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Planning the risk

Paolo Avarello

There are risks, to which most of the Italian territory is exposed, that cannot be avoided. However, one could try to minimize their effects by reducing the damages that they can provoke. This could be done by knowing the territory better, finding out the critical points, the escape paths and the safe places. In addition, it can be achieved by selecting those buildings and infrastructures which security must be guaranteed. It is a must, but not an easy one to accomplish: in fact, how could a mayor select which buildings to save and which other ones to leave to their destiny? Moreover, with which resources? However, resources appear miraculously after 'adversities'. Therefore, they nourish the rhetoric of the 'great opportunity' to 'foster' the development in the affected area and, sometimes, they encourage 'questionable' aspirations. If we calculated the present value of costs of not preserving the territory, we would clearly figure how investing in maintenance is in fact a convenient deal. Thinking of - and inducing the thought of - potential disasters may sound unpleasant. That is way the medias cover the topic only after they have happened. However, we could work at making difficult choices less difficult by implementing public awareness policies, as a few 'small-scale' experiences show. Knowing the territory is a fundamental condition for any possible provision aimed to reduce or eliminate risks. Public awareness of risks is fundamental condition to share any prevention goals, while making costs and necessary choices on investment targets more acceptable. In Italy, there are laws, of

course. They are usually contradictory, seldom up to date (particularly so at the level of new autonomous administrations, at the regional and local scale), hardly ever adequately financed but very detailed regarding administrative procedures. Our French 'cousins' make fun of us by saying that when Italians have a problem they make a new law (instead of solving the problem, that is). There are risks that could be possibly avoided or reduced, in any case, in terms of frequency and magnitude. This is the case of hydraulic and hydro-geological risk, to which some 70% of Italian municipalities are potential victims. There are laws in this specific field, too. One of them (L. 183/89) introduces the 'valley plans' and related authorities, another one (Dpr 18/7/95) is the deriving 'implementation guidance act', another is the so-called, 'Sarno' decree, and other ones should protect the water bearing strata. The Law 183/89 was welcomed with great consideration, also by planners, as a way to overcome the prevailing 'hydraulic' attitude and achieve a new vision, if not a holistic one at least one more careful for territory, populations, administrations. What has this law produced? Few years ago, a study of the Senate has indicated a negative evaluation of its (in fact omitted) implementation. This negative evaluation has produced no follow up, though, apart from the 'Sarno' decree, the outcome of an 'emergency' which, however, does not seem to be able to solve fundamental, institutional and substantial problems. Issues about risks do not seem to enjoy adequate attention by 'political decision makers', neither State ones, nor Regional

ones, nor local ones; in any case, not enough to actually deal with the functionality of the responsible bodies and institutions or with the organization of a system able to control, preserve and manage waters. There are more risks that can be avoided, apart from the inevitable residual percentage of risk, due to fatality. They are the risks deriving or related to human activities, particularly those related to industrial production and caused by not-knowing, or rather negligence, more or less culpable and, sometimes, criminal. The 'industrial areas under risk of relevant accident' (as for the Seveso I and II decrees) that have actually been singled out are still few: they are the tip of the iceberg, only. It is also for this reason that in only few cases there have been earnest actions not only to formally follow the legal rules but also to actually reduce risk factors. In the mean time, conflicts between administrations, at different levels, as well as between more or less 'organized' citizens and their administrators flourish about degasifiers, refuse incinerators, polluting or hazard material disposal sites (but also common garbage collection sites), etc., which enjoy the highlight of the medias, at least for a few days. More or less the same way it happens when 'real estate scandals' are at stake, provided that they are adequately 'visible'. In the mean time, land erosion, corruption and (useless) consumption continue almost everywhere in silence. From illegal waste disposal sites to car accidents, to summer fires, etc., when the public opinion gets shocked, the political reaction is aggravating the punishments: for 'criminals' that will never be identified or, if they are, would be able to escape judgement, and that unlikely will actually

undergo any term of punishment. In Italy, we can count on several laws, but who cares about the 'health' of the territory and the safety of the citizens? We would like to be able to say that urban planning does it. Nevertheless, how frequently is this subject recurring in the urban plans that in fact are produced? How frequently is it considered in the scientific and cultural debate of the planners?