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Cities, districts and regional innovation systems: the intersection between innovation policies and territorial policies

Marco Bellandi, Annalisa Caloffi

We shall begin with a European perspective, and more specifically from the strategic objective, formulated at the European Council of Lisbon in 2000, to promote the passage towards knowledge-based societies and economies. Difficulties along this path have raised the necessity for a deeper reflection on the multidimensional quality of innovation, and the need to adopt a systemic and procedural approach. Furthermore, part of the related literature indicates that innovation involves the relations between research, development, adoption of innovation and the economic, social and political environment (Rosenberg 1976; Freeman 1995). The focus shifts to processes that take place in conditions of uncertainty, with complex feedback, even between the phases of the innovation, especially when the environment of such processes is represented in terms of research, production or territorial systems. Consistent sets of agents and relations frequently have specific territorial characteristics, either existing or to be encouraged. This can be interpreted in at least two ways, which here and below we shall take as representative of a broad spectrum of interpretative and regulatory positions. The first is related to the vision of the competitiveness proper to the 'organisation/enterprise' (O/E) approach (for Italy, the reference is to the Ancona school according to which innovation develops within and between enterprises which

incorporate adequate organisational and entrepreneurial characteristics. Since a large number of the enterprises (especially in Italy) are small local enterprises, the innovation also depends on the capacity of a territory to generate or attract factor O/E, even if then the use of the factor is a matter which remains internal to the enterprise or eventually to the exchanges between enterprises and between them and actors operating in the sphere of research. The second way of interpreting the innovative process in a procedural perspective hinges on the 'local forces' of development, which in Italy for example have led to the consolidation of the industrial districts (Brusco 1994, Becattini 2000). According to this approach, processes for mobilising and reproducing entrepreneurial energies, attitudes of trust, cognitive bases for productive and innovative work and collaboration are not confined within the boundaries of enterprises, industries and markets. They evolve within the living contexts of the populations of which the manufacturers are part. The division of labour, interconnected by such links with the life of the local society, draws from this both reasons for development and a specific stability within the change. If the territory is not a neutral support but a *milieu* with specific and differentiated characters interfering with innovative processes, the innovation policies have to be implemented in appropriate territorial units. These are represented not only by the industrial districts, but by a wider variety of types of urban and regional system. There are three types of units of investigation and policy suitable for illustrating the link between territory and innovation. In the first

place, in the industrial district the presence of linked specialisations between independent manufacturers, of accumulation of technical training and knowhow, of relations of exchange facilitated by closeness and shared bases of trust and cognition are the conditions for a widespread innovative capacity. This capacity, not centralised in the R and D laboratories of large-scale enterprises or of public research bodies, melds with projects for products featuring a high intensity of variation and customisation (Belliandi 2003). On the other hand, the concentration within delimited fields of production and business may also facilitate negative lock-in phenomena. In the second place, the larger urban centres can be *dynamic cities* when they are places favourable to exchange between different cultures and 'communities', the interaction of which can generate mobility and new ideas. They thus become centres of rare technical and scientific skills and competencies, nodes of the major infrastructures for training, research, finance and logistics, which ensure strong connections with the outside of the system, and privileged sites for cluster activities of high knowledge intensity (high tech, cultural assets, innovative services) (Crevoisier, Camagni, 2001; Simmie 2001). However, where not regulated, the interaction and the mobility lead to contradictions, clashes and social and environmental upheavals which block the innovation or reduce it to ghetto-type living and working spheres for a small elite (*the best and the brightest*), divided from the mass of the operators and the excluded. In the third place, a regional *milieu* (Cooke, Morgan 1998, p. 64) can be home to a *regional innovation system* (RIS) made up of a set of innovative

organisations operating within various dynamic localities of the *milieu*, interacting also thanks to regional structures of research, policy and public administration. The triple helix of the innovative process (enterprises, research, State: Etzkowitz 1994) is necessarily included, but here it receives an appropriate institutional qualification. Moreover, it is not sufficient to have a collection of innovative actors and dynamic localities within a region to produce a RIS: the interactions may be fragmentary and inconclusive if the cohesion within the regional *milieu* does not also feature a shared vision of development. In such case, there may be a regional space of innovation, but not a regional innovation system. These three units are the passive object of policies within the traditional linear vision (they are basically administrative fields of policy implementation). They become evolving units of governance processes within the procedural vision of innovation. Let us now move on to innovation in territorial policies. Its importance is linked to the growth of competitiveness between territories and production systems and the increasingly intensive challenge coming from new industries on the global scene. The latter include, for example, those that have powerful territorial bases in certain regions of China, and avail themselves of information technologies and logistic solutions applied to the management of productive and commercial processes on an international scale. The different visions of the role of the territory in the innovation processes also have repercussions on the policies aimed to boost local competitiveness (and welfare) through the support

for innovation. Let us see how, reconsidering the approaches mapped out in section 2.

In the linear vision of innovation, the incentives to innovation are aimed directly at the enterprises and at the improvement of the working of the innovation 'markets', and can only indirectly facilitate the development of the territories.

In the O/E declination of the procedural vision of innovation, the main objective is to stimulate the accumulation in the territory of active and high level managerial and entrepreneurial competencies (policy implications connected with school and university training will not be dwelt on here). The main interventions are those aimed at facilitating the local investments of the enterprises with greater O/E potential: this is a focused form of *territorial marketing*. Added to this is the constitution, within a regional *milieu* which comprises enterprises with high O/E intensity, of research centres and virtual networks of innovators aimed at specific technological and market fields.

The picture is more complex within the local forces declination. Here the response to the global challenges lies in an increase of the local capacities to generate quality and innovation in industrial and commercial products and processes, as well as in the capacity to combine the local capacities with strategies of internationalisation that are consistent with the basic characteristics of the systems of production themselves (Bellandi, Biggeri 2005). In short, it is a question of elaborating initiatives that can stimulate innovation-generating relations between the various actors (Russo 2000; Lane 2002). These should

entail the direct participation of the local agents in the design of the initiatives, as well as the balancing of local governance and regional coordination. The promotion of innovation thus moves within a perspective of bringing together local and global (support for certification, international patenting, creation of telecom infrastructures, international master degrees, etc.).

At EU level, among the operations consistent with the inclusion of a process-type approach to innovation into territorial policy (which is also undoubtedly still influenced by the experience and success of the Italian districts in the 70s), four types of action may be mentioned, in chronological order: the 4 Urban Pilot Projects (UPP) within the framework of the ERDF (Milan, Turin, Naples, Brindisi), onto which the Community initiative Urban (I and II) was then grafted; with URBAN (II), alongside urban policies, the municipalities also elaborated actions aimed at supporting and modernising business infrastructures; the cities of Milan and Rome, as well as certain Regions, took part in the RITTS (Regional Innovation and Technology Transfer Strategies and Infrastructure) with their own strategic plans; the Metropolis network offered policy makers the opportunity to explore together common themes, as well as the Innopolitan network for 2001-03.

The sphere of initiatives of national scope is clearly reduced by the action of the EU and by the decentralising of competencies at regional level. In Italy, old initiatives designed at national level are still being used for support to innovation, destined substantially at incentives for the R and D activities of the individual enterprises. However, starting from the 1980s,

territorial policies began to incorporate, directly, the concept of production system and of industrial district, within the definition of frameworks of action which can accommodate support for innovative processes rooted at local level. We would mention in particular, in chronological order: the emergence of the Service Centres and the promotion of the formation of consortiums between enterprises (Brusco 1994; Bianchi 1985; Ceris 1997); the legislative recognition of the industrial district and the related policies for the districts emanated at national level and by the individual Regions (Balestri 2002; IPI 2002); the central support for actions of local development (e.g. territorial pacts: MEF 2003); support for the 'technological districts' (Unioncamere 2006).

It is relevant to highlight here the presence of the fourth and most recent class of actions, which also find confirmation (albeit of different quality and scope) within the industrial innovation and territorial policies of other European countries. The underlying theory suggests the concentration of public and private resources in sectoral and territorial contexts, featuring major development potential, dynamic areas that can act as a significant driving force for the regions and countries in which they are rooted. Although the emergence of the individual 'technological districts' frequently takes its cue from initiatives at local and regional level, in many cases there exists a sort of formal acknowledgement at the level of central government, via protocols of understanding between the Ministry for the University and Research and the Region, which identify action priorities and funds for their implementation. Connected with such action there are no 'official'

parameters or quantitative thresholds to be complied with, as instead was the case of the industrial districts. In the majority of cases, such initiatives are still in the launching phase, and hence the picture proves to be necessarily partial.

Further, we wish to address the intersection of territorial and innovation policies, as emerging from the observation of the actions implemented in the Italian Regions within EU Objective 2 subsequently classified in terms of specific objectives (of the individual actions), tools, structures and subjects. The formulation of the objectives underlying the activities, often programmed in the period 2000-06, in support of innovation frequently reveals marked contradictions, or overlaps, of ideas derived from theoretical approaches which may be discordant with each other.

We now propose an evaluation of the convergence of territorial and innovation policies in regional programming, classifying the actions designed to support innovation in line with two axes:

- the agents that are the direct recipients of the actions, divided into: enterprises ('individuals'); *networks* of varied composition but generally with a local base ('networks'); local or *regional agencies*, private, public or mixed, which, for example, supply services to the enterprises or create shared infrastructures ('agencies').
- the targets of the actions, divided into: *actions without specific target* ('no target'); *specific sectors or technological fields* ('sectors and/or technologies'); *local production systems, production chains and/or industrial districts* ('local production systems/chains/districts').

Table on p. 24 shows the

combination of the two axes. The various Regions have been classified in the boxes on the basis of the type of agents and targets of the *prevalently* implemented actions. In the case in which the majority of the actions observed do not have an exclusive but solely pre-ferential target, the Region has been classified on both the boxes 'without target' and 'with target'.

If we consider the regulations laid down for the industrial districts (albeit implemented only to a limited extent) we can see that there is a flourishing group of regions in which there is a marked connection between the two types of policy under consideration.

More specifically:

- the boxes of the first column belong to the sphere of the linear approaches to innovation, even though they can be formally inserted within district spheres of action. Incentive actions directed at the individual enterprises survive. The enterprises are provided with incentives to liaise with Universities and technological centres, both through funding aimed at the performance of R and D activities, and through 'technology vouchers' (to be spent at a list of accredited centres: for instance, in Lombardy);

- the boxes of the third column, and also those of the second column with the first and second line, can be more or less directly linked to systemic approaches to innovation declined on the O/E keynote. These are frequently actions (centres for research and technology transfer; regional telecommunications networks, etc.) characterised by reference to the 'three pilaster' or *triple helix* of innovation, and to the strengthening the RIS;

- the intersection of the second column and the third line can be linked to

systemic approaches declined on the keynote of local forces. These are actions aimed at the creation of specific infrastructures, in the first place for the industrial districts (telecommunications networks, information desks, industrial areas), at the promotion of the products of the district on the international markets, and at the reorganisation of the activities of the enterprises through support for internationalisation.

These actions intersect with the presence and operation of the service centres and consortiums within district-type systems of production, and with a flourishing series of other actions more or less directly linked to the support for small enterprise: theme actions on innovation and internationalisation; territorial priorities within actions aimed at the entire regional production system; fund reserves or access priorities for projects submitted by districts or local production systems characterised by particular specialisations; and finally, the technological districts. Within this picture of collective learning, the actions approach and intersect with initiatives for stimulating and driving the creation of innovator networks, also adopted by certain regions. Despite being on the increase, this third mode is still not very widespread.

What do not emerge as units explicitly connected with innovation policies in the recent programming of the Italian Regions are the 'cities', that is the larger urban centres (possibly metropolitan). The cities, especially the more dynamic, are favoured centres of high tech systems and high culture. And that is not all. Consider in Italy the presence of cities in the regions of greatest district intensity, such as Milan, Bologna, Florence, and also Vicenza,

Verona, Ancona. Here we can observe particular and variable combinations of highly valued urban functions, nuclei of local factors similar to those of the district, points of accumulation of the historic-cultural heritage and the traditions of artistic craftsmanship, tourist functions. These are the favourite resorts of: international buyers, many major fashion events, the most important of the *made in Italy* trade fairs, fashion multinationals, leading design centres, and major universities. Along with other cities, these act as catalysts in fixing, in the global collective imagination, the elements of taste, creativity and good living that are associated with *made in Italy*. Functions that are fundamental for the Italian districts and district-like localities. But, without the flourishing of the industrial districts, which is not merely a spin-off effect of the economy of those cities, they would never have developed such potential. We consider that, within the framework of the challenges outlined above, the conscious promotion of positive interrelations between these two territorial components of marked urban, industrial and innovation content, is absolutely crucial.