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North-Western Platform: 'Sit-Ins' as tool for territorial governance

**North-Western Platform:
'Sit-Ins' as tool for
territorial governance**
Umberto Janin Rivolin

In the present article, 'Sit-In' does not imply the invocation of a protest movement, but more simply indicates the Italian acronym of 'Interdependent territorial systems'. The north-western platform is indeed one of the macroregional contexts surveyed by the Itater 2020 research. This was conducted by the Italian society of urban planners on mandate of the Italian Ministry of infrastructures in the framework of the EU cohesion policy programming for period 2007-2013. Sit-Ins are therefore proposed as strategic spatial units for a perspective scenario of the aforementioned context, fostering polycentric development and multi-level governance in the cohesion policy process.

Introduction

The EU cohesion policy for 2007-2013 period is coordinated by the Ministry of economic development in Italy. In this framework, the Ministry of infrastructures (Mi), has promoted a number of analysis and technical assistance initiatives in the past months. Particularly, the Mi has drawn a 'working hypothesis' based on 'strategic territorial platforms' of transnational, national and interregional relevance. Besides, it has assigned to the Italian society of the urban planners (Siu) a research programme called 'Itater 2020' and addressed to represent possible 'perspective scenarios' concerning the main aforementioned platforms. Briefly, the research Itater 2020 was articulated in 'thematic analyses' and 'contextual surveys'. The former were developed in

order to update and to discuss information on various aspects anchoring the country's development perspectives to the territory (e.g. local identities, networks, competitiveness, governance, etc.). The latter were approached as to verify the meaningfulness of thematic analyses in six macroregional contexts, broadly corresponding to the Mi's transnational strategic platforms.

The macroregional contexts adopted for the surveys find also correspondence, in a different perspective, to the 'functional macroregional systems' (FuMaS) proposed by the research itself. The final aim of each contextual survey, developed by independent experts on the basis of a common analytical agenda, was the representation of four possible 'perspective scenarios', respectively addressed to 'decline in different ways the relations and institutional structures and institutional supremacies': namely, the so called scenarios of local proliferation (municipalities supremacy), subsided cohesion (regions supremacy), central networks (state supremacy) and selective interdependencies (multi-level governance). As above suggested, the north-western platform within Itater 2020 research was made coinciding with the 'north-west' FuMaS, overall extended, horizontally, between the French border and the Milanese metropolis and, vertically, between the Swiss border and the Ligurian Sea. This is indeed one of the main economic integration zones at EU level, in conditions of competing with the 'European pentagon'. Moreover, concerned by two main European corridors, this macroregion may be seen as a natural Euro-Mediterranean platform, crossed by three great lines of global importance: one

connecting the Balkans and Eastern Europe to Western Europe and the Iberian peninsula; a second one connecting the Far East to Western Europe through the Suez channel and the Mediterranean Sea; a third one connecting the North Africa and the Middle East to Southern and Central Europe.

North-western platform as opportunity for a multi-dimensional survey

In the light of 'thematic analyses' carried out at national level in Itater 2020 research, the north-western platform has been interpreted, like all the six chosen macroregional contexts, according to four main analytical steps, namely: corridors/territories relationships, dynamics of change, present and future actions programmes and visions of regional planning.

Corridors/territories relationships

If relationships between corridors and territory are considered a main strength aspect for north-western Italy at larger scales, this becomes problematic when territories are locally observed. Therefore, 23 'local identity units' retrievable in north-western Italy have been distinguished according to their localisation with respect to European corridors and, generally, to the existing and programmed transport networks, namely: A. Local territories in a nodal position for their metropolitan rank (Milan, Turin, Genoa) or explicit crossway function (Novara); B. Local territories in a crossing position with respect to corridors (Susa Valley, Verbano-Cusio-Ossola province, Alessandria); C. Local territories in an accompanying position (all the others).

Dynamics of change

Modifications of urban densities occurred in the last decade especially in the southern side of the Milanese crown, in northern Piedmont along the main transport axes, in the Aosta plain and, in a more widespread form, in southern Piedmont. They were weaker on the Ligurian coast. Overall, the traditional centre-periphery model, centred on Milan and Turin, has definitively left place to a polycentric system in north-western Italy. A much more complex and trendy networking territorial structure includes intro- and extroversive elements: a combination of still close and already open local systems, the latter capable to relate themselves to extra-regional 'long networks'.

Present and future action programmes

The 2000-2006 structural funds objective 2 target areas, as well as the Leader+Community initiative ones, interweaved a significant stitch of ambits supported for production and competitiveness (extensible even outside the national borders), in which the areas concerned by 'negotiated programmes' (pacts of employments, etc.) play a pivotal role. Moreover, the cross-border cooperation areas, established since the early '90s, shape a context of joint development promotion, which is particularly strengthened by single planning initiatives like 'Espace Mont Blanc', 'Regio Insubrica' and 'Mencantour Park'. Against this backdrop, the lack of coordination at a macroregional level remains a major problem.

Visions of regional planning

All the four Italian regions concerned have a spatial plan in force or in course of approval, namely: Piano territoriale regionale (Ptr) in Piedmont (1997), currently

under revision, Piano territoriale paesistico (Ptp) in the Aosta Valley (1998), Ptr Project in Liguria (2003) and Ptr Strategic document in Lombardy (2005). The high degree of self-attention of regional spatial policies shows that they are basically finalised to strengthen single competitive advantages outside from a common perspective. This poses problems of overall coherence of north-western Italy spatial policies, especially as far as infrastructures are concerned.

'Sit-In' for a voluntary scenario

Basing on developed surveys, possible 'perspective scenarios' for north-western Italy have been represented in the form of 'trend' and 'voluntary' scenarios. Trend scenarios of local proliferation, of subsidised cohesion and of central networks are all featured by the attempt of one administrative level to prevail on the others as for spatial policy decisions (respectively, local, regional or state's supremacies). All of them are based on respectable intentions but, for different reasons, no one of them is totally convincing in face of the complex challenges concerning north-western Italy in the immediate future. Therefore, the voluntary scenario of selective interdependencies is proposed as a possible 'guideline vision', which implies not only the acknowledgement of strategic advantages of polycentric development, but also a shared commitment on a multilevel governance process. Particularly, five 'interdependent territorial systems' (Sit-Ins) are identified within the north-west 'functional macroregional system' (Fumas). These are conceived as geometrically variable spatial units

(without fixed boundaries), not conditioned by the main administrative partitions and addressed to compose a concrete functional and operational framework in accordance with the Itater 2020 research hypotheses. Briefly, each Sit-In may be thought as an organised ambit of local identity units, which requires the reinforcement of internal polycentrism according to the performing capacities of respective competitiveness potentialities. Not every Sit-In includes a main networks node, capable to commute inner and global fluxes (in both senses). Therefore, the nodes performance in distributing advantages among the various Sit-Ins (also outside the Fumas) has to be improved through the reinforcement of polycentric relations between them. In such perspective, a strategic vision of north-western Italy represents also the demand of new methods for a shared territorial governance. In other words, Sit-Ins pose the need to acknowledge and involve in the decision-making processes not only the established administrative authorities at the various levels, but also the more relevant cooperation and 'lobbying' networks, currently operating in the context.

Conclusions: Sit-Ins as tool of EU territorial governance

The definition of the aforementioned Sit-Ins pays certainly some limitations due to a research developed in a few time and with a scarce availability of resources, which has not permitted, first and foremost, the stakeholders involvement of in the scenarios design. However, the adopted methodology and the 'Sit-In' concept itself seem to answer to the need, the more and more manifest in Italy as in Europe, that planning tools and practices are progressively

harmonised to the EU territorial governance process, in order to increase national and transnational competitiveness as well as territorial cohesion. Of course, the crucial importance of 'polycentric development' and 'multi-level governance' concepts as for the attainment of territorial cohesion in Europe is well known to European planners. Besides, the strategic role of spatial visions in fostering the governance process is equally considered. Both the aforementioned concepts refer, when a visioning effort is required, to the 'network' metaphor. This is considered by policy analysts an 'interpretative lens' of particular usefulness, when Community policy processes have to be explained or oriented. Nevertheless, the fleeting character of this as of any metaphor implies, in this case, that the network is conceived both as 'independent variable' and as 'form of representation'. Otherwise, the 'governance' concept could be easily confused, being this or not in the policy-makers' intentions, with concepts of renewed 'influence structure', pure 'environment of organisations' or simple 'arena for interests intermediation'. The 'Sit-In' hypothesis, here applied to north-western Italy but potentially extensible to other European contexts, is precisely an attempt to draw a bidimensional hologram, in which networks are the form of representation of polycentric territorial structures and, at the same time, become the independent variable of a governance process which is not predetermined by the established boundaries of power. Particularly, the vanishing borders of Sit-Ins are led to emancipate the concerned territories from geopolitical prejudices, in

order to make them concrete 'laboratories of subsidiarity', also in a cross-border and transnational perspective. In conclusion, acting as the connectors between 'functional macroregional systems' (Fumas) and 'local identity units', Sit-Ins might constitute the strategic spatial units for planning processes which are aware and responsible of the new rules of the game posed by EU territorial governance.