

Lab!Puzzle: The missing piece. Mutualism between Self-Organisation, Municipio, and neighbourhood.

“I don't like to say I'm a volunteer... or a militant... I am an activist.” (Leandro)

Climbing the roman hills of Municipio III Monte Sacro on this hot and humid Thursday afternoon is a welcomed change after the masses of soccer fans celebrating the victory of AS Roma in the Conference league. At Via Monte Meta, 23, Leandro, Francesca, Anna, and Michele are waiting for us. While sharing tobacco and a water bottle, they tell us the history and activities of Lab!Puzzle.

Lab!Puzzle is a non-profit organisation which officially started its function back in 2011. The organisation provides both social services and didactical support to local people. Yet, the organisation's history starts already in 2009 with the unification of three different organisations that wanted to make a social impact for the common good – which is why Lab!Puzzle identifies itself as a 'bene comune'. The neighbourhood, Tufello, was already politically and socially active when the organization was founded. The main idea was how Lab!Puzzle can work together alongside and with the community. This is achieved by listening and reacting to the needs of the locals and trying to satisfy them. *“We don't want to be the solution. We want to be part of the process of the solution”*, as Michele puts it.

Lab!Puzzle is open not only for the ones who participate in the activities, but also the ones who want to contribute to the society. Teachers work voluntarily, without payment. Local residents often discuss with the activists about their issues and also suggest new projects. The building consists of five floors. The first three floors are reserved for projects, while the last two ones are for shared apartments. The flatmates don't pay rent but are expected to work at the project. They promote their work by writing articles both on social media and newspapers.

In Tufello, we get to know a formalised, self-organised project with a statute, contracts and knowledge exchanges with governmental structures, and financial aid from official institutions, which is yet highly informal in its roots, projects, and approach to aiding their neighbourhood, working mutually with residents, fighting the effects of an unjust, flagging social system while resisting to be the makeshift of a defecting welfare state. In the following report, we will explore this oscillating ambivalence.

Part One: INFORMALITY.

Neighbours' reactions to Lab!Puzzle, as Francesca and Anna tell us, are by far positive because they can depend on the institution with a lot of problems. Families with low income which can't afford social, economic and didactical support either for their children or for themselves, now have someone nearby their neighbour to talk and help them. In the beginning of Lab!Puzzle's function, the neighbours were very active both in a social and a political way and were welcoming the institution with open arms, exchanging knowledge and support. Nowadays, locals keep on providing the institution with machines and materials, or clothes, accessories, and shoes for projects like DarBazar (see below). Examples like this non-profit give-away shop show how deeply embedded Lab!Puzzle is in the neighbourhood.



The building, a former office building for the municipality that was abandoned for 5 years before Lab!Puzzle occupied it, is distinguishable from far away. [Source: private].

Welfare in progress

states the slogan on the website. The reforms of 2011 were increasing the precarity and decreasing the power and effectiveness of the welfare that was given by the state. Lab!Puzzle, to prevent the worst from happening, installed a bottom-up welfare system. From this perspective, informality can be defined as “the art of bypassing the state”, a mechanism for the redistribution of welfare and power disjointed from orthodox political economy approaches. It is also a way to gain back control of spaces that had been claimed by a newly organized neoliberal state that was giving too little to its citizens in exchange for their services and payments, or not properly fulfilling its functions.¹

What we can actually draw from the experience of Lab!Puzzle is their peculiar attitude towards the State and its institution. In fact, Leandro and Michele more than once said their goal is not to substitute the State and not even working on a parallel track. By identifying locals' needs, they are able to give social solutions but they recognize that welfare is something that is responsibility of the State. They just want to achieve determined social goals, most of which are actually shared by the social State as we know of today. Therefore, they are in a position of some kind of collaboration with the institutions. They operate where institutional solutions failed, or where they simply weren't able to arrive. In this sense, it broadens the meaning of informal governance so to acknowledge the role of everyday actions and common people to the construction of the political. Also, Lab!Puzzle and its' grassroots approach is a great example for informality, but it also shows that strict borders between being formal or informal are always states in progress.

¹ cf. Bruns, Miggelbrink, and Müller 2011, Stenning et al. 2010.

Part two: INBETWEEN. Crossroad between formality and informality.

Even if activities and projects' planning is complicated enough, Lab!Puzzle offers a variety of them for the common good. Since nowadays, the numbers of activities is overwhelming, we will focus on a few examples.

"There's mothers coming in, saying 'My child has ADHD'. And after a week of being here, it changes completely, and we say: 'No, Madam, this child is 10 years old.'" (Michele)

One of the first projects to be created was the Scuola Popolare Carla Verbano, which is named after the unflinchingly fighting mother of Valerio Verbano, a political activist murdered by neofascists in 1980. With this project, LabPuzzle provides didactical support for middle school students. The goal is not only to assist with homework, but by going through extra tasks with them, ideally to teach the youngsters how to learn – and hopefully, to learn to love learning per se. Students can visit Lab!Puzzle for this reason only two times a week (Tuesday and Wednesday) since teachers and classrooms are not occupied, but that does not restrict them to visit the institution the other days. In fact, Michele is observing kids and youngsters coming in nearly every day, assisting each other and thereby creating a sense of belonging and solidarity.



A tidy, welcoming place for people with questions and concerns. [Source: private]

The social counsellor program was created before the institution's formal inception by the local municipality in 2009. After municipality's closing, Lab!Puzzle took on the responsibility for continuing the project. The project is about mentoring program not only for the locals but also for all who are interested into it. Sessions are only open on Friday by booking an appointment. This shows how Lab!Puzzle is preventing the worst by fulfilling governmental duties – a conflict they are constantly quarrelling with.

When the Italian government stopped providing language courses, Lab!Puzzles stepped in, following their belief that if someone does not know the language, they can't participate in the broader society. Taking place three times a week they split the offer into three different classes, for children, adults (mixed for women_men), and for women only, so the learning process can take place in a comfortable atmosphere for everyone and be quite effective. Courses are taught in different languages such as in English, in French or even in Italian, depending from the migrants' preferences and origin. In order to get an official language certification, people have to take public tests. Lab!Puzzle does not provide immigrants with such certificates, but they assure to provide them with all the necessary knowledge and attendance certification which enables them to get official certificates – a great example for the intermeshing of informality and formality, as well as our next example.



DarBazar is a give-away shop with an informal currency system, being a word play of the Arabic word for 'home' and the 'home currency' dar. After paying roundabout five euros for a membership card, the store works with a points based system: the start capital of 50 dar (meaning 50 points) is allowing shoppers to buy shoes for four dar, shirts for five dar and so on, being stocked up once in a while.

The goal is reducing overconsumption, reduces overconsumption and tries to convert impulsive shopping into an eco-friendly second hand way. Clothes and accessories are mostly donated by locals. *"We say to the people, don't bring clothes you're not wearing – bring clothes you would wear, but somehow you don't"*, explains Michele. By this, Lab!Puzzle ensures to get neat apparel. The DarBazar is open every Saturday for everyone.



Free but regulated – the shopping hall of Lab!Puzzle. [Source: private]

The Repair Café stems from the same eco-friendly, overconsumption approach and is mainly about restoring damaged technological devices. Volunteers and mentors work together with neighbours and teach them to fix and not dispose their utensils. That way, they're resisting planned obsolescence and are thereby contributing not only financial relieve for families who don't have to buy new devices, but also foster craftsmanship.

Part three: FORMALITY. Interaction between Lab!Puzzle and the Municipio.

Formality inwards: Organizational and Governance Model

LabPuzzle is by statute a diverse community of people that, through the process of self-governance, shares and practices common principles and collective rights in a commitment to assume daily acts of citizenship within the neighborhood it is located. It constitutes *an autonomous institution of the municipality. a situated experience that arises from the cooperative autonomy of subjects and, as a collective actor rooted in a socio-territorial context, exercises actions of direct and participatory democracy, producing aggregative forms, social values and non-commodity relational goods.*²

According to its representatives, the organizational model of Lab!Puzzle is non-hierarchal, horizontal and inclusive. Anyone who wants to participate in the initiative and/or its various projects is free to do so, as long as he/she aligns with the governing values of the community. All tasks are assumed by the participants in a shared decision-making way that promotes collaboration and mutualism. The governance model of the organization in all bodies and projects can be described as grassroots democracy. That means that the participants can join all decision-making processes, voice their concerns in the small or large meetings and contribute directly in the creation and evolution of the organizations' ethos.

All decisions in the plenary assembly are made by consent, not voting. Consent requires that no one disagrees. Voting (majority vote) and consent differ in that in consent decision-making, the majority cannot outvote the minority. A group will strive to integrate each objection until all members consent. The idea behind that is that minority opinions matter and that majority vote tends to polarize instead of bringing people together.

To discuss in depth the governance model and its functioning we first need to have a closer look to the principals that inform Lab!Puzzle reality, since they are the real determining factors for the institutional internal process of governance. Article 4 of the statute in particular can serve as a solid base for egalitarian practices, expressing the absolute repulse for any type of discrimination, for fascism, sexism, homo- and trans-hostility. Willingness of eliminating inequality can also be found in articles 5-6 which affirm that the activities carried out are oriented towards the production of common goods and services outside of any type of profit logic, therefore making an active effort to alleviate the symptoms of income inequality, which inevitably bring to a difference in the access to opportunity and makes it harder to create a community unanimously oriented towards the same purpose.

The sovereign governing body of Lab!Puzzle is the plenary assembly. It is held on a monthly basis, it is public and open to any person that wishes to participate. The participants represent themselves as individuals, not as delegates of other collective bodies. Anyone that wishes to bring up a particular topic in the plenary can do so, as long as they have included their intervention in

² Lab!Puzzle Statute, Section 1, article 1, par.1-3.

the assembly agenda that gets published before the plenary meeting. The agenda and all the procedural tasks related to the assembly are taken on by a moderator, a role that is assumed in alternating turns from assembly to assembly by all willing participants.

The plenary assembly can create working groups as needed to further its goals but such working groups are temporary and once they have completed their goals, they cease to exist. The only working group that is permanent is the communications group of Lab!Puzzle.

In September, the plenary meeting decides the annual goals and activities/projects of the space. Each project group regulates its own organizational, relational and financial methods, inspired by the founding principles. They look after the horizontal relationships and the bonds of sharing and caring, the climate of human and social promotion, the inclusive respect for cultural diversity, the ethical postures and political positions. In that sense, each project group acts as an autonomous cell of the Lab!Puzzle body and creates its own processes and work habits, in conversation with the plenary assembly, other project groups, as well as external collectives and initiatives of similar ethos.

It is in this section that we can find one of the informality expression of Lab!Puzzle, in art.6 section 2 about activities we can read: *Every single project provide itself of the organization tools it finds the most suitable.* This gives people who are carrying out the project the freedom of finding functional solutions and at the same time the responsibility of the good evolution of the activity. The fact that every activity is conducted on a voluntary basis and it is substantially auto-organised and self-managed efficaciously convey the informal nature of the practice.

Governance without governing?

The governance model of Lab!Puzzle, as described by its representatives, is a loose adaptation of the idea and principles of the model of *Sociocracy or Dynamic Governance*. A concise definition of sociocracy is *a social ideal that values equality and the rights of people to determine the conditions under which they live and work, and an effective method of organizing associations, businesses, and governments, large and small.*³ Much like the processes implemented by Lab!Puzzle, Sociocracy uses the consent-based decision making method among equal individuals and builds the organizational structure in smaller groups based on the shared values and principles of the organization.

The criticism against such governance models is directed mostly towards the principles of inclusivity and accountability that they preach. The consent-based decision-making tool is undoubtedly creating an opportunity to integrate all opposing opinions in the final decision. In reality though, this process can be particularly long and energy depleting. It can be an absolute treasure for small to medium sized, relatively homogeneous groups but remains highly inefficient in large groups, especially ones that are very diverse, as the ones that Lab!Puzzle seems to bring together. The long processes, the need -in many cases- for conflict resolution management and the inefficiency to reach decisions fast, especially when time is of the essence, tends to discourage 'newer' people that lack the experience of such processes and 'language' and results in a small group of 'old members' making all the decisions. This could negate the inclusivity that such a tool was created to accommodate in the first place.

Certainly, not knowing the specifics of such practices at Lab!Puzzle, it is hard to voice a criticism. Most of the representatives that took part in the field research have been members of the

³ <https://www.sociocracy.info/what-is-sociocracy/>, last seen on 15th of June 2022.

organization for years and seem to have developed a common language and way of communicating. They also seemed to share a similar social and educational status, something that greatly impacts the efficiency of such tools. I am not sure if the involvement of people from other cultural, religious, political backgrounds or social statuses would make the consent-based system as easy to practice, at least without supporting training mechanisms and more refined rules.

The latter ones refer to the right of active participation in the assembly and its adjunctive accountability. Open to all, inclusive processes are incredibly rich to a community, but accountability is also a crucial aspect of such democratic practices. Voting or giving consent is only fulfilled as a right when there is also a level of accountability for the tasks that are adopted. In the plenary assembly of Lab!Puzzle -as described by its members- there is no prediction of accountability linked to the right of active participation. This opens the process up to all members, but it could limit the members that are taking on the responsibility of executing such tasks, especially the ones that could affect them personally (eg. liability to funders, political responsibility due to actions, etc.). Such problems can be managed as long as there is a common ethos and a proactive attitude towards it. In similar models, there are different circles of decision-making rights of the members based on their level of participation or even rotating systems of accountability. Sharing the accountability is an act of collective care that is often overlooked in favour of openness and inclusivity.

Formality outwards: mutual expectations, (in)formality - (in)legality

Lab!Puzzle, the city and the Municipio

In late 2014, the city of Rome was shaken by the uncovering of mafia scandals involving municipal administrations that had rigged public tenders for municipal services, causing the debt of the city to skyrocket. The Mayor was forced to resign, and a technical municipal government was formed, which started a process of 'expenditure rationalization' to address the financial situation. Part of the 'rationalization' process was to sell public assets and privatize the public sector to repay the debt in order to comply with the mandatory Fiscal Compact. This scheme of selling public assets and spaces caused a huge response from the city of solidarity, organizations and civic-led initiatives that operated throughout Rome.

In response to the new political status, civic organizations created *Decide Roma*, a working group to conduct a public and participatory audit to discover the real debt of the municipality and the identity of the city's creditors.⁴ Lab!Puzzle, like many other civic initiatives, was an active member of the *Decide Roma* and joined the efforts to open a dialogue with the Municipality in order to collect financial information and promote transparency. The efforts were fruitless as the Administration showed no intention to collaborate with the initiatives. Eventually the works of *Decide Roma* ceased and the civic groups continued their efforts in their local neighbourhoods and boroughs. Lab!Puzzle continued its work at Tufello, trying to remain in the occupied space and to activate the social fabric around it.

⁴ https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/recommended_reading_-_audit_of_debt.pdf, last seen on 15th of June, 2022.



What can go wrong if Super Mario is on your side?
[Source: private]

In 2019, a major change in law took place with the approval of the regional law on common goods, concerning the *promotion of shared administration of common goods*.⁵ This made it possible for the Municipalities across the city of Rome to collaborate directly with citizen groups, *the law allows citizens and administration to share resources and responsibilities in the general interest and establish collaboration agreements, carried out by citizens and by initiatives active in the field of common goods*. The legal framework introduced with this regional law is a unique way of recognizing and 'legalizing' the civic informal practices that give life to the city in all corners that the cumbersome administration cannot reach. It provides a great spectrum of opportunities of collaboration between the Municipal bodies and the service users themselves, laying out a path towards transparency and inclusivity.

*On Tuesday 28th September 2021, in Piazza Sempione, at 11:30, in the Town Hall, the collaboration agreement between the municipal administration and the Meta 21 association was signed, recognizing the "Puzzle Laboratory" as a common good. Thus, the first local application of the regional law on common goods was inaugurated.*⁶ With this first collaboration agreement, Lab!Puzzle and Municipio III are recognised partners of this initiative and have mutual agreements towards one another, opening the way for many more innovative ways of collaboration between the administration and the citizens. As such, it is an innovation that needs to be highlighted for its impact on the city models of collaboration.

From the Municipio's side, it is committed to provide to Lab!Puzzle the use of the previously occupied building for the next six years, it is committing to cover the utility expenses of the building, as well as collaborate in any way possible to support the continuation of the buildings' operations. During the assemblies, a representative from the Municipio is present and gets informed about all the needs that have been identified in the community. Lab!Puzzle is committed to continue to be of service to the local community and keep an open channel of communication with the Municipio, notify its services regarding specific needs in the neighbourhood, as well as constantly strive for the improvement of community life. It is worth noticing that the agreement incorporates the statute of Lab!Puzzle as part of the agreement, binding its community service and goal in the core of the agreement itself.

⁵ <https://www.consiglio.regione.lazio.it/consiglio-regionale/?vw=leggiregionalidettaglio&sid=9360&sv=vigente> , art.2,10; last seen on 15th of June, 2022.

⁶ <https://romah24.com/montesacro/news/tufello-lab-puzzle-primo-bene-comune-riconosciuto-a-roma/>, last seen on 15th of July, 2022.

Unfortunately, we did not receive the content of the agreement, so most of the information about it came from the field research. Being a legal text, it is possible that there are other limitations, liabilities or provisos included that could greatly impact our understanding of the agreement, but overall it seems like an innovative “diagonal” way of promoting the formalization of informal practices on a civic level. The only thought regarding the incorporation of the Lab!Puzzle statute that could be of some value has to do with the limitation of the experimenting character of the whole initiative. Since the statute is a document that captures a particular time and space of an organization and is meant to be a living document accompanying its life, such binding of its form could hold back any experimentation that may arise. In the bigger picture, it could potentially limit (like a ‘precedent’) other less open-minded Municipii that may require from other civic organizations to take on similar goals in order to be recognized as common good. Of course, such an argument is not particularly strong, but it shows the need for the Administration on all levels to become more creative and open-minded in the ways it relates to the citizens and their groups.

As a last commentary, it is important to mention the Lab!Puzzle representatives’ stress of the role of the organization. The role they have taken on is clearly not meant to substitute the Municipal services of welfare, but rather highlight the need for their improvement. Using both proactive and reactive acts of citizenship – as proactive we consider the setting up of the support school and other services’ projects, whilst as reactive we consider actions such as occupations of public spaces that need attention from the Municipality to be transformed into communal spaces like the park nearby – Lab!Puzzle acts as an amplifier of the community needs. It is quite definitive that Lab!Puzzle’s representatives measure their impact by the decreasing number of people receiving their services, rather than the opposite. As Michele says: *“If the Municipality is working better, we no longer need to offer these services to the people. Our job is complete, we have succeeded.”*

Finances: the aims justify the tools

Although most of the work is done voluntarily and without further payment, there are of course costs that cannot be avoided. To mortise those, Lab!Puzzle is always looking for calls for bids. But they’re not blindly applying for everything that comes along, since this means working together with institutions in a way and therefore giving up some independence and informality. There’s always weighing up: how much money is there to possibly get – and what is demanded for it? This is discussed with neighbours and in *“long, long hours and hours of plenary sessions”*, Leandro is smiling wearily. Like the other decisions, this way of obtaining money is only accepted by consent. Yet projects may need up to 100.000 euros in order to be created, so sometimes *“the aims justify the tools”*, as Michele defends themselves after critical inquiries concerning a cooperation with the EU.

Furthermore, donations are coming from locals and other people who want to help by proving stuff that they don’t use anymore. Many supplies for the art & illustration club, DarBazar, devices and tools for the Repair Café, and books for library are provided by locals. Lab!Puzzle even had to reject some donations, received an overwhelming amount of stuff – this shows once again, how much organisations from the people for the people are valued and how mutual exchange of knowledge and tools can lead into something as effective as Lab!Puzzle.

Spinning Nets as survival practice

“Taking a place and regenerating it not only with activists, but with normal persons. To let the place work, work as a common good.” (Michele)

Not only did we get to know Lab!Puzzle as a place that connects the local residents by offering courses, counselling, and sometimes just a place to relax and read a book, but also as a place connecting political activities, where political assemblies, talking and informing about laws and taking action can happen in a safe space. Lab!Puzzle is deeply embedded in a larger group of self-organised projects constantly exchange knowledge and aid. By letting people move in without many barriers – one only needs to go through a ‘testing phase’ to see if habits, beliefs, and characters match – Lab!Puzzles is working against living in an ideological ‘bubble’. “Maybe you’re not political when you move in”, Leandro laughs, “but you surely might be when you move out.”

Our hosts were always emphasizing Lab!Puzzle is not working with the state, yet being open about cooperating and signing contracts with it, receiving financial aid by institutions. They’re constantly balancing their political ideals with the realities of social work and economic pressure. At the same time, they’re holding the Municipio and the government accountable for their avoidance of responsibilities, stating many times to not be a makeshift.

Lab!Puzzle, as we see it, is a best-practice example for the mix of formality and informality and especially collaboration between self-organised projects and local residents as deeply needed safety nets for where state and governments are struggling. It’s a humanitarian aid approach: I’m giving you the tools to come to terms with your situation, but you have to implement them by yourself. Nonna Roma, another project we visited during the field work week, also made this very clear a few times. They don’t want to be needed all the time, but are working towards their extinction, one can say. Let’s hope one day they’ll fulfil that goal.

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Source from the field

Lab!Puzzle Statute

Other Sources

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