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## A GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE TERRITORIAL PLANNING<sup>1</sup>.

*Abstract* - This paper explores an approach to territorial planning from a purely geographical perspective, with the idea to approach the top-down planning concept, similarly as if it were presented «bottom-up». The supporting thesis is that the geographical approaches (such as those proposed by the different addresses of this discipline) have the conceptual, interpretative and methodological tools to overcome, via a holistic and systemic outlook, the hierarchical and pyramidal formulation. Process, distribution and power relations are identified to recognize and explicate the subtended political choices, to get to the heart of problems. Building the foundations to develop a plan «with» the inhabitants, which are the communities that live in the place, and not solely «for» them. Another aim of this paper is to try to offer interpretative keys to «read» and/or evaluate and/or elaborate on participating planning policies (on different spatial scale levels) for a sustainable and ecological equilibrated government of territory.

1. *Premise.* This paper explores an approach to territorial planning from a purely geographical perspective<sup>2</sup>, with the idea to approach the top-down planning concept, similarly as if it were presented “bottom-up” (par. 2). The supporting thesis is that the geographical approaches (such as those proposed by the different addresses of this discipline) have the conceptual, interpretative and methodological tools (par. 3) to overcome, via a holistic and systemic outlook, the hierarchical and pyramidal formulation. Process, distribution and power relations (Raffestin, 1981; 1998) are identified to recognize and explicate the subtended political choices (D’Aquino, 2002), to get to the heart of problems. Building the foundations to develop a plan “with” the *inhabitants*, which are the communities that live in the place, and not solely “for” them (par. 4). Planning “with” the *inhabitants* considers the persons not as paradigmatic actors (who, by definition, do not have any common goal

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<sup>1</sup> A first draft of this work has been written for the national Conference “Geography and territorial planning” during the “Giornate della Geografia” in 2007. This study is part of an academic research project (Department of Geographical and Merceological Science, Faculty of Economy, University of Bari) entitled: “Educazione alla pianificazione territoriale e partecipativa: comunicazione geografica nella formazione universitaria e post universitaria con le amministrazioni pubblica”.

<sup>2</sup> About planning theories and their evolution, referring specifically to the structures and power relations, and the concept of planning as a tool to drive social change, we guide the reader to works by Friedmann (1987, 1998, 2013), about multidisciplinary approaches and paths, we refer to the proposal by Archibugi (2003, 2007).

and their needs and interests have to be interpreted), but rather as syntagmatic actors (who are persons that act collectively to reach common objectives). Therefore, a decision process that, according to the idea of ascendant territorial planning by D'Aquino (2002), is the result of collective learning by action, based on an independent process on accounts of exogenous animation. Each decisive step has to be the responsibility of, and determined by, local actors who become so-called, local decision-makers. Another aim of this paper is to try to offer interpretative keys to "read" and/or evaluate and/or elaborate on participating planning policies (on different spatial scale levels) for a sustainable and ecological equilibrated government of territory.

2. *Signs and considerations about bottom-up planning.* Characteristics of bottom-up planning can be linked to participating experiences in Europe and the USA concerning community power (D'Aquino, 2002) that, since 1980, theoretically refers to a new planning paradigm that attributes a foreground role to non-governmental organizations and to groups that represent the communities (Farinos Dasi, 2009). Today, bottom-up participation is more and more present in public debates and considered in institutional plans (on different spatial scale levels) with the aim of arriving at a mutual vision and decisions that are shared by various territorial actors. Nevertheless, if top-down planning can have a technicistic and a paternalistic formulation (that brings into act the supposed interest of the population and, thus, "for" the people, that presumes to intrinsically know its values and to be able to optimally interpret them, in regard to the needs and the "good" for the collective), then bottom-up planning is often the result of institutional will and initiative<sup>3</sup>, rather than the product of a real social and political moral responsibility and of a consequent self-organization process. This occurs also in the most innovative forms (Prezioso, 2004), which are, in Italy, currently being implemented by the Tuscan and Apulia Regions (Poli, 2013).

Using the theoretic and conceptual construct by Turco (1998), we can affirm that, in this type of planning process, the acts that produce territory, i.e. referring to the symbolic dimension (designation: denominative acts), material dimension (construction and/or predisposition of participating spaces) and organizational dimension (participating modalities), come about by governmental inputs. So, participation risks being reduced to the level of mere "representation". In this way, the top-down and the bottom-up approaches are essentially two faces of the same coin. Effectively, on a conceptual level, both refer to a pyramidal structure, which is a result of hierarchic and binary logic (high/low; core/periphery; developed/underdeveloped) that can be "inverted" (fig. 1), but where the decision power stems from institutional actors. In the "classical" hierarchic-pyramidal structure (fig. 1a), the base confers legitimation to the peak that manages the decision power (citizens can be informed and also called to express their consensus and/or disagreement, but only at the consultative level). In the "inverted" hierarchic-pyramidal structure (fig. 1b), it is the peak (institutional actors) that gives legitimation to the base (social actors) transferring a part of its "own" decision power and establishing width, spaces, limits and conditions for practicing it. So the participation becomes part of a contest where management models are characterized by rationalism, centralization and hierarchy (Hamel, 1986; 1997). Furthermore, it is integrated in a neoliberal logic (and governance) and practiced in the so-called "invited" spaces (Cornwall, 2002, 2004; MirafTAB, 2006, 2009; Sinwell, 2010, 2012) that are established, produced and legitimated mainly from the government (on each spatial scale level), rather than "invented" spaces. The latter are produced by the collective experiences of those excluded. According to Chambers (1983), they are the result of a real bottom-up approach<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> After all, as Bengs (2005, p. 9) emphasizes, "we cannot close our eyes to the fact that the elites are the architects of governance structures, never the crowd. Fairness for all may emerge when the huge majority of the lower parts of the social ladder are strong enough to establish their interpretations of fairness, providing the elite does not corrupt their ideas, but this seems very unlikely to occur".

<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Sinwell (2012) underlines that the inversion of roles, between invited and invented participating spaces, is not necessarily more democratic. It can cause the exclusion of other people if the alternative is not supported by a radical choice focused on social justice.

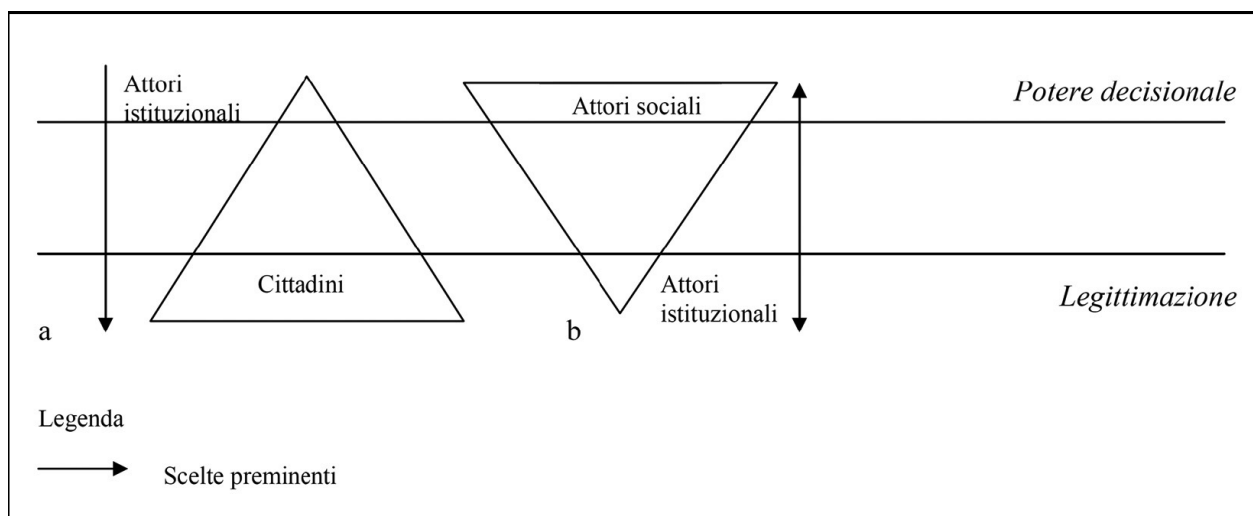


Figure 1 – a) “classical” hierarchic-pyramidal structure; b) “inverted” hierarchic-pyramidal structure”.

Source: own figure.

After all, the language is not neutral and, according to Raffestin (1981), language is a means of power. In fact, the idea of bottom-up planning asserts, from a semantic point of view, the fact that there is a “high” and a “low”, which means accepting and using the hierarchic model for interpretation, representation and management of power. From this point of view, citizens’ participation in planning can be viewed as a way to gain lost social legitimation, for example, because of mistrust due to inefficient, non-transparent and corrupt management (as less and less participation in the voting process indicates). In general, it can be used as an instrument to construct, manage and/or consolidate the political consensus and power, to prevent tensions and conflicts, to eliminate resistance and opposition to the territorial transformation process. In fact, various studies show how the participation processes can be used in a rhetoric way to support propaganda and/or manipulation and/or placation<sup>5</sup> (Arnstein, 1969). More specifically, they can be used to augment the weight of inside actors, legitimating unpopular administrative decisions and developing the initiatives according to the visions and interests of dominant actors, while avoiding resolving the actual disputes (Hamel, 1995; White, 2000; Cinq-mars et Fortin, 2007). Furthermore, the participation process becomes a requirement to access international funding<sup>6</sup>. For these reasons they can become a self-legitimizing tool of local policy to face international and national monitoring bodies (Bautès e Soares Gonçalves, 2009), as well as portraying a hip aim if they are pursued without a clear vision of their benefits (Farinos Dasi, 2009). However, participation without equal power distribution, citizen control and a real capacity of the inhabitants to have an affect in decisional processes, is an empty ritual that, as underlined by Arnstein (1969, p. 216) almost 50 years ago, “*It allows the power-holders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo*”.

<sup>5</sup> Arnstein (1969) established the citizens’ participating scale, defining eight typologies referring to the real power of citizens in order to determine plans and/or programs. These are manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control. In reality, the first levels do not establish an actual power for citizens (or only at a symbolic or representative level) and, for this reason, they are an illusion and a simulation rather than a true participation.

<sup>6</sup> If participation is managed according to modes imposed by exogenous actors, then it can produce a situation of self-exclusion by people, which has no requirements. This can cause or aggravate inequities, affecting the pre-existing equilibriums, destabilizing the system of relations and social organization (Ciervo, 2007, pp. 965-968).

3. *Ideas for territorial planning in a geographical key.* From a geographical point of view, planning can be described as the management of the territorial resources to satisfy community's needs on the different spatial scale levels and, thus, it can be based on the analysis of relations among resources, territory and community, of local changes (which can be continuous or irregular) and of social groups' perceptions.

Referring to the relationship analysis, each disciplinary address and, more generally, the geographical tradition as a whole, offers important conceptual and methodological tools. Such disciplinary addresses range from Classical Geography, founded by Vidal de la Blache and humanist environmentalism, offers a science of places, to New Geography as a science of interaction between areas, to Radical Geography according to its distinct approaches; namely social (Marxist Geography), psycho-social (behaviorism), ecological (Ecological Geography) and systemic (Geography of territorial systems), which offer diverse observational points (referring to their respective space and time contexts and consequent visions, perceptions and aims). These diverse observational points permit ideas less partial about the situation. Put into practice, the focus on the vertical relationship between community and territory, human beings and environment (which was considered old after 1950 with the advent of spatial analysis and Modern Geography) should permit studying the population-resources relationship, which is important in order to understand the ecological "break" points. However, since it is impossible to have exhaustive knowledge of territory, it remains an insufficient reason to set aside this kind of analysis that could otherwise reveal precious information for geographical interpretation and territorial planning. Horizontal relationships could additionally permit focussing the attention on a current and common phenomenon affecting each territory. It considers the relationship between various areas, which produce power relations (Raffestin, 1981), dominance and control with repercussions at different levels of spatial scale. After all, the interpretative and methodological tools offered by Radical Geography permit identifying phenomena such as inequality, tensions and ecological disequilibrium (also according to the social meaning of the word). This "integrated" approach thus draws multiple interpretative tools and could contribute towards a greater understanding of the various aspects of territorial issues. Consequently, territorial planning could consider the analysis of resources in regard to, both, the vertical relations between environment and community (according to the culture and technology), and among areas directed by the demands (considering quantitative and qualitative aspects) and offers (according to availability) in "play". The study of both levels of relations could be useful for interpretation of environmental impacts, ecological tensions and social conflicts, on all levels of spatial scale. Interpreting these issues produces a plan with social and ecological goals.

The analysis of the territorial changes shows the (exogenous or endogenous) origin and the (continuous or irregular) nature of the inputs. In this way, it is possible to clearly identify various actors (with their interests, aims and scales of action), the motives and reasons behind conflicts. The latter can occur as a result of power relations and domination processes (Raffestin, 1981), different distribution of costs and benefits, distinct value systems, asymmetry of power on the decisional and management level or externalization of environmental costs (Faggi, Turco, 2001). The analysis of the change could permit identifying and focussing on "bases of living" (Turco, 2003, pp. 13, 14), which are the existence of all elements characterized by the attitude to endure, the capacity to autonomously preserve one's own identity after the change and maintaining the conditions for change. Analysis of community could be based on tools "offered" by Geography of Population (referring both to quantitative and qualitative aspects of the phenomenon, and also to a diachronic dimension of territorial organization) and by Behavioral Geography. After all, Geography brought to light the importance of images depicting the knowledge of inhabitants of a town, more than forty years ago. Lynch (1969) was among the first geographers who systematically studied the relationships among subjects and territory. He has shown how these images change according to social classes (culture, incomes) and other categories (age, sex). Knowing these mental images could permit understanding the importance of perceived and actual relations, and so they could be implemented as a tool to understand the reasons behind human actions. Considering that the human being, through

its perceptions, attitudes, social legitimation, etc., affects the environment (Bailly, 1992, p. 53), it is possible to affirm that the Behavioural geography could be very useful in order to identify the relationship between the community and the environment. This could also be very valuable for interpreting the tensions and ecological conflicts (also in the social meaning of the word), and thus for managing the territorial issues and planning.

4. *From sustainable development to territorial development.* The concept of development, as any other concept, is not neutral and there continues to be international discussion about its different meanings. Even sustainable development is at the centre of a wide and heated academic and political debate, with even its concept being questioned and different perceptions of sustainability raising many conceptual traps<sup>7</sup> (Magnaghi, 2000). Others are of the opinion that sustainable development is an oxymoron<sup>8</sup> (Serge Latouche, 1992, 1993), encouraging a post-development reflexion<sup>9</sup> (AA. VV., 2003) concerning the various academic disciplines (Sachs, 1992; Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1997; Rahnema, 1997), and also the geography<sup>10</sup> (Sparke, 2006; Sidaway, 2007). However, this debate will not be discussed here, but we do assume that the locution “sustainable development”, referring to the binomials "environment-development" and "nature-human being", highlights a dichotomy vision, which is, perhaps, the basis of the problem. We think that the territorial approach (Dematteis, 1991) can be better for, both, the geographical analysis and for allowing us to overcome the binary formulation. In fact, it assumes inhabitants as reference points and has the aim to promote their capacity of self-organization (Magnaghi, 2000). It is based on the idea that local development stems from the relation between a society and a territory (Dematteis e Governa, 2005).

From this standpoint, the territorialisation process is the construction of virtuous relations among original elements of the territory (natural, constructed and anthropic environment). Likewise, the deterritorialisation is conceived as a consequence of the destructuring of these relations and of the progressive “liberation from territorial bonds” (Magnaghi, 2000, p. 21) that change the equilibrium among the system’s elements. In this way, the environmental and social issues can be interpreted as deterritorialisation processes. So, to create or “restore” an equilibrium situation, and thus its ecological “sustainability”, it needs to re-establish and/or re-phrase the territorial relations. Consequently, planning for the territorial development could look to the riterritorialisation through the production of “territorialisation acts” (Turco, 1988). The latter should be based on the critical interpretation of the reality and finalised to produce a “new” logic, a “symbolic, practical and sensing control of the territory” by people that *inhabit* the territory and not by persons that administer it. In fact, those who *inhabit* the territory have a primary and vital interest in the sustainability of territorial organization and relations among systemic elements, guaranteeing the reproducibility of resources and the cultural continuity. After all, the “production” of territory according to the ecological sustainable criterion should, on the one hand, be based on the continuity of the traditional socio-economic organization and, on the other hand, it could demand the material and organizational transformation of territory<sup>11</sup>. Practically, this could mean, as a first phase, an elaboration (or re-elaboration) of plans for management of water and energetic resources, wastes, mobility and,

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<sup>7</sup> In the opinion of Magnaghi (2000, pp. 50, 51), sustainability risks covering the structural causes of environmental and social degradation by actions to support development that does not put in question the rules that produce the same degradation.

<sup>8</sup> The word "development" contains the concept of economic growth, which cannot be considered sustainable because it causes an increasing consumption of natural and energetic resources and, at the same time, generates a continuous and growing production of wastes (that, also if recycled, need energy and water).

<sup>9</sup> In 2002, this consideration has been developed at the conference "*Défaire le développement. Refaire le monde*" at the UNESCO (putting in question the concepts of growing, poverty, need and aid). About this, we refer to the paper by Lakshman Yapa (2003, pp. 111-124) from the Geography Department of Pennsylvania State University.

<sup>10</sup> *Post-Development Geography* is focused on the external aids that interfere with the popular sovereignty and on post-colonial relations (Sparke, 2006), as well as on the deconstruction of the official dominant discourse (Sidaway, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> About this, it is interesting the concept of “novelties” introduced by Ploeg and others (2006) referring to the innovations that improve the tradition, updating but without creating “gaps” and breaks.

generally, of local public services. A second phase could be focused on a reconversion of the production and consumption according to the local key, in an attempt to maximise effectiveness in the management of resources and reduce the ecological impact at the different levels of spatial scale.

The plan for a sustainable territorial development, beyond the aim to improve the quality of life and well-being, should embrace a policy of responsibility for community and for the “*oikos*”, that is the common house, (at each level of spatial scale). Therefore, it should also be focused on the reduction of the following phenomena: social inequality, ecological disequilibrium, tensions and conflicts (table 1). These last aspects, in a lot of cases, are the effects of a commodification’s conception of space (and resources). This is considered for its economic value rather than its existential value. Consequently, it is governed based on the interests of the group or social classes with greater power. When this occurs, we progress from social planning to devising a plan in order to meet demands among individuals with different visions, which can produce tensions (Bailly, 1992, p. 56). With the aim to avoid this, the territory has not been considered on the basis of its exchange value, but rather it has been “reinterpreted” as a common good.

**Table 1** – Territorial planning according to ecological sustainability criterions.

|             |                         | <i>Key elements</i>              | <i>Object of analysis</i>   |
|-------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| I<br>PHASE  | TERRITORIAL<br>ANALYSIS | RESOURCES                        | Vertical and horizontal relationship.   |
|             |                         | TERRITORY                        | Nature and dynamic of changes.  |
|             |                         | COMMUNITY                        | Social groups’ perception.  |
|             |                         | <i>Issues</i>                    | <i>Proposals</i>  |
| II<br>PHASE | PROPOSALS               | INEQUALITY                       | Reinterpretation and elaboration of the <i>resources-population relationship</i> , according to social equity models.   |
|             |                         | ECOLOGICAL<br>DISEQUILIBRIUM     | Reinterpretation and elaboration of the <i>resources-population relationship</i> , according to models based on the concept of limit and on the respect of ecological cycles.   |
|             |                         | SOCIAL TENSIONS<br>AND CONFLICTS | Reinterpretation and elaboration of the <i>resources-population relationship</i> considering the perceptions and the needs of the different economic and socio-spatial classes. |

Source: own table.

5. *Final remarks.* The “participating” planning concept produced by the institutional initiative and studied “for” citizens is practiced in the “invited” spaces and legitimized by the political input, rather than by the common consciousness and/or a shared social vision. Thus, those interested in solving a specific issue for practical or ideal reasons can be recognised, however it cannot guarantee an effective, widely spread and permanent engagement of inhabitants. After all, in order that the issues connected to key elements of sustainable territorial planning (table 1), i.e. inequality/social justice, disequilibrium/ecological equilibrium and conflicts, do not remain at the level of verification, principle, enunciation or at most representation, a radical reflection of the population-resources relations (both vertical and horizontal) should be considered, as well as their possible reinterpretation and elaboration for pragmatic action concerning the management of resources and territorial organization. So, with this in mind, sustainable territorial planning needs to individualize and consider (on a paradigmatic and relational level) the irregular changes that have historically produced

meaningful “breakdowns” and “gaps” in regards to traditional government of territory. In addition, it is important to evaluate the economic and political choices that produce or increase ecological disequilibrium, social inequity and conflicts, to study inhabitants’ attitudes towards issues as well as the collective ideas of the inhabitants. This analysis is fundamental to try to determine the social and productive organizations that trigger the above problems, but, above all, to enable riterritorialisation as a realistic aim. This is particularly important because it re-elaborates a version of virtuous relations among people, resources and territory for preeminent satisfaction of the community’s existential needs within that territory. This “new” riterritorialisation does not have the same paradigms and methodologies that have produced disequilibrium and conflicting situations<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to note the metaphor used by Magnaghi (2000, p. 9), namely that “the territory is the result from the fecundation of nature by culture”. In fact, when fecundation can be considered as the result of a “love relation”, the territory’s development is equilibrated, and the landscape is harmonic. However, when the fecundation is the consequence of a rape, a violent and embezzling relationship, or even involves the absence of respect and intelligence, the territory is strongly unbalanced and the indelible landscape exhibits the signs of the violence. Thus, it needs a rebirth “by new fecundatory relations that generate territory, which produce freshly fertile relations among human settlements and environment. In this territorialisation act, exists the potential for sustainable development because they constitute an amalgam of virtuous relations, new alliances among nature, culture and history” (p. 10).

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