



Urbanistica n. 134
September-December 2007

Distribution by www.planum.net

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*edited by Irene Cremonini, Adriana Galderisi
Adriana Galderisi, Scira Menoni
Scira Menoni
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Carlo Lazzari, Sandra Vecchiatti
Massimo Olivieri
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Andrea Ceudech*

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*edited by Mirella Fiore, Marichela Sepe
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Carlo Gasparrini
Marichela Sepe

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Giovanni Caudo
Giovanni Caudo

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The territorial responsibilities of Italian multiservice public utilities

Luca Fondacci

Since March 29th 1903, when national law n° 103, 'Giolitti's law', instigated the activity of public service firms, the role of multiservice public utilities (Mpus) has been strengthened and consolidated, with them now managing more than 90% of the distribution and customer sales of the Italian energy supply. As a result of this, these Mpus assume responsibility for technological innovation in energy and energy products, as well as responsibility for the clarity of relationships with territories, thus securing the strategic advantages derived from the Mpus' investments. Furthermore, they take responsibility for the development of an integration between energy, territories and public services. Consequently, we have the prospect of two potentially innovative scenarios for public services.

First, the Mpus could be defined as having the aim of setting up and maintaining the balance of the energy activity of a territorial system. Secondly, as a result of this, and due to their potential to link technical and political expertise, these specific public utilities could widen their activities for the benefit of a coherent urban and territorial development. In this lies the concept of territorial responsibility, but the question remains: in concrete terms, who should assume such responsibility? Investigation into the experiences of certain regions provides two answers to this question: Mpus have responsibility in areas, such as Terni, where the local administration has not been particularly reactive in coordinating, as

a whole, the different energy activities; in areas, such as Ferrara, where a defined coordination or balance is already in existence, the local administration holds responsibility for the territory, and Mpus must refer to and cooperate with them when planning their own strategies. In both cases, we are dealing with territories that possess an economy that is in need of a substantial improvement in energy. To increase the efficiency of these economies, and to improve the social fabric of these territories, it would be necessary to keep the territories one step ahead of their competitors, by having them thrive on a widespread culture of innovation and interaction between the public and private sector. With regard to the two aforementioned interpretations, we consider the case of Terni, where Asm, the most important of Umbria's three Mpus, operates, and the case of Ferrara, where the local public utility is now part of the Hera group, the national leader in the energy, water and environmental industries trading since June 2003. Some basic information concerning new national policies will reveal the ideas behind the development of this concept of territorial responsibility. In terms of the first interpretation, in order to establish what it means for an Mpu to assume territorial responsibility, we must dwell on an important initiative to avoid a crisis for ThyssenKrupp Acciai speciali Terni (Tk-Ast) and for the surrounding industrial area. Such an initiative is based on the Protocollo d'intesa per favorire lo sviluppo del territorio di Terni e Narni, an agreement, made in August 2005, between national government and many local and national stakeholders. To avoid the threat of closure for the Tk-Ast, the

strategy of the Protocollo is to provide a direct supply of energy at competitive prices until 2010, when a new natural gas power plant of 400 Mw will provide the 280 Mw requirement of the Tk-Ast.

This 120Mw differential is already an advantage owing to the fact that it will help with the cost of the construction of the power plant. On top of this, it could become a good opportunity to develop technical and political relationships with agents involved in the project. More specifically, on a technological level, there are already relationships between Asm and Tk-Ast regarding district heating, and on a political level, an ambition exists to expand, to a provincial extent, Asm's thermal waste treatment capability. In addition, there is the intention of the regional administration to proceed towards a regional reorganization of the services, based on a business and organizational model which is able to combine a strong local connection with the need to expand, in order to offer increasingly efficient public utility services. In this sense, Asm could assume territorial responsibility to develop a regional energy network because of their long-standing tradition of providing energy, water and waste services. The construction of a regional energy network is a new-found process that this region could employ to foster the integration of industry, energy and public services.

With regard to Ferrara, we are dealing with a case study in which local administration maintains territorial responsibility for different territorial activities, such as the Mpu Hera Ferrara. As anticipated, the guarantee of an energy supply is one of the key factors in attracting new enterprise, and responds to the needs of the productive and economic world. In

order to achieve these results, first of all, Ferrara is equipping its industrial and technological area with a 800 Mw gas power plant, property of Eni, and secondly, in close collaboration with Hera Ferrara, it is widening its district heating and its thermal waste treatment capability, the implementation of which is being carried out by Hera. These facilities are powerful energy tools for the city, which is also equipped with an integrated system for the management of heat, and this system is also able to use different energy sources simultaneously.

The case of Ferrara testifies to the advantages of a local development strategy based on two political principles: that urban and regional interventions are always driven by planning; that public administration is the reference point for the implementation of the plan. With regard to this local development strategy, we can't escape the fact that the Ferrara administration is still in need of a specific sector to coordinate energy activities. Thus remains the realistic possibility of a regression, either in terms of plan monitoring, or in the decisional capability of local administration in the matters of territorial and energy policies. The possibility of such regression acts as an incentive to comply with Mpu options, and as a threat to the administration of losing its innate ability to maintain the balance of energy with territorial activity or, in other words, its territorial responsibility. In this sense, the direct risk is not for either the administration or for the Mpu, but in fact for the region, which could suffer a decisional stalemate. On a national level, the Italian energy scene is being defined by the intense merger and acquisition activity being carried out between the Mpus. From the beginning, the aim of

this activity has been to create the best conditions, in terms of the size and competitiveness of the Mpus, for the growing open energy markets of Europe. However, on top of the modification and preparation of these big players, wide centres of economic and energy development have been defined, thus implementing a strong integration between energy and territory. With regard to this integration, rather than legislate for specific institutions (ie. Mpus or local administration), there is an opportunity to introduce a national vision dedicated to the territory itself.

If we recognise the present condition of public services legislation as fragmentary and primarily dedicated to the creation of market competition, we can see the necessity of a progression of political focus from the players, to the territory itself, where local administrations are emerging as tutors of common good, and Mpus as caretakers of industrial strategy. Such a diversion of political attention towards the territory could support a redistribution of responsibility, not only in terms of who does what, but also in terms of how a public utility service is constructed.