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“Trust the People”

Civic Engagement and Collaborative Imagination in Bologna, Italy

Image source: Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins

Learning objectives

- Understand the **democratic goals of civic engagement**, including mobilizing resources and building relationships.
- Ask and answer **key design questions** for planning engagement efforts.
- See the breadth of options for civic engagement and make **strategic choices**.
- **Assess and troubleshoot** civic engagement efforts.

The Participation Pathways Framework

Why are city leaders engaging residents in public problem solving?

What is the subject and scope of the engagement?

Who participates in the process?

How are engagement processes structured to achieve desired outcomes?

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Exploration

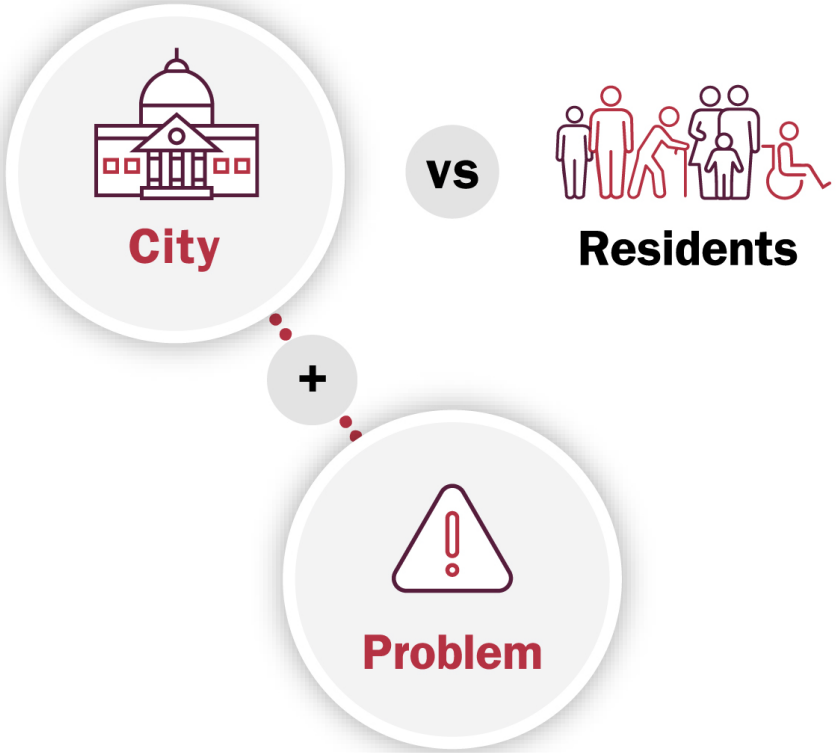
What would happen in your city or town if you went to local officials asking to paint a bench in a public park?

Piazza dei Colori
Bologna, Italy

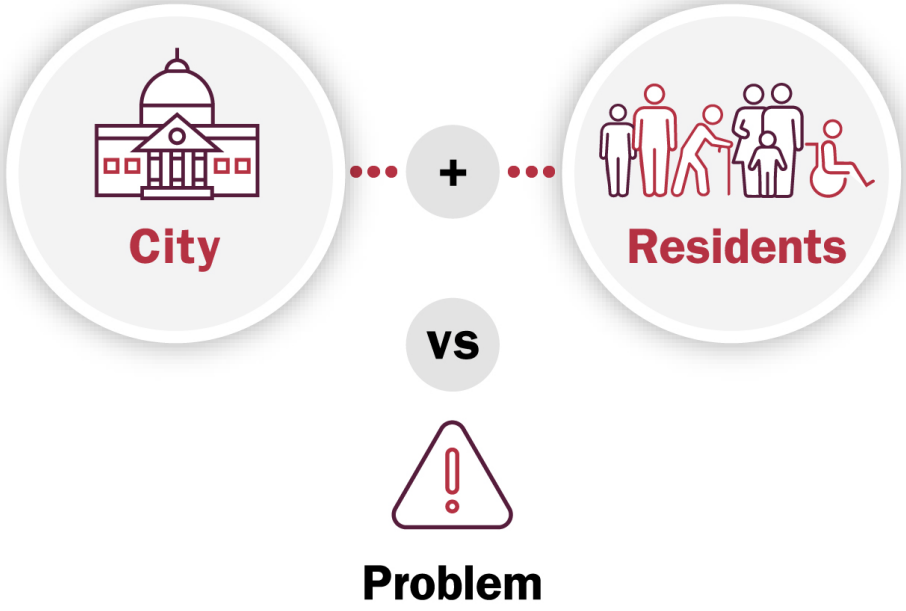
Source: Comune di Bologna

Two paradigms of city governance

GOVERNMENT PARADIGM



PARTICIPATION PARADIGM



Source: *City Leader Guide on Civic Engagement*, Hollie Russon Gilman, Jorrit de Jong, Archon Fung, Rebecca Rosen, and Gaylen W. Moore.

Consider…

***Why** did Bologna embrace the participation paradigm?*

***What** were the city government's goals and why was civic engagement the way to achieve them? (Or was it?)*

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1995: Iperbole – established “digital civic infrastructure”

2010: Incredibol! – supported cultural startups

2014: New regulatory framework – established collaboration pacts and Office of Active Citizenship

“Partecipa” social network – utilized Iperbole to advance civic engagement

2017: Civic Imagination Office – created district labs to execute “proximity” approach

Participatory budgeting – financed grassroots projects

Participation Pathways

Four Key Design Questions

Source: *City Leader Guide on Civic Engagement*, Gilman et al.

Consider (for one or two of the initiatives)…

- *What were the city's goals? **Why** was civic engagement the solution?*
- ***What** was the topic and scope of the engagement? What did the city want the public to think, talk, and act on?*
- ***Who** did the work of engagement—from the city and from the community?*
- ***How** did the city engage members of the public to help solve the problem?*

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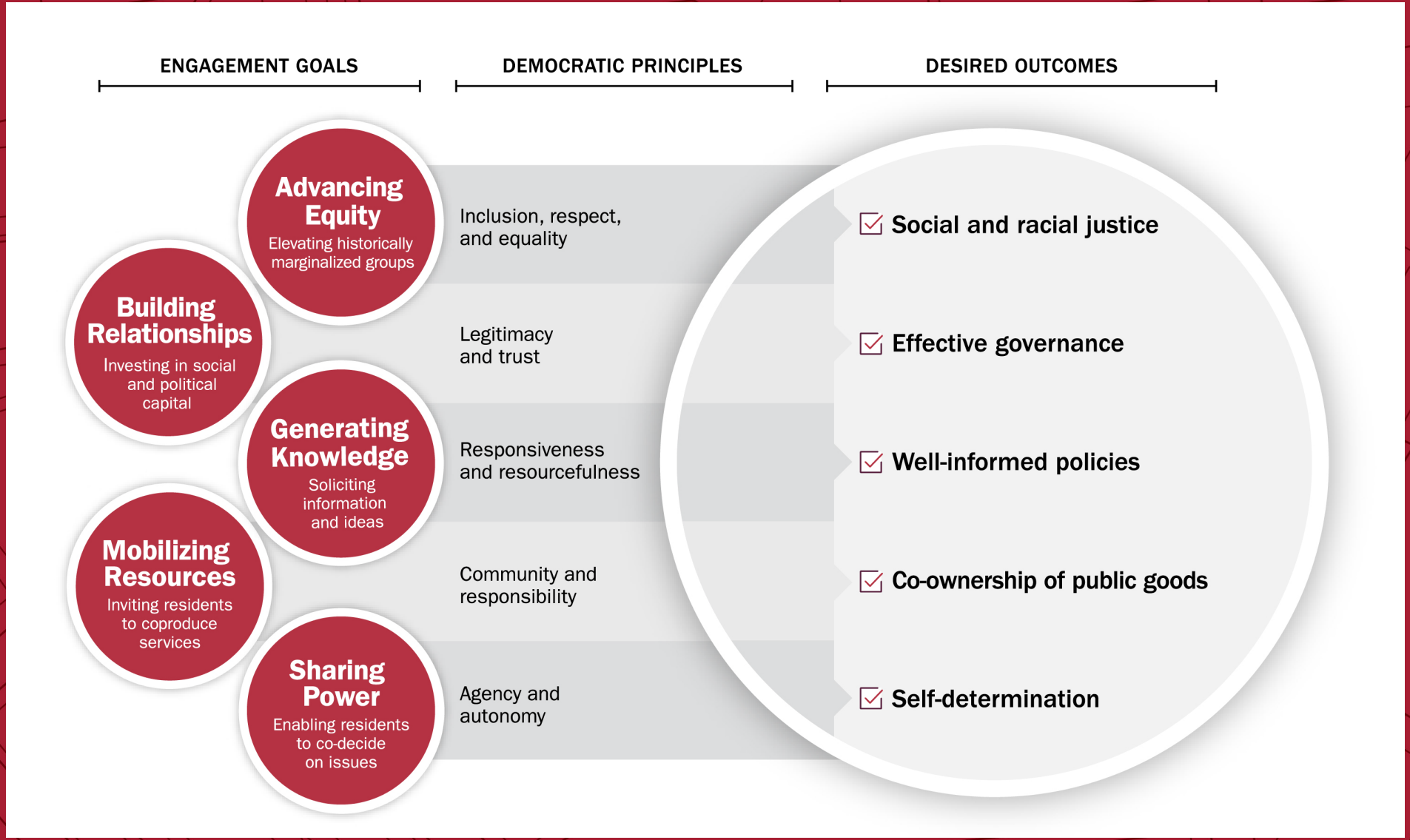
Diagnosis

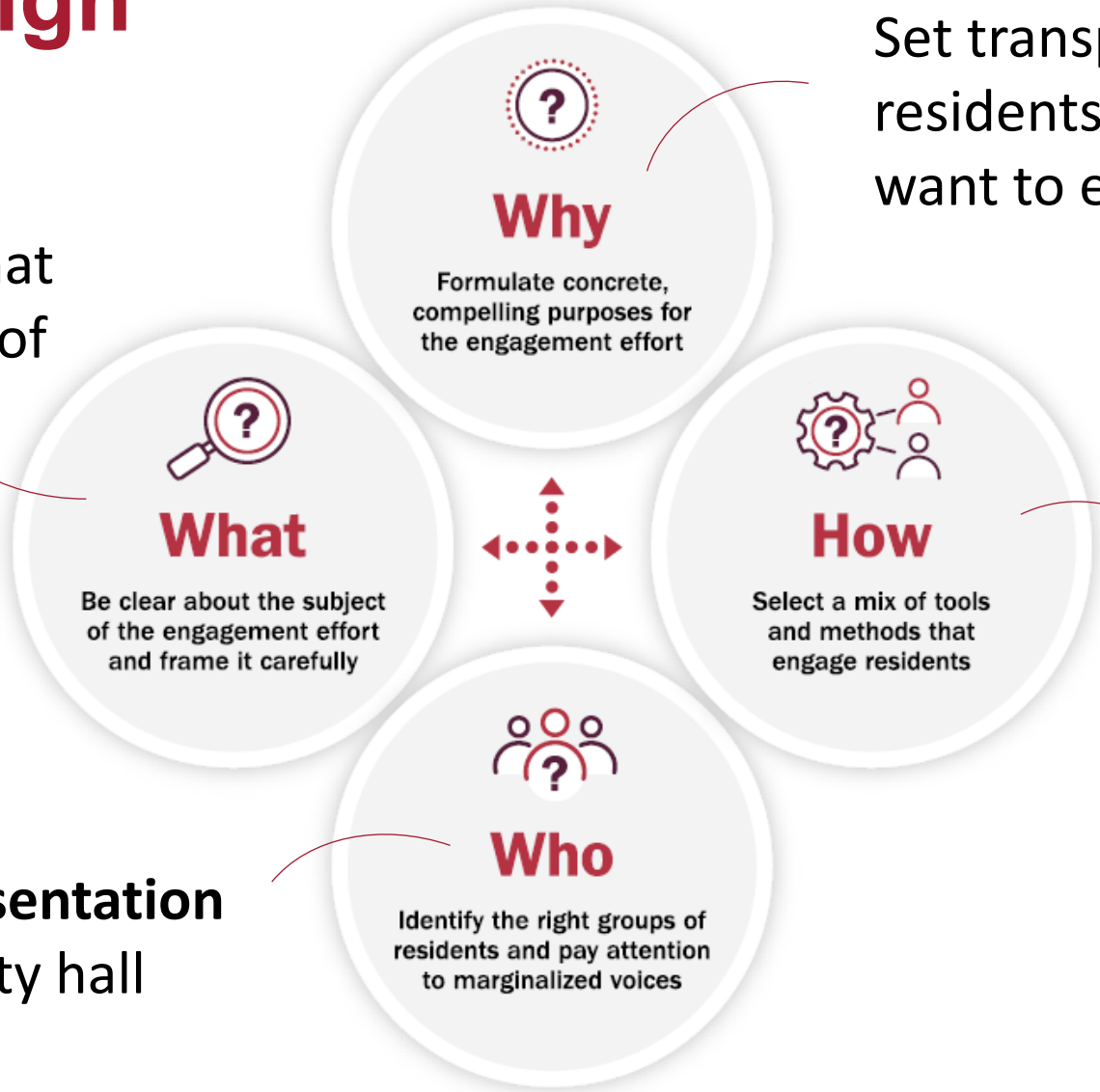
Five democratic goals of civic engagement



Source: *City Leader Guide on Civic Engagement*, Gilman et al.

Four key design questions

Be clear what is and what is not within the **scope** of the effort.



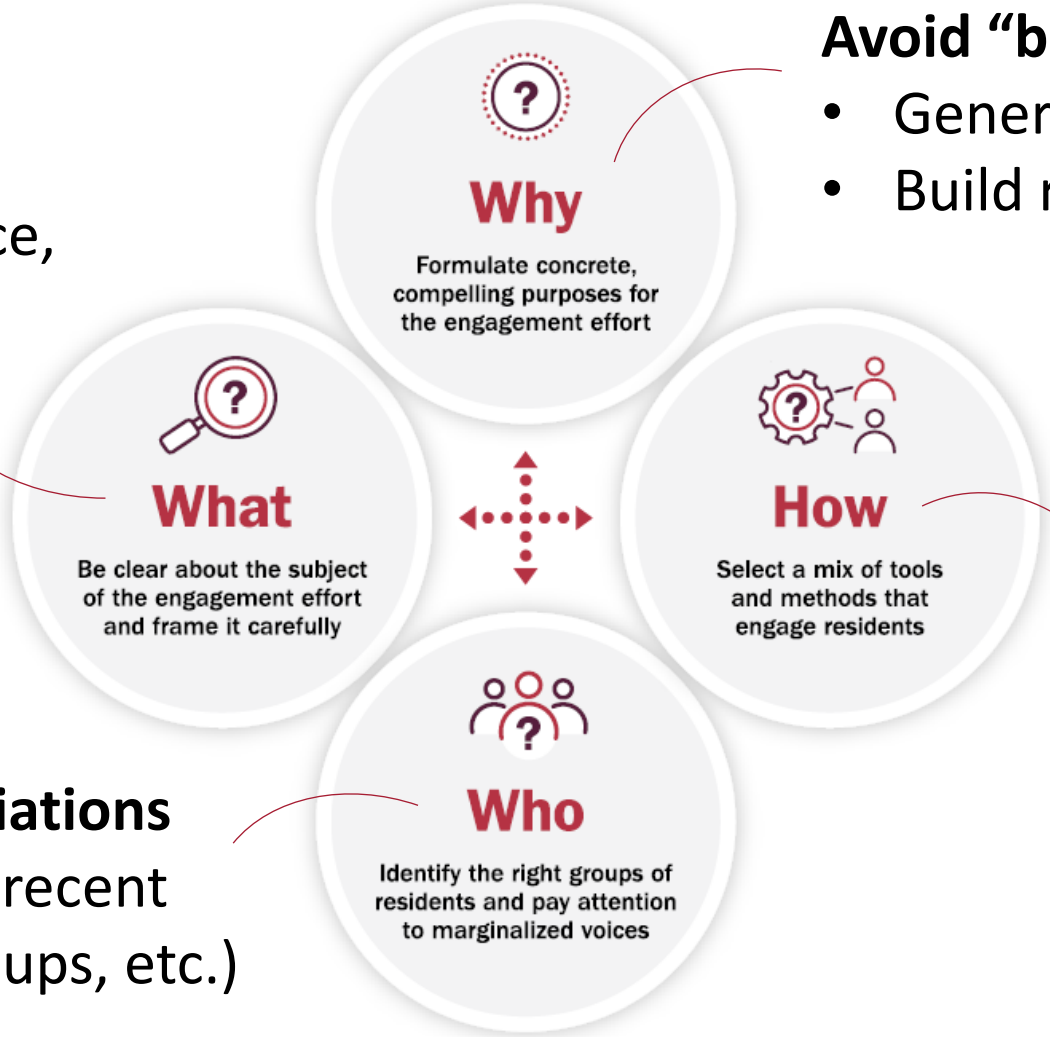
Set transparent **goals** that help residents understand why you want to engage.

Optimize for functionality, accessibility, and inclusiveness.

Ensure equitable community **representation** and meaningful city hall representation.

Incredibol!

Public-spirited ideas
Revitalization of space, advancing
arts and culture



Avoid "brain drain"
- Generate ideas
- Build relationships

Residents and associations
The "creative class" (recent graduates, arts start-ups, etc.)

Competition
City awards of cash, leases, and technical support to winners

Office of Active Citizenship & Civic Imagination Office

“Public-spirited ideas”

- Revitalization of space
- Advancement of arts, culture, sports and community service

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- Generate ideas
- Build relationships
- Mobilize capacity
- Advance equity

Residents and associations

- The “creative class”
- Social entrepreneurs and volunteers
- Neighborhood and immigrant groups

Collaboration Pacts

- Application process
- District Labs in wards
- Regulatory framework
- Small grants budget

Consider…

What were the key features of this institutional evolution?

How did city leaders scale up their efforts?

How did city leaders align the design of their engagement efforts with their goals?

2020: COVID-19

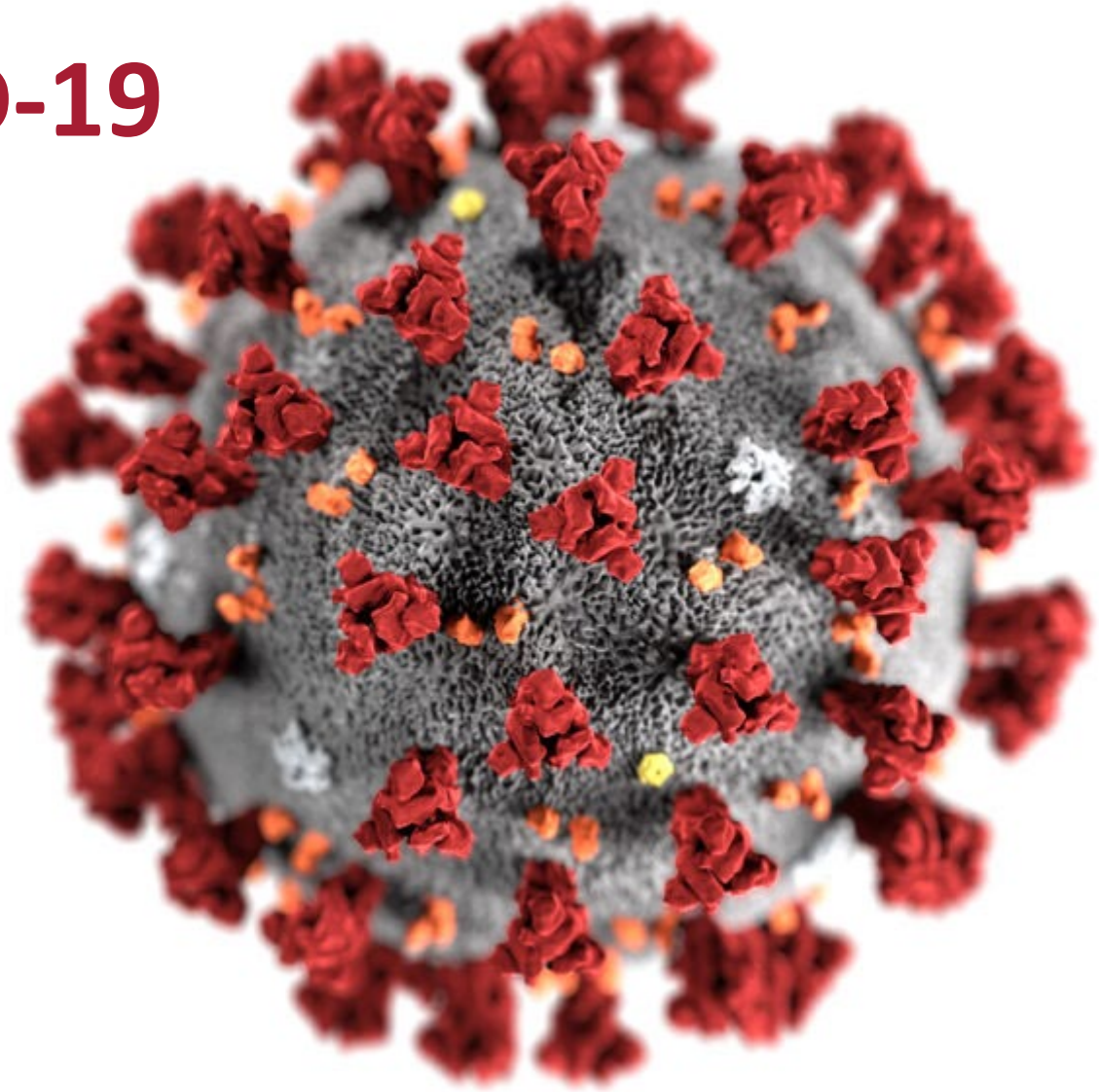

Image source: rawpixel.com / Centers for Disease Control

CNN – FEBRUARY 24, 2020

Coronavirus cases soar in Italy as authorities scramble to find patient zero

THE GUARDIAN – MARCH 22, 2020

Coronavirus: Italy bans any movement inside country as toll nears 5,500

PM shuts down all non-essential factories and businesses as lockdowns spread across the world

AL JAZEERA – MARCH 27, 2020

Italy posts more grim coronavirus records as deaths, cases rise

Italy has more virus-related deaths than any other country in the world, with the latest death toll at 9,134.

Sources: CNN; Michael Safi, Angela Giuffrida, and Martin Farrer, *The Guardian*; *Al Jazeera*

If you were Lepore, would you have redesigned the approach to civic engagement in light of the pandemic?

What would have changed regarding:

- **Why** (goals for engagement)?
- **What** (subjects for engagement)?
- **Who** (residents and groups to engage)?
- **How** (tools, methods and platforms)?

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Epilogue

Source: Wikimedia commons, Angisuri96

“I wouldn’t have wanted to be living in any other city.”

- Matteo Lepore, Deputy Mayor for Economic Development, Culture, Tourism, Sports, & Civic Imagination

Source: interview by Gaylen Moore and Elisa Tragni Maloney, June 30, 2021

What happened next in Bologna?

- Investments in civic engagement and “civic imagination” supported resilience.
- Infrastructure of neighborhood labs and Iperbole proved important (a ready-made roster of engaged individuals who could help fellow residents).
- City facilitated contact between volunteers, non-profits, and those in need of service, and created a special permit for volunteers to leave homes to help others.
- Lepore focused on supporting the cultural sector.

Flyer for Bologna Estate summer festival, 2020

(Translation)

More than a concert

More than a film

More than a show

More than an exhibition

A unique summer born from the desire of all.

A summer conquered courtyard by courtyard, park by park. Together.

Bologna Summer IS HERE

Source: Municipality of Bologna

“Cantiere Consegne Etiche” (Shipyard Ethical Delivery)

Translation: “INNOVATE THE CITY SHIPYARDS • ETHICAL DELIVERY SITE • IMAGINE THE CITY AFTER THE PANDEMIC”

A cooperative for local merchants and bicycle delivery workers delivered groceries, health supplies, library books, and other goods with support from the municipality and the Urban Innovation Foundation.

Margherita Caprilli

Source: Urban Innovation Foundation

Participatory Budget

In late 2020, a revamped participatory budget initiative invited residents to vote for their preferred neighborhood project and their top priorities for public investment.

One million euros were allocated for selected projects and one million for future projects that advanced the chosen priorities.

2021: Lepore Elected Mayor

Source: Massimiliano Donati/Alamy Live News

Takeaways

- The ***goals of civic engagement are broader than a given project or interaction***. Effective civic engagement can help city leaders strengthen relationships with the community, gather essential knowledge, mobilize resources, share decision-making power, and advance equity.

- Experimenting thoughtfully with new forms of engagement that ***remove barriers*** between city government and residents can help build trust and co-productive capacity.

Takeaways (cont.)

- There is no recipe for success in civic engagement but designing efforts with ***clarity of purpose*** and aligning goals, subjects, resident groups, and methods helps avoid disappointment.

- There are often multiple motivations to engage residents. Thinking about ***what success looks like*** and identifying ***meaningful metrics*** helps clarify a city's internal goals and those of its residents.

- The Participation Pathways framework can help ***structure conversations*** and design efforts as well *as* ***diagnose what works well and what could be improved*** in ongoing engagement efforts.

Thank you

Source: Bloomberg Center for Public Innovation at Johns Hopkins

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This slide deck, accompanying the case study "'Trust the People': Civic Engagement and Collaborative Imagination in Bologna, Italy," was created as an instructional aid by the Bloomberg Harvard City Leadership Initiative, a collaboration between Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Business School, and Bloomberg Philanthropies. It is not intended to serve as an endorsement, source of primary data, or illustration of effective or ineffective management. HKS Case 2289.41. Copyright © 2024 President and Fellows of Harvard College. (Revised 9/2024.) Attribution-noncommercial-noderivatives. creative commons