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Editorial

URBAN AREAS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Alberto Clementi

The Inter-ministerial Committee for Urban Policies (CIPU), which was set up by law No. 134 of 2012, started its work at the beginning of the year to prepare our country to programme Community Funding for 2014-2020. The declared objective is to set in motion an organic policy for cities, integrating the various levels of government, sectorial policies and ordinary and additional financial resources, with the intention of avoiding a confused overlap, as has happened in Italy's on-going urban practices so far. The European Commission, for its part, has explicitly manifested its intention to strengthen the role of the cities in future cohesion policies aimed to promote economic development, social inclusion and environmental protection. The new philosophy is an integrated sustainable urban development as the keystone to stimulate innovative projects, commensurate with the specific needs of areas which have been hardest hit by critical social and environmental phenomena.

To follow up on this new policy setting, the Italian State is putting together a National Urban Agenda, with the cooperation of the several central and local administrations, as a prelude to future partnership contracts and operative programmes for the sustainable development of urban areas to be inserted in the Community Strategic Framework 2014-2020. At the moment the Agenda is still just getting started and still reflects the several programmes coming from the several institutional actors, not yet brought together into an overall organic design able to enunciate priorities and times for interventions.

Among the contributions presented in this phase, by the various administrations of the State, Regions and Municipalities, the document presented by the Ministry of the Environment stands out for the clarity of its intentions, "Sustainable Development in Urban Areas, 2014-2020 Programme". Moving from the objectives of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth enunciated by European Strategy 2020, as well as those of a rapid transition toward an economy with low levels of carbon emissions outlined in the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, the document develops a previous "Five Point Strategy for Sustainable Development in Italy" from the same Ministry, which had established as strategic objectives the decarbonizing of the economy, safety in the territory, the reuse of abandoned industrial areas, the integrated management of waste and of water resources. As prioritized issues for intervention were identified ecological cities, those which protect, manage and valorise natural resources (water, air, land, biodiversity and solid urban waste); accessible cities, those which promote sustainable transportation of people and goods, in particular with bike and pedestrian paths; intelligent and energetically sustainable cities, which aim at limiting the consumption of

electrical and thermal energy, by implementing a smart grid and networks of district heating with the perspective of “urban energy islands”; resilient cities, to increase cities’ capacity to adapt to climate change and reduce risks from natural events; productive cities for energy and environmental redevelopment of firms and productivity systems involved in the cities; shared and inclusive cities to improve urban governance with the use of ICT technologies aiming at e-democracy and incentivizing monitoring processes and procedures for green public procurement, which the various levels of the public administration should adopt systematically. These various actions are related to the norms for environmental and energy policies for urban areas established by the European Community to demonstrate their coherence with current regulations.

The proposal of the Ministry of the Environment seems both coherent and ambitious, covering most of the relative themes in the sustainable development of cities, according to what is already happening in many other European cities. But the impression that emerges from a complete reading of the proposals advanced also by the other administrations from central, regional and local levels, is that environmental sustainability is still not understood by the various government agencies as a shared totalizing value. At the same time, the exceptional seriousness of the current moment, weighed down by a prolonged recessive crisis which has brought the Italian economy to its knees is not at all favourable to the great cultural turning point which is implied in the development model inspired by environmental sustainability. Further, as we have already observed in the past, an eminently environmental formulation of sustainability could compromise its recognition as a guiding value of urban change having, as it must, to take into consideration the economic development and social cohesion which are equally important, and explicitly mentioned in the Community’s cohesion policies (see our previous EWT editorials “Bio-policy of sustainability”, No 1, 2011; “Beyond the technologies of sustainability”, No. 3, 2012).

If we move from our country’s programmatic desires to its reality, we realise how advanced the position taken by the Ministry of the Environment is as compared to the situation, which is still essentially backward regarding climate change, and the more urgent environmental challenges. Though the process of improving the cities’ environment performance has generally been initiated, we find ourselves faced with an very wide range of local experiences of various effectiveness levels, often with serious problems but also with episodes of excellence in single sectors – as with differentiated waste collection or the production of renewable energy, whether wind or solar, within a general backwardness of holistic and integrated urban policies of existent cities to “reach sustainability”. Moreover, the unexpected luck of a new theme like smart city, also promoted and financed by the European Community, risks overshadowing the centrality of the environmental question, above all when one does not manage to connect adequately the global control of the local urban metabolisms with the enhancing of the self-regulating intelligence of the several cities, that should however be understood as balanced ecosystems, and as far as possible self-sufficient, as regards the need for local production and consumption to maintain an equilibrium. So that the themes of the sustainability of the urban areas and those of organizational management of big data and those of digital technologies targeted to optimise the activities within the cities, which tend still today to overlap in a very confused fashion (between the national urban agenda and the digital agendas there is still no explicit nexus), there is no adequate programmatic priority and trials of innovation useful in identifying the best suited combinations in the specific contexts.

The question of environmental sustainability in our country intersects with that of the Mezzogiorno, where in the cities – as Zanchini argues – there is a generalized condition of deficiency as concerns access to fundamental resources (water, energy), public services and civil facility infrastructure. And where the

settlements and the landscape – beyond the local contingencies – deteriorate day after day becoming less and less livable, in the meantime the commons are plundered and their regeneration becomes increasingly improbable, in a global economic crisis that worsens progressively the disintegration of the civil fabric and the environmental deterioration of recent decades.

But it is exactly in the Mezzogiorno where sustainability could become a strategic resource for development, generative of a different model taking inspiration from the slow economy, capable of valorising the resources that are abundant there notwithstanding past neglect: unique landscapes, archeological and historical-cultural sites of great interest, high quality agricultural products, important gastronomic and cultural traditions and a wide-spread disposition to hospitality and conviviality. So this is where one would expect a high appreciation for sustainability policies, useful in redeeming the atavistic backwardness of the cities, economy and environment.

Instead it is not so. The new culture to respect and valorise cultural sites which underlies the concept of sustainability struggles to impose itself as a model in a context which is still marked on the whole by neglect and individualist appropriation of available resources, mirroring through the environment the wide-spread phenomena of deterioration of social capital and public life.

Fortunately things are beginning to change, for the moment activity is still fragmentary and nonorganic, but it is concrete. This issue of the magazine EWT has chosen to highlight some of the initiatives promoted by these regions that have finally begun to believe in the value of sustainability, though with actions which are often episodic and sectorial. The experience of Puglia Region stands out, not only because it has made a serious commitment to develop renewable energy, but also because it has undertaken to save the savable putting in place a good Landscape Plan, recognised on the national level for the accuracy of its cognitive base and for the importance it gives to the protection of the rural heritage. At the same time it has managed to initiate a positive strategy of urban regeneration, which has so far yielded only modest results from a qualitative point of view, but they have been considerable in that they have brought awareness to the towns on the themes of recovering the existent.

As described in the contribution by Siddi, also in the Sardinian experience a lot of attention has been paid to landscape. This region has been the forerunner in the new generation of Regional Landscape Plans, though the defeat it suffered in its attempt to assure integral protection of the coastlines has demonstrated its limits, when it found itself opposed to interests which are too powerful on a regional level. This has scaled back the potential of a new development model, on which however work is still being done, though using experimental projects associated to the Community programme LabNet plus. In this same region we also note the effort to activate the area of sustainable building, thanks to tools such as the dedicated Trade Fair, by means of which specific new occasions to reward innovation which are then incorporated in Municipal building codes.

The Abruzzi, which notwithstanding its abundance of natural reserves and its rhetoric as Europe's "Green Region", has shown little interest in environmental themes within its cities, recently is distinguishing itself for its surprising interest in the implementation of eco-neighbourhoods, promoted experimentally by the Region with the partnership of University "G.D'Annunzio", Chieti-Pescara. This is the first application of the new culture of SSUD, Sustainability Sensitive Urban Design, which has barely taken root in Italy, even in the Trentino-Alto Adige Region which has found ways to invest positively in developing the sector of the green economy, of which the eco-neighbourhoods are an aspect when they are carried out by the construction sector and local entrepreneurs.

But it is above all in Naples that we have testimony to the importance of sustainability as a philosophy to regenerate the existent city, trusting in the power of urban projects to finally to reintegrate locally the multiplicity of actions in the sector. The set of projects for East Naples shows that the sustainability party can go beyond new urban expansions, and that the land consumption should be drastically reduced in the future in favour of first recovering the existent. As Russo says, “East Naples is an emblematic space with strong potential. Redevelopment will be the cornerstone of the new idea of the city, an idea that can become the model for a significant innovation for Naples’ future. This is an area in which an in-depth urban regeneration is possible with the radical conversion of its use functions, reclaiming its sites, its soils, recovering those environmental characteristics that represent the extraordinary identity of the city and its ecosystem, the regime of the waters, restoring the soil to agriculture and the network of connections among the lands and the agrarian landscapes on an urban and metropolitan scale”.

Finally, in the Mezzogiorno we find ourselves faced with an overall picture made up of disjointed actions, still without any general direction at a central or regional level, where only a few pilot initiatives manage to recompose themselves through an urban project inspired by the objectives enunciated by the European Commission mentioned at the beginning. However the path has been plotted and one can hope – that with or without the National Urban Agenda – the initiatives aiming at the sustainability of the existent city will multiply in the near future. At least this is the hope with which EWT observes the Italian scene, as we continue in future issues to look at international best practice for the reconversion of cities on the principles of sustainable development.

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