

# Benefits and contradictions of participation set by a local development programme in Southern Italy<sup>1</sup>

*Authors:*

Stefano De Rubertis

Associate Professor of Economic Geography

Dipartimento di Scienze Economiche e Matematico-Statistiche

Faculty of Social, Political and Territorial Sciences, Università del Salento, Italy

E-mail: [derubertis@economia.unile.it](mailto:derubertis@economia.unile.it)

Paolo Margari

Ph.D Student

Dipartimento di Scienze Geografiche e Merceologiche

Faculty of Economics, University of Bari, Italy

E-mail: [p.margari@economia.unile.it](mailto:p.margari@economia.unile.it)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The understanding of the development is closely linked to the transformation of the socio-cultural environments in which it was conceived and from where it has evolved.

The goals that a development project intends to reach are excerpted on the basis of a presumed way to represent the reality and to interpret the relationship between the observer and the observed object.

In this work it is assumed that the implicit subjectivity of every representation may induce the adoption of objectives and strategies that are not shared, thus generating contradictions and conflicts that may trigger off serious modification of identities and/or failure of the project; from this position, the degree and the quality of the participation process in a programme, namely the 'Strategic Plan for Lecce Wide Area 2005-2015', in the course of implementation in Salento, have been analyzed.

The Strategic Plan is an instrument set by the National Government and financed also through European funds, aimed at building a common future for territories through a strong participation process which involves local actors.

The territory affected by the project is a sub-area generally known as 'Tavoliere di Lecce', located in South-Eastern Apulia (see Figure 1). Such area shares socio-economic problems with many other areas of the Italian "Mezzogiorno", such as an high level of unemployment (about double than the national one), and low levels of per-capita income (about 60% of the national value).

This work will analyse the ways pursued by planners to organize and stimulate participation in a key moment of the Strategic Plan building process, outlining benefits and limits of the specific instruments adopted, looking in particular at their characteristics and timing.

## 2. LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

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<sup>1</sup> Paragraph 2 should be attributed to S. De Rubertis while paragraphs 3 and 4 to P. Margari. The Introduction and Conclusions are in common to the two Authors.

Although in the past century the effectiveness and validity of the concept of absolute space was brought into question, it still largely dominates scientific fields as well as, obviously, geographical approaches. Its success is probably due to the undeniable advantages that its “objectification” has created and the absence, within our culture, of alternative options that are equally outstanding and efficient (Jammer, 1954, 148-168; Tuan, 1980, 94-99; Dematteis, 1994, p. 95). The inclusion of each individual in the society (his “training” or socialisation) allows each form of perception to be instantaneously transformed into a conventional system that reduces the complexity of the space-temporal process towards two distinct operators (time and space). This, the subjective spatial and temporary experiences are comparable, consolidating the conviction that object and subject are two independent entities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 179; Marramao, 1990, p. 7; Morin, 1990, 16-18 and 54-58; Harvey, 1980, 29-30).

Social space is a complex and thus irreducible system. Every attempt to interpret it is based on two unavoidable passages: a) the simplification of the relationship between object observed and its context; b) the simplification of the relationship between observer and the object observed. The embedded reductionism of the process is such that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to estimate how much information has to be given up, neglecting the relationships that one has not been able/or wanted to consider (Conti and Giaccaria, 2001 and 2001a; Dematteis, 1985; De Giorgi and Luhmann, 1993). Bearing this in mind, the objectivity of an observer is nothing else than a substantial communion of his point of view (Polmonari and Zani, 1980, p. 177; Maffesoli and Marramao, 1996, 14-32).

To sum up, it is asserted that space represents a complex system of socially produced relationships. Their representation, at all times partial (never objective and sometimes common to all), implies the adoption of a geographic scale that represents the criteria with which relationships and elements have been selected.

Generally, in any representation, elements and relationships according to the quality (from which multiple spaces – economic, social, etc. trigger off) or to spatial-temporal extension (thus the use of traditional geographical scales and historical periods) are selected. Therefore, methods, objectives and different elements lead to different representations or to different conceptualizations of ‘space’ (Crozon e Sacquin, 2001, p. 6; Morin, 1990, p. 18; Harvey, 1978, p. 28) and, as a consequence, to the geographic scale (Brenner, 2001, p. 598; Howitt, 1998 e 2002).

The choice of the scale, as a result of cultural and social influences (Cox e Mair in MacLeod, 1999, p. 233), can be a means towards the “achievement” of specific representations at the expense of others. By that way, “controlling” the geographic scale becomes subject to policies and contentions that are not always recognizable (Kurtz, 2003, p. 5; Swyngedouw 2000, p. 223; MacLeod, 1999, p. 233; MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999, p. 710; Brenner, 2001, 599 e 604, 1999 e 1998; Smith e Dennis, 1987, p. 162).

The enlightenment interpretations of the development concept, although intensely transformed, have maintained intact their personal ethnocentric imprint (Watts, 2000, p. 166; Rist, 1997; Preston, 1996, p. 138; Lee, 1994, p. 128) fruit of the Western cultural hegemony (Latouche, 2005, 17 e 62; Esteva, 2004, 348-349; Escobar, 1995, 5, 8-10). Its ideological dimension (that is developmentalism) (Taylor, 1994, p. 130) is evident at some critical scales, in which it is clearly possible to see the contrast between the development discourse proposed and the locally shared development objectives (Escobar, 1995). At other scales, the conflict is less evident but always present.

In the social space that we have briefly described, each individual is at the centre of a social relationships network. The individual choice to change or to keep the position depends on the configuration of this weave: actions and reactions represent the attempts to achieve development objectives and they produce a chaotic remodelling of the space. The spatial reposition in a more satisfying relationships region of the network is possible only if it is shared by or imposed to other individuals. Therefore, the changes in the social space configuration can occur: a) through a process of the communion of changes; b) through the imposition of changes (cfr. Bebbington, 2003, 302-

303; Van Grunsven e Van Westen, 2003, p. 293). This means that the control over relationships judged as strategic can be obtained through negotiation (and communion) or through a conflict at one's own advantage.

In this view, development consists in the reshaping of the social space. The substantial support of a development project implies the production and the respect of rules that modify or consolidate the identity of the system of "affiliation". To all the scales, at the same time, the process of competition/cooperation is reiterated amongst different projects whether individual or collective. Nevertheless, the risk that conflicting projects may contrast each other increases together with the acceleration of the space-time convergence: the more the opportunities of confrontation increase between different projects, the greater the conflicts become.

The choice of a representation scale of a phenomenon, bearing an implicit project, obviously becomes an object of contention too (Kurtz, 2003, p. 5; Smith and Dennis, 1987, p. 162).

Using the expression "local development", the term "local" is often referred to the place that expresses the identity of a community, whilst the term "development" itself refers to the tradition that conjugates elements of neoclassical theory and heterodoxy approaches. Local development focuses on proportions that are not necessarily of economic nature, such as social and cultural regional features (cfr.: Conti and Giaccaria, 2001a, p. 2; Benko, 2000, 197-205; Benko, 1995, 294-296; Pike et al., 2006, 62-122).

The "local" space is found at an intermediary level between actors (in particular enterprises) and their system of reference (for example, national or regional economy). It is made up of relationships networks that generate externalities which are not easily reproduced elsewhere (Conti e Giaccaria, 2001, 2 e 10). The peculiar features of local space (the system) essentially result from the institutions, that are rules that organize and that distinguish it (Conti e Giaccaria, 2001, 12-13). They determine the organizational quality and thus the capacity to reach the much yearned and commonly shared livelihood (Bebbington 1999 p. 2030; De Haan and Zoomers, 2003, p. 350).

The organization of a community (the system) and the set of rules (institutions) that govern their operation rely on the history and geography, intended as the locally shared culture and values. Regional development is set by the way in which the key actors perceive and evaluate the network of relationships therein included (Conti e Giaccaria, 2001, 17-18). Obviously, local development may be understood as a project shared by a community and its closely related economic dimension, therefore, it ought to represent only one of the very many aspects interrelated amongst each other.

### *Swapping from top-down to bottom-up development*

In recent years in Italy, as well as in other Western countries, the paradigm of development gave importance to public goods, something which is difficult to be obtained by simple market mechanisms. In the same time regional powers were going to increase their importance, while bottom-up policies of development were taking place of top-down ones. The classic development models, hexogen, central, typical of a fordista era, were substituted by bottom-up models, both in National and in European regional politics (see Cersosimo and Wolleb, 2006).

New local development policies have adopted decisional procedures inspired by deliberative democracy principles rather than representative democracy ones, overcoming the latter's limits with the aim to create better citizens and better choices (...) the reduced territorial scale allows to implement a form of deliberative democracy whose best benefits are gained in terms of participation, tendency to cooperate and economic results (ibid., 2006, 3-8).

## **3. THE STRATEGIC PLAN**

The Strategic Plan is a new instrument to pursue local development which has been identified by two institutional levels – both European and national. It aims to define participated strategies of sustainable local development by territories, in a progressive stream of functions decentralisation (CIPE, 2005).

It is an occasion to build a participate future. When setting up strategic choices, new strategies of local development need a strong participation process by which a common vision of the future can be gained. Such a process was missing/unsuccessful/unclear/weak in previous regional/urban development plans.

The Strategic Plan have to contain both primary goals and concrete actions to reach them, mainly focusing the attention to ‘strategic interventions’, those able to start wider development processes.

It is a voluntary act whose success depends on the ability of local actors to promote partnerships and networks towards clear and shared goals, designing a bottom-up process which is constantly flexible. Therefore, it is not a forced duty set by law from the top, but a voluntary step made by local actors to join together around a common vision of their territory’s future (ibid.).

Its aim is to integrate, not to substitute, spatial planning processes currently in act. Differently than traditional instruments it is not going to set limits, but a strategic pattern able to guide the addresses of future spatial plans, looking for a general coherence among them.

#### *The case of ‘Strategic Plan for Lecce Wide Area 2005-2015’*

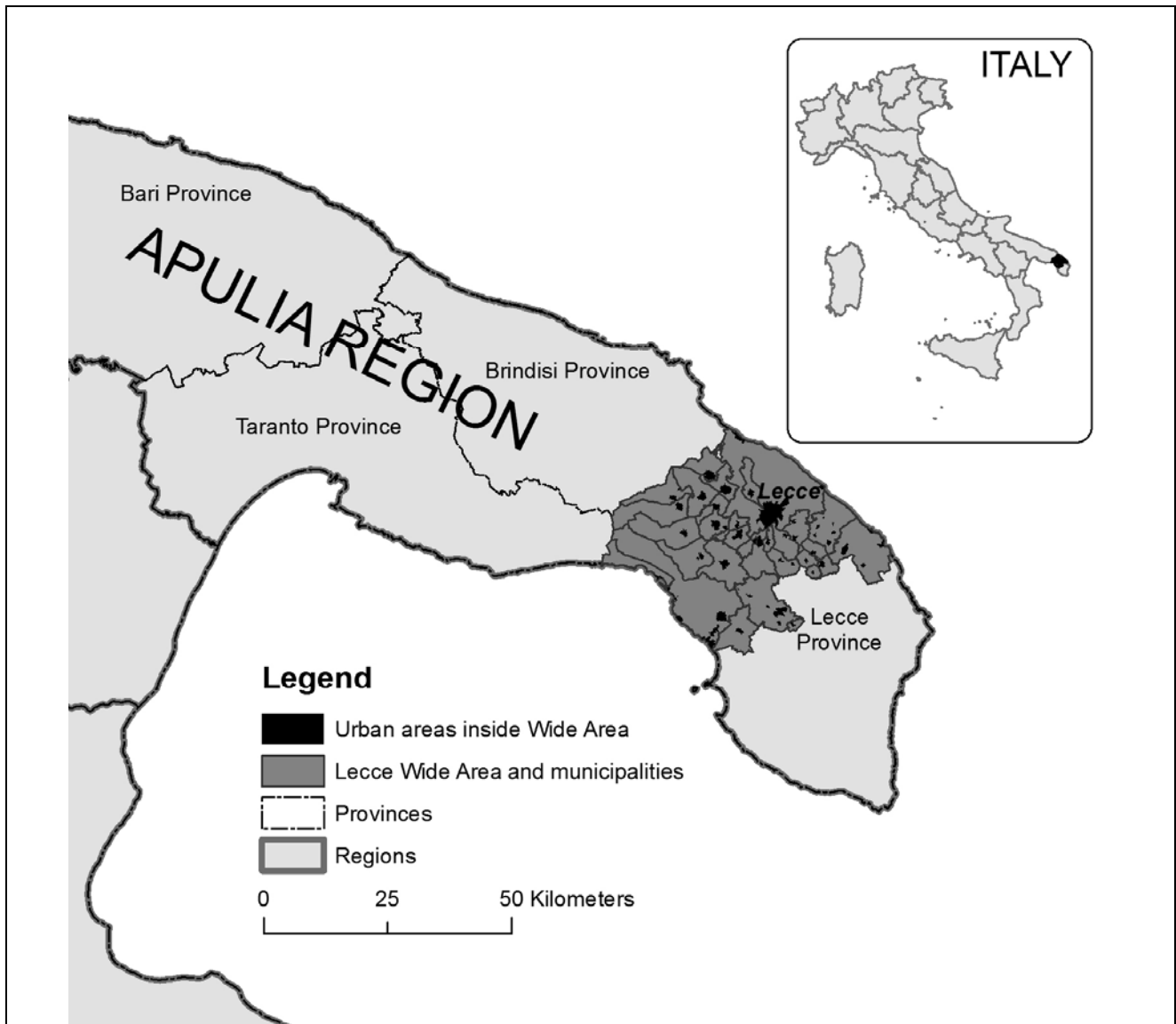
The “Strategic Plan – Lecce Wide Area 2005-2015” aims at creating an efficient coordination of interventions scheduled for the above mid-period on an area which is part of Lecce Province, the most Southern of the six provinces which compose Apulia, an Italian Southern administrative Region. In the specific, the Wide Area is composed by thirty-one municipalities. The biggest city is Lecce, whose ‘local authority’ after setting the project, keep the coordination and main role among the other actors involved.

The project analyzed, and recently approved by the Apulia Region, contains simple guidelines upon which the final strategic plan will be set. The multi-sector approach aims to take the advantages gained during the previous experiences of shared planning and to maximize the synergic effects of them. The key objectives to be pursued are socioeconomic and cultural development of the Wide Area (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

*Table 1. Key statistic indicators. Data are referred to 31-12-2003.*

	<i>Municipalities</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Density of population</i>
Lecce city	1	90.300	378,8
‘Wide Area’	31	302.870	301,2
Lecce	97	801.035	290,3
Province			
Apulia	258	4.040.990	208,7
Region			
<b>Italy</b>	8.110	57.888.245	192,1

*Source: ISTAT (2008).*



*Fig. 1 The area of study.*

#### **4. PARTICIPATION**

Participation is a fundamental step of the Strategic Plan building process. In the case of ‘Lecce Wide Area’, participation of local actors has been implemented by two main instruments: a task force organized by qualified thematic tables and a survey submitted to residents through questionnaires (the so-called “Idea box”). Their outcome, under the supervision and coordination of a main cabinet, will contribute to produce a set of strategic projects which will compose the final Document (see Table 2).

Table 2. Main steps of the process to build the Strategic Plan Document

March 2008	April-May 2008	May 2008	June 2008	June 2008
Starting of Project Groups	Communication campaign: <i>Idea boxes</i>	Preliminary validation of Project Group works	Validation of Strategic Projects	Presentation of the final Document – Strategic Plan for the Wide Area

### *Task force: thematic groups*

Eleven thematic tables have been planned and almost all of them started to work. This step is a fundamental moment of institutional and socioeconomic partnership. Around the table there are key representatives of public and private interests of the territory such as members of local institutions, trade unions, academic and research institutions, quango's, NGO's, etc. Even single citizens could take part to promote their own point of view about the particular theme of the group.

«Their role is to study, research, analyse the territory, identify its emergencies, the priorities and the actions to include in the final Document for the Strategic Plan» (Comune di Lecce, 2008).

Looking at the experiences gained so far, it is clear that this occasion has not been fully interpreted as a moment of synchronisation of different ideas and visions. Instead, in many cases there has been just a collection of concrete proposals, instruments to set up which imply already a vision. Those actions, despite being a positive effort to express any actor's need, could have been placed in a further step, when is already clarified a shared vision. A simple collection of projects by many actors on eleven themes – at the end they may result less – which seem kept strictly isolated, do not help to build a widely shared point of view about the strategy to set up.

### *Questionnaires to residents*

Involvement of residents in the process to build the Strategic Plan Document is another fundamental step whose priority is crucial. In the case of Lecce it is going to be pursued by submitting five thousand questionnaires to local residents by mail and by setting up an online survey which is a secondary alternative. This part of the process, called 'Idea box', on the letter sent to residents has been categorised as a 'communication' campaign rather than a participation one (see Table 2).

The questionnaire is organized on three main sections. The first section, longer than the others, asks to give a rating on a set of priorities related to some key themes such as social services, cultural heritage, urban development, environment, economic development, etc. Almost all the questions ask for the level of satisfaction coming from the perception of quality/access/etc. of the preset theme both in the single municipality and in the "wide area".

A first limit of this process is the fact that the sampling is purely casual so it may not represent the opinion/need/desire of the general public, but one of a particular cluster which is interested in/aware of planning issues.

Moreover, there is a spatial obstacle to the understanding – and the consequent answer – required to people interviewed. When asking the perception about the 'wide area', planners are introducing a territorial aggregate which represents something new, different than the traditional regionalisation generally known by residents, which is designed by administrative boundaries (e. g. municipality, province, region, nation).

Another even greater critique can be addressed at the themes considered. The questions include fields which may not result clear to all residents. An evaluation of the quality of social services in the wide area or the degree of cooperation between one's own municipalities and other public bodies of the 'wide area' can result as tricky questions.

Finally, many of the questions posed to residents already contain a kind of proposal about the future needs/goals, which could have been demanded to people instead. Thus, their closed nature appear as a pre-fixed set of goals where participation process at its best can help to determine their priorities.

The last two section of the questionnaire are composed by open questions. The former ask for a perception of the 'wide area', trying to identify people's vision of their own place, already divided into four main section (touristic, industrial, cultural and environmental). The latter is a free space where is to people to express their expectance from the 'Wide Area' in 2015.

Such difficulties emerging from the participation process outline the need to improve a form of education to participation, helpful to enrich process of governance by gaining a richer and more mature citizen's opinion about their vision.

It is necessary to set up a process to make a recognition on the different administrative levels, to understand usual ways to take decisions, to solve divergences and to involve the citizens, relatively to the allocation of resources and to the planning of the territory in general. It is also necessary to set up and verify on the ground some possible guidelines concerning education and decisional processes in the policies for territorial development. An investigation about the relationship between action and education of citizens, intended both as users and "producers" of a territory, is required (see Fiori, 2008).

Education to participation among all the actors involved in the Strategic Plan (last but not latest residents), surveys about the future vision which are more clear and open and, finally, their placement prior to any other step in the participation process, would help to gain a better contribution from the civil society whose needs have to be considered a fundamental part of a good plan. Differently, participation will become one of a set of duties to accomplish to gain financing to the project, but very few of nothing will be gained by this activity.

#### *Other potential conflicts and further research trajectories*

From this work there are other aspects which can be the basis for further researches. Participation is connected with the process of 'regionalisation', the way by which localities decide to join together. Lecce wide area is one of those spatial aggregates which has been voluntarily built by a set of contiguous municipalities which in the recent past experienced other development plans. Sometimes, such 'development regions' are not experience as a place by their residents (see Celata, 2008).

Another aspect which can be considered is the conceptual dimension of some key terms involved in the development programmes - sometimes they are clarified, sometimes, instead, they are just a set of mysterious words which may lead to future incomprehension. Sharing a project require a reciprocal understanding by all actors whose is demanded to build their future.

## **5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

There is an imaginary line between a participated development and developmentalism. Even bottom-up processes, like the one analysed in this work, can hide a kind of developmentalism, which in this case is intended as a project imposed by few actors to an entire area.

The 'Strategic Plan for Lecce Wide Area 2005-2015' represents a form of bottom-up development process, being implemented voluntarily by local actors who look for a common vision of their future. In doing this, the process of participation – which is not just a bureaucratic step but has to be

considered as the instrument by which it is pursued – is a key factor to determine its success or failure.

An instrument which cannot be understood by a wide arena of actors can lead to partial or wrong representation of local actors' needs, giving space to the 'imposition' of one of few leading voices' point of view in the development design process. To avoid tendencies to developmentalism, therefore, it is necessary to 'educate to participate' local actors, building instruments which maximise the feedback from them.

The project analysed refers to the 'vocation of the territory' but without a good participation this aspect cannot be identified. Clarity, timing and education are then three important factor in determining the degree of involvement of local actors in the future development building process. Their lack or absence risks to lead to 'developmentalism' instead of a project fully shared by a local community.

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