

A STRATEGIC USE OF KNOWLEDGE: LOCAL POLICY-MAKERS AND THE FORMATION OF NEW “KNOWLEDGESCAPES”

C. Calvaresi

Istituto per la ricerca sociale (Irs), via XX settembre 24 – 20123 Milano, Italia,
ccalvaresi@irsonline.it

Abstract: In this paper, I will try to explore how processes of public participation in strategic planning, combining different forms of knowledge (steering, professional, ordinary, milieu, ...) generated by various types of actors (political leaders, experts, representatives of business community and civil society organisations, etc.) can produce a new Knowledgescape, that is – according to Matthiesen – the heterogeneous combination of knowledge forms and the respective forms of interaction (Matthiesen 2005). I will observe the results of this kind of processes in terms of technical outcomes (results for planning activity), and in terms of impacts on the actors network and of collective learning. In particular, I will try to answer to the following questions: How and to what extent did local political leaders learn something from this kind of initiatives? Did they change their initial perception of the policy problems and transforming their frames? Thanks to this processes, did strategic planning and public policies gain effectiveness?

To discuss this kind of topics, I will present a professional episode. Since 2004, I have been working as consultant for the Municipality of Jesi (a city of 40,000 inhabitants, located in the centre part of Italy) in the field of strategic planning and citizen participation. A personal involvement in the process allows me to have a direct notion of the story that I present, developing of self-reflection around the contribution I gave to the process in terms of professional and scientific knowledge.

Keywords: participation processes, Knowledgescape, governance, political leaders, strategic planning

1. Background

The story begins in 2003, when a left-wing coalition won the municipal elections in Jesi, a city of 40,000 inhabitants located in the centre part of Italy. The new fact is not the political colour of the coalition, because Jesi has always been ruled by left-wing parties (socialists and communists) since the end of the Second World War. The new fact is that the mayor and the most important

members of the local government did not have a political background. They did not come from the “school of the party”, but from other organisations (the mayor, from Trade Unions) or from the civil society (vice-mayor and the councillor for city planning, from NGOs of catholic inspiration).

This important change was made possible by the critical situation that Italian parties experimented during the last years of the past century, with the emerging of a huge corruption mechanism extended to the whole political system. Local political leaders in Jesi were partially involved in this kind of suspicion. On the other hand, the reform for the direct election of mayors induced parties to select new personnel, less involved in previous political experiences and coming from civil society.

The new municipal government of Jesi took an important decision, that was to reformulate the General Plan for the city. For this operation, the Municipality selected as consultant a group of professors and researchers of the Department of Architecture and Planning (DIAP) of Milan Polytechnic. Two sub-groups were formed, one responsible for the new Plan, and another one responsible for the process of community involvement to be developed in the very first stage of the General Plan formulation process¹.

In fact, the mayor and the councillor for city planning expressed a clear demand that I could synthesize in this way: *“We are absolute beginners without any previous experiences of local political responsibility. Our channels of communication with the citizens have to be built, whilst the traditional devices (e.g., political parties as filter mechanisms) to channel local demands and to deal with social needs do not work as before, or are experimenting a deep crisis. We would know what local community really wants, and we think to use the formation of the new General Plan as an occasion to develop a broad process of listening to emerging demands and needs”*. This demand, that might be perceived quite folkloristic, contained a genuine pressure to open up a channel of communication with the local society, and to use strategically the new Plan, not just as a technical activity but as a “local event”, a special moment in a life of a community when it can take a moment for itself, to reflect upon its wants and to frame its “volitions”, in a process of “social probing” that emphasises the value of “ordinary knowledge” (Lindblom, 1990; Lindblom & Cohen, 1979).

2. A public participation process for the new General Plan

Starting from this kind of request, the group of DIAP developed a process of community involvement articulated in various activities:

- a set of interviews (at the end of the process, more than 80) to stakeholders (members of business community, of local associations, of

¹ I have personally been involved in this second group. The coordinator was Alessandro Balducci.

- institutions, etc.), and to opinion leaders and experts;
- meetings in the neighbourhoods with citizens and local groups;
 - focus groups with a selected representatives of local community.

From our side, we were really interested to use citizens participation in two ways: as a means to increase the effectiveness of city planning tools (and of the new General Plan, in the specific case), and as a contribution to improve the quality of local democracy.

From the first point of view, citizens possess important informational and intellectual resources. Firstly, the knowledge citizens express is deep and local, different from technical and political knowledge. It is knowledge that does not usually enter into the process of preparing plans, projects and policy decisions. As John Forester argues, by listening and posing questions, planners “probe for deeper interests, for still undisclosed but relevant information, for new ideas about possible strategies, agreements or project outcomes” (Forester, 1989: 109). Secondly, citizens have important design resources which make it possible to widen the field of opportunities considered, if these interact with the skills of other political and professional actors.

From the second point of view, participation is a process that fuels the self reliance of (local) actors and helps to eliminate the practice of merely delegating power or just making claims. It produces broader involvement in the actual solution of problems and develops a sense of ownership of the plan on the side of the participants which in turn creates favourable conditions for its implementation. The communication channels set up between the various actors involved will probably remain in place like permanent (social) capital for future initiatives.

There is therefore a double sense and a double use of participation: as a means of building more effective policies because it allows a better probing of choices and as a means of reconstructing social webs.

As I have argued in another contribution (Balducci A. & Calvaresi C., 2005), participation is not a matter of finding the right answer to a given problem, but of interpreting the problems and processes, of highlighting the available resources, facilitate the collective process of deliberation and discovering the appropriate solution. Its major strength is a sort of “common heritage” produced by the actors involved, consisting of knowledge, trust and communication channels.

At the end of ten months of work, in the summer of 2004, a document that summarized points of attention for the new General Plan emerged from the process of community involvement, was prepared and issued. But which were the main outcomes of the participation process according to its double use that I

have just mentioned, i.e. in terms of technical results for the planning activity, and in terms of social capital, impacts on the actors network, and collective learning?

An important part of our work during the interviews had been addressed to discuss with local actors their perception of the problems, the resources, the opportunities for the future development of Jesi. This activity gave us important information to organise the focus groups, which were organised as occasions to confront different perceptions, to establish a conversation between distinctive opinions, and to try to frame problems and opportunities in a new way. We had at our disposal a rough material: not well developed images of Jesi, sometimes contradictory, sometimes troubled: Jesi that, for its development, can count on its own, but on the other hand that needs to establish new relations with other cities and development poles at regional level; Jesi that is a very provincial city but with well known cultural resources (the opera theatre, the museum of renaissance paintings, etc.) that pose it at a higher level; Jesi industrial city with a rooted work ethic, with a strong social cohesion, and with a strong capacity of the local actors to co-operate.

During the focus groups, we re-proposed these images in order to induce a reframing process from the actors involved². By re-defining frames, we tried to help actors to establish a “back-talk” conversation with the problem situation in order to foster innovation (Schön, 1983). From our work, a new representation of Jesi emerged, as a territory of interconnections, as a space of intersection between endogenous capacity and exogenous opportunities, between local dynamics and new development initiatives which come from outside, between an environmental system of great quality, a beautiful landscape and a problematic insertion of new infrastructure projects³.

At the end, we proposed a new vision for the future, which invited to look at Jesi and its territory with new eyes. But the important value of this vision was that it altered the consolidated images of the local actors, it was unusual, it put attention on neglected (and for this reason, interesting) aspects, it was both interpretative of the present and anticipative of the future, evocative and plausible more than accurate⁴. Indicating a reasonable perspective, it should to be used as a benchmark, to measure how long is the distance of the desired future from the present, and to pose the right questions: If Jesi is marginal

² «There is no way of perceiving and making sense of social reality except through a frame, for the very task of making sense of complex, information-rich situations requires an operation of selectivity and organization, which is what “framing” means» (Schön, Rein 1994: 30).

³ In a recent contribution, Simin Davoudi (Davoudi & Strange, 2009: 217) outlines that recognition of relational spaces is a feature of new strategic spatial plans in UK.

⁴ As Weick wrote «accurate perceptions have the power to immobilise. People who want to get into action tend to simplify rather than elaborate. [Perceptions] can never be accurate because, by the time people notice and name something, it has become something else and no longer exists» (Weick 1995: 60).

compared with other development poles, how could we fill the gap? Or, if Jesi has important resources, how should we use them strategically? Vision indicated a space to fill in with policies and decisions, it served to mobilize actors.

In sum, we used future visions as devices of attention shaping, something linked to a process of self-reflection on the local identity and on the generative possibilities of the local context (Calvaresi & Pasqui, 2004). What we tried to do was to generate sensemaking. And, as Weick notices, it has to do with something not usual and anomalous: «An instance of sensemaking: someone notices something in an ongoing flow of events, something in the form of a surprise, a discrepant set of cues, something that does not fit» (Weick, 1995).

The final document of participation process presented these visions, and around them it tried to identify an agenda for the future of Jesi, and possible projects to be developed by the General Plan. We defined it a strategic plan, emphasizing its visionary and mobilizing dimensions.

We have to answer to the second question: Which were the main outcomes of the participation process in terms of impacts on the actors network, and of collective learning?

On the one hand, the impacts on actors network were quite modest in terms of emerging new actors and of developing a sense of ownership of the process. The process of participation was largely perceived as “a matter of the Municipality”, a sort of a strange experiment that the new municipal government wanted to test with the local community. For this reason, the process mobilized the same-actors-of-always, which saw in this initiative an opportunity to self-represent themselves to the new local coalition.

But strange experiments provoke curiosity. Just to mention an element: Along the process, we realized that the interviews had almost two meanings: the first one was that we conceptualized from the beginning, as a means to gather information and to collect different opinions, in order to inform the first stage of the plan-making process with the points of view of local actors. But later, a second meaning emerged: Interviews represented for local actors the way to legitimate themselves as interlocutor vis-à-vis the Municipality. The interesting effect, that we did not intend at the beginning, was that conducting new interviews meant also an added legitimacy for our work. Whilst at the beginning of the process we estimated 30-35 interviews, at the end we interviewed more than 80 persons.

On the other hand, the impacts of the participation process in terms of collective learning were relevant. First, participants to the focus groups learned to expose their point of view to the others, to listen to mutually, to exchange different types of knowledge, to be part of a group process. In some cases, new positions emerged as outcome of interaction, and actors agreed on a new problem

definition. Patsy Healey in her recent book refers to the question of how spatial strategies might make use of the various forms of existing knowledge and related validity claims (Healey 2007: 235f.). I would underline that she sees spatial strategy-making as social “construction sites” where multiple forms of knowledge and meanings of the region are negotiated, selected and filtered⁵.

On the side of political representatives, we registered the most relevant effects. Participation process had the capacity to increase the legitimacy of political representatives. It allowed local leaders to consolidate (or to reopen) a communication channel with the local community, to increase their fame (participation gives visibility), to affirm themselves as leaders (able to listen to and to promote group processes).

3. After five years: A strategic plan for economic development

The local elections of 2008 confirm the same coalition and the mayor. The councillor for city planning, which gained the highest number of votes among the candidates to the City Council, changed position and took the responsibility of economic development. Having closed the process of formation of the General Plan, this second phase was characterized by a different request. Not opening up new channels of communication between Municipality and local society, but redefining relations between the two, the former assuming a role of facilitator, of networking and of strengthening relations among actors, and the latter called to be a partner of the Municipality in designing and managing development projects.

The idea of a strategic plan for economic development emerged. The process of elaboration started in the summer of 2008 and has been finalized in the February of the current year. At the end, we have prepared a brief document that presents a list of proposals for the development of local economy, together with a vision for the future. The proposals are at different stages, from ideas not still need to be defined to projects promoted by several actors.

The strategic planning process has been organised in such a way: the Municipality anticipated its own vision of the problems and perspectives of local economy in a conference to whom local stakeholders were invited, as representatives of local organizations, single entrepreneurs, banks, foundations, Chamber of commerce, etc. During the first conference, Municipality presented also the organisation of the strategic planning process in three arenas: one concerning the structural dimension of local economy (manufacturing, logistics, infrastructure, etc.); one concerning the creative dimension (innovation, ICT, relations between universities and local firms, technological pole, energy

⁵ “Spatial strategy-making episodes are social construction sites, arenas in which multiple types of knowing about what is significant and about what could happen are explored...” (Healey 2007: 236).

production, etc.); and one concerning the so-called “slow” dimension (agriculture and eno-gastronomic capital, tourism promotion, cultural production, etc.). The actors who attend the conference were invited to join the strategic planning process confirming their interest to one or more of the three arenas.

For each arena, two meetings were organised: to the first meeting, experts of the topic concerned were invited, in order to frame the problem and to present the main issues. The idea of involving together experts (mainly coming from the academic world) and stakeholders worked well. The contribution of scientific knowledge allowed the local representatives to understand better the conditions, in terms of shortcomings and opportunities, of the local economy, and improved their capacity to frame the problems, having the possibility to compare Jesi system with other situations.

During the same period, the technical group responsible for the elaboration of the plan and for the management of the interactive process conducted a set of interviews and collected a certain number of proposals from the local stakeholders. The councillor for economic development met the participants individually or in sub-groups, in order to convince them to propose a project, or to create a support coalition for an existing one.

In the second meeting, participants discussed the proposals emerged from the interviews, trying to identify or to strengthen existing partnerships. A final plenary session that gathered the participants of the three arenas took place, to present and discuss a draft version of the plan.

At the end of the process, a new vision for local economic development strategy emerged. The “slow” paradigm seemed to be the right framework to entail different images: A vital industrial district that has not still passed deep crisis and consequently necessity of restructuring, a peaceful city with a calvinist work ethic that is a good example of that part of Italy where, according with Putnam (1993), social capital gains the highest rates. Jesi is also the capital of the “Verdicchioshire”, as we call that part of Italy that produces the most important white wine of Italy and that it is becoming a new destination of that international tourist demand seeking beautiful landscapes (like in a painting of Italian Renaissance), resources of “terroire”, quality of life.

Framing the economic development strategy of Jesi in such a way means to establish links (which are not easy to formulate) between resources, opportunities, actors, and problems to deal with, between white wine and tourist promotion, between a strategy of attraction of foreign investments and the presence of Ital Cook (a famous international school of cooking that many students from abroad come to visit each year), between the process of innovation of manufacturing sector and environmental protection, etc.

At the end of the strategic planning process we can say that local stakeholders seem to agree with this kind of representation of economic problems and perspectives. It was not an easy operation, because in general a local community fails to recognise its own resources, or to connect them in an holistic view. As for the reframing process occurred with the first strategic plan, also in this second initiative local actors needed a push from outside, that moved the inertia and operated as a device for self-reflection. The role of scientific knowledge, of the experts which attended the first meetings of the three arenas was crucial.

On the other hand, five years did not pass in vain. During this period other initiatives of public and stakeholders involvement had been developed with good results. Nowadays, nobody would consider anomalous the image of Jesi as a territory of interconnection, while the issues of large-scale planning and multilevel governance has gained political attention and an important place in the public policies agenda. The new political leaders which emerged five years ago are not longer absolute beginners, they are well equipped to deal with governance problems and to design public policies. Finally new local stakeholders have emerged. The interesting shift that I have seen from the first to the second strategic plan is from representatives of local associations and organizations, to single businessmen, owners or CEOs of local firms. I think that a new model of relations between institutions and private actors, based on partnerships for specific projects, has gained space and legitimacy. The previous “neo-corporatist” model has not been substituted, simply an important turn happened: Some representatives of Jesi business community have taken seriously the efforts of the new political leaders to assume a pro-active role. An attitude towards inclusive strategies, involvement and mobilizing processes that at the beginning was seen as a strange experiment, now seems to be a common behaviour. It is like if the local system in Jesi experimented the three levels of governance performances outlined by Healey (Healey, 2007).

4. An original Knowledgescape?

According to Healey, we could count the same story referring to her three levels of governance performances. An initial spatial strategy-making initiative (the first strategic plan) produced new arenas (focus groups) involving different actors and promoting interactions between them (the first level of “governance episodes”). They were finalised to establish networks and coalitions (the second level of “governance processes”) which perform governance activities (as for the strategic plan for economic development). The third level is that of “governance cultures”, that seems to me emerging in the most recent phase. It «refers to the cultural assumptions through which the rhetorics and practices of those involved

in “doing governance”, in significant collective action, derive their meaning and legitimacy» (Healey, 2007: 22).

Coming back to the problem of knowledge, a new knowledgescape emerged, as a result not only of a specific combination of different knowledge forms, but also as a result of an interplay between knowledge forms and governance performance. Here we find a point concerning reflective knowledge: To what extent, is it influenced by certain governance performances and arrangements?

Finally, I would say something concerning how assessing participation initiatives. In order to evaluate them correctly, in terms of outcomes and impacts on actors network, we have to observe a longer period of time. In fact, if we stopped at the first stage of our story, we could observe just some impacts on the political leaders. We should say that local political leaders had learnt something from the community involvement process, had changed their behaviour code, and, thanks to this process, had gained legitimacy. In this case, we should say that community involvement does not produce relevant effects on public policies, neither it seems able to improve planning effectiveness. Rather community planning produces relevant impacts on the local politics, being a source of legitimacy, or (in the best case) a device to increase the “intelligence” of local political leaders.

But if we look at the following stages of the process, we could say that a growing capacity to learn has regarded other actors. It has been like a process of progressive exposure to the effects of inclusive strategies. From a first stage when just political personnel was directly influenced by this kind of activity (also because they promoted it), to the subsequent situations in which local stakeholders were influenced by governance processes incorporating participation mechanisms.

In conclusion: Participation processes experiment difficulties to produce direct relevant outcomes in terms of improving effectiveness of planning activities. Instead, they can produce relevant impacts on the political sphere, and consequently on the other actors involved. And it is just by this kind of mechanism that participation processes can finally produce effects on the quality of public policies.

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