

Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY), an endemic syndrome influencing Environmental Policies

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The so-called “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) syndrome refers to the propensity of local citizens and officials to insist on siting unwanted but necessary facilities anywhere but in their own community [1]. On one hand, it demands that authorities fully involve the public with openness and integrity in all aspects of the planning process. On the other, local pressure can lead to political involvement in an uninformed and unstructured way where a small number of vocal individuals can change the outcome of a decision. This can be inequitable, particularly if a facility is sited in a less suitable location but close to people with fewer resources to oppose it.

The scientific literature on the determinants and magnitude of the NIMBY syndrome is still scant despite its growing influence on environmental and public health policies [2-5]. Two very recent cases, from very different contexts, highlight how policies should consider these phenomena very carefully: i) first, the famous perfume maker Chanel has warned that a planned strategic high-speed train line through the prized flower fields near the southern French perfume-making area of Grasse will threaten the production of its famous Chanel No. 5 scent [6]. The company has found a relevant ally in this battle, the Mayor of the renowned municipality of Cannes. Second, a child care centre is proposed for an urban area in a beachside suburb of Sydney, Australia and local citizens oppose the plan, anticipating traffic and noise problems [7].

Italy is one of the European countries most affected by the NIMBY phenomenon. Since 2004 an observatory on the NIMBY syndrome has been active, coordinated by a non-profit organization, with the co-operation from the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (8). The observatory's purpose is to analyse the syndrome and collecting data from mass media, internet and institutions. Currently 355 disputed public works are under the observatory's surveillance; among them 62.5% belong to the energy sector, followed by waste treatment plants (25.9%) and infrastructure facilities (8.7%). Data indicate that and main reasons for the protests include the impact on the environment (39.0%), on health (13.6%) and on quality of life (11.7%). The Italian regions reported to be more frequently affected by this syndrome are Lombardy (62 cases), Veneto (47) and Tuscany (38).

We believe that the so called “NIMBY syndrome” should be subject to greater attention from the international scientific community in order to understand and mitigate its potential negative effects on environmental sustainability, the economy and population health. The scope of research includes specific projects, collection of data and multidisciplinary technical boards with extensive participation of experts in: architecture, engineering, environmental science, political science, economics, epidemiology, psychology and sociology, as well as community and civil society involvement. The Environmental Impact Assessment and the Health Impact Assessment tools aim to reduce the environmental and health risks from new developments. These tools should become more effective in identifying the costs and benefits of developments across the dimensions of environmental sustainability, “One Health” and “Health in all Policies” [9, 10] in order to objectively address the concerns of local people and the involvement of politicians.

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