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Three Years of Landscape Observatories in the Veneto Region: an Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

The regional administration of Veneto has been one of the first in Italy to establish and structure landscape observatories both at regional and local level.

The first initiative was the project “OP! Landscape is a part of you!” launched in June 2011 in “Canale di Brenta” (Prealpine area), that led to the institution of a local Landscape Observatory, as a result of the co-operation between regional, local administrations and the Universities of Padua and Venice (IUAV). Some months later, other seven local initiatives started in the Veneto region, under the supervision of the regional government and thanks to the co-operation of local administrations, stakeholders, NGOs, etc. At the same time, the Regional Landscape Observatory has been instituted with the official involvement of the Universities in the Scientific Committee. The Committee has also had the commitment of the co-ordination of the network of the local Observatories.

The author presents a first evaluation of the previously mentioned experiences, to which she has actively participated. She focuses on the following points:

- The objectives and purposes of the regional and local initiatives, compared with actions effectively implemented and/or in progress
- The means used in the implementation of the actions and the structuring of the observatories
- The roles of the stakeholders (institutional as well as non-institutional), the involvement of lay people, the communication inside and outside the observatory network.

This evaluation, despite its positive and/or negative outcomes, may contribute to a more effective implementation of Landscape Observatories, at regional and local scale, in the Veneto region as well as in other places.

1. The state of the art: landscape observatories in the Veneto region

This contribution presents some remarks coming from an evaluation of the system of landscape observatories in Veneto, since its beginning in 2011.

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The first initiative has been the project “OP! Landscape is a part of you!” launched in June 2011 in Canale di Brenta (a valley in the Prealpine area) that led to the creation of a local Landscape Observatory, thanks to the co-operation among the regional government, the local administrations and the Universities of Padua and Venice (IUAV). In this one year-long experi-

mental project many different activities were put in place, related to the implementation of the European Landscape Convention; they concerned the improvement of the local landscape knowledge, training and education, diffuse awareness raising – especially with school children –, participation. The pivot of all the activities in the project were three keywords: knowledge, awareness and sharing; they were implemented in connection with many different stakeholders in the valley, from the local cultural institutions to the NGOs.

In addition, the regional Observatory has been established inside the regional administration, and coordinated by a scientific committee. Thanks to an official agreement between the administration and the Universities, two representatives of each university in the region were involved in the committee, together with representatives of different department of the regional administrations and of the Authority for heritage and landscape. In the frame of higher ambitious general aims, the committee –dealing with scarcity of financial resources – in these years has mainly attended at the establishment and coordination of the regional network of local landscape observatories (see below) and – in the last year – at the organization of a training course for technicians and professionals, in co-ordination with the Associations of Architects and Planners, Engineers, Geologists and Agronomists. This course, which was held in spring 2014, was attended by 50 people; it will be proposed again in 2015.

The regional network of local landscape observatories is the other part of the system formed in the last three years. Following the first local experience (the one in Canale di Brenta) other eight local observatories have been established and other five are going to be established in the future. These local initiatives are structured by following a strict protocol that involves some local administrations in agreement with the regional one. Each one can be different in terms of structure, however, in all cases, at least one local administration takes the initiative and signs the agreement with the regional government. Furthermore, different organizations can be involved, from the public and private sectors (such as the consortium for water management, or the public and private consortium for local development as well as cultural organizations such as museums, or local foundations) and NGOs, too.

These local observatories are not financially supported by the regional government and therefore they have to find their own resources to develop their programs. As a matter of fact, these programs cannot be very ambitious.

2. The evaluation

The evaluation here presented aims at putting in evidence the strength and weaknesses, the opportunities and risks of the system of landscape observatories in Veneto. This evaluation is first of all needed for internal purposes, in order to finalize better the next steps; but it can also be useful in the scientific discussion, in which the analysis of the case studies provides a wider overview on what observatories could or should be, on how they could or should work. This evaluation, besides its positive and/or negative results, by making emerge further-questions, may contribute to a more effective implementation of Landscape Observatories



activities and to the enhancement of knowledge of the ELC implementation process, in a broader perspective.

The evaluation considers three main issues: the scale, distribution and borders of the observatories; their composition, setting and organization; their activities, functions and resources

2.1. Questions of scale, distribution and borders: where are the observatories?

Considering the first question, the two different scales of observatories can be noticed, regional and local: this is probably the first and still the unique case of this type of organization, in Italy at least. This dual scale structure presents different reasons of interests: for instance, it permits a strong connection with the highly differentiated local realities in the Venetian area, from the Dolomites mountains 3000 m high to the coast and the lagoon with the town of Venice; this also means different social, economic, cultural contexts. At the same time this structure permits the co-ordination and the connections among initiatives, and the choice of the appropriate scale level for the different activities, as far as some of them are better implemented at regional, and others at local level. Anyway, the question on how to improve concretely the connection and the coordination is still open.

A second topic considers the boundaries of the observatories, which coincide with the administrative ones: in this sense, of course, inside each observatory there is not only one type of landscape, but probably more than one (plain and hills, valley bottom and uplands, and so on). This fact - that is linked to the way the observatories are established – can appear excessively strict, but can be tackled as an opportunity, too: indeed, in the local observatory people attempt to address actions to all these various types of landscape, avoiding, therefore, the risk to only consider the exceptional ones. They have to consider the connections and the mutual interactions among different areas, in a perspective that can overcome the rigidity of the zoning used in planning. As a matter of fact, the observatory should work to a greater extend on the basis of people living in the landscape than on the basis of the types of landscapes.

In the same way, the observatories usually cover more than one municipality, in order to stress the necessity of co-operation.

2.2 Questions of composition, setting, organization: who and how they work in the observatories?

The questions concerning people, roles, competencies and organization have large relevance in the concrete functioning of the observatory system.

At regional level, we put in evidence two main aspects. First, the official presence of the Universities in the scientific committee since its very beginning is considered as a very positive fact: the landscape observatory is not just a question of administration, it involves broader questions, it requires different skills, and needs a strong connection with the scientific knowledge of landscapes and of dynamics. Second, we highlight that the co-operation among the

professional associations (architects and planners, engineers, geologists, agronomists), built during the last year - in order to implement the training course on landscape issues - is very positive and innovative (at least in Italy). Apart from the difficulties in managing different approaches and languages, and keeping in mind all the improvements that are needed, this co-operation is forward-looking and promising, in order to connect these different worlds and to facilitate the spreading of a shared vision and the learning of a common language on landscape.

At local level, let's first focus on the fact that the observatories are based on the local administrations: this has good positive consequences from the point of view of stability and grounding the initiatives on the actions that transform the landscape; on the other hand, there is the risk of insufficient involvement of the local community, that does not always feel itself represented by the administration; the administration is often perceived as distant, not giving importance to what the citizens demand and actually live in their everyday life; local administrators are often considered as politicians, who only care about their position and power. In this sense, we question if the approach of local observatories has to be really intended as a "bottom up" approach: the local level is not necessary a guarantee of a correct implementation of the ELC principles concerning the involvement of the public. Moreover, the strict connection with the administration does not help the observatory in being a "third part" between local communities and institutions.

Concerning the program and the actions that are implemented, they strongly depend on the "active part" of the observatory, which could be performed by a key figure such as a "director". As a matter of fact, we address this question as one of the most important ones. As far as the observatory has very scarce resources, there is not a large investment on this position. Sometimes the director is one of the employees of the administration, with additional tasks to carry out; in other "extreme" cases he is a volunteer with cultural and social interests. We suggest that the regional committee should pay more attention on it, requiring peculiar expertise and directors with skills on the landscape matters, and investing on the education, training and co-operation among them.

Concerning the organization of the observatory, we can positively remark that the administration has the possibility to involve all the interested bodies at local level in the management and in the activities proposed, as it happens in the best experiences. Local associations, NGOs, cultural bodies can meet together in the observatory. Two categories are particularly significant:

- the organizations linked to the productive world, i.e. in agricultural, in industrial, as well as in tourism sectors. The observatory is not a place disconnected from the local economy, it is not just a matter of discourses, it can be an opportunity for integrating different approaches and finding new ways for sustainable development in the region;
- the school world, at different levels, from the kindergarten to the secondary school: school children should be seen not only as the "recipients" of an expert knowledge that has to be spread; they should be addressed with an approach of "landscape literacy", in order to give them voice as active citizens; moreover, school children can be directly involved as actors of dissemination and awareness raising activities, with effective results towards a large public.



2.3. Questions of activities, functions, resources: what do the observatories do?

Concerning the long lists of activities that the regional and local observatories have in their programs and try to implement (monitoring and landscape analysis, dissemination, awareness raising, training and education etc.), we can discuss first the following question: due to the scarcity of financial resources, is it correct to keep wide the range of the activities in the programs of the observatories? Would it be better to choose just one or two of these activities and to finalize the use of resources more strictly? Even if from the point of view of resources some choices are necessary, in our opinion it is a good thing if the observatories act in several directions, as far as they are (or they should be) connected each other. The increasing of landscape knowledge has to be implemented together with the involvement of citizens; the training of technicians is not disconnected from the activities in school. One of the peculiarities of the landscape observatory is in fact to build these interconnections, avoiding, therefore, any narrow view on the landscape issues: for instance, in the experience of Canale di Brenta all the initiatives we proposed could stay under the umbrella of the same three keywords, and in this sense, they were related to each other.

Anyway, some priorities should necessarily be defined, at local as well as at regional level, mostly clarifying the criteria used to define them and avoiding the risk of dispersing energies in a hyper-fragmented scenario, made of single projects without a global strategy.

Moreover, the observatories should not necessarily be the direct organizers of activities (that requires financial support), but they can be mostly the catalysts, the hub of initiatives proposed by other organizations; they could launch, activate and co-ordinate what already exists or could be done at local level. As an example, we can remember that in “Canale di Brenta” the activity with school children (that involved more than 1300 school children) was the less expensive one among those implemented: we proposed a short training to the school teachers and a tutoring during all the period of the project; this was not so expensive; afterwards, the teachers worked with their pupils, in school time as they always do, just finalizing their educational activities towards the aims of the project proposed by the observatory. This part of the project did not require any financial resource from the observatory.

Another question concerning the activities, which we evaluate negatively in the experience of the Veneto region, is the insufficient connection between the observatories and the planning and policy making processes. The observatory should be the place for a better understanding of the purposes, the feasibility and the effectiveness of planning and policies affecting landscapes at different levels; concerning spatial and landscape planning first, as well as other sectors such as energy or rural development. This should be done through precise participative processes and mostly by creating a spirit of dialogue among the stakeholders, a spirit by which the observatory activities should be characterized. We acknowledge that it is a political question that should be addressed in the appropriate context, nevertheless it is also a matter of a more or less diffuse consciousness. Furthermore, a stronger relationship with planning and policies sectors would make the observatory itself considered more useful, in a practical sense. Otherwise, there would be the risk to be perceived as useless, as just a squandering/wasting of public resources.

3. Final remarks

This evaluation highlights that the system of landscape observatories in the Veneto region can be viewed as a “container” with many strong points as well as some weaknesses; the regional administration first and all people involved should do the effort to “fill it up” with effective initiatives in an adequate way, step by step, considering the priorities, the resources and the opportunities that are growing. Surely, in these three last years this system could have made more achievements, however it should be recognized that all started from a scratch and that very few other experiences were at that moment active, in order to follow or replicate them. The interest of this complex process is its experimental, forward looking and promising character.

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