

Introduction

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Over the last twenty years, the methodological principles of European planning have undergone radical changes. The transition from a top-down to a bottom-up approach — albeit something of a mantra — has probably been the key factor in bringing about this transformation. The new approach has promoted and undoubtedly increased the participation of local actors and their integration into the processes of planning territorial development.

The history of Local Action Groups (LAG) is connected closely with the penetration of these dynamics into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Since the 1990s, in effect, faced both with the problem of farm surpluses and with the urgent need to free up markets, prompted by the march of globalization, the European Union has been forced to change the social mandate assigned to rural areas. Rural communities were called on not only to provide food — crop cultivation and livestock production in the strict sense — but to maximize intangible food-related assets as well: protection and utilization of natural resources and of the landscape, promotion of local cultures and identities, guaranteeing the typicality and authenticity of food products.

In this situation, the notion of rural development as being a mere product of territorial rebalancing policies gave way to the prospect of endogenous development, based on the possibilities afforded for local actors to identify territorial resources and take them as a basis on which to build objectives for asset enhancement and shared development strategies. In terms of policies, this potentiality inspired the shift from sectoral actions — that is to say targeted essentially at crop cultivation and livestock production — to actions having a territorial focus, based on new forms of distribution as concerning responsibilities. In an essentially neo-liberal political-cultural scenario, this transformation was interpreted not as a case of territorial contexts winning autonomy and self-determination,

but rather, as the tendency toward construction of the European space as a space for competition between territories, where the task of social actors is to build their competitive advantage against a background of global competition, through the “discovery” and intelligent use of so-called endogenous resources.

It was in this historical-political milieu that the European Leader approach originated, ushering in the “bottom-up” development policies that would be continued thereafter with Leader II and Leader+. With the Leader approach, a new method of overseeing the relationships between social system and institutional system was tried out for the first time, with the creation of Local Action Groups (LAGs), i.e. complex organizational entities given the task of bringing together local actors and institutions to pursue the aims inherent in maximizing the resources of rural territories. It was LAGs, therefore, that would be expected to interpret the new method of overseeing economic and social processes, referred to conventionally as *governance*.

This volume publishes the findings from a cycle of studies on the planning of rural development in Apulia, conducted as part of a nationwide research project in Italy exploring the tools of governance for rural development. The analysis therefore relates to a specific context, but with the objective of finding elements in this same context that can help to understand the scope and the limits presented by such tools of governance, in evolving from conception to implementation.

First and foremost – as explained in the opening chapter – the top-down element of territorial planning has never completely disappeared. The “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches to planning continue to coexist, overlap and interfere one with another; moreover, as regards the choices effectively made in regional development policies and strategies, their consistency with the idea of planning they claim to emulate has been shown to be fragile and fragmentary. For example, in the more general sections of the two main strategic tools used for territorial planning in Apulia during the period 2007-13 (the Regional Strategic Document for wide area planning and the Rural Development Programme for rural planning), one finds the promise of a procedure based on broad and active

participation, but this promise is then ignored in the operational sections of the programme, where participation is reduced to mere consultation of the actors and/or sectors considered to be most influential.

Whilst the original movement to change the paradigm of territorial development met with broad political consensus, it struggled to bring solid innovation in the practices of regional planning applied to local development. In the absence of any real “culture of participation”, the actors providing governance had to improvise the construction of networks, in an effort to capture European resources. In these circumstances, Local Action Groups — which on paper are defined as mediators of local interests, situated in the middle ground between institutional powers, business interests and social pressures — tend in reality to operate as *a party among parties*. As illustrated in chapter 3 (dedicated to the analysis of action taken by intermediate organisms in community development), while exposed to the assessment of the beneficiaries of the measures and of citizens themselves, LAGs tend to replicate the composition and modus operandi of local power centres.

Similarly, the objective of acknowledging and promoting difference — a keystone of the theories of local development — is pursued, in reality, with less than total assurance. All LAG projects will identify different territorial systems, but in most instances will also apply standardized objectives, rarely shared with the local communities. The situation is aggravated by two apparently opposing trends: on the one hand, the different experiences of integrated programming over the last twenty years have been typified by a high turnover of partners; on the other — as explained in chapter 5 of this book — the objective of preserving the continuity of partnerships, in order to maintain leadership in the territory, encourages phenomena of discontinuity and renders attempts at coordination problematic.

This same lack of coordinative capability is discussed in the findings of chapter 2, which creates a map of the main institutional networks that have operated at local level in the Region and illustrates the discontinuities and inconsistencies that emerge from the combination and the succession of different governance mechanisms (such as ITP and Wide

Area). Conversely, better elements of continuity can be observed when comparing the first experiences of bottom-up planning, like the LAGs, and the more recent experiences recorded in Wide Areas. On the other hand, elements of consistency and continuity between these tools cannot be seen unambiguously as an index of virtuousness, since they are often induced as the result of influence brought to bear by regional government, or they depend on the fact that the acceptability of cooperation projects is evaluated by regional technocratic structures on the basis of purely technical parameters, focusing more on the objective of obtaining approval for projects than on favouring incremental learning on the part of the community. In short, that which appears as continuity is often identifiable substantially as a general move toward isomorphism and homologation of the practices of cooperation, which in reality has the effect of disassociating local communities from the planning activities in which they are involved.

Thus, the process of participation has apparently been reduced to a mere summation of the objectives pursued by single actors, rather than achieving their integration. Instead of being embraced as a social mandate, participation is often perceived by LAGs as being a tiresome obligation, like an item on a check-list. Citizens in local contexts do not see themselves as being able to influence the sphere of decision-making, and neither have businesses genuinely built a network that seeks to promote the well-being of the community and implement an integrated masterplan.

The governance of rural development should be stimulated by a principle of heterarchy, capable of harnessing the positive energy in “dissonances”. From the research presented in this publication, however, what emerges most clearly is an inability to see the complexity of interdependencies as a resource. Chapter 5 looks at the attempt to achieve hierarchical control over the organization and management of the network, observed in the study of the a Local Action Group in Apulia. This is one of the 25 LAGs that were operating in Apulia during the 2007-2013 planning period, which our study explored through a cycle of 19 in-depth interviews with persons having various roles in the processes of

governance, aimed at understanding their interpretation of rural development, the dynamics of “participation”, and the conflicts and agreements between policy objectives and tools of governance.

Charged initially with embodying the “spirit of the networks” and seeking to implement a style of governance based on participation and heterarchy to counter the failures of the market, Local Action Groups showed that they themselves could be the authors of such failures. Chapter 4 offers a reference grid from which these failures can be identified and understood, comparing the actual performance of the LAGs with the objectives they formally pursue.

As in other previous studies (see Jessop 2006), it emerges from this research that in the planning of rural development, the achievement of results is in reality much more laborious and uncertain than might at first be suggested by declarations of intent and abstract institutional engineering. The problems and the responsibilities are many, and their nature and scale markedly varied. Notwithstanding the numerous instances of failure — clearly recognized by the actors most heavily involved — the interest in governance has not declined, perhaps by reason of that sentiment which Bob Jessop (2006) calls *public romantic irony*: the social actors proceed *as if* the success of intermediate institutions were a foregone conclusion, despite the high probability that governance will fail. In this scenario, understanding the limits and failures of intermediate institutions is an act of realism, needed to stimulate the search for remedies and new solutions.

The volume is presented as a collection of autonomous essays, proposed by various authors who sometimes recall, functionally, the same references to the European policies discussed in this work.

