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Urban governance and sustainable development in Sicily

The growing interest in the urban dimension of sustainable development results, on one side, from the greater attention paid by many scholars to local dynamics, and, on the other, from the fact that the use of sustainable development strategies in urban centres is becoming more and more important. This importance comes from the acknowledgement of the fact that the pollution and destruction of the natural environment is a result of bad management and planning of towns, whose development is therefore incompatible with the protection of the environment.

The greater responsibility of towns for environment alterations, both inside the towns themselves (with the consequent worsening of living conditions) and on a global level, has led to the need of a halt and, at best, to the reversal of a trend as far as the management of towns is concerned, that is the introduction of sustainable development strategies. In this paper I will examine the changes in the planning of urban areas of Sicily that are expected to bring more sustainable conditions to cities.

Introduction

The management of contemporary towns has to face new and deep changes in the organisation of urban and metropolitan space, new and deep settlement changes, the development of new technologies, a growing work segmentation and a widespread process of services privatisation. At the same time, being the role of nation states reduced, the tasks of local administrations have extended to the fields of economy, welfare, protection of environment and of cultural heritage, and more generally, to the providing of public goods and services, which has projected towns in an extra-regional dimension.

The governing of such growing complexity in a way that aims at the towns' sustainable development, calls for strong social cohesion, which is necessary both to build up frameworks of reference that are widely shared and capable of giving coherence to local policies, and to obtain large participation to projects and actions. Many European towns have tried to solve the complex problems concerning the urban sustainable development through the application of both strategic planning principles, and those which result from the carrying out of Local agenda 21. These principles and procedures aim at directing the towns' physical, economical and social transformations, and are becoming more and more determinant for the achievement of future objectives. These objectives include, most of the times, the construction of articulated and complex urban structures, sustained by closer and closer relation networks, which work both within and outside the town itself.

The will to apply new strategies results from the need to start a strong public action aiming at relaunching innovative processes in order to improve the towns' efficiency and competitiveness. Moreover, there is the necessity to deal with a complex set of objectives and projects in an organic way. These projects' object is the space configuration and the economical and social structures of a town which is endowed with many functions and interested in synergic processes, in order to: improve sociality conditions and revive the environment of the old and new suburbs; restore socially and physically deteriorated places; relaunch job opportunities, exploiting local cultural, social, environmental, and scientific resources; consider sustainability's principles as discriminant factor in the urban development policies.

1. The strategic planning approach

The strategic planning approaches are based on the use of flexible methodologies, which are multisectorial and practically efficacious, and on the constitution of special bodies, which have decisional powers to write, coordinate and carry out the projects. The multisectoriality is one of the fundamental characteristics of strategic town planning, since the development of towns must be based on the promotion of their different activities in a synergic way, and has to be sided by the environment restoration, the infrastructures exploitation and the social support. With regard to this, we must say that the introduction of such instruments also results from the crisis of traditional town planning, especially of the General Town-planning Schemes, which are now considered too rigid to deal with the new urban development issues.

Among the most important features of strategic town-planning, which marks the shift from a supply-based town policy to a demand-based one, we can mention: a) the building of shared visions of urban and territorial transformation, and the defining of a new role of towns in a competitive context; b) the constitution of a network of partners that can represent individual and collective interests, and that take part to the management of complex operative urban policies, through various forms of consultation and cooperation. A sort of urban governance which is capable of ensuring strong support to a shared goal, and new and better conditions to town administration, and which can be achieved with the aid of institutions and of public and private actors.

Therefore, strategic town planning considers complexity and towns' plurality of interests as values to protect and as opportunities for the devising of shared objectives. It marks the shift from *government*, based on the unilateral and prescriptive definition of objectives, to *governance*, which is based on consensus and on the negotiation of objectives. In this kind of town planning, consensus is essential in all the phases of the planning process, both during the definition of the strategies and objectives, and during their implementation.

An essential part of the strategic planning process peculiarity lies in its participative dimension, that is in its being devised, built up and implemented through a structured relationship among all the town's interest-bearing subjects. With its constant use of negotiation, this kind of planning aims at facing the growing complexity of decisions, as well as answering to a stronger need of transparency and democracy. In this way, not only is the complexity of problems and objectives accepted and considered as a

resource, but also the diversity of interests, even conflictual ones, becomes a value to protect.

The creation of a close functional connection between the Scheme devising process and the *city users* is fundamental in order to ensure consensus and start a virtuous circle made up of collaboration, trust, efficiency, and certainties about choices and investments. Indeed, citizens, who express their political views through their vote, those who have strong economical interests in the territory (*stock-holders* and *stake-holders*, i.e. those who own a stock of the territory capital – land, buildings, infrastructures – among whom there can be residents, workers and non-workers, and businesses), and external partners, with their contribute of capitals and resources, they all take more or less active parts in the planning process, cooperate towards its development, and negotiate the periodic revision of objectives and instruments. In this kind of town-planning, which we could also define as network-planning, it is essential:

- to organise systematically and formalise the participation of all local actors and citizens in the making of the Scheme;
- to take into consideration "diffuse interests", which were, in the old generation schemes, sacrificed in favour of the power-lobbies ones;
- to enlarge the decisional field, through the application of more recent laws concerning local autonomy;
- to write flexible documents which can define long-term objectives;
- to encourage forms of public-private partnership and between public actors;
- to link all the different urban policies, from transport to school, from health to the organisation and reorganisation of the territory and of services, in order to devise a project of integrated development, which is common to the whole urban system.

The relation between the Strategic Scheme and *urban marketing* is also an important one. Indeed, it is functional to the devising of a plan which is no longer based on supply, but on demand. Aiming at increasing the territory's competitiveness and sustainability, the scheme has to create all the necessary links between all the different *city users'* needs, which must be constantly monitored, and the territory supply. Indeed, marketing should precede, accompany and follow all planning stages, in order to ensure that all decisions concerning the urban development are always relevant with the town's

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vocations, the global networks' trends, and the different categories of citizens' needs. Therefore, marketing should also be seen as an instrument to verify and, if necessary, modify the planned strategies, in order to make the supply follow the demand's changes in time, as closely as possible.

Thanks to their flexibility, the new generation Strategic Schemes are not exclusively concerned with short and medium-term planning processes, but also include long-term hypotheses, since they must ensure economic efficiency, i.e. efficient resources allocation and distribution, social equity, and openness towards the outside. This is fundamental if you want the planning to be compatible with the new sustainability paradigms.

The strategic planning-sustainability combination can be efficaciously used in order to solve problems of strategic services and infrastructures localisation, as well as problems of impact on the environment, which result from the intensifying of traffic, the exploitation of the soil and of other unrenewable resources. In other words, all the problems caused by the growing phenomenon of sub-urbanisation. In any case, in the most recent schemes, the ideas of strategic planning and sustainable development are strictly connected. They underlie the research of a new town-planning model on a metropolitan scale. In this regard, we should point out that such schemes extend to the metropolitan scale because this is the most compatible with the new sustainability and subsidiarity paradigms; indicators of sustainability underlie both preliminary analysis of context and consequent decisions.

This is a kind of town planning no longer rigidly hierarchic and prescriptive, but flexible; it is carried out by local actors, both individuals and groups, and it is capable of anchoring itself to the local *milieu*'s features, that is all the material, historical, social and cultural elements which form the local heritage. Such heritage is, on one side, the starting point for a coherent and unique growing process; on the other side, it allows the local system to take part, with its peculiarities, into the global competition.

2. The strategic scheme in European urban development programs

The urban policy of the European Commission has already adopted these principles, as we can see in some documents, among which *"The Framework for Action for Sustainable Urban Development"*. First adopted in October 1998, this documents acknowledges the importance of the urban dimension in the community policy. The same considerations can be made for the more recent programmes co-financed with structural funds, like *Urban II*, which aims at sustaining the devising and implementing of innovative strategies for the economic and social development of European urban areas.

A confirmation of the close relationship between the strategic town-planning process and sustainable urban development comes from Local A21, which considers the process methodology as an instrument to implement sustainability on a local level. The fundamental stages of this process have been pointed out in different documents, among which the *Aalborg Charter*. Signed by the local authorities that took part in the *European Conference of Sustainable Towns*, in 1994, this document defined the principles and methods of towns sustainable development, provided a general framework of objectives and all the necessary local actions to achieve them (by the end of 2001, 6.416 local governments and 113 different countries had already subscribed to the Aalborg Charter). Shortly, the Agenda tries to help and guide local authorities and communities in their effort to start a process of sustainable development, by providing a common framework of reference. At the same time, it tries to give the necessary autonomy to local actors with which they can face all unexpected occurrences related to the planning process in a creative way. In other words, they are free to deal with the problems resulting from contingent situations, such as functionality, resources and time limits and restrictions. Indeed, the Agenda is defined by the *Aalborg Charter* as a local and creative operative way, which means that every local community is free to find its own way.

It is important to point out that, during the implementation of A21, the local authority works in collaboration with all the community sectors in order to devise a conscious programme for the improvement of the environment quality. This leads to the devising of Action Schemes for the pursuit of sustainability on a local level. Obviously, such schemes are adapted to the problems, economy, culture, history and resources of the different urban areas. Moreover, in most projects of Local A21, the participative dimension is considered essential, together with the variety and complexity of all the

sustainability-related problems, the *audit* activity, and the consideration of the necessary time to reach the wished effects of the different actions.

Indeed, Local Agenda 21 is also defined as a "strategic process which, starting from the definition of choices, ends with the implementation of concrete actions to encourage and control sustainable development". Therefore, it can't be considered a traditional Scheme, but a *programme of actions* aiming at directing development towards sustainability and community welfare objectives. Its value added lies in the fact that it integrates the objectives of different public local policies and the objectives of public and private individual actions expressing different interests, and makes them coherent and sustainability-oriented. In relation to the present planning processes, Local Agenda 21 can be very useful, since it can be used as an integrative instrument for their evaluation and close examination and for the coordination of the different sectional public policies. Moreover, it can give the possibility to confront with the aspirations of the different sectors of society.

Lastly, the Agenda gives the chance to participate in the strategic decision-making process to different social actors, even those who could not traditionally take part to the planning and programming processes, such as the companies which have a significant responsibility as to the problem of environment pollution. Even weak categories are involved, such as children, outcasts, etc., as they can bring their contribution of precious knowledge to the processes of Local A21, thus helping to build up social sustainability. In comparison with other instruments of territory government, the Agendas have a wider range of project, since they include actions for sustainable development which are related to different areas of public policies, even those which do not concern the territory, or the territory only; they can be related, for example, to policies which aim at social equity.

3. The Sicilian case

The most important Sicilian towns are incredibly late both in the application of the Strategic planning and sustainable development principles, and in the implementation of Local Agenda 21. Only a few towns have subscribed to the Aalborg Charter or implemented some projects related to Local Agenda 21 (Misterbianco, on its own, and the Etnean towns of Trecastagni, Nicolosi, Pedara and Viagrande, together), though the progressive affirmation of the local administrative dimension and the greater autonomy of local government bodies (with greater power given to mayors) have

permitted the relaunch of the role of towns as collective actors. They have been involved not only in the planning of the territory physical asset, but also in the management of the economic and social transformation processes and in the carrying out of policies for the territory socio-economic development.

In Sicily, therefore, the extension of consensus and the participation of the different local actors to all the stages of the town-planning process (which should mark the shift from *government* to *governance*), still present many problems. The shift to governance should ensure, on one side, negotiation of interests and consensus, on the other side, consensus and more stable participation to the achievement of common goals, so as to create new and better government conditions in the island towns. This should also be done with the participation of institutions and public and private actors. The importance of such a change mainly derives from the new configuration of the role of towns, in relation to the varied needs of the territory. It also derives from the growing difficulties of governing urban areas, where the relations between different economic, social and cultural functions are becoming more and more complex. Such relations influence economy, the town's quality of life, social cohesion, and the cultural dynamism.

In fact, the Administrators of Sicily's main urban areas are beginning to understand that it is no longer possible to avoid competition among towns; this trend, which is becoming more and more widespread, began in the European central regions and is now extending to the Mediterranean area. This competition aims at attracting new businesses, economic functions and activities, thanks to their increasing mobility and interest in the quality of external conditions. Such new businesses result from infrastructures and services, but also from the qualification of work, from social and cultural dynamics and conditions, and from the quality of the urban environment.

Face to such a complex context, where the island's towns are involved in overlapping local processes and global forces, it is clear that their chances to succeed are closely dependant on some conditions, i.e.

a) a growing social cohesion;

b) the definition of strong and shared ideas of development and metropolitan areas improvement, which should be at the base of the territory government;

c) the possibility to face complex problems through *management,* entrepreneurial, operative skills, in order to get and manage the necessary

funds, establishing wider and wider forms of partnership between public and private subjects.

In the public debate, we can often notice that local Administrations are aware of these problems. However, concrete actions are still decided by central authorities, that is without the participation of local bodies and, above all, without the definition of a clear reference strategy. Indeed, participation to big decisions concerning towns is almost non-existent, and consensus, especially in the projects' definition stage, is not yet explicit. Therefore, the affirmation of *governance* principles is still to be considered unrealistic, also because consensus and participation are not often sided by solid reference structures.

That's why projects concerning the principal Sicilian towns are only occasionally based on clear and unambiguous strategic lines. They are sometimes inspired by managerial models, other times by entrepreneurial ones. Indeed, some of them tend to use conspicuous public funds in order to create or restore big structures, such as accommodation facilities for tourists, congress and exposition centres, theatres, museums and other structures which can in their turn become a pole of attraction for new cultural and commercial activities. The involvement of the private sector, through collaboration and partnership with the public sector, is also becoming more frequent for the implementation of projects aiming at adapting urban areas to the post-industrial reality.

Theoretically, such choices have been widely discussed and criticised because they involve conspicuous funds that could be used to solve social problems (education, unemployment, housing, suburbs), and because they cause an unequal distribution of costs and benefits within the urban area. Moreover, with the progressing of the towns' restoration, the weaker segments of population are progressively expelled from the centre (*gentrification*) and confined in poor urban districts; indeed, they are excluded from political choices and from all those activities characterising urban central areas.

Other projects aim at re-functionalising the town centre as aggregation place where the feeling of civic identity is stronger. Such focalisation on the centre results in some projects to create an efficient and cheap public transport system, to stimulate the coexistence, within the same quarter, of houses, shops, restaurants, and amusement places, and to favour the formation of "cultural quarters" which could ensure vitality to the town centre, even at night. This second approach, though not directly aiming at social rebalancing, can help to recreate a situation of equity inside the town, at least as to

the access and fruition of its centre. It has the advantage of trying to preserve different lifestyles within the old town centre, thus avoiding a rigid division of the urban space among classes, which is considered the source of the growing social tensions.

Only recently has the so-called *"entrepreneurial"* approach been considered, which developed in Europe during the eighties. It was the result of the growing competition among towns, which was triggered by the multiplying and intensifying of international contacts and global economic exchanges. Indeed, some of the principal Sicilian towns, in particular Catania and Palermo, have tried to attract capitals exploiting business mobility (amplified by the demolition of space barriers) and the diffusion of tourism, especially cultural tourism, in order to favour their economic, social and cultural development. These choices are sometimes accompanied by the relaunch of the town's image through the use of urban marketing techniques, which can't however be compared to what happens in other more important European towns. Moreover, we can notice an effort to participate to cooperation, which extended from the European towns to the Mediterranean ones and is favoured by the establishing of towns *networks*, in order to carry out common projects.

Lastly, we have to point out that the policies in some of the island's urban areas tend to privilege the pursuit of favourable economic conditions through the implementation of infrastructures and the control of labour costs, and the support to local and foreign investors, especially through territorial and work agreements and area contracts. This is the typical objective of the so-called "entrepreneurial town", that is the attraction of financial, productive and consumer resources which are extremely mobile and highly flexible, although this objective is not supported by the definition of success strategies related to local particular resources.

Indeed, such policies are not totally accomplished if compared to what happens in some of the most important European towns. Here, following the principle of participation to the global competition, some sophisticated instruments are used, such as: a) increase in innovation and creativity; b) optimisation of human resources; c) promotion of entrepreneurial vitality; d) promotion of networks; e) valorisation of attractions and comforts in residential areas in order to attract high-income manpower which is characterised by high creative and innovative potential.

Certainly, the urban policies based on entrepreneurial principles have been redirected, since they show now more attention to the problems of environment and urban sustainability. But the contradictions emerged in the last years as to their

motivations, objectives and instruments should make Sicilian Administrations think about the danger in going on this way. In fact, it is not possible to ignore that creating conditions of equity within the town, improving the quality of environment and society, i.e. carrying out a project of sustainability, also means making the town more competitive than others in attracting economic and financial operators. If we pay more attention to the solution of the more and more serious environmental problems of towns, this could help us redirect the present priorities of Sicilian urban policies towards a greater social equity. Indeed, the projects aiming at turning towns into sustainable entities force us to reconsider what lies at the base of urban development. It is evident, in any case, that the balance between efficiency and economic objectives on the one side, and social equity on the other, requires the adoption of a model of urban development that, apart from caring for the environment, tries to revive the whole economic, cultural, and social context. A model that unifies the project for a sustainable town and the project for a sustainable society.

The *governance*'s focalisation on common interests is, at present, the best way for Sicilian towns to direct urban transformations and face the issues of sustainability and globalisation. However, it is necessary that the forms of consultation and coagulation of the social actors' consensus (which are, at present, considered in some stages of the Sicilian towns planning) become real participation, based on public/private stakeholder cooperation.

In the formation of such *governance* for urban sustainability and better quality and efficiency in the towns' management, digital technologies can provide an important contribution. Indeed, they can help create interesting forms of self-organising community networking, because they allow towns both to exchange their experience, through national and international networks, and to adhere to some of the most important collaboration projects concerning sustainable urban policies. There are, indeed, many organisations which have created urban networks and which often focalise on specific community policy actions. They are capable of activating and propagating instruments and methodologies of active participation of citizens to the towns' government, providing all the municipalities with formation, information and resources. These are some of them:

a) the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR);
b) Eurocities (http://www.eurocities.org);
c) Euromedcity (http://www.euromedcity.org);

d) The Global Community Networking Partnership (GCNP) (http://www.globalcn.org);

e) Metrex (http://www.eurometrex.org);

f) The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) (http://www.iclei.org);

g) The United Towns Organisation (UTO);

h) The World Health Organisation's Healthy Cities Project (WHO);

i) COPPEM (http://www.coppem.org).

These networks are promoting a lot of projects, such as DISCUS (Developing Institutional and Social Capacities for Urban Sustainability), which was launched by ICLEI in December 2001, InterMetrex and PolyMetrex, aiming at re-examining and updating metropolitan strategic planning methodologies and competences. There are other projects of international urban cooperation which are gaining an important role in the development of local Euro-Mediterranean partnership. Such projects are included in the European Programmes called Interreg III B – Medoc (Western Mediterranean) and Interreg III B Archi-Med (South-East Mediterranean). Among them, we can find "Network urban strategies for a sustainable development of the Mediterranean area", sponsored by the Municipality of Rome and aiming at defining a polycentric urban model that can be adapted to the Mediterranean area.

The formation of a *governance* involving all local actors, is particularly important for those Sicilian towns which aspire to metropolitan status, such as Palermo, Catania and Messina. For these towns, along with the Urban Planning, that is the old Town-planning General Scheme (Piano Regolatore Generale), which defines the urban soil destination and occupation forms, it is fundamental to consider the Strategic Planning as well. The latter should define the objectives of the town and the metropolitan system, the necessary forms, methods and time to achieve them, and the indispensable financial, cultural, economic and social concurrences.

Indeed, the definition of a town "Strategic Scheme" involving the whole metropolitan territory, represents an autoreferential coordination instrument through which the town, considered as a network of interacting subjects and collective actors, should define its own future. Obviously, local actors should be levelled by the possibility to play an important role in the making of the Scheme, both for the specificity of the interests they bear and for the attention they pay to the town success.

Among the principal interests-bearers that can act and interact within the urban context, according to more or less complex modalities, we can remember *policy-makers* (whose task is the management of the urban activity and the political and technical circuits among urban subjects); *stock-holders* (the political ones, that is citizens, and the economic ones, that is land, buildings, and infrastructures owners); *stake-holders* (those who bear town-related interests, since their economic businesses efficiency improves with the improvement of the urban efficiency, such as employees, entrepreneurs, professionals, builders, etc.); the techno-administrative structure (that is, the techno-structure or bureaucracy); the external partners (those who provide resources, such as the regional and national governments; those who provide projects and services, such as public and private companies; those who provide competences, such as the universities and the local and non-local research centres; those who provide cooperation, such as other towns or external institutions or bodies which are part of technological, commercial, financial or cultural cooperation networks).

The delay, approximation and extemporaneity with which the main Sicilian towns are facing these problems should not surprise us, if we consider that many of them, including Catania, still haven't got the traditional General Town-Planning Scheme. However, we must point out that some important strategic instruments have played a relevant role in directing Sicilian towns both towards new and wider forms of participation to the territory government, and towards the adoption of the sustainable urban development principles. They are complex projects, such as the EC Programmes P.I.C. Urban I and II, the Territorial Agreements, the Work Agreements, and the recent PITs and PRUSSTs, which have had a large echo among Sicilian towns. Apart from introducing fundamental elements of collaboration and concerting between public and private subjects, they combine and integrate different policies and actions.

Obviously, the principal problem is represented by the definition of key-actors, which should take two important aspects into consideration: on one side, their direct relation with the Municipal Administration; on the other, the objectives, strategies and actions they pursue, in conformity with the municipal policies, investing their own resources. As to the first aspect, the key-actors could be institutional subjects, companies, and private subjects which have stipulated contracts, agreements or conventions with the Municipality for the implementation of projects and activities of strategic relevance for the town. As to the second aspect, key-actors are found among those who can contribute to the main strategies for the town socio-economic

development, in relation to the planned projects and the resources they need. Such resources can be economic, financial, technical, decisional, political, or concerning the planning stage or voluntary work. Political resources basically include everything which aims at obtaining the necessary consensus to legitimate the participation to the decisional process.

Another important step for the island's urban administration is represented by the definition of a *Masterplan*, to be carried out alongside with the *General Town-Planning Scheme*. It should help clarify and strengthen the traditional scheme's choices and relate them to a wider context of socio-economic development of the town, of its relations with the metropolitan and regional territories, and of its relations with national and global networks. Indeed, we must point out that sustainable development policies, particularly those concerning social and economic development, can only partially be represented by the traditional Planning Scheme. They should, on the contrary, be inserted in the wider context of strategic planning, which has its operative expression in the *Masterplan*. This document includes, organises and systematises all the urban development policies, playing an essential subsidiary role to the Planning Scheme's one. In other words, the *Masterplan*, which defines operative strategies of economic, work and social promotion, should side the Planning Scheme, which is basically an instrument regulating the transformations of the urban space, thus preventing the latter from being loaded with non-relevant contents and objectives.

Moreover, the *Masterplan* is considered an instrument of analysis, management and evaluation, particularly suitable to redirect the territorial components of a systemically complex urban area. Indeed, thanks to its wide compass, including actors, resources and activities, it allows us to manage the passage from general objectives to specific objectives and strategic choices according to systemic principles. It also helps us manage the following operative actions for the implementation of those programmes, projects and plans which affect urban development processes.

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