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**Participating and building new forms of leadership: the role
of planning in fostering local mobilization**

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In this paper, we try to explore the concepts of participation and leadership in planning – as well as possible complementarities between the two – presenting a case study. In this case study, we can see how a wide process of community involvement has produced deep changes in local leadership, redefining the exercise of political leadership expressed by the mayor, and promoting the emergence of new leadership figures. The role of planners in this process was far from marginal and that helps to open a new perspective about the use of participation in planning processes. From this perspective, leadership and participation occupy a common ground where the planner too comes into play.

The story of Cinisello Balsamo “Neighbourhood Pact”

Background

The Neighbourhood Pact¹ began when Cinisello Balsamo – a municipality located in the first ring of the municipalities in the north of Milan – decided to do something about the S. Eusebio neighbourhood, one of the areas of the town suffering most from rundown housing, poor urban quality and the problems of social emargination.

Located in the North of the town, the district was built in the 1970’s, a period when the demand for housing in Milan and the areas immediately surrounding the metropolitan area was particularly high as a result of the arrival of migrants from Southern Italy and Veneto (the Venice Region). Two important residential housing estates were therefore built, the ‘Palazzone’ and the ‘Cinque Torri’ with a total of 450 apartments which today house over one thousand people.

In the 1980’s a number of neighbourhood associations grew up to address the needs and demands of residents: a Tenants Committee, the S. Eusebio Neighbourhood Antidrug Movement (MARSE), the Welcome Group for the Disabled (GAD). Together with other local organisations in the district, such as the local parish church, local residents made demands on the authorities to improve living conditions, law and order, housing, public transport, and the presence of local services in the neighbourhood. They were years of hard fought battles which produced a variety of positive results by placing the S. Eusebio neighbourhood under the spotlight of public opinion.

The neighbourhood went through a difficult period in the middle of the 1990’s when police intervention against crime and drug trafficking in particular intensified².

The first stage: Elaborating the project

In 1997 the Municipality of Cinisello decided to participate in a national competition to obtain Neighbourhood Pact funding. The municipality sent in the proposal for the S. Eusebio Neighbourhood Pact to the Ministry in June 1998. The

¹ Neighbourhood pacts were instituted by the Ministry of Public Works in 1997. They were an experimental programme for funding public housing areas to deal with the problem of urban, building and social decay, using the mechanism of nation wide tendering. They involved intervention on infrastructures and housing stock, and also on employment, occupational training, truancy and school dropout phenomena, assistance for the elderly and experimental housing. They follow the examples of similar programmes organised in recent years in other western countries (the “City Challenge” programme in Great Britain, the “Contrats de Quartiers” in France and the “Empowerment zones and Enterprise Communities” in the United States).

² Some of the operations were quite dramatic with helicopters landing in the courtyards of apartment blocks to carry out police raids.

proposal was signed by all the local neighbourhood organisations³ and involved the following types of intervention:

- improvements to the general conditions of buildings, by overall maintenance of buildings, apartments and common areas and the splitting of the larger apartments into smaller units to provide housing more suited to the present characteristics of households⁴;
- the insertion of experimental housing units in the ‘Palazzone’ apartment block with particular distribution and technological features destined to new types of tenant;
- the design and implementation of social welfare services;
- the creation of workshops for business and craft/light manufacturing activities to foster the birth of new enterprises.

In February 1999, the Municipality of Cinisello Balsamo won the Ministerial competition and obtained funding of approximately 8.5 million euro from the Ministry of Public Works to start the S. Eusebio Neighbourhood Pact project⁵.

The Mayor of Cinisello (Mrs. Daniela Gasparini) was the driving force behind the initiative. Her strategy was to take advantage of all opportunities to undertake urban regeneration. She had already tried to draw up a proposal for the EU initiative “Urban I”, but it was not accepted for funding.⁶

The participatory nature of this instrument (the term ‘pact’ indicates the desire to reach agreement and to co-operate with all local organisations over the design and implementation of the regeneration project) required intense work in the neighbourhood right from the beginning to reach agreement between all those who signed the pact.

An office, the Neighbourhood Pact Office (now the Participatory Urban Development Programmes Office), was set up during the first year by the Municipality to run the project and later a Co-ordinating Group was formed consisting of personnel from ALER, the Municipality and outside consultants. Initially this was charged with illustrating the Neighbourhood Pact proposal to all the various institutions concerned.

In November 1999 the final project was approved and an agreement protocol was signed between the Ministry, the Region and ALER for the implementation of the project.

Presenting the project: controversies arises

Work began in the neighbourhood in January 2000 and meetings of small groups of residents (on the same staircase) were held to illustrate the project and the house moving schedules, the means by which part of the housing units in the ‘Palazzone’ were to be divided and restructured to form the existing housing units. It was in this period that the project entered the public domain through the activities of the Neighbourhood

³ Municipal Administration of Cinisello Balsamo, Constituency 4, S.Eusebio Tenants Committee, GAD - Welcome Group for the Disabled, MARSE - S. Eusebio Neighbourhood Antidrug Movement, Il Torpedone Social Co-operative, Friends of the Grugnotorto Park, The Italian Red Cross, The Cultural Club ‘Salvador Allende’, The Italian Catholic Guides and Scouts Association, Sammamet Social Co-operative, S.Eusebio Local Parish, SICET (Tenants Union).

⁴ There were 158 housing units involved in the first proposal out of a total of 288 in the neighbourhood. Then 52 housing units were actually refurbished and transformed to result in 78 units.

⁵ The programme was then also to be funded by other public authorities (3.8 million euro from ALER, 1.7 million euro from the Municipality of Cinisello Balsamo, 600,000 euro from the Region of Lombardy and approximately 1 million euro from the North Milan Development Agency (ASNM).

⁶ The ALER (Lombard Agency for Residential Housing), is the owner and manager of the regional government’s residential housing stock.

Workshop (set up in December 1999 to foster dialogue between the various groups involved and to allow the community itself to formulate proposals concerning the project) and by numerous presentations in public meetings (approximately 40).

The Neighbourhood Pact experienced its greatest moment of conflict in the Spring of 2000. What had until then been a proposal drawn up by a few professional and institutional actors inevitably had to be presented to those to whom the project was destined. The project was presented in detail to local residents in a public meeting attended by the Mayor and the President of the ALER along with municipal and ALER officials and various neighbourhood associations.

The residents of S. Eusebio contested the project in very strong terms. They were obviously interested in the improvements to their housing that might arise from the redevelopment process, but they rejected those aspects of the project that might cause them considerable inconvenience (e.g. the house moving plan which involved the temporary evacuation of whole sections of the building, with residents housed in temporary accommodation) or the introduction of buildings not exclusively dedicated to housing in the neighbourhood (such as the multi-functional centre in the courtyard or the craft workshops on one floor of the building).

The protest action resulted in the presentation of a petition to the Municipal Council signed by 150 tenants. They formed a new association (Tenants Association) and refused to co-operate with the project unless their demands were given consideration.

The local residents were willing to see the chance of receiving funds for their neighbourhood go up in smoke if it meant accepting a proposal they did not like. The municipality on its part could not allow itself to lose funding but neither could it make residents unhappy. A compromise therefore seemed the only course to take, even if it did not seem an easy one to take at the beginning.

Taking local conflicts seriously

Initially the Mayor seemed to find herself in difficulty faced with an unexpected neighbourhood “rebellion”, which she felt had been stoked up by the opposition in the municipal council. Her idea was to solve the protest problem by relying on the mediating powers of local associations. This course of action became immediately impossible because local residents had lost confidence in the local associations that had signed the proposals and refused to recognise them as representative of their interests.

The new consultants called in by the Mayor (Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale) were experts in participatory planning and had already worked with Mrs. Canaia (the project manager and head of the Neighbourhood Pact Office). They advised the Mayor to take the local residents protests seriously and convinced her that their requests were reasonable. They explained that the conflict that had arisen might provide an opportunity to improve the project.

Those responsible for implementing the project (ALER and the Municipality) acted quickly to make changes to the project jointly with the ministerial bodies concerned (the CER, Committee for Residential Housing in particular, the ministerial body responsible for Neighbourhood Pacts) in order to avoid losing the ministerial funds since the terms of the competition required approval of the final detailed design specifications the following month. The short time available obliged all those involved to adopt an incremental strategy: only part of the final detailed design specifications was approved in May 2000 to meet the deadline set by the decree, while other parts of the project were

left temporarily undecided in order to take account of the proposals that emerged from the Neighbourhood Workshop.

Structuring the community involvement

Community involvement took shape as a result of the work done by the IRS consultants with the setting up of the Neighbourhood Workshop. It was located in a room on the ground floor of one of the neighbourhood buildings and started activities in December 1999 and it still constitutes a institution which brings together the Municipality of Cinisello, the ALER, professionals and local associations and residents.

Its purpose was to constitute a place where the questions of local residents could be listened to, where their needs were identified and where a consensus could be built over changes to be made to the initial project. It also had the purpose of restoring the confidence of citizens in the municipality, of filling the gap left by the delegitimation of local associations and of developing a sense of ownership of the project in local residents.

The workshop divided into four working groups to facilitate the involvement of local residents and the discussion on specific issues:

Housing project. Objectives: overall improvement of accommodation; increase the variety of accommodation available in the neighbourhood; develop new methods of using accommodation; restore legality by changing methods of housing management and of dealing with arrears and with squatting.

Public places project. Objectives: new non residential social type centres; the creation of places for socialising and meeting (creation of a multi-function centre of a residential facility for non self-sufficient elderly and pre-school facilities for infants 'Play, But Not Only').

Employment Project. Objectives: formation of new enterprises and creation of craft workshops; training and entrance of young people into the formal labour market.

Info&Events project. Objectives: to provide information on the project; involvement of residents in all phases of the implementation stage.

The workshop gave local residents a concrete opportunity to participate in an organised fashion in Neighbourhood Pact decision-making. An expert (outside professional, or experts from the Neighbourhood Pact Office) was assigned to each working group to organise the work, interpret the results and report to those responsible for implementing the project (the project manager for the municipality and the senior manager from ALER). The participation of local actors in working groups was based on self selection criteria according to the individual interests and resources (in terms of skills) that people were able to bring to bear on the problems dealt with by each group and the commitment they were able to make on a continuing basis. Neighbourhood Workshop decisions were taken through discussion and based on a consensus.

The Neighbourhood Workshop continued its activities into the implementation phases and seems destined to remain even after the work of the Neighbourhood Pact has finished as an institution for promoting local community involvement.

Implementing the project

The programme then entered into its decisive phase. The main parts of the project were then addressed and discussed with exponents of the local community (citizens, associations representing particular interests, agencies) and the public authorities (Neighbourhood Pact Office, various municipal departments such as social and

educational services and the housing department, ALER) in the Neighbourhood Workshop.

The first refurbishing work started in September 2000 (Work on the Cinque Torri had already started in July), but it only really got underway with the opening of the Palazzone construction site in June 2002.

A public event covered by the press and television, given the extraordinary nature of the project (constructions sites opened with expenditure totalling 30 billion lire in a period lasting a little less than 4 years). The S. Eusebio Neighbourhood Pact was one of the few successful projects in Italy that involved the experimentation of innovative urban development instruments).

Outcomes in terms of leadership and participation

From the point of view of leadership and community involvement, there are two stages to the 'Neighbourhood Pact'. The first concerns the design of the proposal and obtaining funding from the Ministry of Public Works. The second stage consists of the process of broad community involvement, the changes to the initial proposal, the negotiation with the Ministry, and the implementation of the project.

Which consequences on community involvement and leadership?

First, the old local associations that had signed the original 'Neighbourhood Pact' without the backing of local residents were obliged to exit from the scene, because they clearly lacked the necessary requirements (consensus and skills) to remain in the process. They were long established neighbourhood associations which had worked for years on issues of social hardship and poor housing at S. Eusebio. After the opposition of local residents to the first Neighbourhood Pact proposal emerged their position (and that of the S. Eusebio Tenants Committee in particular) was considerably weakened in terms of local legitimation. They were to be replaced by new associations who followed the development of the project as active political actors. Other local resident associations were formed during the course of the process which were to work on housing issues (such as the S. Eusebio Tenants Association), take part in the Neighbourhood Workshop and develop planning and negotiating skills.

The process of community involvement saw also the birth of new local leadership figures. The new figures here were those residents who contributed to the management of important parts of the project. If leaders are defined as persons capable of mobilising people into action and of generating support for shared goals then some of those persons who worked in the Tenants Association may be seen as local community leaders because they involved other local residents in the project.

Second, the highly organised nature of the process allowed the Mayor to avoid situations of direct contact with the residents of S. Eusebio, which had made her very vulnerable in the first stage of the process and at the same time she was able to take up a central stance a true and genuine focal point of the project. She kept the channel for listening to residents and maintaining contact with them open through the Neighbourhood Workshop, she kept herself informed of progress so that she could intervene at key points thanks to her close relationship with the project manager and she provided political backing to the negotiations with the Ministry.

In this sense the involvement of the community in the Neighbourhood Pact can be said to have acted to restore legitimation to the political leadership. The mayor's

capacity to dialogue with the local community had been strongly challenged by fierce opposition to the initial proposal. It wasn't until the Mayor demonstrated a willingness to listen to the demands of S. Eusebio residents that she regained their trust.

Finally, it is important to note that the role of professional technical staff in this process was far from marginal. It was they above all who took the requests of local residents seriously in the initial stages, considering them as reasonable and a potential improvement to the project. They persuaded the mayor not to consider them merely as the result of more general political conflict stoked up by the opposition in the municipal council. Put briefly, the position of the professional technical staff was to take the dispute seriously and consider it as a resource for improving the effectiveness of the project. In particular, the IRS designed the community involvement process of the Neighbourhood Pact and directly managed parts of the Neighbourhood Workshop. It was present at all parts of the process and, while it took a very active role in the middle decision-making stage, it still plays a fairly significant role in the implementation stage where it continues to animate the Neighbourhood Workshop. The N.P. Office was responsible for the progress of the project from the final detailed design specification stage to implementation. It handled relations with all those involved, negotiated all the changes to be made to the original proposal with the Ministry, was present at the Neighbourhood Workshop with its representatives, produced the periodical newsletter on the Neighbourhood Pact, maintained relations with outside consultants and agreed changes to the project with ALER with whom it jointly managed relations with the building contractors.

There was an original relationship between the political and technical leadership of the project and this included both the N.P. Office and the outside consultants. To a certain extent it was the action taken by the professionals that resulted in the effectiveness of the political leadership. This last point gives us the opportunity to develop some further consideration concerning the role of planning to foster local mobilization and to build new forms of leadership.

Planning and the promotion of leadership in community involvement processes

Participation and leadership occupy different positions in the field of planning theory. Whilst the former plays a crucial role throughout the history of planning (Hall 1988) and still forms the basic content of many current planning practices, the latter is not a usual concept in planning theory. Only more recently, after the emergence of new approaches (strategic planning, consensus building in group processes, 'argumentative turn'), which emphasise the interactive nature of planning activities, leadership has become more popular in planning literature (Balducci, Calvaresi forthcoming). According to these approaches, which see "planning as an interactive, communicative activity and depicts planners as deeply embedded in the fabric of community, politics and public decision-making" (Innes 1995), planners are the real leaders of group processes, able to build consensus, to organise participation and co-operation, to mobilise actors, to mediate conflicts, to foster social learning and to promote innovation.

Our case study shows a different situation. The planner really plays a crucial role but interpreting this as a leadership role seems contradictory for two reasons. On the one hand, because after having promoted a weak vision of planning, these approaches

finally build a strong vision of planners. On the other hand, they end up by depoliticising the interaction that occurs in planning processes, because they acknowledge the central importance of interaction to the extent that it reinforces the professional perspective (Crosta 1998). We argue that the true distinction that our case helps to highlight is between a perspective that sees the complementarity between leadership and participation as something which strengthens the professional role, and one which sees participation as a means of mobilising society where one of the aims is to build the capacity of the local community to guide planning processes. The latter seems coherent with the perspective that we could define, using Lindblom's terms (Lindblom 1990), of a "self-guiding society". In this perspective, encouraging forms of leadership to grow in the local community is the real task of planning activity.

In order to better understand how and to what extent participation processes can enable local actors to assume leadership roles, we have to identify the main features of this kind of processes.

They use a kind of knowledge that is deep and local, and that otherwise does not enter in the processes of preparing plans, projects and decisions.

They use important design resources that, if enter in interaction with the competence of other political or professional actors, allow to widen the field of opportunities considered.

They anticipate conflicts that, if treated in the process of policy and plan construction rather than later, become indicators of needs and demands rather than obstacles.

They construct an enlarged idea of partnership that includes not only private actors, but also a variety of local actors that can bring about fundamental resources for the success of policies and plans.

They can produce social, intellectual and political capitals among participants which can be an important legacy for following policy initiatives (Innes et al 1994).

In this perspective, the planner is not of course the provider of solutions any more, but at the same time does not have to hide the substantive knowledge. The most important role is that of the designer of the appropriate methodology to deal with the particular problem in the particular context. Another important role is that of trustee of the memory of the group: who recalls what has been said and the agreements reached at the different stages of the process. There is also the role of the technician but just when it is really required by the project team (the people) and just under the condition of explaining and arguing clearly what contribution the planning knowledge can give to the specific problem. It is close to the *reflective practitioner* of Donald Schön (1983) and to the *attention shaper* of John Forester (1989) but with a particular commitment toward the definition of the appropriate methodological framework through which the group can work.

The new participatory approaches in this sense go beyond the normative argument of the past (Forester 1999) that states that participation is needed to give voice to parts of the society that are excluded from decision making processes.

There is a new functional argument that is in a way much more relevant in the situation of fragmented cities. This in the first place leads us to recognize that participation is a means to gather detailed information about people leaving conditions in a situation that is new, difficult to understand and in rapid change. Secondly it allows to recognize that participation is a way of gathering ideas from a variety of social actors that can widely probe and therefore improve the solutions that we can find. Thirdly it

states that participation is a means to construct a sense of ownership toward a project or a plan that can ease implementation of what is decided in a highly fragmented environment and to reconstruct social connections contrasting the process of societal fragmentation. Finally the functional argument leads us to intend participation as an instrument for raising awareness about public problems and the ways to deal with them in a situation that tends to atomize perceptions.

The functional argument that we have presented contributes to redefine the problem of how to combine leadership and participation according to a vision of the planning as an activity that helps to produce and reproduce social webs and common goods.

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