Evaluation and the environmental democracy of cities: Strategic Environmental Assessment of urban plans in Italy.

Bonifazi, Alessandro and Rega, Carlo and Torre, Carmelo Maria

Politecnico di Torino, Politencnico di Bari

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Evaluation and the environmental democracy of cities: Strategic Environmental Assessment of urban plans in Italy.

Alessandro Bonifazi[1], Carmelo M. Torre[2], Carlo Rega[3]

Cities stand up as a major concern for environmental governance and democracy, and an ideal target for theoretical investigations and practical innovations alike. Our work is concerned with reconstructing the links between democracy and the environment, by targeting urban governance and tapping into the institutional practices of *Urban Planning* and *Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)*. SEA is a major policy tool, and its interplay with planning unravels key issues in both urban governance and environmental democracy, including coping with fundamental risks, voicing non-human agents, managing *commons*, addressing environmental justice. The observations we present in this paper rest on two parallel approaches. First, we carried out a *content review* of 12 SEA reports concerning urban plans in Italy. Second, we were involved in two case studies concerning urban planning and SEA in the towns of Monopoli and Magenta. We point to some key reflections with the aim of opening up the discussion. Participation often languishes in institutional arenas, yet it thrives in other forms that affect decision-making. Negotiation around individual planning processes should be framed in the general governance arrangements that are constantly reshaped through interactions among fluid trans-organizational networks. Legally binding measures have an ambivalent relation with environmental governance strategies, and they are handled with difficulty by deliberative planning approaches. In mainstreaming new policy tools (such as SEA), procedural aspects are usually stressed, whereas a focus on process and desired outcomes could foster, respectively, capacity building and salience.

1 Introduction

During 2008, for the first time in history, the share of the world population living in urban areas will reach 50%, and the figure is expected to rise to 60% by the year 2030 (United Nations 2008). Beyond the sheer magnitude of the phenomenon, cities stand up as a major concern for environmental governance and democracy, and an ideal target for theoretical investigations and practical innovations alike. Whereas there is no need to trace *democracy* back to the *polis*, we notice that the literature on urban governance played an important role in advancing the general understanding of the concept (Le Galès 1995; Coaffe and Healey 2003; Irazabàl 2005).

Our work is concerned with reconstructing the links between democracy and the environment, by targeting urban governance and tapping into the institutional practices of *Urban Planning* and *Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)*. We investigate the role of planning and evaluation in influencing how democratic the modes of governance of environmental issues at the city-level are, and the mutual relations alike. We refer in particular

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[1] a.bonifazi@poliba.it, Technical University of Bari (Italy).
[2] torre@poliba.it, Technical University of Bari (Italy).
[3] carlo.rega@polito.it, Technical University of Torino (Italy).

to those environmental issues that are challenging the ways societies deal with collective action in the public domain (for instance, the role of non-human agents, fundamental risks, local and global commons, environmental justice, *etc*.).

In the following sections, we first present some background information on SEA and urban planning in Italy, and then brief readers on how we developed our methodology. Section 4 dwells on the results of a *content review* of Environmental Reports (ERs), whereas the following section is devoted to a case study regarding urban planning in the city of Monopoli. We conclude by pointing to some key reflections with the aim of opening up the discussion.

2 Strategic Environmental Assessment and Urban Planning in Italy

International reviews on the application of SEA indicate that many different models exist worldwide and within Europe alike (Chaker et al. 2006; Sheate et al. 2001; Sadler and Verheem 1996). In a relatively small group of frontrunners the practice of SEA is more advanced, notably in the Netherlands, UK, Scandinavia, USA and Canada, but attention has been increasingly paid also to other European countries with weaker traditions in environmental management, as well as to developing countries (Dalal Clayton and Sadler 2005). In this context, Directive 2001/42/EC on the *assessment of the effects of certain plans and programs on the environment* represents a cornerstone in the environmental policy of the European Union, by setting a common procedural framework for carrying out Strategic Environmental Assessment at different levels and in virtually all sectors. Despite the belated implementation at the national level[4], almost all Italian Regions had already introduced (over the last decade) SEA requirements in the process of broader planning system reforms.

Urban planning in Italy has evolved as a deeply political process with a strong technical component: public participation was never prominent, and the factual involvement of citizens was limited to making remarks to the official documents. Negotiations among socio-economic actors often took place in an unofficial and opaque way, while inter-institutional relations were highly hierarchical.

New territorial governance frameworks, following recent (2001) constitutional reforms that devolved significant legislative powers to the Regions, feature some important innovations: local authorities are given ever more power in elaborating and approving their own plans according to the *subsidiarity* principle. Moreover, the relationships among different levels of government tend to move towards cooperation modes, and public participation mechanisms are now in place (though highly variable in scope).

The potential influence of Directive 2001/42/EC reaches beyond mainstreaming environmental considerations in policy making, as it also provides for innovations that might affect significantly the whole environmental governance system. Firstly, the Directive requires that the public and environmental authorities be involved right from the outset of the planning process; secondly, they should be able to join the crucial assessment stage, rather than simply be surveyed about their knowledge and expectations; finally, the plan should make clear how the inputs from participation and the recommendations of the assessment have been taken into account. Thus, by

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[4] Completed in 2008, almost four years behind the schedule.

providing a legal framework for environmental assessment, the Directive also fosters accountability, openness and democratization, which for the Italian planning system could represent a significant improvement.

3 About methods and processes

There are different takes on what constitutes a "good" SEA. Consistently with a certain bias towards administrative and professional communities of practice, the SEA literature deals often with *effectiveness* (Retief 2007; Sadler 2006; Fischer and Seaton 2002; IAIA 2002). When a *procedural* point of view is adopted, the focus is on a series of steps that the process should take regardless of the specific planning system or institutional context[5]. More often, the emphasis is on modifying the way decisions are made, by calling for open and participatory ways and tailored methodologies, the motto being "the *process* is more important than the product" (Brown and Thérivel 2000). More recently, some authors have urged practitioners and researchers to refocus the debate on the *outcome* of the process, as there is no guarantee that participation leads to more environmentally sustainable and socially fair decisions (Connelly and Richardson 2005; Fischer 2003).

The need for an articulated research methodology is endorsed at both academic and intergovernmental level. For instance, Harrington and Morgenstern (2004) have proposed a three-tiered approach to Regulatory Impact Assessment's quality where *content*, *function* and *outcome* tests clearly resonate with the aforesaid classification. On the other hand, the OECD (2007) came latest in producing guidelines that provide for both a quality control check and evaluating the achievement of envisaged outcomes.

The observations we present in this paper, and the reflections thereof, rest on two parallel approaches. First, we have been carrying out an across-the–board analysis of the handling of environmental issues in contemporary urban planning at the municipal level in Italy. We opted for a purely documental, desktop, analysis and thus turned to a *content review* of ERs, based on the assumption that these are the main outputs of SEA and should reflect its position vis-à-vis all three aforementioned levels (procedure, process, and outcome). Second, we were involved in a limited number of planning processes, which we developed into more detailed case studies, two of which are included in this paper.

3.1 Content review of environmental reports

Reading texts systematically, to interpret them and make conjectures about the processes they describe, is a relatively common exercise in both planning (Khakee 2000) and evaluation (Stufflebeam 2000; Lee and Kirkpatrick 2006), and in environmental assessment alike (Tzoumis 2007; Van Hinte, Gunton and Day 2007). We agree that Environmental Reports are easily accessible sources of relevant knowledge, yet they are by no means exhaustive of the complexity of planning processes, let alone of governance dynamics.

While reworking our tentative methodology over previous collaborative efforts (Rega and Bonifazi 2007; Bauler *et al*. forthcoming), we shifted away from what Scriven (1991, 228) named *metaevaluation*, that is, an "evaluation of evaluations, indirectly, an evaluation of evaluators", and we sailed very close to a *content test*, geared towards ascertaining the compliance to legally binding requirements, guidelines and good practice (Harrington and Morgenstern 2004). The first step consisted in mulling over a tentative **set of semantic**

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[5] This is for example the approach of Directive 2001/42/EC.

dimensions[6]. We moved from a list of *effectiveness criteria* developed by a national society of environmental evaluators (Pompilio 2007), and we reworked them into the following: *Integration*, *Networking*, *Ecosystem approach*, *Equity*, *Articulation*, *Cyclicity*, *Strategies*, *Salience*, *Accountability*, and *Learning*. Based on the dimensions, we developed an **80-question checklist** to deconstruct the different texts and make sense of the main issues by synthesizing observations for each ER into *idealtypes* and *exceptions*. This is an on-going project; however the *content review* we present in this paper covers 12 ERs concerning urban plans at the municipal scale in Italy, carried out in 6 different regions.

3.2 Case study

Although we have been personally involved in a number of processes as either planners/evaluators or researchers, here we discuss only two cases. In particular, two of us (Alessandro Bonifazi and Carmelo M. Torre) played different roles in three urban planning-related activities concerning the city of Monopoli (Italy), namely the development of a new **urban plan**, its **Strategic Environmental Assessment**, and an **ICT-supported participatory initiative** funded under a national e-democracy program. This case study is based on a multiplicity of sources and methods, including notably:

► reflection-in-action (Schön 2002);

► 1200 questionnaires filled in by citizens and administered by a partnership of local NGOs;

► semi-structured interviews and informal conversations;

► government, academic, and press documents;

► direct observation of about 20 public meetings and/or their video recordings and minutes;

► about 300 messages posted on 6 forums, 2 blogs and a geoblog.

CR was responsible for the Magenta case study. By June 2008, the plan was still undergoing the approval procedure, and the definitive ER had not been published yet. However, we had access to valuable information thanks to the collaboration with the SEA expert contracted by the Municipality[7]. Sources included:

► a synthesis of SEA covering methodology and participation techniques, actors involved, results achieved and difficulties encountered;

► a desktop analysis of documents issued by different stakeholder groups in view of the final public discussion forum;

► a conversational interview with the SEA expert focusing on the influence of SEA and public participation on the agreed plan, the attitude of local policy makers and stakeholders toward SEA, and strenghts and shortcomings of the process.

4 An evaluation perspective on the environmental governance of Italian cities

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[6] For a thorough account of the methodology please refer to Bonifazi and Rega (2008).

[7] The authors would like to thank the appointed SEA practitioner, Dr. Giorgio Baldizzone, for the information provided.

In this section we summarize the most interesting findings of a *content review* covering 12 ERs of recent urban plans at the municipal level in Italy. Though we originally screened the reports having in mind the ten dimensions we presented in **section 3.1**, here we reworked relevant observations into two separate paragraphs, focusing respectively on *governance* and *democracy*. Many concepts tend to be equally mobilized in the literature on either subject (participation, accountability, legitimacy, *etc.*), so *governance* and *democracy* converge towards overlapping areas of meaning as:

► deliberative and participatory modes of democracy pull a greater share of citizens back to the political arena, and push them towards government-oriented activities such as decision-making and implementation (Bobbio 2002);

► executive power in the public domain gets fragmented and distributed over a multiplicity of (mainly collective) agents, thus requiring cooperation and increasing relational complexity (Healey 2006).

It is probably not desirable, let alone possible, to disentangle them, as both concepts can be useful to describe, understand and interpret an urban polity. However, discourses on *democracy* lean towards universal **rights** and **justice** (Hunold and Young 1998), **inclusiveness**, **equal access to decision-making**, articulations of **public interest** (Elster 1998). On the other hand, by resorting to *governance* authors tend to emphasize **networking** and **effectiveness in collective action**, accommodating both business-driven concerns for more efficient infrastructures and administrations, and claims by social movements to bringing social justice, diversity and environmental awareness to the front (Coaffee and Healey 2003). Our largely arbitrary attribution of findings into either one or the other paragraph reflects the abovementioned orientations.

4.1 Governance

The first aspect we considered is the **harmonization** of SEA within the assessment procedures system, and its **coordination** with other environmental governance processes. Indeed, the mushrooming of competent authorities and management tools would call for securing synergies and avoiding duplications. In practice, we found poor traces linking SEA to *appropriate assessments* of plans affecting NATURA 2000 protected areas[8], whereas Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) are systematically overlooked. There are occasional references to local Agenda21 processes, while widespread calls for the implementation of voluntary environmental management schemes (such as EMAS/ISO 14000) do not result in any rule or incentive.

As for the consideration of, and coordination with, **other environmental regulations and policies**, we would argue that they are often significant, yet seldom systematic. We noticed three main families of sources that are tapped into more frequently: international sustainability principles (such as the Aalborg Commitments), national binding provisions (especially on pollution and environmental quality), and hierarchically higher spatial plans. In the same fashion, the system of relations with lower tiers of spatial governance is only partly established.

Inter-institutional forms of **cooperation** are frequent, but not always fully reported in the ERs. The role SEA plays in this respect is still not prominent, as the reference framework is rather provided by planning laws. With respect to the **distribution of powers and responsibilities** between local planning authorities and higher level government bodies, two main strategies are in place. Where Regions opted for full *subsidiarity*, the city council

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[8] pursuant to the Habitats Directive (1992/43/EC).

is in charge of both approving the Plan and evaluating the Environmental Report. Process is streamlined but lack of accountability is around the corner, since there is no independent review. Under these circumstances, a well established public participation process may mitigate this risk. In other Regions, an independent body takes care of either the plan or the ER. Though an independent judgment might be useful, the dual track approval procedure proves often time consuming and poorly coordinated, and it paves the way for political conflicts and litigations. The picture is made more complicated by the changing status of SEA, ranging from an *argumented opinion* to a proper *authorization*.

As for **integration**, it seems that the complexity of urban plans (especially in terms of a strong semantic and technical inertia) can be tackled by a deep co-evolution that reshapes both the rules of the planning game and development scenarios (Fusco Girard, 2006). The widely acknowledged correlation between early integration and the influence of SEA on planning seems to be confirmed by our analysis. Moreover, two cases show that even when SEA lags behind the plan, it can influence the final outcome, given it ventures into regulating *implementation* mechanisms.

In some cases we sensed a possible bias while investigating the interplay among **governance strategies and the spatial localization of environmental impacts**. Negative effects, largely ensuing from **regulations**, were allegedly balanced by positive effects to be brought about through **coordination and guidelines**. On a similar note, good news tended to come from (marginal) **rural and natural areas**, whereas (core) **urban developments** persisted in unsustainable trends.

In a sustainability perspective, we looked for the integration of environmental issues with economic and social ones. **Social aspects gain systematically the foreground** in the SEA discourse (and curtail the scope of environmental policies) in the guise of the traditional issues urban planning is supposed to tackle: housing needs, population, distribution of economic activities and provision of services, mobility. On the other hand, the **full retreat of SEA from economic analyses** puts at risk its credibility towards the majority of elected representatives and civil servants, as well as entrepreneurs and citizens who believe that efficiency and competitiveness do matter after all.

4.2 Democracy

Public participation stands out as one of the weakest point in the planning and evaluation processes we analyzed, when compared to the requirements of Directive 2001/42/EC and international guidelines. Even when we actually knew from other sources that some forms of participation had taken place, they often left no trace in the ERs. SEA practices seem to be stuck at the ABC of participation, and the way towards actual empowerment (Arnstein 1969; Sandercock 2003) is hindered by more general issues, such as who is allowed to participate, what is actually permeable to participation, and how much do the inputs of participation influence the planning process. There is hardly an acknowledgement of the different chances citizens stand to join in, while new divides might be dug by the spread of Information and Communication Technologies, if issues of accessibility and digital literacy aren't addressed properly. Even in the reductive form of consultations, people are more likely to be surveyed about their knowledge of places and general opinions, rather than being involved in the generation and evaluation of alternatives. Finally, once offered, citizens contribution tend to vanish in the meanders of planning without neither resulting in any real change, nor being properly addressed in the

justification of choices. **Affirmative actions** could at least address process discrimination introduced by participatory modes of governance when they fail to redress unbalanced chances to join in. It wasn't the case, though faint hints showed up in the guise of inclusive *stakeholders mapping* and the intentional involvement of *marginalized groups* (elderly, women, low income groups).

All cases we surveyed emerged as allegedly **value-free evaluations** (Chelimsky 1998), since there was no room for questioning motivations, purposes and implications beyond a generic reference to *sustainability* or *environmental management* as self-explaining concepts. Acknowledging the lack of explicit handling of values, we tried to read through the lines in order to identify underlying registers. Interestingly enough, a concern for *human wellbeing* outstrips all others, followed by the perspectives of *environmental management* and *ecosystem functioning*, as respectively human- and eco-centered understandings of complexity.

As for **inter-generational equity**, political actors seem too busy negotiating their short term welfare positions to engage in those of virtual stakeholders, and the life-span of plans has never been extended beyond the strict legal scope (10-15 years). With respect to the use of non-renewable resources, as well as the unsustainable use of renewable ones, the dominant approach is striving to slow down the pace, which could at most result consistent with weak conceptions of sustainability (Dietz and Neumayer 2007).

Substantial aspects of intra-generational equity belong to the cultural and professional background of urban planners: the accessibility of services, urban amenities, and transfer of development rights (Micelli, 2002; Pruetz, 1993), with the latter apparently motivated by the need to streamline implementation rather than by an actual concern for fair real estate markets. **Environmental justice** has traditionally been tied to a spatial perspective, and it is no surprise that (at least at the level of analysis) evaluators acknowledge the uneven distribution of environmental "costs and benefits". However, the more political link between areas and specific (disadvantaged) social groups was never established, and even the mainstream concept of territorial cohesion (Faludi, 2007) didn't play a relevant role in the overall value judgment.

At first glance, the often conflicting principles of **subsidiarity** and **independence** might be framed in the political discourse on evolving governance arrangements. However, beyond procedural technicalities, there lie crucial issues of the like of democratization of decision-making and accountability of evaluation actors. In the first instance, the cons of self-government are mitigated by institutional checks and balances: compliance to plans and policies standing higher in the hierarchy, cooperation within multilevel governance schemes. The latter proved useful under the second strategy as well, when the problem is binding the otherwise arbitrary power of a central environmental authority to clear democratic rules, as well as testing its assumptions and deliberations for relevance to the local context they refer to. On the other hand, by appointing separate groups of external experts for planning and evaluation (which was the rule in the cases we analyzed) more favorable conditions may be restored in either case.

Democratization of knowledge in general, and the role of expert advice in particular, deserve a closer look. The handling of dependencies, if any, took place outside the scope of environmental reporting. Evaluation methods are generally clearly explained, whereas the processes by which they convey knowledge, opinions and political conditions through the bottleneck of value judgment, and out again in the guise of justification of choices, is sometimes opaque. On-line publishing of planning documents is becoming established, yet primary

sources are not always explicit or fully accessible. As a consequence, some ERs tend to read like *ex cathedra* endorsements of urban plans, rather then basis for, and account of, truly open deliberative arenas. As for mutual influences, it is more likely that ERs emphasize the effectiveness of evaluation in amending the plan, rather than making clear how input from consultations and participation inspired and steered SEA.

5 Urban planning and environmental governance in Monopoli

Monopoli is a town with 50.000 inhabitants lying on the south-east Italian coast (Puglia region). The territory is divided into a coastal plain and a hilly area, with a steep hillside in between. Though outnumbered by industry, services and trade in terms of employees, agriculture is still central to local economy as most land is covered with olive groves and the production of olive oil is relevant. What follows is a brief account of three related planning processes (focusing respectively on the development of a *new urban plan*, its *strategic environmental assessment*, and an *e-participation* project), through which we highlight some underlying issues affecting environmental governance and democracy.

5.1 The contested redefinition of rural environments

To this respect, two areas are concerned:

► a Site of Community Importance (SCI)[9], in the process of becoming part of the NATURA 2000 network, characterized by **oak woods and scrubland** on calcareous substrates;

► a major part of the coastal plain that is covered by **age-old olive groves** and home of a rich historical and architectural heritage linked to the rural organization of labor and production.

By mobilizing legal instruments, scientific and moral discourses, and trans-organizational networks (both grassroots and institutional), the former is faintly being constructed as a **biodiversity sanctuary**, whereas the latter is more convincingly becoming established as a remarkable **cultural landscape**. Along these lines, SEA includes an *appropriate assessment*[10] of the foreseeable environmental effects of the plan in the protected area which reinforces the perception farmers and residents have to "be in a special place". However, a proper appreciation of the social practices that contributed to shaping what is now perceived as a valuable environment seems to be missing. Direct stakeholders (farmers and rural residents) have been blamed for discontinuing compatible technologies and activities rather than being praised for contributing to generating and maintaining these *local commons,* causing both latent and manifest environmental conflicts. Indeed, the underlying forces that have shaped these environments are consitutively linked to the way the very same people have understood *housing*, *farming*, *leisure (hunting)*. As these social practices are being constantly reinvented, the existing landscape can be frozen only if their right to self-determination is invaded. On the other hand, these direct stakeholders, no matter how infringed, do have some rights (be that *property*, *development*, or *representation*) acknowledged at both juridical and political level, whereas there are voiceless subjects (ranging from *other species* to *future generations* and *tourists*) whose claims for a stake in the environmental governance of this

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[9] Established under the EU Habitats Directive 1992/43/EC.

[10] Provided for by the EU Habitats Directive 1992/43/EC.

territory can partly explain the encroachment of different authorities (European Union, Regional Government) and entities (NGOs, scientists, artists) upon the realm of local politics.

5.2 The interplay between planning and territorial governance

Planning in Monopoli developed under a hybrid approach, as the emergence of new planning paradigms doesn't entail the extinction of predecessors, which still compete for academic and professional "territories" (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Quite the contrary, theorists and practitioners make use of hybrid forms of planning that partly overlap with different conceptions (Khakee 1998; Lawrence 2000).

Planning in Monopoli was **rational** in the sense that it was deeply rooted in expert knowledge and professional expertise, it fitted into the framework provided by legislation, guidance and hierarchically higher plans, and it attempted at positioning on a straight timeline the stages of analysis, proposals, and decisions[11]. It was **negotiative** within the local political community (with the ruling majority constantly seeking consensus with the minority) and between the city and the regional governments. Planning tried also to be **deliberative**, especially through the *e-participation* project, which enabled communication among stakeholders throughout the process and created the conditions for broad accountability.

Though it is too early to evaluate its final outcome, it seems that **cooperation** worked relatively well, as it led to an *ad hoc* agreement between the regional government and the municipality on the flexible enforcement of a law[12] that would have otherwise jeopardized core planning choices. As for **democratization of knowledge**, the improvements in transparency brought about by the swift availability of official documents (due to systematic use of ICT tools) and the attention of the media is unquestionable. However, neither were citizens able to manipulate expert knowledge, nor were their contributions actually taken much into account, unless they reinforced established orientations. Meanwhile, local experts were reluctant to participate in any kind of public interaction, and they waited until the plan was ready for adoption to meet up in an independent forum and release a radically critical statement. More importantly, politicians weren't lured into the new rules of the deliberative game, and the apparently sweeping **retreat towards the well-established repertoire (both overt and hidden) of political representation** is a major failure, though not fully unexpected.

After two years, the work of a dozen experts[13], half a million euro spent, and countless debates, in one single day the rural governance scenario that had emerged was overturned by the effective (yet not necessarily coordinated) synergy among corporatism, street protest, and city council's right to an ultimate deliberation. While the elected representatives were holding a never ending session, farmers and rural residents swarmed over the city centre riding their tractors and singing the praises of the countryside. Inside the town hall, the minority withdrew its support to the plan and eventually walked out of the meeting. The high price the majority paid to secure enough votes for the adoption was a u-turn on some crucial aspects, notably loosening the restrictions on land use and development rights in both the protected area and the olive groves plain.

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[11] This account is tentative because the planning processes is currently stuck at the level of adoption, so final approval and all the more implementation are still far from being realized.

[12] Specifically geared towards protecting age-old olive trees.

[13] Including one of the leading planners nationwide, who is currently serving as president in the most important professional association.

5.3 Governance strategies

Though similar considerations might apply to the NATURA 2000 protected area, we picked up the olive groves plain for the following discussion because it represents a better developed case. A recent history of the several attempts to steer development in the area highlights four different, yet often intertwined, strategies for territorial governance:

► **Regulation** - command and control approaches providing for specific land uses and economic activities;

► **Coordination and guidance** - implementation-focused measures that aim at making the most out of existing frameworks and sharing good practice;

► **Programs** - goals-oriented activities entailing investments to realize initiatives and/or introducing incentives (e.g. through market-based instruments or tax rebates);

► **Moral suasion** - political or symbolic acts that have no direct consequence on any of the aforementioned levels, yet may bring about shifts in worldviews, discourses, and collective behaviors (e.g. demonstrations, art exhibitions, popularization of scientific findings).

So, in recent times, a regional register of monumental trees (2001), an update to the municipal building regulations (2004), and an attempt at creating momentum around a bottom-up proposal for a rural protected area (Celino 2003), have all aimed to prevent this remarkable cultural landscape from fading away. No matter how far-seeing, they proved largely ineffective. When a new regional law was passed in 2007 to enforce a mix of measures specifically geared towards the conservation of ancient olive groves, the only message that was grasped clearly in Monopoli was the imposition of an almost total embargo on any development scenario beyond current city limits. The impact of this reform on the planning process was apparently disastrous. Despite reaching a compromise with the regional government on its enforcement in Monopoli that avoided frustrating the whole plan, farmers and rural residents got exasperated by the new obligations. Indeed, we would maintain that their pressure contributed significantly to the last minute rejection of any further binding measure within the plan that wasn't already provided for elsewhere. Moreover, planners themselves had opted for a mixed implementation strategy based on both **prohibitions** (no new buildings in the protected area) and **incentives** (more cubage allowed when complying with voluntary environmental standards), but only the former were taken up as an argument, and strongly opposed.

To a certain extent, all kinds of governance strategies have been mobilized, and some efforts were clearly geared towards coping with a complex situation by integrating different approaches. However, we would argue, voluntary strategies tend to require longer time horizons to influence development patterns, and their credibility is strongly dependant on the unstable asset of mutual trust. On the other hand, legally-binding measures may be an unavoidable step to far-reaching innovations, yet they trigger steadfast opposition and dwarf all other aspects of an integrated strategy during deliberative processes. Up to this stage of the process, the environmental assessment didn't have any significant influence, partly because key environmental issues had already been framed within the planning process, but also due to this plan being the first ever undergoing an SEA following a recent reform in the territorial governance system.

Olive groves have been covering a major share of the municipal territory for several centuries, and the puzzling look of ancient olive trees, twisted in amazing shapes, is the outcome of unique circumstances ranging from

climatic conditions to cultivation techniques. Today, the main threat to such natural and cultural heritage is **loss of profitability**, when compared to modern alternatives based on the wide use of machines and irrigation, or to the even easier business of eradicating the trees and selling them as garden plants. Given such conditions, we might wonder whether targeting farmers and residents by favoring economic activities that would still be compatible with preservation, might have engendered a deeper sense of ownership in key stakeholders, fostering multilevel governance arrangements without worsening local political relations.

6 Public Participation in SEA and Urban Planning in Magenta

Magenta is a town of 23.000 inhabitants in northern Italy, Lombardy Region. Its territory covers an area of 22 square kilometers in the flat, highly industrialized and densely populated metropolitan region of Milan. However, the municipality has some important environmental features, and it is entirely comprised in the Ticino River Valley natural park.

In 2006 the Municipal Council initiated the process of drafting a new urban plan, following regional legislative innovations passed in 2005 that introduced subsidiarity-oriented planning instruments and approval procedures[14], while implementing Directive 2001/42/EC requirements. SEA was undertaken as part of the planning process, and participation was framed into the evaluation agenda.

As for SEA methodology, the following main steps were envisaged:

► Environmental baseline data analysis and scoping;

► Scenario building and SWOT analysis;

► Sustainability assessment of plan's objectives, alternatives and courses of actions;

► Identification of a set of indicators for monitoring plan's implementation.

6.1 Participation process

Public participation cut across all aforementioned phases, and public involvement was started off from the outset of the planning process. Along with the definition of plan's objectives and policies, a core set of *performance indicators* were identified and later discussed in a public forum. As for the scoping phase, a dual-track approach was followed. In a first round, selected authorities and stakeholders were invited to contribute to the collection of data, description of ongoing projects, and identification of threats and opportunities. The results of this first effort were then presented and discussed in a public forum. Afterwards, different working groups were established in order to proactively contribute to reformulating plan's alternatives and actions. In doing so, several participation programs, involving different sectors of the society (children, elderly people, experts etc.), were carried out. The involvement of schools and children paid off as planning and SEA became a popular topic of discussion at home.

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[14] According to Lombardy planning law of 2005, the municipal urban plan is the "Piano di Governo del Territorio". It is made of three different documents: the "Documento di Piano" resembles a strategic plan, envisaging objectives and development scenarios. Two other planning instruments replaced more traditional master plans by providing legally binding rules on public services and land use,. SEA is applied only to the "Documento di Piano".

Several participation techniques were used, ranging from well established methods (focus groups, Delphi surveys, brainstorming sessions) to other more innovative approaches such as:

► **OST** (Open Space Technology) is a workshop management technique based on self organization of groups dwelling on a specific topic, aimed at enhancing communication and stimulating creativity;

► **EASW** (European Awareness Scenario Workshop), officially promoted by the European Commission, is divided in three main steps-*scenario building*, *stakeholder mapping* and *visioning*;

► **GOPP** (Goal-Oriented Project Planning) follows the Project Cycle Management approach to setting clear and shared planning objectives and coordinating different projects.

► **Participatory walking:** it is a method of "active listening" by which residents are invited along with planners and evaluators for a walk through their neighborhood to point out specific problems and characteristics of their living space.

Effective communication strategies emerged as a key issue: participation was enhanced by the fact that simple, understandable documents were timely disclosed to citizens. Participation methods were tailored to specific target groups, ranging from technical meeting to informal discussion arenas. A mixed methodology combining both top-down and bottom-up approaches was used: in the first case the public was stimulated with specific inputs from the experts, in the second one the diffuse knowledge and problem perceptions of the population were tapped into to inform the SEA process. At the end of the evaluation and participation phases, a number of outputs will be released that have already been prepared:

► a full Environmental Report

► a non technical summary

► audiovisual documentation of the process (already screened in several public meeting) will be included in an interactive DVD

► the municipality's web site will host all of the above.

In terms of number of participants, the whole process proved successful: some 500 individuals, 80 associations and more than 1.000 students from primary schools were involved. Different sectors of the local society were represented: workers unions, retailers, entrepreneurs, developers, farmers, environmentalists. However, the whole process proved costly and time consuming: it took more than two years, and during the planning process, local elections took place. As a result, for some time the electoral campaign drained resources and shadowed other public concerns; since the retiring government that had started the process was confirmed, planning and SEA were soon back on track, but arguably this would have not happened in case another coalition would have won the elections. As for participation methods, the response was satisfactory when stakeholders were explicitly invited to contribute to the discussion on a specific topic, while open calls to generic public meeting proved less attracting.

6.2 Effects on decision making and planning

Public administrators were initially reluctant to engage in the participation process: the definition of a set of selected performance indicators and the establishment of a common evaluation framework against which public decision can be continuously scrutinized is not common in the Italian decision making system. On the other

hand, planners were open to experiment with new form of community planning, which again is not often the case in Italy particularly when experienced practitioners are contracted. It took some time before local politicians accepted, and then actively supported, the participation process, which they came to consider a way of building consensus. However, once participation was accepted at the political level, municipal civil servants and technical experts had to change their internal routines to cope with a completely new way of working, and it proved a difficult step. These critical points were eventually resolved with a strong commitment by local government, planners and evaluators and a deep involvement of a selected number of civil servants within the municipality, whose experience and knowledge of the territory was used for selecting the participants. The elaboration of a set of performance indicators and a shared evaluation framework helped define the range of feasible and acceptable options. This in turn forced different players (decision makers, civil servants, planners, and evaluators) to play by common and transparent rules, thus mitigating the risk of special interests prevailing over public ones. Participation eventually succeeded in supporting planning and evaluation by providing information and knowledge; it influenced the final outcome by envisaging different scenarios, objectives and courses of action, and fostered the transparency and accountability of the whole process.

On the other hand, while this case study shows that under certain circumstances open and effective participation processes can indeed be set up, we might wonder whether this "good practice" is the result of a series of fortunate, rarely repeatable, factors that would make it hardly transferable to different planning settings.

7 Discussion

We conclude our survey on contemporary urban planning practices in Italy by highlighting some of the issues we met with, which might be of general interest to the debate on environmental governance and democracy.

Where do we have to look for **participation**? Only in the institutional arenas set up within planning processes? What about all kinds of public involvement revolving around the mechanisms of representative democracy (be that street protest, corporatism resorting to lobbying, or electoral propaganda)? How effective the different forms of participation are in influencing the decision making process? Even when institutional arenas get relatively crowded, participation inputs tend to get lost in the meanders of planning (yet participants often enjoy empowerment) whereas it is amazing how those forms of citizens involvement that counter or reinforce representation can influence decision-making, though they often prevent change and frustrate complex proposals.

Each legislative, planning or political act influences only to a limited extent the environmental governance arrangements in a given territorial community, where many initiatives are likely to develop at the same time. Moreover, most actors have complex stakes: within local authorities, different coalitions and networks push for often contradictory agendas, while local communities are anything but united faced with environmental issues. Then, how can **negotiation** be successful when friction around one issue could jeopardize actors' commitment across all processes they are involved into, despite hardly-won progress towards securing agreements?

How can different governance strategies strike a balance between the rights of stakeholders and the claims of those agents that have no access to **deliberation** (other species, future generations, marginalized groups, *etc*.)? In particular, what is the role of legally binding restrictions to individual rights in pushing for radical changes?

Though they might nurture environment-friendly social practices, they tend to be more strongly opposed than guidance and incentives, and an overall assessment has to weigh up both short and long term effects.

How do different **implementation** strategies interact with **deliberation** to strike a balance between the rights of direct stakeholders and the claims of voiceless agents (other species, future generations, marginalized groups, etc.)? In particular, restrictions of individual rights might nurture environment-friendly social practices, yet tend to be more strongly opposed than *guidance* and *incentives*, while the problematic role of spokespersons (environmental NGOs or advocacy planners) is seldom capable of bringing voiceless agents fully into the decision-making process, thus doing without unpopular *legally-binding measures*. Along these lines, shifting the focus of environmental governance **from territorial constructs to social practices** could help reconcile individuals' self-determination with public environmental interests.

New environmental policy tools (of the like of SEA) materialize worldwide as standardized **procedures**, yet their actual evolution is often a tale of *diffusion* without *convergence* (Radaelli 2005), as national, regional and even local contexts tend to shape their substantial nature to a major extent. Then, would it be advisable to emphasize key **process** features (inclusiveness, accountability, interdisciplinarity, *etc.*)? What if the desired **outcomes** were defined more accurately instead, e.g. by strictly binding SEA to **principles** (e.g. environmental justice) and **targets** (for pollution, energy use, *etc.*)? Both alternatives entail learning and adaptation and could result in further fragmentation, yet they might foster, respectively, *governance capacity building* and *planning salience*.

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