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**Strategic plans:
risks and critical issues**
Francesco Gastaldi

According to a survey recently promoted by Censis-Rur, there are about 70 strategic planning projects currently under way in Italy, being at different stage of development. These figures represent a surprisingly data, even for the most attentive observers of this new form of territory governance, who would have never imagined such a widespread and rapid diffusion over the last few years. Such diffusion could be a positive sign if it stood for, for each area involved, a greater consciousness on the territory potential and on the different possible pathways of future development. Unfortunately, this is not the standard situation currently taking place in Italy: if we carefully analyse case by case all the projects under way, we can find out that homologations, imitations and quite limiting interpretations are prevailing.

Diffusion

The diffusion of strategic planning practices can be considered as a 'heritage' of the increasing attention generally paid to local development typical of the last decade. This phenomenon is the result of the new role played by local actors in building their own destiny, being conscious that the challenge launched by international globalisation and competitiveness can be won only sharing as much as possible a guiding ideal aiming at a common and harmonious development, resulting from self-reflection on the potential as well as the resources a given area can count on. Turin, a pioneer city, whose experience was inspired by other European cities, followed and implemented a pathway marked by a strong territory marketing. Turin

has already designed a second strategic planning project. Other cities, such as Rome and Trieste, gave up their projects while La Spezia, Trento and Piacenza started a new 'thinking phase'. Innovative experiments are now carried out in Florence, Pesaro, Jesi and Verona, while some big cities in Southern Italy, such as Naples, Bari, Messina and Cagliari have recently started to develop their own pathway. Strategic plans often aim at creating new forms of collaboration and new methods of territory governance, affecting local governments as well as metropolitan areas: it also attempts to overcome the traditional administrative constraints in a perspective of integration of sector actions within an overall and coherent programmatic frame. In some cases the Province play a role especially active in elaborating and developing the plan (as in the case of the Province of Milan).

**Critical issues
on existing experiences**

Having set these premises, we are now attempting to point out some considerations, especially stressing the risks, the critical issues and dangers that are often linked to some aspects especially recurring in those strategic planning processes activated in Italy. We analyse now the main critical issues.

Elaborating without innovating

By analysing the experiences currently under way in Italy, it is evident how the formulation of addressing lines/lines of action is not up to the innovation expectations that the projects themselves tend to promote. The projects, not often resulting from concerted decisions, could merely end up in a 'sum' of single projects, often fragmentary and heterogeneous, not

ascribable to a recognizable and coherent strategy. Sometimes, strategic plans act as catalyzers of existing projects (previous or currently under way initiatives) and only in a few case the guiding ideas are really innovative. Sometimes the strategic plans merely end up in marketing and communication operations aimed at a sterile search for consensus, thus boiling down to generic and scarcely selective documents, lacking in the necessary scientific investigation and not tied to actual decision-making procedures (current or future) or to actually implementable future planning schemes. Some strategic plans seem to be very far from reality, both for the financial possibilities available as well as for the planning scheme at other levels of territory governance.

Too ambitious processes

I had already clarified how strategic planning generates great expectations, being sometimes considered as a solution for all existing problematic issues. Strategic planning results sometimes too ambitious if compared to what can be actually done because it scarcely take into account the real resources available (not only financial resources). Too ambitious plans for territories not able to acknowledge them properly, or plans too distant from a territory's reality are a prelude to insuccess. A strategic plan should be deeply rooted in available resources and be in tune with the existing projects (at various stages of definitions), not to run into failure and resistance.

Weak diagnostic and territory examination phase

To be effective, a strategic plan must stake on the unexpressed local potential, not yet or not adequately enhanced. These potentialities could be environmental or territory

resources, local cultures or development ideas, knowledge or abilities that are often latent and that must be therefore activated and developed. The issue in the promoting policies often lies in identifying such potentialities, in finding the reasons for their missed expression and in choosing where to address them. In order to recognize the peculiarities a given territory can count on within a competitive frame, it is therefore essential a careful territory examination. In order to make the resources usable, it is necessary to make them interact with local or market needs, to support those activities that are spread and dispersed throughout the territory, to integrate internal investments and weak production systems through external funding.

Search for

'ready to use' solutions

Strategic planning does not come from specific prescriptions: this leads to a proliferation of different experiences, pathways, interpretations and methods of approach: every single local case should elaborate a peculiar line of development, as much as possible targeted and coherent to the social-economic and political-institutional features of the area involved. In Italy instead, especially in the most recent cases, quite standardised procedures are now prevailing. The increased number of manuals and "guidelines" on strategic planning do not allow us to be optimistic. On the other hand there is an undeniable trend in local governance bodies to ask for 'ready to use solutions', thus risking to change strategic planning into a sterile mechanism, reduced to some necessary formal duties' fulfillment. The population's involvement is then just a rhetorical expedient to legitimate decisions and choices already made elsewhere.

Overextended times of definition

In a previous contribution, I had already argued how concertation stress and fatigue are bitter enemies of bottom-up territory promotion policies. Furthermore a special attention must be paid not to extend too much times and ways of building up forums and concertation meetings. It is then essential to avoid the dispersion of a certain 'propulsive' drive, the 'glue' that keeps actors joined one another, the enthusiasm that generally follows start-up phases. An uncertain situation must not lead to difficulties or frustrations in the involved subjects (generally a vast and heterogeneous audience of actors), thus resulting in giving up and renouncement in a process that should produce fundamental and motivated choices, deeply rooted in the territory. In order to add confidence and credibility to the decision-making process, short term results, even the simplest, are needed.

Sterile participation mechanisms

A further critical issue lies in a possible hegemony in strategic planning process by lobbies or strong local subjects. This could lead to a 'fake' participation by legitimate and weak actors in favour of hegemonic and non pluralist subjects. If participation mechanisms are not so fertile and widespread, decisions and objectives can be legitimated in improper sites or, even worse, imposed by strong economic actors or partisan interests. It is very difficult for a strategic plan to take into account also opinions of weaker parties and of all the different social situations that can be found in a city or a territory. It is natural, in multilateral decision-making processes, that strong subjects prevail, it is at least necessary to avoid the implementation of

strategy falsely concerted and unanimous just for rhetoric and appearance.

Conclusions

Strategic planning is risking today to be 'artificially' funded, thus becoming 'codified', or, even worse, imposed by law. A strategic plan must instead be the result of reflections on a territory's features by local subjects. The plan should help to unveil existing potentialities and resources that are not yet identified, changing them into economic activities. The strategic planning building phase should be an occasion of institutional learning, a chance that can generate other initiatives. If these premises are lacking, we risk to run into fake and meaningless consulting and concerting sessions, thus leading to necessarily unsuccessful development strategies. Furthermore, since the plan creates a great expectation, in case of failure, it can trigger a chain reaction, making local policies less credible.