

Preface

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In a research programme entitled “New forms of governance for strategic territorial development”, coordinated by me as part of a Research Programme of National Interest (PRIN) in 2009, an analysis was conducted on six European regions. One of these was Apulia, in Italy. And Apulia has figured in a variety of volumes already published, dedicated to the discussion of existing and new intermediate institutions as possible agents for development within the framework of EU policies.

This publication, while placed appropriately within the above noted research framework, is dedicated entirely to the region of Apulia. Accordingly, the discussion continues to focus on the same subjects, called upon to be protagonists, likewise the same strategies, and the same questions (answered only in part). Looking at the overall experience — or at least the substantial part explored here — the picture is disappointing. Perhaps because the expectations were too many or too high. At all events, the judgement of “failure” that recurs repeatedly in certain of the interviews is undoubtedly a worry.

The resonance of this noticeably negative judgement is especially strong in the case of Local Action Groups, leading players in Apulia as in other regions of Italy. Indeed LAGs — the acronym by which they are most widely known — were seen as the new intermediate institutions that would provide governance for the territory and support the economic development of specific areas. The intention of the European Union and the Region is that they should offer assets and public service. The tasks entrusted to LAGs, perhaps over-optimistically in hindsight, were to organize and coordinate the demand originating from the territories and regulate existing interests there. Also, precisely because of their make-up, with both public and private subjects, it was expected that they would favour cohesion and strengthening of local communities.

The hopes placed in LAGs seem — thus far, at least — to have been misplaced in the case of Apulia. And not only Apulia, as we know from studies of the other regions aforementioned.

In a scenario where they ought to promote direct contact and cooperation between subjects not only with business interests, LAGs seem able, rather, to provide only a very limited participation. Ordinary citizens, moreover, have never been able to exercise any real influence on LAGs. Despite their supposed commitment to rural development, in particular, it seems actually that there was little awareness on the part of LAGs as to what “rural” and “rurality” really mean, whereas it is true that their decision-making powers are small. Our case study highlights the critical aspects, which include the opportunist conduct of many actors, the emergence of awkward self-promotional attitudes, and the overlap of political/administrative domains.

*If these are issues arising from the management of LAGs, there may be various causes. Firstly, one can cite the homogenization of a model imposed by the Region, which has stifled the localist vocation, hence the *raison d’être* of single LAGs, impairing their independence and their capacity for initiative. But one could also point, rightly, to the less than transparent relationship between sectoral and rural development policies, the asymmetry between the points at which the “determinants” of change are located and the points at which governance is exercised, also the lack of decision-making capability in the very structures of governance. In short, as discernible in the case study, the expectation of an action rooted in the territory has not materialized, and neither has the expectation that traditional practices driven by patronage and/or familialism would be abandoned. And all this, notwithstanding the actual experience should have fitted into one of the more successful EU initiatives, namely the Leader Approach.*

And yet, the development policies promoted by the European Union could have brought about the switch in approach from top-down to bottom-up. There has however been some movement in this direction, favouring an increase (albeit modest) in the level of actor participation and integration. One has also seen the advent of strategic planning, in some measure, heralding a more innovative

approach that could succeed in overcoming the limits of traditional planning. In these areas, the European stimulus would seem to have been effective.

But strategic plans have ultimately become overlaid and overlapped, the choices made have not always been consistent with the type of plan they claimed to emulate, and there has not been a tangible willingness to innovate. Consequently, the planning adopted by the territories has been derailed by opportunistic or sectoral influences, following an old model of neo-utilitarian inspiration. There is the risk that in the future too, this same acceptance of European models could lead to a watering-down of local potentialities.

The picture emerging from the contributions to this publication is therefore not one of optimism. One can only hope that the institutional and administrative changes introduced — in Apulia as elsewhere — will ultimately encourage and assist territorial cohesion policies.

