

Alessandro Bonifazi

Politecnico di Bari
Dipartimento di Architettura e Urbanistica
Via E. Orabona, 4
70125 BARI-ITALY
a.bonifazi@poliba.it

Carlo Rega

Politecnico di Torino
Dipartimento Interateneo Territorio
Viale Mattioli, 39
10125 TORINO-ITALY
carlo.rega@polito.it

SEA AND THE TANGLES OF URBAN GOVERNANCE: SUSTAINABILITY, DEMOCRACY AND EFFECTIVENESS

In this paper we try to advance the debate on the evaluation of sustainable development by applying a *reflexive approach*, that is, by directing evaluation logics and methods towards a better understanding of evaluation itself. We survey Strategic Environmental Assessments of urban plans in Italy, acknowledging the three-fold nature of SEA (*procedure, process and product*). Though discussing an articulated methodology, we present full results from the first tier only, based on the analysis of ten Environmental Reports concerning as many municipal plans in different Italian Regions. Texts are deconstructed into *semantic dimensions*, yielding both *idealtypes* and *exceptions*. While making sense of our observations in order to ascertain the contribution of SEA to mainstreaming sustainability in urban governance, we bump into a number of crucial issues that may be subsumed into the categories of *democracy* and *effectiveness*.

1 Introduction

While a great body of scientific literature, political processes and social practices coalesced around sustainable development, it seems the concept irresistibly lost momentum as a driver for change. Such evolution might be optimistically explained as a consequence of maturing. However, the sustainability discourse will not automatically turn into a somehow disenchanted, yet fruitful, store of knowledge. Evaluation activities can help reweave the fragmented spaces of conceptualization and implementation of sustainable development, by fostering mutual learning among the many organizations, groups and individuals who engaged themselves with this integrating construct.

In this paper we investigate the contribution of reflexive evaluation approaches to positioning sustainable development at the centre of conceptions and practices emerging in new modes of urban governance. In a reflexive effort, evaluation logics and methods are directed towards a better understanding of evaluation itself. We try to do so by focusing on the original evaluation question (*does it work?*) and projecting it onto the interface between

environmental issues and urban development. Though presented in a broader conceptual frame, we developed our work moving from specific empirical cases, that is, contemporary strategic environmental assessments (SEA) of urban plans in Italy.

In the following sections, we first brief readers on the state of art of SEA in Italy, and then discuss the use of a family of concepts that aim at defining *good* evaluation practice in this field. Section 4 reconstructs the evolution of our methodology, and it is immediately followed by the presentation of our observations. After envisaging further efforts to cover missing links, we draw some conclusions.

2 Environmental assessment and urban planning in Italy

Six years after the adoption of Directive 2001/42/EC a national SEA normative framework has not yet been fully established in Italy. Formally, the Directive was first brought into force on August 1, 2007, but in the meanwhile a review process had already started and an amended text was enacted in January 2008.

Over the last decade, however, Regional Authorities had already introduced SEA systems in their legislations. We then have to turn to the regional level to frame the contexts within which the cases we investigated have been developed. A first group of Regions introduced SEA requirements in the EIA legislation; others integrated them in the new territorial governance frameworks, following recent (2001) constitutional reforms that devolved significant legislative powers to the regions; a third cluster of Regions did not pass new laws, yet enacted specific regulations implementing some requirements of the Directive (REGA, 2007).

Following a classification repeatedly found in the international literature (DALAL-CLAYTON/SADLER, 2005; CHACKER *et al.*, 2006), two different approaches to SEA can be recognized, namely the *EIA model* and the *integrated model*. In the first case, the SEA process ends with an *environmental compatibility statement* issued by a technical body. In the second case, SEA is part of the broader planning process, and does not follow a separate approval procedure. Although regional planning laws differ significantly, some common features are emerging in the latest generation that is slowly replacing existing frameworks. Firstly, local authorities (municipalities, in our case) are given ever more power in elaborating and approving their own plans according to the *subsidiarity* principle. Moreover, the relationships with other levels of government (Provincial and Regional) tend to move towards negotiation modes and away from traditional *command and control* approaches.

As for the effectiveness of environmental assessments, both models show some pros and cons. In the *integrated model*, SEA is fully embedded in the planning process and therefore the approval procedure is streamlined. On the other hand, lack of accountability is around the corner, since the same authority is in charge of elaborating, assessing and approving the plan. The *EIA model* may assure a more independent assessment, but the double approval procedure often proves very time-consuming and may give rise to political instability and hinder the whole planning process.

3 Making sense of better evaluations: *effectiveness, quality, integration and learning*

Effectiveness is quite an explored topic in SEA international literature: though terminology and interpretations varies, a lot of works in the SEA domain deal with the establishment of sets of "effectiveness criteria" (FISCHER/GAZZOLA, 2006).

Here we make a first distinction by acknowledging that SEA is at the same time a *procedure*, a *process* and a *product*. If we adopt the procedural point of view, SEA effectiveness is focused on establishing a series of steps that the process should take regardless of the specific planning system or institutional context within which it is framed. This is for example the approach of Directive 2001/42/EC.

Most of SEA literature emphasised the importance of SEA as a *process*: in this perspective, the more SEA is successful in modifying the way decisions are made (in an open and participatory way), the more effective it is. A common motto in the international debate is that “the process is more important than the product” (see, for instance, BROWN/THÉRIVEL, 2000).

More recently, some authors have partially questioned this point: FISCHER (2003) and CONNELLY/RICHARDSON (2005) urge practitioners and researchers to refocus the debate on the *product* side, namely the outcome of the SEA process. The authors maintain that there is no guarantee that participation leads to more environmentally sustainable decisions, especially if the process is oriented to building consensus. In this understanding, SEA is *effective* if the plan incorporates strong elements of environmental sustainability and justice. They don't mean to argue against wide participation in SEA process, but point out that participation processes often turn out to be the arenas where strong groups or interests prevail.

The assessment of SEA effectiveness can thus be seen from two points of views: one relies on the concept of *quality*: a “good SEA” follows the guiding principles largely accepted by the SEA community. The second one is focused on the *outcomes* of SEA: “a good SEA” succeeds in steering the plan towards more environment-friendly courses of action. The OECD evaluation framework for SEA in the field of development cooperation echoes this twofold approach, by providing two distinct checklists for evaluation as a *quality control check* and evaluation of the *delivery of envisaged outcomes* (OECD, 2007).

Whereas these considerations apply to SEA in general, we argue that in addressing the specific field of urban planning the concepts of *effectiveness* and *quality* can be further elaborated and explained in terms of *integration* and *learning*. *Integration* is another key word in the SEA literature, but it can be interpreted in various way (EGGEMBERGER/PARTIDARIO, 2000). Here we want to emphasise the interactions among different disciplinary fields. SEA practitioners often come from the environmental studies domain, while urban planners, at least in Italy, are mainly civil engineers and architects, and they draw from a structured body of technical and legal expertise, as well as they fit into administrative and institutional practices, which only recently began to evolve towards new forms according to the shift from *spatial planning* to *territorial governance*.

Learning emerges as a crucial category for evaluating effectiveness and quality of SEA of urban plans, and can be understood as: (i) exchange of knowledge among experts; (ii) transfer of knowledge to/from the local community and (iii) establishment of new routines inside the technical-administrative apparatus of local governments and opportunity for dialogue among different tiers and bodies of the territorial governance system.

4 In search of a method

We have been reworking our tentative methodology over previous collaborative efforts (REGA/BONIFAZI, 2007; TORRE *et al.*, 2005) that moved from acknowledging evaluation products (the Environmental Reports) as easily accessible sources of relevant information. While we soon realized that they are by no means exhaustive of the complexity of SEA processes, we nevertheless tried to reconcile our original metaevaluation approach with a broader understanding of the manifold trajectories of interaction among evaluation, planning, and the context they occur in. With the term metaevaluation we mean, according to the original definition by SCRIVEN (1991: 228), an “evaluation of evaluations, indirectly, an

evaluation of evaluators". We then turned to the framework introduced by HARRINGTON/MORGENSTERN (2004) to investigate quality in the field of Regulatory Impact Assessment. They envisaged three mutually reinforcing tiers of analysis:

- 1) *content test* is typically based on reading evaluation documents, and geared towards checking their compliance to legally binding requirements, as well as guidelines and good practice;
- 2) *function test* should aim at understanding how and to what extent evaluation influenced planning throughout the process, from setting the objectives to implementation and review;
- 3) *outcome test* is set with the ambitious task of gauging evaluation's reliability by comparing (*ex post*) its predictions to the actual effects of a plan or policy.

Though clearly arbitrary and partly questionable, this classification works as a logical platform where different research approaches can be woven together in a meaningful way. Moreover, we found it consistent with the literature emphasising, respectively, the *procedural*, *process*, and *product* nature of evaluation, a classification we have introduced in section 3.

The following step consisted in mulling over a tentative set of dimensions to support a semantic characterization of the SEA discourses we were eager to plunge into. Again, we moved from established approaches, namely a list of effectiveness criteria (POMPILIO, 2007) developed by the working group on "SEA and urban planning" that was set up at a national society of environmental evaluators¹. By reworking the dimensions to take account of growing consensus in the international literature upon a number of issues, we agreed on the set we present in Tab. 1.

SEMANTIC DIMENSION	key concepts
INTEGRATION	Coordination between planning and evaluation; evaluation influence on final outcomes.
NETWORKING	Institutional cooperation; participation; communication.
ECOSYSTEM APPROACH	Holism vs. reductionism; carrying capacity; interscalarity; time perspectives.
EQUITY	Values; social inclusion; inter-generational and intra-generational equity; environmental justice.
ADAPTABILITY	Steps; approaches; timing; methods; alternatives; impacts.
CYCLICITY	Monitoring; indicators; information systems; feedback.
GOVERNANCE	Synergies with other evaluation and management processes; integration of environmental, social and economic policies; implementation strategies.
SALIENCE	Focussing; timeliness; cost-effectiveness.
ACCOUNTABILITY	Legal status of SEA; independence; subsidiarity vs. hierarchy; transparency.
LEARNING	Knowledge and cognition; mutual and organizational learning; reflexivity.

Table 1: the semantic dimensions through which we analyzed Environmental Reports, along with the main concepts related to each of them.

¹ Associazione Analisti Ambientali.

Building on the effort to back our method with reliable references, we turned to a third family of sources in order to operationalize it. We drew from the body of normative and guidance texts that have been piling up worldwide, in the EU and at the national (Italian), level for over a decade now. We of course looked at Directive 42/2001/EC and the related implementation guidelines (CEC, 2003), we used the manuals meant to assist the environmental assessment of plans and programmes under the current and the previous structural funds programming cycles (MATT, 1999; RETE AMBIENTALE, 2006). Reaching to a broader arena, we looked for the International Association for Impact Assessment's performance criteria (IAIA, 2002) and the OECD's good practice collection in applying SEA to development cooperation (OECD, 2007). Whereas the EU Directive sets the legislative and procedural framework Europe-wide, the two national manuals have been the most popular references for Italian local authorities and practitioners. On the other hand, IAIA criteria sum up the scientific take on process issues, and OECD good practice tries to integrate on an international level the viewpoints of different actors (practitioners, development agencies, donors, NGOs, *etc.*) and includes a blueprint for evaluating SEA.

Taken altogether, these documents address all three perspectives we described that have been adopted more frequently in previous research efforts, namely *procedure*, *process* and *product*. By screening these widely acknowledged references we became confident that the semantic dimensions we had chosen, though not exhaustive, hold prominent positions in the intertwined discourses on SEA at professional, academic and administrative levels. Meanwhile, we were able to derive some of the direct investigation tools we needed. As for the *content test*, the only stage we have fully accomplished so far, such tools consist in specific questions included in the checklist through which we interpreted the ERs. For the time being, we only speculated about possible implementation strategies for, and discussed some of the issues that are likely to hinder the investigation in, the further levels of analysis we spoke about (namely, the *function* and the *outcome test*).

With respect to the target of our study, we chose to focus exclusively on Environmental Reports concerning urban plans at the municipal scale in Italy. We occasionally picked up other sources (planning documents, administrative acts, *etc.*) when we needed to clarify some issues that were not clearly explained in the ERs. However, we stuck to the assumption that only what was evident in the report should be registered, and used further information just to facilitate interpretation. Anyway, our research remained within the scope of a documental desktop analysis. This is an on-going project; however the *content test* we present in this article covers 10 ERs, carried out for as many plans² in the following cities:

- 1) Bassano del Grappa (region: VENETO);
- 2) Monza (LOMBARDIA);
- 3) Camposampiero (VENETO);
- 4) Rosà (VENETO);
- 5) Bologna (EMILIA-ROMAGNA);
- 6) Cuneo (PIEMONTE);
- 7) joint plan for the towns of Argenta, Migliarino, Ostellato, Portomaggiore and Voghiera (EMILIA-ROMAGNA);
- 8) Pegognaga (LOMBARDIA);
- 9) Portogruaro (VENETO);
- 10) Falconara Marittima (MARCHE).

² The plans we studied are not exactly the same kind of instruments, though it would be too complicated to explain the differences as they depend on the Italian (regional) planning systems. Suffice to say that most of them resemble strategic plans, whereas a minority falls into the class of traditional, legally binding, master plans.

Reading texts systematically, to interpret them and make conjectures about the processes they derive from, is a relatively common exercise in both planning (KHAKKEE, 2000) and evaluation³ (STUFFLEBEAM, 2000; LEE/KIRKPATRICK, 2006), and in environmental assessment alike (TZOUMIS, 2007; VAN HINTE/GUNTUN/DAY, 2007). HARRINGTON and MORGENSTERN (2004) are quite elusive on implementation guidance, and we found few cases in the literature drawing explicitly on their approach (ADELLE/HERTIN/JORDAN, 2006; TORRITI, 2005). We therefore proceed our own way, by answering (for each ER) to a set of specific questions related to each semantic dimension shown in **Tab. 1**.

5 Deconstructing SEA practice: a *content test* of Environmental Reports

The results we present in this section ensue from carrying out a *content test*, as described in the previous section, on 10 ERs. By synthesizing the annotations made for each report, we came to the reflections on the most relevant semantic dimensions that are treated in the following paragraphs. Each paragraph presents both *idealtypes* (aggregation of most recurrent features, not necessarily corresponding to any real case) and peculiar observations.

5.1 Integration

The earliest integration between planning and evaluation is one of the main guiding principles of SEA (see for instance BROWN/THERIVEL, 2000: 187; SADLER/VERHEEM 1996). In the practice of spatial planning in Italy, however, the relatively recent introduction of SEA requirements largely applied to plans already in-the-making. Half of the Environmental Reports we examined were developed after a first draft of the plan had already been prepared, while more recent experiences of SEA, integrated in the planning process from the outset, have reached the final approval stage only in two cases due to the quite long duration of approval procedures.

The widely acknowledged correlation between early integration of SEA and its degree of influence on planning seems to be confirmed: in the five abovementioned cases of full integration, SEA contributed to develop plan's objectives and visions, while in the other ones, the evaluation had no role in establishing plan's strategy and its function was limited to the proposal of mitigation and compensation measures. Nonetheless, two cases show that even when SEA lags behind the plan, it can influence the final outcome, particularly in those contexts where concrete developments are regulated by operational instruments of a lower tier in the planning system, when SEA provides explicitly for implementation mechanisms.

In most cases, SEA endeavours to harmonize the evaluation steps with the planning process, mainly relying on integration schemes provided by regional regulations or other guidelines⁴ (for instance the ENPLAN project, 2004), although not in all cases the complex and interwoven patterns of plan making and evaluation are clearly mapped out. In the same fashion, the establishment of relations with other tiers of spatial governance are pursued but not always fully achieved. As we dwelled on the municipal level, Provincial Plans, where they existed, were often taken as the main reference, particularly in setting environmental objectives and the structural options of development. Only in one case, however, the ER at the local level could refer to a previous SEA at the provincial level, establishing sound relations between environmental baseline data and assessments across geographical scales. As for the relation with the lower tier of local planning (operative plans, OP), situations vary according to regional planning systems: where OP are to be submitted to

³ Whereas this assertion is quite obvious for evaluation in general, we specifically refer to *metaevaluation* as understood by SCRIVEN (1991: 228).

⁴ Such as those developed under the ENPLAN (2004) project, available at the following URL in four languages (Italian, French, Spanish, and Catalan): <http://www.interreg-enplan.org/linee.htm>.

SEA, more specific aspects are deferred to further evaluation steps; in other contexts, OPs don't fall within the scope of SEA. In these circumstances, evaluations often have to recognize that the identification and assessment of certain impacts would be possible only if applied to OPs, since actual effects on the environment depend on their implementation. The only possibility for SEA to influence it is to set clear guidelines and criteria for their elaboration already in the structure plan, as it happens in five of the examined cases. However, the effectiveness of such recommendations and guidelines should be tested, all the more so because they are not always legally binding.

While a specific requirement according to Annex I of Directive 2001/42/EC is that ERs contain an outline of plan's contents, we found that only in 6 cases this task was carried out systematically; however, in all cases ERs try to make plan's objectives and courses of action more explicit by systematizing the sometimes rhetorical apparatus of plans. This appears to emerge as an important function of SEA in urban planning.

In all cases the ER was drafted by a team (2-6 persons) of external consultants from different fields, with architecture, environmental engineering, agronomy, natural sciences and forestry being the most represented disciplinary backgrounds of evaluators. Professional backgrounds, rather than the regulatory frameworks enforced in the different regions, seem to significantly influence the methodological approach to SEA. Strict collaboration between planners and evaluators is another widely acknowledged criterion of SEA effectiveness; however, this aspect was openly mentioned only in half of the cases in hand.

Based solely on the analysis of ERs we were not able to ascertain whether evaluations applied to the final version of plans and could thus consider all choices and options, or missed some aspects due to amendments occurred in the very final steps of approval procedures.

5.2 Networking

Public participation appears perhaps as one of the weakest point of current planning and evaluation processes, when compared to the requirements of Directive 2001/42/EC and other international guidelines. Furthermore, even when some forms of participation took place, there was often no trace of them in ERs. From other sources we actually know that involvement of stakeholders in the planning process occurred in five cases out of ten, but only in two this is reported in the ERs which, however, are vague in stating how the results of the consultations were taken into account in the final version of the plan. This observation supports the impression that in the current practice in Italy participation is conceived as a part of the planning process rather than as a specific task within the SEA process. For the same reason, it is often not possible to discern from the ERs which groups of citizens were involved, if participation was occasional or iterative, and which element of the plan or the evaluation process were discussed (objectives, scope of the assessment etc.).

Nevertheless, some recent experiences, though not fully representative, are worth being mentioned. The joint plan in Emilia Romagna try to set participatory processes pursuant the Directive's requirements by exploiting the potentialities of the internet: a web platform was developed in the framework of a regional project aiming at promoting e-democracy and fostering the dialogue between citizens and institutions by using multiple tools: discussion forums, mailing lists, public enquiries, questionnaires. Main issues at stake and plan's directives are discussed and alternative options are identified in pursuit of a common or widely accepted position.

The plan for the city of Portogruaro establishes a twofold process: participative planning workshops are first organized, in which selected stakeholders actively contribute to set plan's objective and discuss strategic choices. The second level resembles more traditional consultations or dissemination meetings, but this is the only case explicitly addressing the involvement of marginalized groups in the participation process (elder people, women, low income classes), by scheduling dedicated public meetings.

While on the one hand these examples show that inclusive participation can be achieved with a reasonable amount of money and time, on the other one the real influence of such processes on the final outcome of the plan remains to be tested.

Inter institutional forms of collaboration are more frequent instead, as they are foreseen and often encouraged by new regional planning laws. This reflects the aforementioned shift toward a more dialectical planning system in which different levels of governments jointly carry out some planning activities. Again, this aspect is not always fully reported in the ERs: the role that SEA plays in this process is still not prominent, inter-institutional collaboration processes are at the moment triggered more by planning laws than by SEA regulations.

5.3 Ecosystem approach

The conceptions of environment emerging from our investigation are fragmented, which is not surprising when one thinks at the reduction to relevant themes embedded in Directive 2001/42/EC, and widely tested both in EIA and SEA in the specific field of structural and cohesion policies (EC-DG ENV, 1998). Accordingly, assessments are more focused on identifying the environmental “targets” of individual actions rather than framing the causal relations among them in an ecosystem perspective. This is reflected by the choice of environmental issues (as defined in Annex I to Directive 2001/42/EC) to be included in the ER: the most common environmental receptors (air, water, soil) are present in all examined ERs, but differences arise in relation to other, more complex, aspects. Landscape is another common theme (8 occurrences), often associated to (but distinguished from) architectural and archaeological heritage (6 occurrences).

Ecosystem functions are considered using a variety of terms, including: biodiversity (5) flora and fauna (3), ecological network (2), habitats, natural areas, natural resources. Human health is also a cross cutting theme, sometimes standing as a single issue (4 occurrences), or often considered in more specific terms, such as noise pollution (4), electromagnetic radiations, or related to air and water pollution. Soil consumption, industrial and hydro-geological risk, waste, energy and global climate change are other frequently cited aspects. Along with “environmental” issues, we also detected classic urban planning categories (*territorial identity, network of infrastructures, urban morphology*), or socio economic ones, referred to as *social-economic wellbeing, economic activities, quality of life* or simply *population*.

As a general consideration, SEAs are still largely shaped by a sectoral approach, whereas emphasizing the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts proves a hard task. Efforts in this sense are not missing, but appear not entirely capable of providing a truly holistic evaluation. Attempts include revolving frequently around spatial sub-systems where homogeneous typologies of intervention are foreseen, resorting to SWOT analysis, or aggregating the effects according to functional systems (residential, infrastructural, mobility).

Issues of scale are becoming a prominent topic in SEA research (JOÃO, 2007); by looking at how ERs deal with inter-scalarity, we found that identification of the nexus between local phenomena and broader environmental dynamics is often limited to the provincial level, representing the closest upper tier in the planning systems to municipal plans. Efforts in this direction are present in the majority of the cases, generally concerning identification of binding normative restrictions (protected areas, buffer zones around major infrastructures) or harmonization of local objectives with guidelines and directives of provincial plans. Attempts to derive local objectives or assessment criteria from global environmental policies and declarations (the Aalborg commitments, both the European Union and Italian Sustainable Development Strategy) are present only in two cases.

Finally, ERs deal with the variable of *time* mainly in two ways: the first one consists in providing historical series of data, where they are available, generally related to air pollution, demographic trends, socio economic aspects; the second one refers to the historical development of the territory, particularly in terms of the interplay between human activity and

natural (morphological) conditions in shaping the landscape. On the other hand, the consideration of the past evolution of natural systems, which in many cases is crucial for foreseeing possible future developments, is a largely neglected aspect of current ERs, probably due, among other things, to the lack of data and consolidated methodology. Scenarios building, which is often mentioned as an important tool for SEA (see for example MÖRTBERG/BALFORS/KNOL, 2007), was found in two cases.

5.4 Equity

All cases we surveyed emerged as allegedly value-free evaluations (CHELIMSKY, 1998), since there was no room for questioning the motivations, purposes and implications beyond a generic reference to sustainability or appropriate environmental management as self-explaining concepts. Feeling disappointed by the lack of explicit handling of values, we tried to read through the lines in order to identify underlying registers. Interestingly enough, a concern for *human wellbeing* outstrips all others, followed by the perspectives of *environmental management* and *ecosystem functioning*, as respectively human- and eco-centred understandings of complexity. The relevance of such concepts as *risk* and *pollution* can be read as corroborating the main findings.

A further step towards inequalities-sensitive evaluations would be matching values, stakes and responsibilities to different groups and organizations. However, we never came across such an approach, and the rare attempts at identifying relevant urban actors, no matter how accurate, didn't venture into linking them to conflicting viewpoints. Affirmative actions could at least address *process discrimination*, that is, the additional divide dug by participatory modes of governance when they ignore the need to redress unbalanced chances to join in. It wasn't the case, though faint hints showed up in the guise of inclusive *stakeholders mapping* and *gender-sensitive* methodologies.

As *inter-generational* equity is never dealt with openly, we turned to some of its building bricks. We realized that the use of non-renewable resources, as well as the unsustainable use of renewable ones, stays constantly within the reach of evaluators' concerns, yet fails to influence their deliberations. Longer-term perspectives do not stretch beyond the average ten year effectiveness of urban plans. When it comes to *intra-generational* equity, the only substantial aspects belong to the cultural and professional background of urban planners: the accessibility of services and urban amenities, and *equalization planning* approaches (MICELLI, 2002; PRUETZ, 1993), with the latter apparently motivated rather by the need to streamline implementation than by an actual concern for fair real estate markets⁵.

Environmental justice has traditionally been tied to a spatial perspective, and it is no surprise that (at least at the level of analysis) evaluators acknowledged the uneven distribution of "costs and benefits". However, the more political link between areas and specific (disadvantaged) social groups was never established, and even *territorial cohesion* as such didn't play a relevant role in the overall value judgment.

5.5 Environmental governance

The mushrooming of competent authorities and management procedures would call for coordination to ensure environmental policies are both *efficient* (with regard to information management and monitoring implementation) and *effective* (in terms of coherence among different interventions). The need for SEA to be fine-tuned to EIA, *appropriate assessment* introduced by the Habitat Directive (92/43/EC) or *integrated environmental permit* system under the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control Directive⁶ is stressed by legislators at

⁵ By "equalization planning" we mean planning mechanisms making use of the transfer of development rights to promote more equitable impacts on land ownership while facilitating the actual realization of public interest developments.

⁶ Amendments to the original Directive 96/61/EC have recently been codified into Directive 2008/1/EC.

all levels, from EU, through member states, to regions. More generally, scientific literature points to the integration of SEA in local Agenda21 and/or other voluntary schemes for environmental management (such as EMAS and ISO 14000), as conducive to better evaluation practices. For instance, a well structured and widely supported local Agenda21 process may deliver a comprehensive *Report on the State of the Environment* and trigger participation, thus coming a good way to fulfilling SEA tasks. So far, what is deemed desirable. In practice, we found poor traces of such networks for environmental governance. The close relationship with other forms of evaluation seems to be secured only for *appropriate assessments* of plans affecting NATURA 2000 sites, whereas EIAs are systematically overlooked. The synergies with voluntary processes for environmental governance and management are limited to occasional references to local Agenda21 and widespread calls for the implementation of EMAS/ISO 14000 schemes, which however do not result in any rule or incentive.

As for the efforts made by evaluators in charge of SEA to survey all possible sources of both regulatory and programmatic environmental policies, we would argue that they are often significant, yet seldom systematic. We noticed three main families of sources, which are tapped into more frequently: *international sustainability principles* (such as the Aalborg Commitments), *national binding provisions* (especially on pollution and environmental quality), and *hierarchically higher local plans* (at the province rather than the region level).

Socio-economic aspects have always been included somehow in the evaluations, and attention has been mostly devoted to the traditional issues urban planning is supposed to tackle: *housing needs, population, distribution of economic activities and provision of services, mobility*. On the whole, these arguments seem to support development agendas without offering useful clues about how to reconcile them with ecological rationalities. We never came across proper economic analysis, let alone in monetary terms.

While dwelling on the modes of environmental governance as embodied in the ERs, we strove to sort out evidence into original contributions of SEA and plan's legacy. In this respect, we found a deep integration between the two processes, which might also be ascribed to the strong semantic and logical inertia introduced by complex texts such as urban plans as they are being reworked during evaluations. Moreover, the urban plans we have chosen are not homogeneous constructs, as some resemble legally binding *master plans*, whereas others could be defined as *strategic plans*. Notwithstanding the aforesaid limitations, we encountered all four implementation strategies we searched for, though (1) *coordination and guidelines*, and partly (2) *regulation*, were more prominent than (3) *programmes and incentives* and (4) *moral suasion and raising awareness*. In some cases we sensed a possible bias, as negative environmental impacts, largely ensuing from *regulations*, were allegedly balanced by positive effects to be brought about through *coordination and guidelines*. On a similar note, good news tended to come from (marginal) rural and natural areas, whereas (core) urban developments persisted in unsustainable trends. With respect to environmental quality, a *reactive* approach seemed to prevail whereby both planners and evaluators try to mitigate and compensate the negative impacts of development, rather than *proactively* devising it in a sustainable way from the outset.

5.6 Accountability

We decided to group under this heading a number of issues that, though generally ascribed to the realm of governance and democracy, have more directly to do with the specific issue of understanding how measures are taken and who is responsible for them, a precondition for the evaluation of political actors' behaviour (HAUS/HEINELT, 2005: 15). With respect to the distribution of power and responsibilities between planning authorities (municipalities) and higher level government bodies, two main strategies are almost equally represented. As Lombardia and Emilia Romagna opted for full *subsidiarity*, the city council is in charge of both approving the Plan and evaluating the Environmental Report. In Piemonte, Veneto and Marche, though with some differences, an *independent* body takes care of either or both.

The picture is made more complicated by the changing status of the evaluation, ranging from an *argumented opinion* to a *proper authorization*.

At first glance, the often conflicting principles of *independence* and *subsidiarity* might be framed in the political discourse on evolving governance arrangements. However, beyond procedural technicalities, there lie crucial issues of the like of *democratization of decision-making* and *accountability of evaluation actors*. In the first instance, the cons of self-government are mitigated by institutional checks and balances: *compliance* to plans and policies standing higher in the hierarchy, *cooperation* within multilevel governance schemes. The latter proved useful under the second strategy as well, when the problem is binding the otherwise arbitrary power of a central environmental authority to clear democratic rules, as well as testing its assumptions and deliberations for relevance to the local context they refer to. On the other hand, by appointing separate groups of external experts for planning and evaluation (which was the rule in the cases we analyzed) more favourable conditions may be restored in either case.

However, the role of expert advice deserves a closer look. The handling of dependencies, if any, took place outside the scope of environmental reporting. Evaluation methods are generally clearly explained, whereas the processes by which they convey knowledge, opinions and political conditions through the bottleneck of value judgment, and out again in the guise of a justification of choices, is sometimes opaque. Different circumstances might be blamed: sources aren't always explicit or fully accessible by third parties, though on-line publishing of planning documents is becoming established; the links between evaluation steps are missing, which could reveal a rhetorical use of methods; finally, some evaluators stretch their discretionary power beyond reasonable limits.

Another flaw that might hinder the credibility of expert advice is the failure to explain clearly uncertainties, assumptions, evaluation mandate, and the roles and responsibilities of the different actors that are involved in the process. As a consequence, some ERs tend to read like *ex cathedra* endorsements of urban plans, rather than basis for, and account of, truly open deliberative arenas. As for mutual influences, it is more likely that ERs emphasise the effectiveness of evaluation in amending the plan, than making clear how input from consultations and participation inspired and steered SEA.

6 Exploring the further levels of investigation

On the theoretical level, Harrington and Morgenstern's approach shows an appealing clearness and holds a promise of comprehensiveness. It is therefore no surprise that different scholars have picked it while dwelling on methodology or embarking on any desktop analysis based on evaluation reports (RADAELLI, 2004; ADELLE/HERTIN/JORDAN, 2006). Finding examples of either *function* or *outcome test* proved a harder task, and following our own attempts we concluded that, whereas the first level of investigation is intuitively feasible, the others are much more demanding, and they challenge research design and conceptual foundations to such an extent that their actual usefulness could be at stake. So far, we only ventured into planning empirical work in these perspectives, and our preliminary reflections are sketched in the following paragraphs.

6.1 Function test

Given this test is expected to trace the unpredictable paths along which evaluation influences planning, we should opt for a flexible methodology. Some clues might come from fine-tuned desktop research, once extended to other planning documents with explicit reference to SEA. Press clippings might help plunge (*a posteriori*) into the political climate and reconstruct the argumentative plot around main issues. However, we could hardly do without surveying (through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, *etc.*) those who participated in the

planning process. Most semantic dimensions would retain their significance when shifting from *content* to *function test*, though we can reasonably expect some to prove more relevant than others, e.g. *learning* mechanisms and *participation* within *deliberative arenas* (BOBBIO, 2002). A better catchword than *influence*, *integration* could label the conceptual horizon for a *function test* aimed at grasping the mutually constitutive relations between planning and SEA. Finally, by resorting to Social Network Analysis (based on the collection, interpretation and representation of relational data) we might highlight the underlying networks of collaboration/conflict and make sense of the role of individuals, groups, and organization in shaping these deeply collective and interactive phenomena.

6.2 Outcome test

Here, Harrington and Morgenstern's triple test seems to reveal its origins, rooted in economic approaches applied to Regulatory Impact Assessment, with a broad confidence in cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness analyses and a bias towards *estimates* rather than *evaluation*. Already within the boundaries of the original application, proponents acknowledged the intrinsic flaws of an *ex post* investigation aiming at:

- Isolating all effects of the intervention under scrutiny from non-related phenomena;
- Compare real outcomes of an intervention to evaluators' guess, and determine their coherence.

We won't dwell on the many perils of such an evaluation strategy (ranging from incommensurability of effects, to uncertainty in assigning certain outcomes to a specific action). Conflicting observations make it difficult to think of plans and the environment as fully separate and perfectly knowable things, and then expect to appreciate the interdependencies. Luigi MAZZA (1995), maintain that the overall consequences of planning on dynamic equilibriums of a city are beyond the scope of our understanding, not least because the technical account of a plan "resembles a radio broadcast full of interference". Nathaniel LICHFIELD (2001), on the contrary, reported how planners were reluctant to new forms of environmental policy integration, justifying them on the ground of an allegedly native environment-friendliness of urban planning practices.

Although we reject comprehensive and deterministic approaches, we build on those pieces of literature distrusting SEA as solely process-oriented (FISCHER, 2003; CONNELLY and RICHARDSON, 2005) and maintain that a reflection on effectiveness may also take advantage of a critical debate on the effects of plans. All the more so when such an effort would entail closing the planning/evaluation cycle by devising binding measures, incentives and guidance to steer implementation according to feedback. These reflexive practices would of course concern *monitoring*, and they would be enhanced by going beyond the boundaries of individual evaluation studies to trigger mutual learning within the networks that operate territorial governance and democracy. Such networks can be, in this specific case, framed in planning/evaluation systems in each Italian region. They connect individuals, groups and organizations and differ from each other for regulatory framework, administrative culture, professional expertise, shared knowledge base, social and political climate.

7 Reconstructing SEA discourse: effectiveness, sustainability, democracy

Notwithstanding the limitations imposed by relying exclusively on analyzing ERs, we observed that none of the SEAs we surveyed is fully consistent with main expert guidance and legal requirements. We are reassured that even a predominantly procedural investigation still holds a certain explanatory power, at least until Italian SEA practices grow mature. Once we accepted the outcome of our analysis as a proxy for SEA **effectiveness**, we wouldn't link this weakness to poor evaluators' competence or lack of sound

methodological approaches. We are more inclined to blame the missing links to a number of crucial issues:

- conceiving the plan as the unpredictable outcome of a comparison among alternative strategies for urban development;
- accepting SEA as a means to support the aforesaid comparison;
- fearing (on the side of local authorities) accountability when based on environmental sustainability criteria;
- coordinating organizations and authorities in collecting information and sharing knowledge;
- building truly inclusive decisional arenas, without hiding the conflict dimension.

These issues are probably to be related to current modes of territorial governance in Italy, rather than to be ascribed to some built-in SEA flaw. Such modes may explain the remarkable inertia we observed in introducing a relatively new process like SEA. Moreover, evaluators' background and technical/administrative routines seem to influence to a larger degree than (inter)national guidance and regional legislations the fortunes of SEA. Maybe different cultures and settled practices have not yet been challenged in the current phasing-in stage.

On a more generalizing tone, the trajectory of plans and programmes evaluation seems to get bogged down in two areas: *sustainability* and *democracy*.

The contribution of SEA to mainstreaming **sustainability** in policy-making, at least in the specific case of urban governance and spatial planning we have surveyed, looks disappointing. Despite the constitutive role assigned by Directive 2001/42/EC to "promoting sustainable development", the *coordination* function of the concept is poor, let alone the *paradigmatic* one. A more thorough assessment is therefore dependant on breaking down sustainable development into its most widely accepted building bricks.

The acknowledgement of the **ecological limitations** to development is often part of a series of statements (especially with respect to the use of resources including land, pollution, and biodiversity) that seem to belong to the rhetorical apparatus of the report than to influence the evaluation rationale. A promising exception lies in the link between the concept of *carrying capacity* and the *sizing of developments*, which has long been one of the most controversial issues in urban planning.

As for **Inter-generational equity**, political actors seem too busy negotiating their short term welfare positions to engage those of virtual stakeholders, and the life-span of plans has never been extended beyond its strict legal scope of approximately 10-15 years. Speaking again of the use of non-renewable resources, as well as the unsustainable use of renewable ones, the dominant approach is to strive to slow down the pace, which could at most result consistent with weak conceptions of sustainability (DIETZ/NEUMAYER 2007). On the other hand, it could hardly be otherwise, as SEA is not even rooted in far-reaching historical perspectives on the interactions between human societies and space. **Intra-generational equity** apparently enjoys a long-standing familiarity of urban planning with the distribution of environmental costs and benefits, and the friction thereof. However, the rise of sustainable development didn't succeed in building a level-playing ground for urban actors, overcoming their actual capacity to influence the plan-making process. By looking at our specific application field, we would maintain that the criticism sustainability suffered from theorists of justice for its flawed treatment of equity (GOSSERIES, 2005), and in particular for its "theoretical ineptitude" and for "simply naming the problem rather than actually solving it" (GARDINER, 2006: 161) have been untimely. SEA as one among the most promising policy process meant to promote sustainability was never even equipped to start thinking about any understanding of equity, as it proved human-centred and largely blind to the structural imbalances among different societal groups.

Some further remarks about sustainability regards the **integration of environmental issues with economic and social ones**. Whereas social aspects systematically gain the foreground in the SEA discourse (and curtail the scope of environmental policies), economic ones are missing. This is true not only for substantial considerations, which however must lurk somewhere in the backstage, given the dominant role of political economy approaches in contemporary urban planning, and therefore the influence that they are likely to exert, eludes public scrutiny. Indeed, the retreat of SEA from economic analyses, while cost-effectiveness still features in top decision-making criteria (at least when it comes to justifying choices), puts at risk its credibility towards the majority of elected representatives and civil servants in local authorities, entrepreneurs and citizens who believe that efficiency and competitiveness do matter after all⁷. In other words, we acknowledge the caution SCRASE/SHEATE (2002) suggest when dealing with “integration” in assessment practices, as they placed the integration of equity concerns into governance among the least environment-supportive policy innovations. However, we maintain that the same risks of watering down environmental policies would apply when SEA dealt exclusively with strictly environmental issues, as it would anyway be embedded in complex governance networks where social and economic issues are crucial. Meanwhile, we look forward to extending our survey to Toscana, where the Regional Planning Law (1/2005) provides for an *integrated evaluation* that revolves around the three pillars of sustainable development (economy, society and environment) plus the *health* and *territorial* dimensions, and comprises SEA. An interesting comparison could be made with UK *sustainable appraisals* (SA) that subsume SEA within a broader evaluation framework as well. UK experience points to the risk that the environment might be addressed less extensively and less transparently (SHEATE/BYRON/SMITH, 2004: 89) given that traditional SA practice is far from fulfilling Directive’s requirements (THERIVEL/MINAS, 2002).

As for **democracy**, here is where disappointment arises for barely open decision-making processes, poor transparency, hard won citizens participation and actual *representability* of environmental values (CONNELLY and RICHARDSON, 2005). There are two aspects we wish to discuss, as they help framing participation and governance in a better perspective, relieving them from the realm of sheer procedures.

Though SEA practices seem to be stuck at the ABC of participation, the way towards actual **empowerment** (ARNSTEIN, 1969; SANDERCOCK, 2003) is hindered by more general issues, such as who is allowed to participate, what is actually left open to participation, and how much do the inputs of participation influence the planning process. When there is hardly an acknowledgement of the different chances citizens stand to join in, and no affirmative action is put into place to redress long-standing inequalities, while new divides might be dug by the spread of Information and Communication Technologies. When even in the reductive form of consultations, people are more likely to be surveyed about their knowledge of places and general opinions, rather than being involved in the generation and evaluation of alternatives. When, once offered, citizens contribution tend to vanish in the meanders of planning without neither resulting in any real change, nor being properly addressed in the justification of choices. Then, there is still room for a significant improvement in the way SEA can foster the environmental democracy of cities.

On a similar tone, the evolution towards **deliberative** models of SEA (BARTLETT, /OLDGARD, 2003) would entail, besides all conditions we have already mentioned in the previous paragraph, a better dialogue between expert and citizen knowledge, and the advancement of cooperative modes, under full public accountability, among the many nodes in multiple-level governance systems.

An interesting way out of the poor achievements we observed in the phasing in period, could be triggered by *learning dynamics*. Many doubts crowd, about the capacity of technical

⁷ Though the kind of urban plans we analyzed do not command public expenditure directly, it would be reductive and misleading to maintain that they have no bearing on urban economies and the welfare positions of a wide range of subjects.

rationality to manage environmental evaluation as a learning enterprise (SCHÖN, 2002), the uncertainties of interdisciplinarity, the friction between emphasizing creativity and competitiveness in strategic planning while caring for ecological dynamics.

From these angles, we can't help noticing that the contribution of SEA to integrating environmental values and policies in urban planning, despite actual *knowability* of the environment and *evaluability* of plans, is not impressive. However, some of the innovations coming with the package might foster self-learning among key actors. Focusing issues and broadening the environment and sustainability discourse. Feeding back to planning and strategizing the drive for creativity induced by thinking in terms of alternatives. Reinventing transparency. Those who hold legislative and executive power within the systems of planning/evaluation may ignore these learning opportunities, or rather enhance them by establishing reflexive evaluation mechanisms, ranging from more traditional quality controls⁸ to *mutual learning* networks based on moral suasion and the acceptability of peer-pressure schemes, such as the OECD peer-review system (LEHTONEN, 2006).

An individual SEA may result more or less effective than others depending on a whole series of circumstances, but radical and sustained innovations become more readable at the level of planning/evaluation systems. They are underpinned by legislative reforms, learning and rearrangements in communities of practices and local authorities, transformations of social and intellectual capital. All these phenomena may be supported by an iterative and collective reflection on the conditions and consequences of evaluation processes.

⁸ Which had been provided for in Directive 2001/42/EC, though they don't seem very popular yet.

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