

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

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We worked in very specific research conditions:

- 1 type of evaluation (Strategic Environmental Assessment)
- 1 application field (urban planning)
- 1 country (Italy)

However, maybe our reflections can be of wider interest because:

- SEA is considered one of the most promising policy tools to promote SD
 - Cities are a paradigmatic embodiment of human development
 - Notwithstanding trans-national differences, EU Directive 2001/42/EC provides a common framework at least Europe-wide

OUTLINE OF THE PRESENTATION

1. In search of a METHOD
2. SEA and URBAN PLANNING in ITALY
3. DECONSTRUCTING SEA: Integration, Networking, Ecosystem Approach, Equity, Environmental Governance, Accountability
4. Making SENSE of SEA: SUSTAINABILITY, DEMOCRACY, EFFECTIVENESS

In search of a method: the framework

Reading and interpreting relevant texts systematically, to make conjectures about the processes they derive from and the outcomes they might lead to, is a relatively common exercise in both planning (Khakee, 2000) and evaluation (Stufflebeam, 2000; Lee/Kirkpatrick, 2006), and in environmental assessment alike (Tzoumis, 2007; Van Hinte/Gunton/Day, 2007).

Aiming to broaden the scope of this kind of approaches, we turned to the three-tier framework introduced by Harrington/Morgenstern (2004) in the field of Regulatory Impact Assessment:

- 1) **CONTENT TEST** is geared towards checking the compliance of evaluation documents to *legally binding requirements, guidelines and good practice*;
- 2) **FUNCTION TEST** should aim at understanding how *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.

In search of a method: semantic dimensions

<i>SEMANTIC DIMENSION</i>	<i>key concepts</i>
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.

In search of a method: steps and tools

We came to the final set of dimensions after:

- reworking a set of effectiveness criteria proposed by an Italian scientific association of environmental experts,
- screening them against the background of national, European and global regulations and guidance (EU, OECD, IAIA, etc.)
- checking its relevance through a scientific literature review that focused on quality and effectiveness in the SEA field

To perform the content test, we developed the dimensions into an 80-question checklist

We analyzed 10 ERs concerning urban plans at the municipal level in five Italian regions

We also consulted other sources (planning documents, administrative acts, *etc.*) to clarify some issues, yet we assumed that only what was evident in the report should be registered, and our research remained within the scope of a documental analysis

SEA and urban planning in Italy

Integrated model

The Environmental Report (ER) is part of the plan and follows the same approval procedure

The whole process is streamlined and harmonized but accountability may be at risk

New regional planning systems are characterized by strong subsidiarity: adoption and approval of plan (and ER) in charge of the same body (municipalities)

EIA model

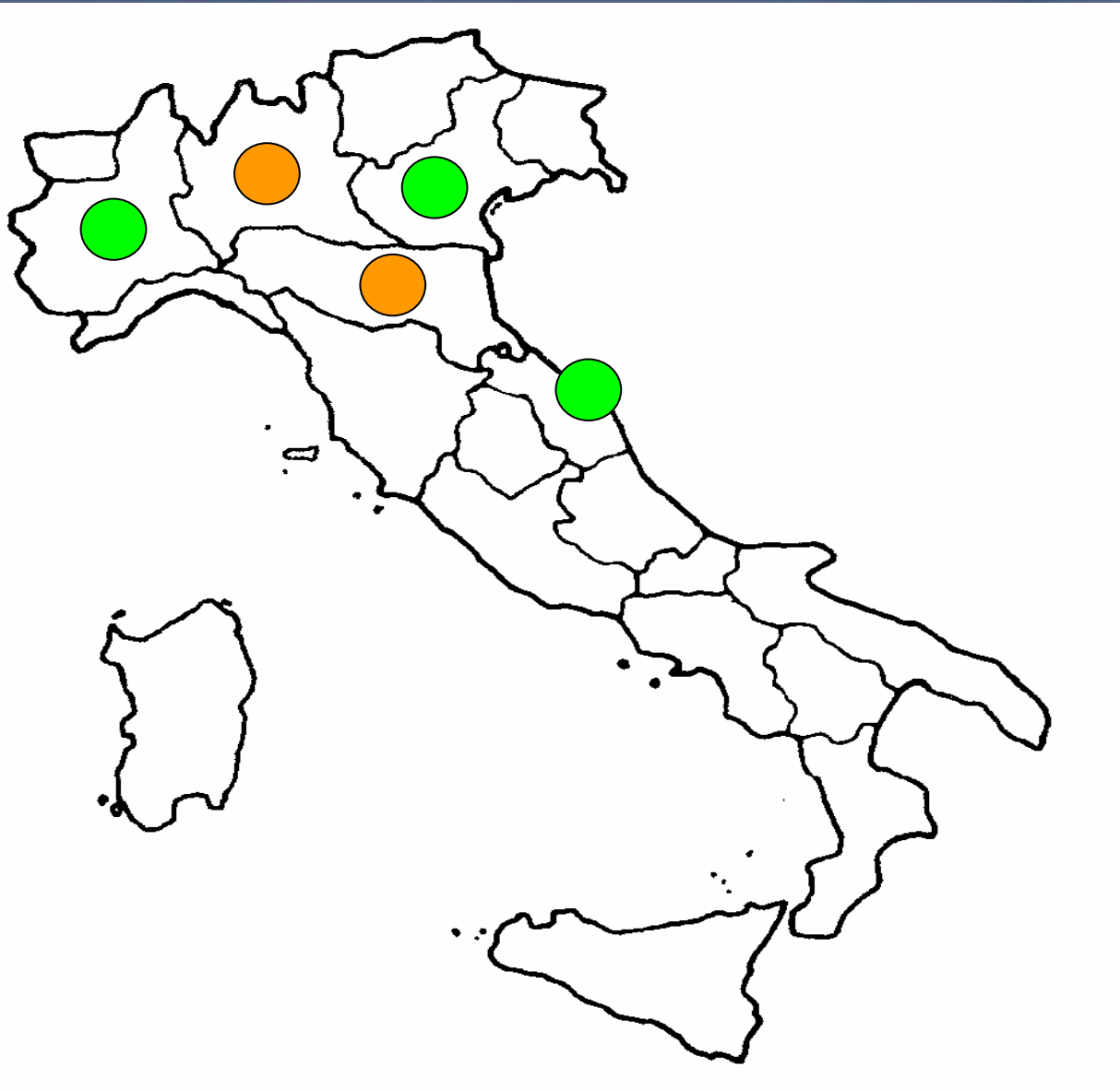
The ER is part of the plan but follows a specific approval procedure in charge of a technical body as in EIA

A more independent assessment might be assured but:

Dual track approval procedure often proves time consuming, not coordinated and somewhat “schizophrenic”

Political conflict and litigation?

SEA and urban planning in Italy



- Full subsidiarity: city council approves the plan and evaluates ER
- EIA model: an independent body takes care of either or both

evaluation status ranges from an argued opinion to a proper authorization

Deconstructing SEA: INTEGRATION

- SEA contributed to develop plan's objective and actions in 5/10 (early integration)
- SEA limited to mitigation proposals in 3/10 cases
- SEA proposes mitigations and establishes guidelines for Operational Plans 2/10 cases
- Clarification and systematization of plan's objectives (but a clear outline of the plan in 6/10 cases)
- Harmonization with planning procedures pursued but not always fully achieved

Deconstructing SEA: NETWORKING

- Really inclusive participation processes still rare (2/10), more frequently stakeholder involvement (5/10)
- SEA vague in reporting results
- Forms of participation triggered by planning laws more than by SEA requirements
- Inter institutional collaboration more frequent reflecting the new turn in spatial planning, but SEA role is still limited

Deconstructing SEA: ECOSYSTEM APPROACH

- Fragmented conception of the environment, largely dominated by reductionism
- Attempts to providing a more holistic approach are not missing but often fail in reconstructing the interdependence of the parts
- Scale issues: links to large scale dynamics not systematic, some references to Provincial Plans (objective and constrains)
- Time dimension: dealt with in terms of time series of pollution or demographic data, or historical evolution of landscape
- Past evolution patterns of ecosystem is missing

Deconstructing SEA: EQUITY

- allegedly VALUE-FREE evaluations (Chelimsky, 1998), no room for questioning the motivations, purposes and implications of decisions,
- Faint hints of addressing PROCESS DISCRIMINATION in the guise of *inclusive stakeholders mapping* and *gender-sensitive methods*
- INTER-GENERATIONAL EQUITY is never dealt with openly, sustainable use resources stays fails to influence deliberations, short time perspectives (no longer than ten years)
- INTRA-GENERATIONAL EQUITY is translated into the professional language of urban planners as accessibility of services, urban amenities, and transfer of development rights
- evaluators tend to acknowledge the uneven distribution of "costs and benefits", yet miss the more political link between areas and specific (disadvantaged) social groups that underpins ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE.

Deconstructing SEA: ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

- Close relationship with **appropriate assessments** of plans affecting NATURA 2000 sites, occasional references to local **Agenda21**, **EIA** and **IPPC** overlooked
- Three families of **regulatory and programmatic environmental policies** tapped into more frequently: **international sustainability principles** (such as the Aalborg Commitments, but not the EU-SDS), **national binding provisions**, and hierarchically higher **territorial plans**.
- **Socio-economic aspects** (housing needs, population, distribution of economic activities and provision of services, mobility), seem to **support development agendas. No proper economic analysis**
- Negative impacts, largely ensuing from **regulations**, are balanced by positive effects to be achieved through **coordination and guidelines**
- 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

Deconstructing SEA: ACCOUNTABILITY

- Through **cooperation within multilevel governance** schemes, and by appointing **separate groups of external experts** for planning and evaluation, better conditions for accountability may be restored in either **subsidiarity** or **hierarchical** systems
- Methods are clearly explained**, but how 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.
- Sources **not always explicit** or fully accessible by third parties, though **on-line publishing of planning documents** is becoming established
- Some evaluators stretch their **discretionary power** beyond reasonable limits
- Uncertainties, assumptions, evaluation mandate, and the roles and responsibilities of the different actors that are involved in the process are not explained clearly
- 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.

Making sense of SEA: SUSTAINABILITY

- Contribution of SEA to mainstreaming sustainability in policy-making looks disappointing: the **coordination function** of the concept is poor, let alone the **paradigmatic** one.
- The acknowledgement of the **ecological limitations to development** is formal and irrelevant.
- Political actors too busy negotiating their **welfare positions** to care for future generations.
- The rise of sustainable development didn't succeed in building a **level-playing ground for urban actors**, overcoming their different capacities to influence planning process.
- SEA is not equipped for fully addressing equity, as it proved exclusively **human-centred** (no room for *deep-ecology* or *intrinsic value of nature*) and largely blind to the **structural imbalances among different societal groups** (no *empowerment* or *affirmative action*).
- Social aspects gain the foreground in the SEA discourse, and tend to curtail the scope of environmental policies.
- Retreat of SEA from economic analyses, while **cost-effectiveness** still features in top decision-making criteria puts at risk its credibility towards the majority of elected representatives, civil servants, entrepreneurs and citizens who believe that efficiency and competitiveness do matter after all.

Making sense of SEA: DEMOCRACY

- There is still room for a significant improvement in the way SEA can foster the **environmental democracy of cities**.
- **Empowerment** is hindered by structural issues, as citizens stand different chances to participate, 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.
- People are more likely to be surveyed about their **knowledge of places** and **perception of problems**, rather than being involved in the generation and evaluation of **alternatives**.
- Once offered, citizens contributions tend to **vanish in the meanders of planning** without neither resulting in any real change, nor being properly addressed in the justification of choices.
- The evolution towards **deliberative** models of SEA would also entail a better dialogue between **expert and citizen knowledge**, and the advancement of **cooperative modes**, under full public accountability, within multiple-level governance networks.

Making sense of SEA: EFFECTIVENESS

Critical issues limiting SEA effectiveness in current urban planning in Italy

Not poor evaluator's competence or lack of methodologies, but rather:

- conceiving the plan as the outcome of a comparison among alternatives
- accepting SEA as a means to support the aforesaid comparison;
- fearing accountability when based on environmental sustainability criteria;
- coordinating organizations and authorities in collecting information and sharing knowledge;
- building inclusive arenas, without hiding the conflict and power relations.

Making sense of effectiveness: the threefold nature of SEA

Procedure

Compliant with legal requirements

International guidelines

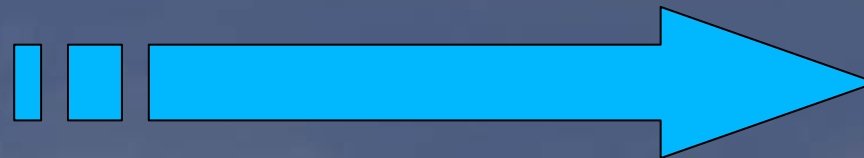
Process

Influences decision making:
Participation
openness
accountability

Product

incorporates strong elements of environmental sustainability and justice in the PP

Quality check



delivering desirable outcomes

Making sense of SEA: EFFECTIVENESS

Improving effectiveness: two possible ways ahead

Learning:

- exchange of knowledge among experts;
 - transfer of knowledge to/from the local community and
 - establishment of new routines inside local governments and opportunity for dialogue among different tiers
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- Reflexive evaluation:
 - Quality controls *mutual learning* networks
 - Peer-pressure schemes, such as the OECD peer-review system.

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