



## Resource-based view of sustainability engagement



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### ABSTRACT

This research examines local sustainability planning processes under the label of Local Agenda 21 in Italy from a resource-based view. Two types of resources, municipal (or internal resources) and relational resources, are considered. Relational resources stem from (1) dyadic relationships with higher levels of government and (2) network relationships (municipality-higher level of government-municipality). A model is proposed in which the integration of these resources explains the engagement of municipal authorities with Local Agenda 21-type processes. The model is tested by considering the perceptions of 108 local senior officials and politicians who are in charge of Local Agenda 21 processes in Italy. The respondents account for 31% of the members of a formal Italian Local Agenda 21 network. The results show moderate to low engagement with Local Agenda 21 processes, which is explained by moderate to poor levels of relational resources. Our findings indicate that local authority engagement with Local Agenda 21-type processes requires a systemic perspective, where higher levels of government and municipalities integrate and combine their resources and create new purposefully led resources through regular and intense interactions.

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### 1. Introduction

Municipal spaces are viewed as having advantages in making the concept of sustainable development (SD) operative (Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006). The rationality behind this idea is primarily based on three assumptions. First, the municipal sphere facilitates an integrated, down-to-earth, embraceable, and interrelated perception of multidimensional problems (O'Riordan and Voisey, 1998; Evans et al., 2006; Shaw et al., 2014). Second, the proximity between public and private actors in municipal space makes it easier for local authorities to interact with citizens, businesses, and other stakeholders in order to know their views and interests and adopt pragmatic and consensual solutions (Lafferty, 2001, pp. 10–11; Evans et al., 2006; Betsill and Bulkeley, 2006). Third, the meeting of SD aspirations is dependent on the everyday activities of citizens, businesses, and other local stakeholders in their most immediate local contexts (e.g., energy consumption and waste production) (Solecki et al., 2013). Therefore, as suggested by Ostrom (2010), it may be better to encourage polycentric efforts than to focus only on global efforts (which are indeed a necessary part of the long-term solution).

From the resource-based view (RBV), which forms the basis of this research, the above assumptions could be summarized by stating that municipalities have distinctive resources in terms of having a comprehensive understanding of multidimensional SD problems, as well as searching for and implementing participative solutions. Higher levels of government (HLG), in contrast, manage larger and less graspable territorial spaces and are not so close to their citizens (Barney 1991; Dyer and Singh, 1998; Wernerfelt, 1984).

Local authorities, however, are not broadly engaged in many important local SD practices, such as participative strategic planning (Echebarria et al., 2009; Evans et al., 2005; Velasquez, 2001). We argue that while municipalities have distinctive resources that make them particularly suitable for defining and deploying local SD practices, they lack other resources that are essential to implement such processes in a way that satisfies local authorities' aspirations and stakeholders' expectations. On the basis of the RBV, we propose that municipalities need relational resources from (1) resource-rich partners (usually HLG) who are willing to share some of their proprietary resources and (2) networking resources, which emerge from multi-scalar interactions (in our case, municipality-HLG-municipality). Policies addressed to promote local SD should therefore adopt a systemic perspective in which municipalities are not left alone but are supported with relational resources (for related views, see, e.g., Velasquez, 2001; Barnett and Campbell, 2010; Betsill and Bulkeley,

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2006; Bulkeley and Betsill, 2013; Ingold and Fischer, 2013; Chen et al., 2014).

To confirm the appropriateness of our view, we study a networking structure that was addressed to promote Local Agenda 21 (LA21) implementation in Italy. This context is used to find an answer to our research question: what factors (in the form of internal and relational resources) explain the engagement of local authorities with LA21-like tools in a networking context? LA21 was proposed at the Rio de Janeiro World Summit (Brazil, June 1992) and was intended to make the SD concept operative (Eckerberg and Lafferty, 1998). On the basis of prior literature (Eckerberg and Lafferty, 1998; O'Riordan and Voisey, 1998; Evans et al., 2005; Echebarria et al., 2009), we define LA21 as a municipality-led, community-wide participatory effort to establish a comprehensive medium-term local strategic plan for tackling environmental, social, and economic issues that lead to quality-of-life improvements. LA21 is 'by nature a planning and democratization reform' (Lafferty and Coenen, 2001, p. 287).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the specific context of this research. The third section discusses the conceptual background that serves as a basis for this study. The fourth section develops the model and hypotheses that were tested, and the fifth section examines the methodological issues. The sixth section describes the model specification. The seventh section refers to the results of the empirical test, and the final section presents discussion and conclusions.

## 2. Research context: Italian LA21 network

A preliminary step in this research was to choose an appropriate network as the object of study. To engage our research question, we needed a network in which both internal and relational resources were present. Internal resources are naturally present, at least to a certain degree, in municipalities, regardless of whether they are members of a network. The network label tends to be overused and misused in practice, however, and relational resources may be nonexistent in some networks (i.e., inter-government interaction could be virtually absent).

The networking experience of Mediterranean countries captured our attention (Echebarria et al., 2009). Mediterranean countries were characterized as laggards in terms of LA21 spread in pioneering studies (Lafferty and Coenen, 2001); however,

LA21 processes significantly grew in the early 2000s in Spain and Italy. These countries had poor baseline conditions for LA21 spread (in terms of municipal resources and SD tradition), and the emergence of LA21 processes was associated with the promotion of formal networks (Sancassiani, 2005; Echebarria et al., 2004, 2009). Therefore, our initial expectations were that relational resources could be relevant in both experiences. While both countries could provide an appropriate context for this research, we ultimately chose Italy because prior research on LA21 in that country is scarce.

To promote LA21 implementation in Italy, a formal networking structure known as the Italian Coordination for Local Agenda 21 (Il Coordinamento Agende 21 Locali Italiane) was promoted in 2000 by the Ministry of Environment. While the network is mainly intended to support LA21 initiatives at a municipal scale, Italian LA21 processes have been implemented at different institutional levels: municipal, neighborhood, associations of municipalities, provincial, regional schools, and national and regional natural parks (Sancassiani, 2005).

Fig. 1 shows the evolution of membership between 2001 and 2012. In 2012, the association had 495 members, of which 347 were municipalities. Overall, membership grew between 2000 and 2008 and dropped after that, reflecting a slowdown in the interest aroused by LA21 processes in Italy.

A typical LA21 process includes the following steps: (1) official support given by local authorities to the Aalborg Charter; (2) opening of the civic forum addressed to define priorities both in terms of areas of special interest and knowledge gathering; (3) elaboration of an environment state report, which is understood as a tridimensional diagnosis of the current situation; (4) beginning of thematic work-tables in which the priority problems and their possible solutions are underlined (following the European awareness scenario workshop methodology); (5) new plenary sessions of the civic forum in which the results of the thematic work tables are presented and a local action plan, which includes specific projects that have to be addressed, is proposed and approved by the forum; and (6) official adoption of the local action plan, implementation of the projects included in the plan, and monitoring of the results. As in other contexts, LA21 processes in Italy involve different activities such as a situation analysis, scenario definition, the creation of action plans and programs, implementation, monitoring, and feedback.

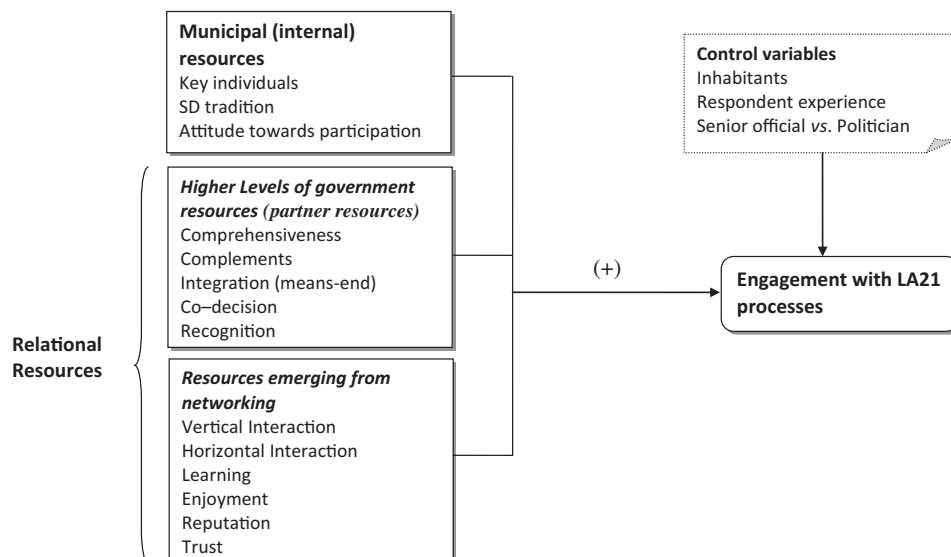


Fig. 1. Members of the Italian LA21 association.

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