Has interaction in collaboration pacts impacted the way that citizens see and relate to government and/or the way that public officials see and relate to citizens?

Answer David by Gregorio Arena

Absolutely, very much so. Citizens have become more aware of the challenges public officials face, having to apply legal rules which are often very rigid or outdated, and constantly being subject to scrutiny by numerous authorities, especially the criminal justice system. Meanwhile, officials have learned to appreciate the valuable contribution citizens and associations can make, and relationships of mutual trust have been built. This is crucial in Italy, even more so considering the crisis of representative democracy in our country, proven by the decline in voter turnout. A 50% abstentionism, in some cases even higher, is now structural in elections in Italy, both political and local elections.

Citizen participation in public life, achieved through collaboration pacts, is therefore essential to help fill the gap that has opened between citizens and institutions due to the crisis of representative democracy. From this perspective, collaboration pacts are small but widespread training grounds for democracy and participation.

What has surprised you about the way that shared administration has developed as cities and citizens have worked with it?

Answer David by Gregorio Arena

First of all, we didn't expect citizens to respond so enthusiastically to the possibility of collaborating with administrations to take care of their neighborhoods and towns. In Italy, the relationship between citizens and governments has traditionally been one of mutual distrust



and suspicion, so it was a pleasant surprise when we publicly presented the first Regulation for Shared Administration in Bologna in February 2014, to discover that there were thousands of people all over the Country eager to get involved.

Also, we hadn't considered the role of collaboration pacts as intermediary bodies, as forms of social aggregation. Pacts strengthen community bonds, produce social capital, social cohesion and a sense of belonging, they help people feel part of a group. They are an antidote to loneliness!

Finally, one more thing we've recently discovered: these pacts are training thousands of citizens to become politically competent, in the broadest sense of the term. Active citizens thanks to the pacts learn how to organize a meeting, how to maintain relationships with institutions, how to raise funds, how to resolve conflicts... in short, they are persons who, if they decide to join local institutions, can bring in these institutions an extraordinary wealth of experience and skills gained through collaboration pacts.