

ISSN 1127-8579

Pubblicato dal 09/06/2015

All'indirizzo <http://www.diritto.it/docs/37128-the-regional-partnership-model-and-the-sustainable-development-the-agenda-21-case>

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The regional partnership model and the sustainable development: the “Agenda 21” case

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The recognition of the inadequacy of traditional development cooperation has resulted in the '90s in the affirmation of a new way of cooperation based on partnerships between non-state actors and local authorities and, in particular, with regard to the Italian case, partnerships between territories in view of the relational process.

The Italian Cooperation Law 49/1987 recognizes for the first time local autonomies as implementers of development cooperation nationally. In March 2000, through the "Guidelines for addresses and methods of implementation", decentralized cooperation was defined as the action of development cooperation carried out by locals, also with the help of expressions of civil society organized in the region, implemented in partnership with counterpart institutions in partner countries, facilitating the active participation of the various components of civil society in decision-making for the sustainable development of their territory.

At the same time, starting in the late '80s, the Italian Regions and Autonomous Provinces have begun to adopt laws on development cooperation, attributing generally to non-governmental organizations and local authorities of their own territory the role of promoters and performers of cooperation activities. This new mode of cooperation of local authorities and non-state actors (as also defined by the European Commission) is valued and supported by major international organizations as the expression of a new way of conceiving the equitable and sustainable development among the peoples founded on the actors and relational processes. Compared to the traditional cooperation, the capacity to foster development that is more democratic and centered on the needs and priorities of the actors involved is attributed to the cooperation model of territorial partnerships, because of the greater proximity to citizens and local realities.

The pattern of territorial partnerships offers an added value compared to the traditional bilateral form of government, in favor of a participatory approach characterized by some basic principles that should characterize their quality:

- Recognition of the interdependence and of the need to initiate and sustain a dialogue between political territories (co-development);
- Ownership of the processes by the actors involved on territories;

- Fairness and reciprocity relations (sharing of responsibilities, commitments, including financial, and rules and compliance) and application of the rules;
- Support for open and sustainable endogenous development through the enhancement of local vocations and the mobilization of resources and the excellence of the territories involved;
- Multi-dimensionality of the partnerships;
- Strengthening of the capacity of institutions and civil society actors;
- Multi-level governance relations (vertical subsidiarity);
- Coherence, coordination and complementary of implemented policies;
- Continuity of relationships and implementation of common development strategies in the medium to long term;
- approach centered to the territories and the relational process (building social capital and of a path of learning in small steps);
- Adoption of participatory methods and support of active citizenship, supporting processes of democratization and decentralization that meet the principles of good governance (fairness, accountability, transparency and efficiency);
- Testing and implementation of innovative models.

Sustainable development is one of the principles that guide the model of territorial partnerships and is located in the very definition of decentralized cooperation adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in accordance with sub-national authorities. Some experiences of decentralized cooperation also make direct reference to the principles and methodology of the local Agenda 21, established by UNEP. Similarly other programs of multilateral and multilateral cooperation, such as the UNDP program on sustainable human development, involved the Italian decentralized cooperation in the formulation and implementation of environmental initiatives and sustainable economic and social development. Even thinking of the European framework, central to the Italian decentralized cooperation, sustainable development is identified as a crucial element. The European Commission has set out in the Gothenburg Strategy the principle of the interdependence of environmental issues globally, stressing the need to make economic growth, social cohesion and environmental protection go hand in hand in the long run.

This position has direct effects on internal policies and external assistance policies of the European Union: in the case of decentralized cooperation actors are called upon to adopt the principle of sustainable development in territorial cooperation programs involving neighboring countries and the acceding (see in this respect the new IPA and ENPI), programs of technical assistance and cooperation from the Twinning Urban and Asiatubs, the new subject line of non-state actors and local authorities, as well as in their own programming and annual plans of cooperation national and sub-national actors (with particular reference to the role exercised in this regard by the Italian regions, but also at the national level by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of the Environment). When setting these tools, it is possible to highlight the awareness of how simplistic and misleading it is to consider development as growth, to which mainly quantitative changes (such as GDP) are usually associated, while we should more properly refer to the concept of sustainable development, which is associated to more qualitative changes, an expansion of the potential of different contexts and improvements to the collective life through a different use of resources and a different relationship with nature.

In this regard, for example, we can refer at the conceptual level to Ignacy Sachs, who takes inspiration from an ecology based on needs, has been among the firsts to raise the issue of an alternative development founded on locally developed strategies and that are based on the satisfaction of fundamental human needs (basic needs) which, in addition to the material well-being, include freedom, self-determination, security, environmental quality and ecological balance. "Materials or assets alike, they are not needs established from the outside, but they are identified by civil society in the act of giving itself a project of civilization [...]. The development that in theory would follow, would necessarily be targeted and balanced".

The local development strategies, both endogenous and self-centered, supported by democratic participation, therefore, appear particularly appropriate to ensure the processes of co-evolution of human society balanced with nature, in respect of future generations. For these reasons, the model of territorial partnerships, as defined above, is a valid mode of action for sustainable development, not only because it must comply with its principles, but also because, thanks to the added value associated with it, is able to develop and test innovative practice that is focused on the process of developing the relationship among civil society, institutions and natural capital of the territories.

There are, therefore, many experiences of decentralized cooperation (including also those defined as territorial cooperation within the framework of European programs for cross-border, transnational and interregional issues) for

sustainable development, made during institution building projects, support to the development of rural areas, the growth of small and medium-sized companies with eco-friendly productions and services, biodiversity conservation, fighting desertification, management of key public services, and so on. In this regard, there are no including databases, but it is possible, for example, to refer to the analysis by CeSPI for the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Italian regions, in the framework of the Italian Environment and Sustainable Development in the Mediterranean, which has cataloged 119 projects in this area and under construction from 1998 to 2004. At the same time, however, there is a relative lack of reflection about the means to learn the collected lessons and put them online in order to improve the methods for planning and implementing and to increase the quality and effectiveness of cooperation. It is also important to understand how many and which of the experiences have been undermined by institutional barriers and policies at national and international levels, or from opportunistic behavior of actors such as multinational corporations or large centers of national interest. In this sense, it is necessary to begin to define evaluation criteria, indicators, peculiar to the pattern of territorial partnerships and based on the principle of sustainable development, which will help to operationalize the concepts, helping to initiate common learning processes.

Starting from the need to put the issue of conservation and management of natural resources and environmental public goods among the specific and cross-cutting objectives and of any cooperative activities, it is possible to try to identify some of the dimensions to be taken into account when designing, monitoring and evaluating initiatives and decentralized cooperation programs for sustainable development.

Over the past few years countless indicators of environmental compatibility have been drawn, which, despite not having been defined with specific reference to the model of decentralized cooperation and regional partnerships, provide a basis to be taken into account in terms of complementary. An example is the initiative of local government in support of Agenda 21, which is expressly provided for in Chapter 28 of the document "Agenda 21", signed by 170 countries attending the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Based on the assumption that "most of the problems and solutions which Agenda 21 addresses have their origin in local activities", the document is directed primarily to local governments, as "representing the level of government closest to the people, they play a vital role in raising awareness, mobilize and respond to citizenship for promoting sustainable development".

The document sets out the basic principles of the initiatives, identifying a central

element in the definition of specific methods of consultation, information sharing, building consensus on which should the dialogue between local government, citizenship, economic sectors and civil society on issues sustainable development should be set. From the Rio Conference , the experiences of Local Agenda 21 have multiplied, becoming one of the main means of achieving the goals set in 1992. Italy is particularly active in this case expressing the dynamism of the local administrations and the ability to aggregate planning, human and economic territorial resources around innovative processes, as key factors in the dissemination of local Agenda 21. The development of the Italian Local Agenda 21 is part of a more general process of multi- level integration of environmental policies pursued both at national and European level.

The Environmental Action Strategy for Sustainable Development, prepared in Italy by the Ministry of Environment and Protection of Land and approved in July 2002 as well as the Sixth Environmental Action Plan of the European Community 2002-2012, assign a central role to the consultation, participation, sharing of responsibilities between different levels of government, that, in the light of the principle of subsidiarity, are crucial for the continuity of actions. In this respect, the preparation of sustainability strategies at all levels is promoted, for the implementation of these objectives in relation to their specificity, adapting to these contents and priorities in collaboration and partnership with local authorities and all parties involved.

Characterized by open processes and an highly territorial dimension, the development of local Agenda 21 experiences was divided into modalities and trends which change according to the contexts, to the environmental needs addressed, the type of actors involved, and other factors characterizing the individual local variations, enriching the landscape of practices and experiences with highly differentiated trials around some common denominators:

- The multi-sectorial planning process, coordinated by a body composed of local stakeholders, whose equal participation in the process is configured primarily as a mechanism of mobilization of cultural, human, planning, ideals, relational resources;
- Consultation with partners that are part of civil society such as local associations , NGOs, entrepreneurs, government agencies, professional associations, trade unions, expressions of the research world, religious congregations, which aim to share goals and identify proposals for action;
- Common assessment of the social, environmental and economic premises;
- The horizontal or cross-disciplinary approach, involving the integration process

within the whole complex of activities of local institutions;

- The common definition of objectives through processes of negotiation between the main stakeholders;
- The global and long-term perspective with which the issues of sustainability of local processes are tackled;
- The use of monitoring and evaluation processes, oriented to track progress and maintain a high level of mutual accountability among the participants.

From the clear centrality of the process as a factor determining the local Agenda 21 initiatives, descends the importance of the methodological framework applied. Importance that, on one hand reflects an awareness of and an attention to the system of the process, on the other does not translate into a rigid methodological definition, as in a consolidation of landmarks around some basic principles developed at international level, which is add modulations outlined at the local level and scattered through the dense web of relations between local companies committed to sustainability issues. The backbone of the process involves a few basic steps that can be identified:

- A preliminary stage of activation by the sponsoring organization that provides an information, awareness and promoting the initiative in citizenship, stakeholders, directors and technicians of local authorities;
- The organization of a forum through the identification and involvement of major local stakeholders, sharing a regulation for the management of its activities, the organization of thematic working groups within it;
- The preparation of a Report on the State of the Environment (RSA), which provides to an environmental analysis, socio-economic and planning policies and local development, and is constructed by identifying a set of indicators to describe the situation environmental and socio-economic local area local community and the state;
- The discussion of the RSA in the Forum and the identification and validation through the debate of sustainability goals and their order of priority;
- The construction of the Environmental Action Plan, which translates the objectives into a strategy intervention and in a series of policies and actions achievable by public authorities and other local actors and identifies the operational tools;

- The adoption of the Action Plan as a shared program planning and local development through its presentation to local stakeholders and the formal adoption by the Forum and the local authority;
- The implementation of the plan, which includes the identification and activation of the structures and operating procedures, monitoring the status of implementation and, based on the results of the same, the update of the Plan by the Forum in a process circular and continuous reviewing objectives and actions on the basis of the results, changes in environmental conditions and the acquisition of new information and technical capabilities.

The monitoring tools used refer to the wide range of indicators of environmental sustainability that are available both nationally and internationally, from time to time by adapting the choice of the type of batteries to specific objectives and to the local context within which it operates. The Aalborg Charter as well as the European Union's Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign and the 6th European Environmental Action Programme refers to the use of indicators able to capture the different dimensions of sustainability and adapt to the specificities of local contexts, to consider as means of orientation both during the preparation of strategies, and in the verification of the results. At the national level, a point of reference is indicated in the Guide to Local Agenda 21 published by the National Agency for Environmental Protection which refers to the 10 + 1 European Common Indicators (ECI), which, thanks to the recognition at European level, allows to compare the results with those of all the local authorities in Europe who adopt them.

The ECIs have been developed within a joint project with the participation of several organizations and local authorities with the aim of encouraging local authorities in Europe to use them as the baseline indicators complementary to national or local ones. The parameters tested are indicative of the quality of the environment (emissions, air quality, noise pollution), the quality of environmental policies and behaviors (mobility, land use, sustainable consumption), the perception of the quality of life, to which is added the eleventh indicator that refers to the ecological footprint of the population that insists on the territory. The same guide also cites a second set of indicators referring to what processed in 2002 with the first report of the Institute for Sustainable Development Italia20 that proposed three "Baskets of sustainable development" (society and economy, the environment, resource use) selecting for each one ten key indicators to be calculated starting from the basic

indicators available in Italy. The integration of thirty indicators comes together into the “ISSI” (Sustainability Italian Index) , which expresses the overall level of sustainability in Italy.

The reading of the local Agenda 21s in terms of working method for the realization of sustainable development processes qualifies such experience to serve as a cultural basis to stimulate local actions that widen the horizon of objectives. The presence of some essential cornerstones of the mechanism, identifiable, as already seen, in the sharing of knowledge and skills in participatory planning, circularity and continuity in the verification of the results and consequent modification of strategies and tools, makes it a good basis for the development of forms of intervention based on the interaction of social and institutional components, starting from the local dimension addressing the issue of sustainability of global development. In this sense, the exploration of the potential application of approaches developed by the local Agenda 21 on the ground of international cooperation in general and decentralized cooperation in particular is particularly interesting. Experimentation with the use of the local Agenda 21s’ own methodological approach in the action of decentralized development cooperation, supports and induces a parallel emphasis on the centrality of the issue of environmental sustainability in development within the strategic development of cooperation initiatives. Characteristic to this approach, is the awareness that aspects of economic, social and ecological development must be kept in constant balance and that this is favored by the constant collaboration between the components of civil society and by their own assumption of responsibility.

The capitalization of the methodology and the results obtained from the Local Agenda 21s within the processes of defining strategies and actions for decentralized cooperation, represents an opportunity to contribute to the integration of these strategies within the theme of sustainable development. Similarly, the ability to borrow the methods of sharing the analysis stages of the matter, of defining objectives, of action planning and monitoring of the results from the local Agenda 21s, increases the capacity of decentralized cooperation to represent needs and stimuli of the civil societies that are linked, increasing the level of ownership of the processes that are initiated.

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