Improving an urban sustainability environment through community participation: the case of Emilia-Romagna region

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Abstract

In the national planning context, Emilia Romagna government policy leans quite heavily toward a participatory approach to urban development. At first public participation has been promoted for creating place and community identities and for conceiving a more effective and democratic assessment of the territory, with the aim to turn people from passive consumers of urbanity to creative re-shapers of cities. But since the 1990s onwards, the quest for sustainable development reinforced the role of people’s commitment in the long-term transformation of the city environment, linking community participation with the need to act for a more sustainable urban environment. Nevertheless, these planning policies are still not sufficiently working and more efforts are needed for becoming more effective and for making the development of the regional urban environment more sustainable.

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1. Introduction

Italy’s institutional framework is characterised by a ‘region-specific’ context. As a consequence, since 1972 the management of key components of economic development policies has been due to regional governments. Since then, each regional government has been safeguarding its environmental resources, controlled its physical development and ensured the well-being of its urban and agricultural communities [1]. Therefore, planning in Italy is generally regionally-regulated and administrated. Among the Italian regions, Emilia-Romagna has been analysed and studied internationally as an example of good planning policies and legislative innovation, and as a good model of linking regional outlays to specified regional

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economic priorities. Its success has been due to the stability of its governments through the time and to a diffuse “civic culture” that has been the guarantee of a high level of political involvement [2].

Recently, the Emilia-Romagna Regional Government has approved, following one of the other leading regions in subject of local policies (the Tuscany region), a law which enhances and promotes participatory processes for the elaboration of local and regional policies. This new law is the last one of a series of regional policies designed and experimented with, since the 1950s, in order to tackle the rising need to integrate public concerns into planning. Public participation, in fact, has been a crucial issue in the public agenda of Emilia Romagna municipalities since the post-war reconstruction and especially since the increasing of decentralization in planning policies in Italy. Community engagement has been fostered at first for creating place and community identities and for conceiving a more effective and democratic assessment of the territory. Lately, the emerging of new issues –as the quest for environmental, economic and social sustainability, or the need to integrate public resources with private investments– has led the region to reframe its participatory models for facing the future development and regeneration of its territories.

Nevertheless, until now the capacity to influence and determine the transformation and development of our cities and regions has been sporadic and, referring to the ladder of participation [3], more linked to the level of information and consultation or to the objective of increasing awareness and perception of the complexity of situations among citizens, rather than to the inclusion of citizen’s objectives into the decision-making process or – going even further – into the implementation of plans [4]. Big results have still to come; but, to a reasonable extent, the Emilia-Romagna region has started to ‘climb’ the ladder of effective participation with some coherence and continuity. This is why, even if not without underlying some difficulties and problems, a brief analysis of the evolution of participatory planning policies in Emilia-Romagna could help us to understand the way a good urban sustainability environment is usually directly linked to a good ‘culture of governance’ and consequently to the promotion and inclusion of community participation in planning.

2. Planning and public concern in Emilia-Romagna

2.1. The role of neighborhoods for the building of communities: the legacy of the Bologna experience

In Emilia-Romagna the neighborhood unit has been included in planning policies as the best measure to interpret the social, cultural and economic energies that can produce new place identities and promote a democratic assessment of the city. After the World War II in this region (like everywhere else in the North of Italy), cities grew in population with a rhythm which never occurred before. This phenomenon affected particularly its capital city, Bologna, where the need to plan new neighborhoods became a crucial issue. In 1951 Giuseppe Dossetti, the leader of the catholic party “Christian Democracy”, presented the “White Paper for Bologna”, a policy document that advanced a city renewal model from the perspective of its inhabitants, considered as a “key factor” to generate new identities and thus to turn marginal areas into “real” parts of the city [5]. This issue was tackled ten years later by the Municipality with the institution of decentralization: the city was divided in fifteen neighborhood councils, formed by twenty members appointed by the City Council, with the function of discussing “the problems of the neighborhood in an organic relationship with the general situation of the city and in relation to the city budget and long-range development plans” [6].

From a methodological point of view, therefore, there have already been experimented with new methods of plan making directly through citizen participation via the decentralized organ of the neighborhood. The management and the direct participation to the planning process, through the sessions of the Neighborhood Councils, the role of the Committee and of the different meetings, had indeed included the local scale into the stages of analysis and definition of choices and proposals [7].
The importance of this experiment has brought academics to assume that “each significant initiative originating from Bologna had a national impact and sometimes even international, thanks to the excellent communication capability of its administrators” [8]. Since 1963 till 1972, in fact, Italy has witnessed to an increasing of decentralized experiences, as the institution of Neighborhood Councils in several municipalities (and this occurred especially in Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany). In Bologna, the role of the neighborhoods has been central even when, at the beginning of the 1970s, the Municipality decided to focus not only on its peripheral areas, but also on its historical centre: once more, the fundamental idea behind this intervention was that of renewing the historical centre as model of a genuine livable city, to be achieved through the active participation of city dwellers; the maintaining of the stability of residents and of local activities; and the involvement of owners who guarantee controlled rent in exchange for financial support from the municipality [8].

All these experiments induced the state to finally institute, in 1976, the executive role of neighborhoods through a national law: the Bologna experience demonstrated that giving to neighborhood a role in the decision making process could help to increase efficiency (especially the delivery of public services) and speed the process of plan implementation.

2.2. Intermezzo

In Italy Regions have also the role to interpret the implementation of EU programmes and to participate and define emerging national and international policies. During the last twenty years, a new issue has entered the planning scene: the need for urban regeneration and sustainable development. To meet this objective, the EU have stressed the importance of partnerships for urban development and social inclusion and, after the spreading of “Action Agenda 21”, on the quest for policies oriented to enhance sustainability [9]. The Emilia Romagna Region has addressed these objectives by structuring its policies on two different levels.

One the one hand, in 1998, by instituting PRU (Urban Regeneration Programmes, Regional Law 19/1998): a planning practice that combines the need to collaborate with the private sector –in order to integrate resources, negotiate solutions and accelerate the implementation process– with the quest for preserving the identities of the neighborhoods. In order to ensure a good involvement at the local level, the Region has established that the neighborhood should have been regarded as the privileged scale of intervention, arguing that the “quality of life” can only be improved by studying the location of the services at the neighborhood level, where people live and where they would be most efficiently used.

On the other hand, two years later –with the approval of the new planning regional law (L.R. 20/2000)– the Regional Government focused deeply on the double need to put into effect the principle of sustainability and to make planning procedures more flexible and effective. The local plan has been thus divided in two main plans: a strategic/structural plan (PSC), aimed at locating all regulations (e.g. environmental, economic, infrastructural) in a long term strategy; and an implementation plan (POC), to be outlined every five years and aimed to balance the resources of the municipality with other public or private initiatives. To complete this two-fold planning system, the promotion of the principle of subsidiarity –the collaboration among the different governmental levels through the institution of two tools or procedures, the “Conference of Service” and the “Programme’s Agreement”– and sustainability –the obligatory need to present an environmental evaluation of the plan: the “VALSAT”–[10].

Paradoxically, the attention paid on interpreting this “international needs” has completely excluded, despite the “legacy of the past”, the role of communities from the planning process. For instance, during these years of political reforms it has not been taken into account the principle of subsidiarity regarding the “horizontal cooperation among the public sphere and the civil society”. At the same time it has been undervalued the importance of the role of citizens for the implementation of sustainability action (making thus ineffective the role of Agenda 21 local actions). The only exception occurred in 2002, when the Region started to experiment in 13 municipalities the “Neighborhood’s Contracts” [Contratti di
quartiere], an urban regeneration programme (promoted by the national government) based on an “agreement” between the inhabitants of the deprived neighborhood and the municipality: the promise to regenerate the city through the inclusion of its citizens into the planning process. Nevertheless, even if regarded as important experiments from a methodological point of view, recent studies [11] have shown that participatory processes have been generally stopped or interrupted at the implementation phase, because they have been generally intended by each municipality as a technique to inform citizens and to solve potential conflict rather than a means to assess an inclusive policy-making model based on authentic dialogues and aimed at building networks or at creating institutional capacity [12].

2.3. A new planning season

The tendency to exclude citizens, especially at the “strategic level”, from the planning process has tried to be reversed by the Emilia Romagna government during the very last years through two innovative regional laws.

The first one is the regional law L.R. 6/2009, “Governance and supportive regeneration of the territory” [Governo e riqualificazione solidale del territorio], aimed to fill the gap existing in the previous planning law (L.R. 20/2000) in term of citizen participation and regeneration at the neighbourhood level, as well as citizen participation and strategic objectives. On the one hand, the new law has supplied some lack of regulations about citizens participation in urban regeneration programmes (PRU, L.R. 19/1998) by stating –following the lesson of the “Neighborhoods Contracts”– that “the Region supports initiatives at the local level which enhance citizen’s participation for the definition of the objective of the urban regeneration, through the institution of participatory process or through participatory workshops”. On the other hands, it has introduced the “Programming document for urban quality” [Documento programmatico della qualità urbana], a sort of “services plan” aimed, through a participatory process, to localise areas that lack the delivery of public services or to implement the objectives of regeneration programmes. The document is especially designed to strengthen the role of implementation plans at the municipal level (POC), in order to evaluate better the real needs of the population, to safeguard the identities of places and to pursue more specific objectives like sustainable mobility, environmental well-being and the quality of public spaces. In both cases, participation is intended as a “tool” for making urban regeneration more effective: community participation as a process that enter the transformation of places in the decision making phase rather than in the implementation one; and as a way to help the municipalities addressing as best as possible public policies with private developments.

Even if the L.R. 6/2009 has the merit to have officially introduced the citizens among the main actors of the planning strategies at the local level [13], the more comprehensive attempt aimed to include citizens voices into the elaboration of local policies and thus accomplish “the real meaning of representative democracy”, is the latest regional law, L.R. 3/2010: “Norms for the definition, rearrangement and promotion of consultation and participation procedures to the elaboration of local and regional policies” [Norme per la definizione, riordino e promozione delle procedure di consultazione e partecipazione alla elaborazione delle politiche regionali locali]. In accordance with the main international charters (like the Directive 2003/35/EC of the European Parliament, or the Aalborg Charter and Leipzig etc.) and emulating the “Tuscany process” [14], the Regional council of Emilia-Romagna have started to promote the use of deliberatively-oriented policies to be outlined through participatory processes. The idea is to supplement the role of citizens by transforming them from “demanding consumers of public services” to “responsible co-producers of public governance” and by involving citizens in the design, implementation and enforcement of local and regional policies. The underling argument is that local governments need the perspectives, ideas and resources of affected stakeholders in order to generate innovative policies and not to get stuck in diverse policy problems [15]. The means to achieve this goal is the “participatory process”, defined as “a path for starting organized discussion in order to pursue a future project or a future regional or local law (by networking institutions and citizens);
to obtain the complete representation of each positions, interests, or needs related to the issue; and to reach a general agreement through negotiation and consensus”. The participatory process is therefore a means to obtain the collective interest through the building of dialogue and networks which can help the implementation of plans. The outcome is a document that the government will take into account before making its deliberations.

3. Conclusion

The “new planning season” has been interpreted as a real attempt to reach the future challenge of a “joined-up governance” which is “truly open to” and “functional for” different political strategies produced through a democratic debate [16]. Unfortunately, because these new reforms have been approved recently, we can advance only some hypothesis or hopes for the future rather than an effective evaluation of this new direction of planning in Emilia-Romagna. Nevertheless, this brief “planning tale” on the evolution of the way this region has interpreted, through the time, the need to include citizens in the governance process, allows, at least, to summarize three final reflections which could help us to outline the tough relationship that bonds community participation and sustainable planning.

The first thought regards the importance of the planning context: a good civic culture is the consequence of a culture of good planning policies. The path to community participation is long and problematic; it needs to be gradually built through a culture of good governance that takes years or decades of reforms and practices to be achieved. Even if the “communicative turn” has recently affirmed a planning model that should be equitable and inclusive, this has not always been the dominant paradigm for policies formulation in Italy. Despite of that, since the 1950s, planning in Emilia-Romagna has tackled the need to balance the asymmetries and the un-reciprocated ties that generally characterise planning policies. Throughout the years, in fact, it has been recognized the importance of making the right conditions that can allow a direct participation of citizens who are interested at first to the formation and then to the implementation of plans: in this regard, the key to good planning policies is the ability to build choices that are coherent with the public interest through the inclusion and with the adherence of a wide portion of the society [17].

The second consideration regards the idea of citizenship. If we agree that the final end of planning, even if unconscious, is citizenship and that the political nature of citizenship needs a political control not only by the local governments, but also by the inhabitants involved into the planning process [18], planning policies have to enhance the role of the local level. The Emilia-Romagna Region has tackled this objective. To generate citizenship means to enhance the public will through a “conscious whole”: each one is attending to his own work, but at the same time each one is understanding perfectly what the general purpose is and how he or she is contributing to [19] and thus playing a role in the planning process.

The last thought, connected to the previous ones, relates community participation with the permanent tension of planning toward achieving a better “urban quality”. We all agree that the quality of our cities is the necessary premise for a genuine and sustainable economic, environmental and social development. But even if this objective is generally accepted, it is impossible to define a shared and accepted strategy for improving urban quality. For this reason, it is even more necessary and fundamental to involve local communities to design and re-think the future space to which they belong [20]. As Olmsted [21] observed several years ago, “there are three logical divisions of any city planning movement: first, the winning of public support; second, the planning itself; and, third, the translation of plans into facts”. Hence, the support of citizens is not only desirable: it is a crucial step to make planning policies effective and working for an urban and regional development framed for and from its communities. This is the real challenge that will attend to the Emilia-Romagna Region in the near future.
References