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Preliminary document for a territory to be reconceived

Alessandro Balducci,
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We received the assignment to develop the studies for the Preliminary document of the Provincial territorial plan after a positive feed back of a previous project concerning the experimentation of a new policy for the containment of productive sprawl. Provinces, as we know, are weak subjects in the Italian governance landscape. Since 1990 the long experimentation which has followed the law 142/1990, which introduced the planning powers of a renewed province, has not given a clear indication about the interpretation to be given to the new provincial territorial plan. The province territorial competences are in fact squeezed between the strong autonomy of municipalities and the neo-centralist attitudes of regional governments. Although we know that the intermediate level of the provincial government is the right one to develop policies for growth management, environmental protection, transport services, economic development and so forth. This problem is particularly serious in Veneto where in the field of planning the Region has always been very active even in the framework of the previous regional law. This had risen many conflicts between the Region and the Vicenza Province in the past. Nowadays, with a new planning law (n. 11/2004) which has redesigned the contents of the different plans and the procedures to form and approve them, a new situation is in sight. The law is quite innovative following Inu proposals and the disciplinary debate. Central themes are the subsidiarity, the co-planning

between municipalities and higher levels of government, the separation between a strategic document (*Piano di assetto del territorio*) and a more operative tool at the local level (*Piano degli interventi*), the introduction of the Preliminary document as an initial stage to prepare the Provincial territorial plan.

All along the new law there is an emphasis on the participatory processes that must characterize the formation of the different planning documents. The idea is also proposed of 'concerted actions' between groups of municipalities and the province to start intercommunal planning tools.

It is a very interesting innovation because it tends to identify a role of the Province as a facilitator of inter-communal cooperation. Even though there is a limitation to this innovative idea: the Province will become a formal and real interlocutor for municipalities only when the Provincial territorial plan will be approved.

On the basis of these considerations we have interpreted the preparation of the Preliminary document as course of action which not only should have made the participatory approach operational, but also as a way to experiment and practice a new role of the Province as enabler of a cooperative effort and as the connecting agent between municipalities and other bodies of government. A role which is not easy to interpret because it presupposes an open recognition of the relative weakness of the Province, and the capacity to demonstrate that this weakness can be turned into a strength: to overcome the failure of hierarchical planning the Province can act as a strategic actor who tries to favour cooperation offering a vision which is a general framework encouraging municipalities

to work together and offering opportunities to meet and develop common policies.

It is a difficult challenge, but very important to test a new approach to provincial planning. The basic idea is that of a Preliminare which is more than a document which declares the objectives and presents the methodology to be followed in the preparation of the Plan; it is rather a kind of policy statement which presents an interpretation of the territory and describes a new role for the Province in the planning process.

Three are the main direction of work we have followed: the construction of a vision of the Vicenza territory as part of a polycentric metropolis; the experimentation of forms of co-planning with municipalities; the development of implementation programs for strategic projects.

The *Preliminare* presents a thick description of the provincial territory in which we try first to recognise different 'settlement landscapes'. This is based upon the interpretation of physical aspects, the analysis of social and economic trends, the examination of local spontaneous forms of collaboration and the recognition of relevant local projects. For each landscape we propose a profile in which problems and resources are presented in order to favour the development of the cooperation between municipalities for the production of a number of local intermediate projects. In to anticipate cooperation the role of the province is double: the facilitator of cooperation and the subject which is capable to select It is important also the proposal to anticipate the cooperation in the current phase, when municipalities have to produce new plans in order to comply with the new planning regional law.

Strategic projects. The third pillar of the approach proposed by the Preliminare is the presentation of a methodology to deal with a number of strategic projects, from infrastructures to great services like the new Fair, which are often blocked for technical, financial or political reasons. Each project is dealt with analysing all the information available about the state of things, the problems encountered, the opportunities to link projects at different scales as a mean to treat in a proactive way the issue of acceptability. For each project a possible path is designed in order to guarantee conditions of feasibility.

We think it is useful to present here in *Urbanistica* the materials of this experience because, beyond the actual outcomes which, as explained elsewhere, have seen the Department exit in the phase of transition from the Preliminare to the Piano territoriale, they could offer in the disciplinary debate a possible interpretation of the role of the Province in the planning system. We have tried to go beyond the rhetoric of participation, to explore what this could mean in practice; in this attempt we conclude that this is the only difficult way to deal effectively with a problem of designing a new role for the Province in the planning system and of trying to be effective in pursuing sustainable development.