



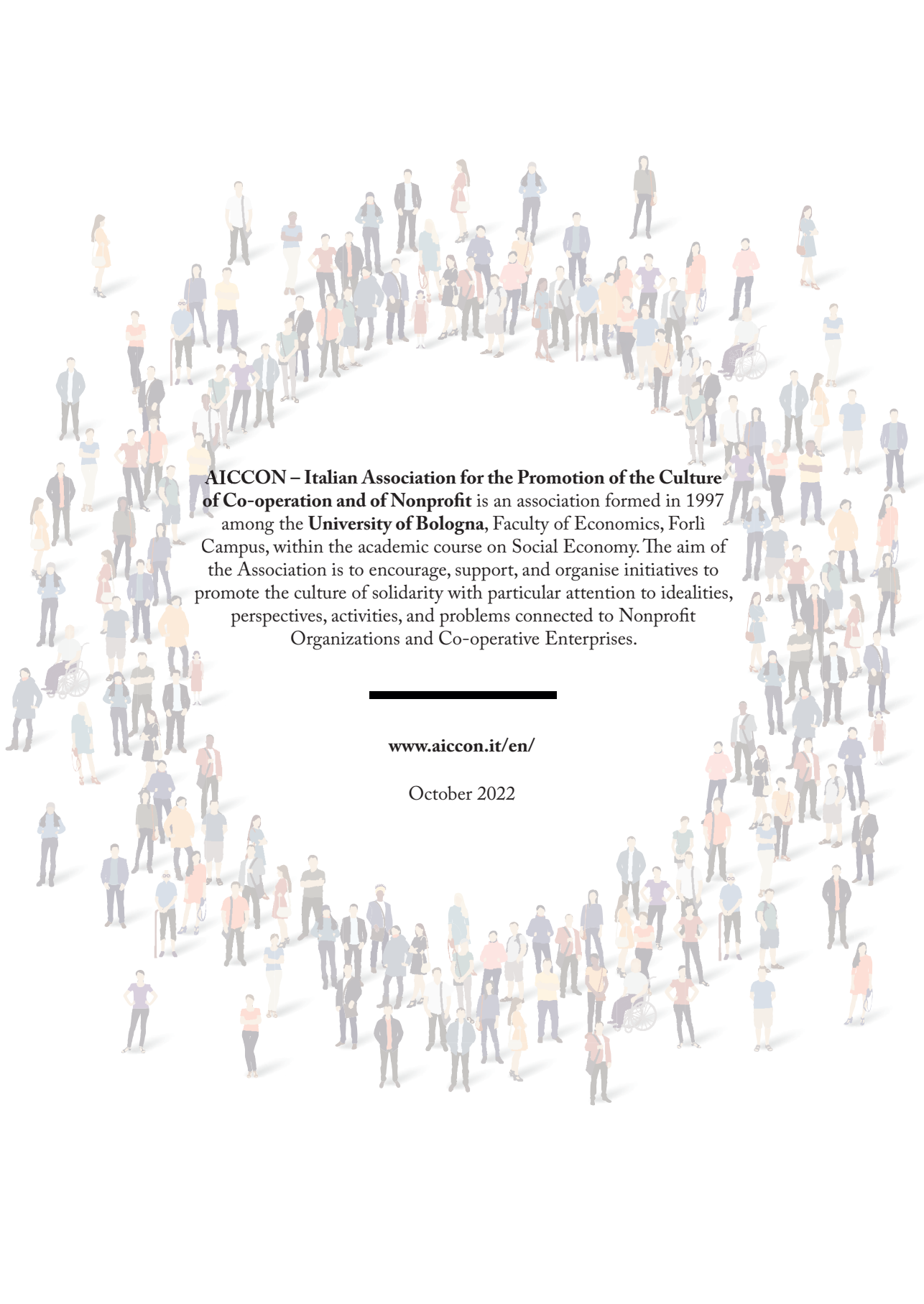
# COMMUNITY INDEX®

a tool to measure the value and quality of  
community organisations

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We believe in inclusive language and, whenever possible, we will use it in this report because we would like differences to be represented. In some cases, we will use the gender-neutral masculine, to keep the text more fluid, even though we are aware of all the limits that this implies.



**AICCON – Italian Association for the Promotion of the Culture of Co-operation and of Nonprofit** is an association formed in 1997 among the **University of Bologna**, Faculty of Economics, Forlì Campus, within the academic course on Social Economy. The aim of the Association is to encourage, support, and organise initiatives to promote the culture of solidarity with particular attention to idealities, perspectives, activities, and problems connected to Nonprofit Organizations and Co-operative Enterprises.

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October 2022

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Within the Italian third sector reform, indeed, the social impact assessment is defined as the «**qualitative and quantitative assessment – on the short, medium and long term – of the effects of the activities developed within the community of reference**, in relation to the identified objective. »<sup>3</sup> In other words, the intent of the analysis is to measure “the effects of the activities carried out on the community of reference”. It then becomes clear that the analysis should be focused on the changes generated by the activities carried out, **to be observed** not “only” in relation to **the direct beneficiaries of the activity, but also to the wider group of interested parties (people and organizations) involved during the entire process**. Thus, we can understand the importance – and at the same time the difficulty – of **defining the meaning of community of reference** and creating quality relationships with it.



<sup>3</sup>The aforementioned definition contained in the non-profit Code of conduct is available [here](#).

## Difficulties in defining the idea of community

In line with the very nature of the instrument here presented, we think it is necessary to start with a clarification of the idea of community and, in particular, of the idea of “community of reference” used in the Italian Guidelines for social impact assessment systems<sup>4</sup>. The difficulties in **defining** the “community of reference” are intrinsic to the very nature of the idea of **community**. This term emerges, since the very beginning, as a “**controversial concept**”, which is to say that it «has always expressed its greatest communicative effectiveness when it represented a driver of controversy, [...] mainly created to criticize a certain aspect of reality and to imagine it in a different and positive way. This aspect related to imagination – intended as thinking of something that does not yet exist – is crucial for the constitution of society. »<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the term community is a **polysemantic term** that, from time to time, identifies one or more groups of people – or suggests a method to do so (structural or processual interpretation of the concept of community)<sup>6</sup> – depending on the sphere of activity in which it is used, on the way in which a certain topic is addressed and/or on the background of the person using it. These aspects represent additional elements of complexity to the present work, since the C-Index aims at stimulating the organizations to reflect precisely on their relationship with their community of reference and with the broader ecosystem of organizations of which they are part.

In this work, we will intentionally talk about the categories of community of reference, in the plural form, and we will try to clarify by whom they are composed and which kind of internal relations can be established, in accordance with the existing literature and with what emerged from the stakeholder engagement process<sup>7</sup>. By reason of the multidimensionality of the criteria defining the sense of belonging to the community, and of the abandon of the traditional relationship paradigms in favour of new creative processes that can build community relationships based on desire and imagination, **it is necessary to adopt a perspective of multi-belonging to the community, from which derives the choice of using the term in the plural form**. This implies the transition from a substantial to a functional connotation of the term community, based on the practice of unity –that is, the different ways of acting and living together that individuals continuously choose and rediscuss in their communal approach – more than on the sharing of strict systems of values. From these brief considerations, it is possible to **imagine a new approach which allows to think of community as a way of “gathering together” in a contingent and fluctuant manner and not as a definite and definitive idea of belonging**.

<sup>4</sup> The Italian Guidelines for social impact assessment systems are available [here](#)

<sup>5</sup> Prandini R. (2016), “Abitare il ‘comune’: come costruire senso di appartenenza” (Inhabiting a common space. How to build a sense of belonging)

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem

<sup>7</sup> Please refer to the section ‘Method, Framework and Data’ for more details on the stakeholder engagement process that characterized the development of the C-index.

In this sense, the C-Index is meant as an exercise to encourage the organization to reflect on these topics, starting from the definition of a “community profile” to take as a reference and to confront itself with (community of reference), **without claiming to capture and explain the complexity and totality of this special relationship**, given its structural and specific nature that cannot be exhausted in any group of indicators. **Rather, the designed system of qualitative-quantitative metrics intends to represent some sort of a “compass” that will help to evaluate – through a system of proxy – the relational capacity in the perspective of community organization, where “to evaluate” has to be understood as giving value to the quality of relationships and not only quantifying them.**

For these reasons, though aware of the above-mentioned critical issues, we decided to focus our research efforts on the development of an **instrument of auto reflection for organizations** – certainly improvable but **co-designed together with the third sector** – that tries to analyse the “community meritocracy” of an organization, by stimulating the aspect of internal management and thus, **by improving the action of the organization in a “community oriented” perspective.**

## Defining the concept of community of reference

The impossibility of defining the broader term community in a definitive and unequivocal way inevitably leads to a difficulty in identifying and defining the concept of community of reference. As suggested by the social impact assessment (SIA) guidelines, the community of reference represents the perimeter within which we can observe the transformative capacity of the organisation through its actions. The capacity of the organisation to generate impact can involve people and organisations as parties that influence or are influenced by the actions. With reference to people, for example, we can include **in the community of reference the direct beneficiaries of the activities, but also their relatives and the inhabitants of the areas where the organization intervenes**, without forgetting the possible positive or negative effects produced on the **internal dimension of the organisation** (workers, volunteers, social base etc).

To this extent, it is important to remember that **the communities living in the places where the organisation works do not coincide with this acceptance of community of reference with which the organisation works. Similarly, the latter cannot coincide only with the group of direct beneficiaries of the activity** explicitly recognized as such (figure 1). This markedly multidimensional perspective allows to value the presence of a plurality of actors (people, organisations) which, for various reasons, take part into and/or are the beneficiaries of the transformative process within which the above-mentioned impact is generated.

## COMMUNITIES LIVING IN THE TERRITORIAL CONTEXTS WHERE THE ORGANISATION WORKS

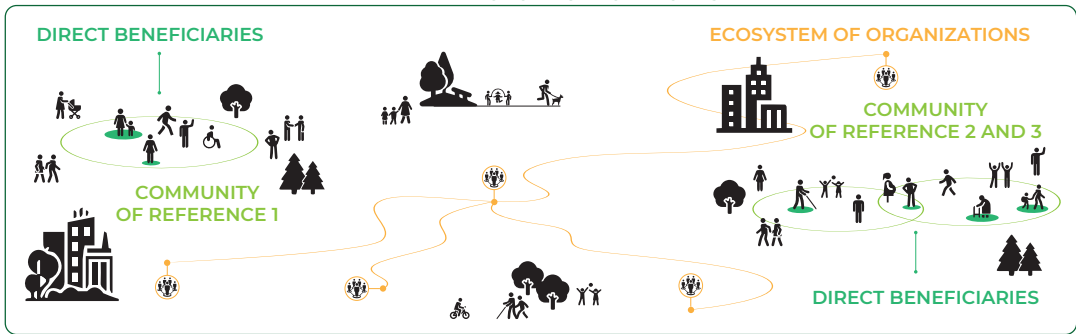


Figure 1 - Communities, community of reference, direct and indirect beneficiaries, territorial contexts and ecosystems of organizations

If the relationship with the community of reference is a prerequisite for the organisation to generate impact, then **three important conditions must be met in order to guarantee the expression of the organisation's transformative capacity.**

### identification

A feeling of **identification** between the organisation and the people to whom the activities of the organisation are addressed. Plato, with the term *thimos* (identification), had already stated that the primary need of human kind was to be recognized and to recognize the other. This identification takes place when we recognize interdependence between one self and others. It is this precise condition that shapes the real sense and possibility to realize actions and projects such as the ones to which this study is addresses.

### intentionality

The presence of **shared intentionality**. A community flourishes when there is intentionality at the basis of all collective action and it must then be desired, before being organized and lived. Moreover, the shared intentionality implies a certain awareness of the parties involved with respect to the fact that they are taking part in a project aiming at generating an impact (transformative community intentionality).

### mutualism

The presence of **codified forms of mutualism**. There are three main forms of mutualism that constitute together the main pillar of collaborative action, aimed at fulfilling the needs or aspirations of the community. The first one is **mutual recognition**, main and founding element of collaborative action. Relational goods exist only if recognised and if they are above all the result of conversational processes. The second one is **mutual benefit**, or the idea that to live you necessarily have to create connections with others, by collaborating and producing shared sense. The third one is **mutual assistance**, the idea according to which there needs to be an explicit match on the interests and results deriving from acting together, otherwise you will be catch into mere social welfare.



Identification, intentionality and mutualism are the three key elements characterising the relationships at the basis of an organisation.

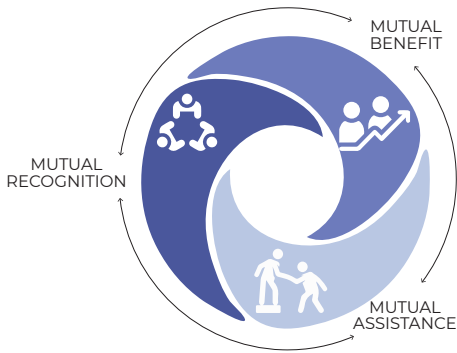


Figure 2 - 3 criteria to define the community of reference

As already suggested, **an institution – in order to be community-oriented – must recognize and be recognized by its community of reference**, defined by mutable characteristics specific to the organization and by the nature of the party involved (illustrated above). For this reason, **the inclusion of possible categories of people within the community of reference is left to the organisation**, with the suggestion to use as criteria of reflection for the insertion of certain groups of people the concurrence of the three elements investigated in point c.

**The concurrence of mutual recognition, mutual benefit and mutual assistance**, though with different degrees of intensity and sensibility for each element, defines the perimeter of the organisation's community of reference and underlines how much a community-based orientation is a product and not a mere addition of the above-mentioned factors. Even a low intensity of one of the three factors influences the result in terms of general community-based orientation, while the absence of one of the three factors resets it.

# 01. How to define the Community Index

## 02. Method, framework and data

### 03. The value in use of the Community Index

## 02.

The Community Index is the final result of the **implementation of years of on-site observation, study and reflection** carried out by AICCON and of a **participative path that has involved representatives of the target organisations**. The stakeholder engagement process – developed through 2 focus groups and a selection of organisations from the world of associations, voluntary sector and social enterprises – represented a valuable opportunity to discuss and validate both some important elements related to the practical realization of the instrument<sup>8</sup>, and the value in use of the instrument beside some possible criticalities derived from its use. In this sense, this phase of co-design with the direct beneficiaries has been crucial in the construction of an instrument that can really be useful and effective.

The result of this research work comprises:

1. a **framework composed of 4 analysis levels (identity-based, inclusive, ecosystem-based and transformative)** each of which is, in turn, composed of 3 sublevels, useful to better understand the main areas of analysis on which to base the observation of the relationship with the community of reference defining the organisation.

2. a series of relevant indicators, coherent with said conceptual framework, which feeds a scoring system, based on thresholds and weighting, that takes into account the different characteristics of the organisations involved and gives – through an **interactive dashboard** – not only useful insights to the target organisations<sup>9</sup> but also the relative areas of possible improvement<sup>10</sup>. The digital instrument can **collect, elaborate and visualize almost in real time qualitative and quantitative data** related to the solar year and offer an overview of the achievement of the community mission, by attributing a **score from 0 to 10** in each of the **12 sublevels** composing the conceptual evaluation framework (figure 3).

In this sense, the C-Index intends to strategically support self-reflection inside the organisations that, in a perspective of constant learning and improvement, want to measure and reorient their action in a community-based perspective, by taking into account the development trajectories indicated by the instrument itself.

<sup>8</sup> In the two focus groups carried out with selected representatives from the world of associations, voluntary sector and social enterprises, the participants addressed the issues of the definition of community of reference and the system of thresholds and weighting to be used in order to consider organizations biodiversity and value it.

<sup>9</sup> The system at issue will be adjusted during the testing phase.

<sup>10</sup> The digital tool, at the moment, has been developed internally with the Office package, in particular using Excel as data collection tool and PowerBI for interactive data analysis and visualization.

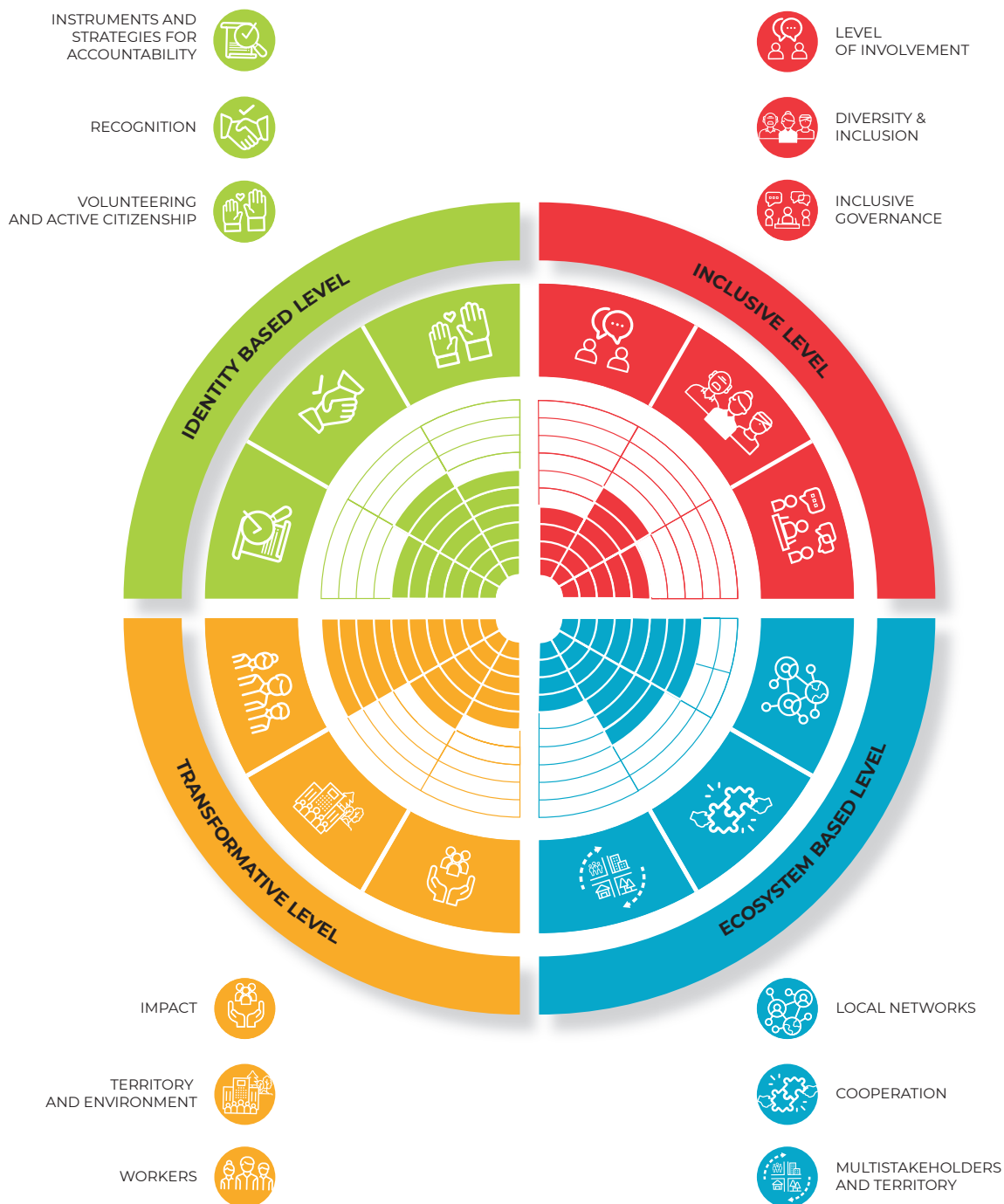


Figure 3 - The framework of analysis

## The 4 levels of analysis

Within the **identity-based level**, we intend to include the capacity of the individual to bring out and communicate his/her original and distinctive value and the consequent results in term of reputation and activation of the community of reference. Having established these objectives, the qualitative-quantitative data to be collected refer to:



instruments and strategies for accountability that characterize the organization



strategies for recognition used both by the community of reference and by the organization to promote this identification (with a specific focus on donations)



volunteering



other information and relevant materials, coherent with the level of analysis

With the **inclusive level**, we focus our attention on the quality and quantity of the involvement of the community of reference. Having established these objectives, the qualitative-quantitative data to be collected refer to:



degree and intensity of engagement of the community of reference



diversity&inclusion of people involved in the community of reference



ability of the organisation to involve the community of reference in the governance processes



other information and relevant materials, coherent with the level of analysis

The third area of analysis is the one **related to the ecosystem** in which the organisation works and that it promotes. In this level of analysis we intend, on the one hand, to describe the quantity and quality of the networks in which the organisation is inserted and of the actions implemented thanks to this logic; on the other hand, we want to underline the openness of the organisation towards the area in which it operates. Having established these objectives, the qualitative-quantitative data to be collected refer to:



extension, type and heterogeneity of the networks



quantity and quality of the cooperative action



multi-stakeholder (ability to involve the parties belonging to the ecosystem into the governance processes) and territorialisation characterising the organization



other information and relevant materials, coherent with the level of analysis

Finally, the last perspective of analysis is the **transformative** level, which is to say the observation, if possible, of the organisation ability to generate impact (intended as a medium/long-term change produced for the community of reference) and orient its actions towards a maximisation. Having established these objectives, the qualitative-quantitative data to be collected refer to:



degree and intensity of the impact generated (with a focus on understanding and application of SIA)



activities and investments of the organisation towards territorial development and environmental protection



initiatives for workers – considered not only as an “instrument” for the realisation and implementation of the organisation activities, but as an essential element, often too little considered, to which the organisation must particularly refer, in order to define itself meritorious in a community perspective



other information and relevant materials, coherent with the level of analysis

Data and information related to different levels and sublevels will be collected to create a path that every interested organisation could take. A path that does not want to be a mere collection, elaboration and return of data, but a **capacity building path for the organisations involved which intends to raise awareness – internally and externally – of the issues of interest.** In this sense, **the data requests are inserted in a paradigm of relationship with the organisations** and do not have any purpose of investigation, comparison and/or classification of the involved institutions.



# 01. How to define the Community Index

# 02. Method, framework and data

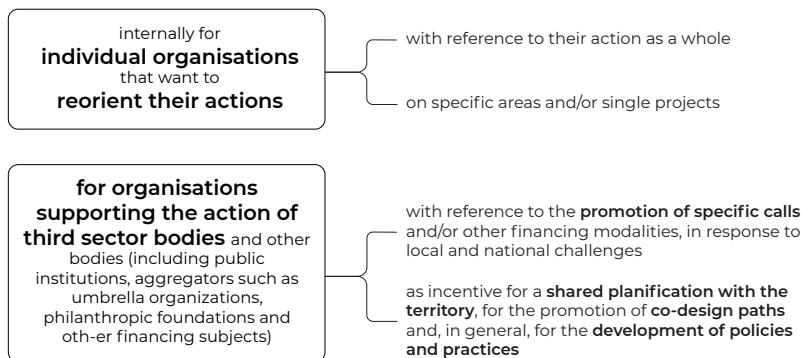
# 03. The value in use of the Community Index



## 03.

As already pointed out, the instrument is composed by a conceptual framework and a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators that can provide useful evidence for the assessment of one's community direction and is meant to be used in its entirety (conceptual framework and metrics). However, its value in use is not limited to this mode of use and can, instead, vary on the basis of the mode itself and of the type of organisation that intends to use it. In this sense, **the value in use of the instrument is inevitably wider, since the modulation of the different parts composing it (levels, sublevels and set of qualitative and quantitative indicators) allows to adapt the instrument to one's own purpose.**

For example, **the conceptual framework alone**, composed by 4 levels and 12 sublevels, without data and information, is already a good **basis of reflection and strategic orientation** (figure 4):



In this sense, the above-mentioned organisations can also use only one of the levels indicated in the framework or a combination of two or more levels, in case they want to focus their attention only on certain areas of reflection. For example, it would be possible to consider the inclusive level and its sublevels as a starting point to the planning and realization of participatory paths and/or in the context of urban regeneration processes.

The ad hoc conceived framework is the essence of the reflection that has characterised this research work and also the core asset that we intend to make available to the wider possible range of organisations.

**By shifting our focus on the value in use of the instrument from the framework to the metrics, it can be interesting for the different types of organization to use only the qualitative-quantitative indicators of the Community Index, without taking into account the conceptual framework within which they were conceived. For example, by emphasising the indicators:**

- in the context of **social accountability processes (social or sustainability report) and SIA**
- **in the access to funds, contributions and other development opportunities promoted by public or private bodies**

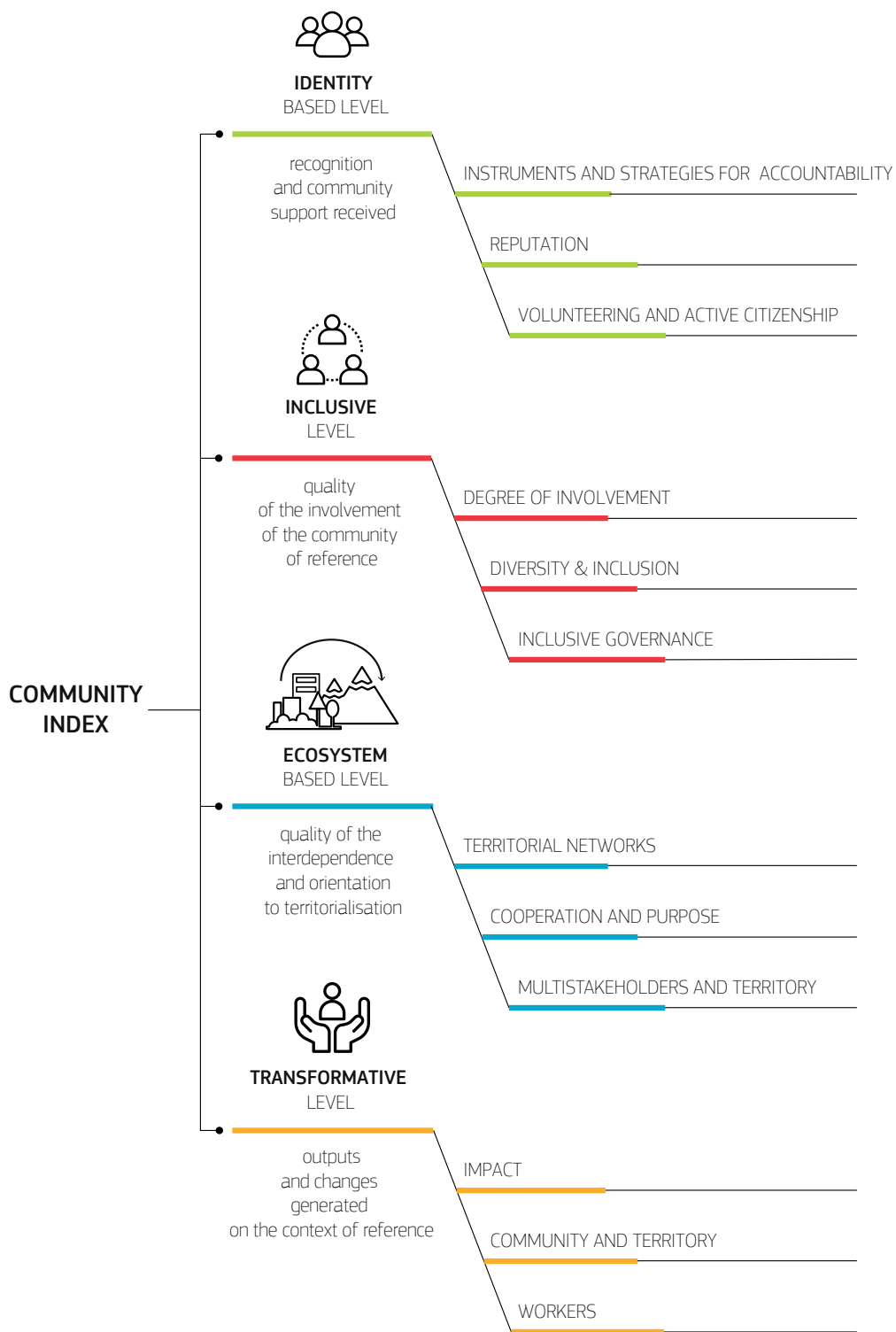


Figure 4 – Analysis framework

It is important to underline that, **in accordance with AICCON, it is possible to customize the indicators within the different levels and sublevels**, as well as to integrate the precise data requests within every sublevel with additional information considered useful and coherent for an adequate evaluation in the area of interest, as explained in the section “Method, framework and data”.

In short, the value in use of the instrument can be characterised by 3 strategic intents:

As we have already said, **the strategic orientation of the organizations** can constitute the main – but not the only – purpose of use of the Community Index.

If we consider, for example, the **internal dimension of the organisation**, the path can increase the motivation, most of all those intrinsic, of people operating within it, with positive effect on the **organizational atmosphere**. Through this instrument and the involvement in the path leading to its implementation, workers, volunteers and the social basis in general can become more aware of the value generated by their reality and/or acquire elements useful to boost the effectiveness of their actions through the improvement of the relationship with the members of the community of reference with which they are in contact.

Moreover, the instrument, its evidence (intended both in terms of single indicators and in terms of an overview) and the analysis path started by the organisation can be emphasized in a **communication** perspective, by improving the visibility and the reputation of the organisation itself. The Community Index, in this sense, also represents an instrument of dialogue for the organisation. The communicative intent is not only directed to the community of reference, because the instrument (as a whole and in some of its parts) can constitute an integrative and meritorious element in the request for contributions and, in general, in a fundraising perspective.

Finally, as we have already said, the discussion on the Community Index derived from a reflection on identity and developed with research intents. For these reasons, as a **future development, the aggregated** (when possible and applicable) **and anonymous analysis of data and qualitative and quantitative information** collected can be important to:

- emphasize the contribution offered, for example, by the third sector (or by some parties) and/or by other locally active parties
- understand connections between the diffusion of particularly meritorious parties in a community-based key and the well-being of territories, in order to identify some useful drivers to promote the development of the relationship with the community or specific patterns specific of the positive bond with the territory;
- study the relationship between the organisation results and other variables (e.g., size and type of organization) mapped.



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