

Participatory Democracy. The Challenge of Relational Intelligences

Concept Note

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WHY

The National Festival of Civil Economy 2025, entitled “*Participatory Democracy. The Challenge of Relational Intelligences*”, represents the concluding stage of a three-year journey dedicated to the theme of participation as a founding dimension of civil economy.

The journey began in 2023 with “*Beyond Limits: The Commitment That Transforms Us*”, where the Festival emphasized personal and collective commitment as a force capable of overcoming barriers and generating change. It was an invitation to recognize that social transformation is born from assuming shared responsibilities.

In 2024, with “*The Time to Participate*”, the focus shifted to the urgency of turning that commitment into active participation in economic, social, and institutional processes. It was a call not to postpone, but to live participation as a daily practice necessary to build inclusive and resilient communities.

Finally, in 2025, the theme “*Participatory Democracy. The Challenge of Relational Intelligences*” opens up the political and institutional dimension: how to make democratic participation effective, widespread, and meaningful. The key lies in developing *relational intelligences*—social, emotional, and collaborative skills that allow us to face today’s complex challenges together.

Thus, over three editions, the Festival has built a true cultural cycle: from transformative commitment (2023), to the urgency to act (2024), to the perspective of a democracy strengthened by the quality of relationships (2025). A journey that highlights how civil economy is not just an economic model, but also a laboratory of participation, inclusion, and regeneration.

HOW

The Festival aims to be a space for public debate and exchange, a moment to showcase the many forms of civil economy in Italy and Europe that combine economic sustainability with social and environmental responsibility. For all those involved, it is important to preserve the heritage of culture, traditions, and spirituality inherited from Antonio Genovesi and transmit it to future generations.

The National Festival of Civil Economy has never been conceived as a mere event, but as a real process of programming and, in the best cases, participatory co-design.

The theme of relational intelligence is not just the common thread guiding the panels and linking individual contributions, but also a call for collective coordination to co-create initiatives, projects, and proposals of civil economy that can enhance the participation of people, organizations, enterprises, and public administrations.

THE THEME OF THE 7th EDITION

Power is nothing without control.

And artificial intelligence is nothing without relational intelligence—otherwise it risks becoming the

mere exchange of bombs and missiles by artificial agents of opposing powers, without even the possibility of human intervention.

For this reason, and many others, the key not only to satisfaction and meaningful life, but also to social and economic prosperity—as millions of data and empirical studies confirm—is relational intelligence, understood as the ability to build meaningful and quality relationships with other human beings. In this moment of technological euphoria, where pressing a button seems to make everything possible, a sad sequence of events—from femicides to wars—reminds us of the urgent need to study, learn, educate, and train ourselves in relational intelligence. It is built on trust, trustworthiness, generosity, gratitude, and reciprocity—foundations of quality relationships that create social capital.

Human beings are structurally diverse, each with unique, non-overlapping skills and experiences. Life is a team effort, and knowing how to play as a team is essential. Relational intelligence enables us to perform the fifth operation: cooperation—one plus one always makes more than two. This demonstrates that life, in the things that matter, is not a zero-sum game where I win only if you lose, but a positive-sum game where cooperation makes the pie bigger.

Civil economy, by drawing on real-world and experimental evidence on social dilemmas, can help us build the conditions in which “homo homini natura amicus” (man is by nature a friend to man) rather than “homo homini lupus” (man is a wolf to man), as Antonio Genovesi recalled in response to Thomas Hobbes. Through this edition of the Festival, by sharing best practices and testimonies from institutions and practitioners, we want to reflect on how the foundations of relational intelligence can generate solutions to today’s problems:

- Climate change and the climate emergency require multilateral cooperation between nations and coordinated policies for mitigation and adaptation. Locally, citizen opposition to new infrastructures is overcome through cooperative schemes that return part of the benefits to the territory.
- Labor policies demand advanced forms of dialogue and participation between workers and employers. Relational intelligence, both internal and external, is key to market success, wage improvement, and fairer sharing of productivity gains.
- Healthcare systems depend increasingly on the quality of relationships as life expectancy rises, making relational wealth crucial to well-being in old age.
- International politics and conflict resolution require relational intelligence through restorative justice and cooperative peacebuilding to heal past and present wounds.
- The foreign debt crisis, worsened by global macroeconomic policies, demands new relational agreements to restore investment opportunities in health and education.
- Demographic challenges cannot be solved by economic incentives alone; without trust, relationships, and a sense of future, birth rates will not recover.
- Inner areas and local well-being rely on relational intelligence through shared administration, co-programming, and co-design of local public goods with communities.

VISUAL CONCEPTS



Balloons of Collective Thought

Animation: Two hot air balloons (one red and one turquoise) move slowly across the sky, carrying paper boats with human figures. The balloons expand and merge, simulating a dialogue that then becomes the “E” logo of the Festival.

Visual effect: The words *Participatory Democracy* and *Relational Intelligence* break apart into floating letters and then recombine into new words: *trust, dialogue, care, listening*.

Message: Thought rises only when it is shared. Relational intelligence makes participation take flight.

The Factory of Meaning

Animation: The structure below (similar to a projector/industrial construction) comes to life: gears turn, lights switch on, and from its “mouth” emerge images, words, and symbols.

Visual effect: The “factory” launches ideas into the air that become thought-clouds connected to the balloons. Each cycle represents a participatory process that transforms raw material into shared projects.

Message: Participatory democracy is a living machine, made of processes, people, and imagination.

Sailing Together: The Paper Boats

Animation: Paper boats rise into the sky, then meet and form an aerial network. Each boat contains a different figure (young person, elder, woman with child, etc.).

Visual effect: From each boat a line extends to connect with the others. In the end, they form a “mandala” or a pulsating relational knot.

Message: No one decides alone: participation is a collective journey that creates bonds.

RESEARCH

This year, the Festival aims to offer several original cultural and research outputs that we hope will become a reference point for the panel discussions scheduled over the four days of the event.

Research on Well-Being and Generativity

The proposal contained in the *Well-Being Report 2025* identifies *Aree Vaste* (Large Areas) as a new interface for the country's development, capable of overcoming current institutional fragmentation and the limited capacity of provinces to serve as strategic levers. The model envisions replacing the 107 provinces with 53 *Aree Vaste*, structured into 24 Metropolitan Cities (14 already existing and 10 newly established), 26 Diffuse Large Areas, and 3 Autonomous Provinces.

These new territorial units, conceived as generative ecosystems, are positioned at an intermediate level between Regions and Municipalities, consistent with the role of Chambers of Commerce. They become tools for promoting integrated policies of human development, ecological transition, social cohesion, and civic participation. The proposal is based on a system of *Well-Being and Generativity indicators*, combining quantitative dimensions (renewable energy, birth rate, mobility, access to services) with qualitative ones (cooperative capacity, culture, business biodiversity). This offers a more accurate picture of territorial vocations. The approach fits into a logic of *generative multilevel governance*, integrating local strategies, the national institutional framework, and civic protagonism.

The design of the *Aree Vaste* also connects to the tradition of Italian industrial districts, overcoming administrative rigidity and enhancing morphological, economic, and relational logics already rooted in the territory. In this perspective, *Aree Vaste* can become true pilot laboratories, capable of harmonizing the functional geography of territories (mobility, labor, production chains) with the political-administrative one, paving the way for future *Diffuse Districts of Social and Civil Economy*.

The Report also outlines several strategic guidelines to launch a "generative" institutional reform, based on circular subsidiarity, continuous evaluation through indicators, and territorial polycentrism. Among the priority actions are:

- Establish Generative Territorial Observatories at the *Area Vasta* level.
- Map functional interdependencies between neighboring territories to identify future Diffuse Districts of Social and Civil Economy.
- Integrate Well-Being indicators into regional and national policies, particularly in areas such as territorial healthcare, social cohesion, proximity, ecological transition, and civic/digital innovation.
- Launch regional regulatory experiments to extend the competences of *Aree Vaste*, in line with what is already provided for Metropolitan Cities.
- Promote co-programming among institutions, enterprises, the Third Sector, and citizens, with a generative approach.
- Strengthen socio-economic districts linked to sustainable supply chains and territorial vocations.
- Use results of individual Generativity to personalize public policies and reduce inequalities.
- Expand the metropolitan model: from the current 14 to 24 cities.

Objective: to make the new Metropolitan Cities hubs of integrated territorial development, endowed with autonomous programming capacity and able to aggregate neighboring municipalities in a cooperative form.

Augmented Democracy Research. AI, Relational Intelligence, and New Architectures of Consensus

The paradigm of relational intelligence applied to artificial intelligence has led us to explore its use in building consensus among different positions and supporting political choices aimed at the common good. In the experiment conducted—which will be presented at the Festival—we created a virtual sample of Italians with whom AI, starting from divisive propositions, was able to generate convergence and consensus not only on principles but also on policy proposals. These convergences and consensuses were then validated on a real sample of people, in collaboration with IPSOS.

The experiment tested the role of artificial intelligence in fostering consensus on politically divisive issues: ecological transition, migration, and inequalities.

1. **First phase:** A representative sample was presented with polarizing statements (e.g., taxing fossil fuels, welcoming migrants, redistributing wealth). Consensus rates were low (around 50%).
2. **AI intervention:** Through iterative interactions, AI reformulated the statements in a more balanced way (e.g., ecological transition yes, but with attention to social costs; migration yes, but with security and integration; reducing inequalities yes, but balancing merit and equal opportunities). This quickly led to near-unanimous consensus in the virtual sample.
3. **Empirical verification:** An IPSOS sample of 1,000 Italians confirmed the results. The AI-generated proposals gained about 40 percentage points more consensus than the initial statements.
4. **Translation into concrete policies:** Based on the new consensus propositions, operational policies were developed (legal entry channels and humanitarian corridors, taxation of the wealthiest to finance opportunities, energy communities, and subsidies for green enterprises). These achieved, on average, 33 percentage points more consensus.

Development Proposals and Next Steps:

Methodological deepening

- Replicate the experiment with different samples (by age, territory, political orientation) and in international contexts to test robustness.
- Vary the themes: not only migration, inequalities, and ecological transition, but also healthcare, education, security, and digital transformation.
- Compare different AI models to assess effectiveness and stylistic differences.

Transforming consensus into real policies

- Create co-design labs where citizens, institutions, and businesses evaluate AI-generated proposals and translate them into concrete actions
- Field-test micro-experiments (e.g., pilot energy communities, targeted legal entry programs for migrants) and measure their social and economic impact.

Ethical and democratic dimension

- Launch a public debate on the role of AI in building consensus: a tool for democratic empowerment or a risk of rhetorical manipulation?
- Study how to integrate the use of AI with existing deliberative processes (citizens' assemblies, participatory budgets).
- Analyze citizens' perceptions: how does consensus change if they know proposals were generated by AI?

Innovation in social research

- Use AI not only as a “spin doctor” but as a stimulus for new policy frameworks difficult to imagine in traditional debates.
- Build longitudinal datasets to monitor how reactions change over time and during crises (e.g., economic or climate-related).

Education and critical capacity

- Integrate educational pathways on AI and consensus: training citizens and policymakers to interpret, evaluate, and improve AI-generated proposals.