Inclusive Strategic Programming: Methodological Aspects of the Case Study of the Jonian Valleys of Peloritani (Sicily, Italy)

Giuseppe Bombino[1], Francesco Calabrò[2(✉)], Giuseppina Cassalia[2], Lidia Errante[3], and Viviana Vinci[4]

[1] Department of Agriculture, Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria, Reggio Calabria, Italy
giuseppe.bombino@unirc.it
[2] Department of Heritage-Architecture-Urbanism, Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria, Reggio Calabria, Italy
{francesco.calabro,giuseppina.cassalia}@unirc.it
[3] Department of Architecture, Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria, Reggio Calabria, Italy
lidia.errante@unirc.it
[4] Department of Law, Economics and Human Sciences, Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria, Reggio Calabria, Italy
viviana.vinci@unirc.it

Abstract. This paper is the first part of a broader work that illustrates a multidisciplinary research activity carried out as part of an institutional collaboration, between the Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria and 18 Sicilian municipalities, located in an area called "Jonian Valleys of Peloritani". The collaboration is finalized in order to outline perspectives and strategies for the material and immaterial progress of the area. The research activities are at initial stages, this paper illustrates the methodological aspects.

Keywords: Strategic programming · Stakeholder involvement · Citizenship education · Youth entrepreneurship · Project evaluation

1 Introduction

Stakeholder involvement in the Strategic Development Process (SDP) is inherently complex, because of need to satisfy multiple interests (Richards et al. 2004).

In light of this, the diversity of knowledge and values of the community have to be taken into consideration (Reed 2008); moreover it is necessary to ensure that there is stakeholder participation in decision-making processes (Stringer et al. 2007) and implementation, according to democratic right.

The reciprocal interaction between stakeholders, moreover, improves new relationships (Forester 1999; Leeuwis and Pyburn 2002).

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Therefore, stakeholders' participation generates a strong sense of ownership over the process and outcomes achieved (Reed 2008).

As SPDs are the means by which government and institutions deliver a range of services to raise awareness, it is important to look at the available best practices in stakeholder participation.

By improving a model to facilitate stakeholders' approaches in SPD, we provide a participative approach as a process where individuals, groups, and organizations choose to take an active role in making decisions that affect them (Wilcox 2003).

To this purpose, an Agreement Framework (AF) between the "Mediterranea" University Reggio Calabria and 18 Municipalities of the entire area of the "Valleys of Peloritani" was developed, in order to outline perspectives and strategies for the material and immaterial progress of the area.

The area is located in the northernmost part of the Sicily region, in front of Calabria region, right in the Strait of Scylla and Charybdis. The four "Valleys of Peloritani" falling down from the homonym mountain of "Peloritani" in the Jonian side (Fig. 1), and develop within as many watersheds covering a total area of about 264 km^2. The relative watercourses have a torrential hydrological regime typical of the Mediterranean semi-arid climate.



Fig. 1. The study area

More specifically, the AF for SDP of the investigated area aiming to:

- carry out collaborative activities aimed at enhancing the system of villages and the tangible and intangible cultural resources of the geographical area in which they fall;
- encourage the transfer of knowledge from the university to the local communities;
- facilitate the conduct of studies and research specifically aimed at the area of interest;
- exploit and promote the results of the collaboration;

- contribute to the elaboration of Strategic Plans and Programmes for the development of the integrated system of villages;
- encourage the exchange and sharing of good practice and experience in the relevant territory;
- foster, in the strategic programs, processes of active citizenship education and youth entrepreneurship development, by means of participatory paths of research, training and educational networks.

Therefore, the AF has an operational agenda that requires the beneficiary communities to get involved in all the different phases of the project planning and management; in fact, it is generally believed that a process can only be regarded as fully participatory when participants are in direct control of decision making in terms of goal setting, planning, policy making, implementation, and evaluation (Robinson 2002).

After investigating the extent to which the community and stakeholders have participated in the planning and management of previous projects.

The AF is managed by a board of Researcher, coordinated by the Rector of the "Mediterranea" University, which is mainly responsible for the project development. The stakeholders that make up the board are the Majors of the 18 Municipalities, representative of the beneficiaries. The board of members have a vested interest in the AF, and hence they contribute personnel to see to their interests in the project.

As the AF, the project should aim at making sure that stakeholders:

- come together to identify common development challenges and a focus that will benefit or lead to the realization of mutually agreed objectives,
- achieve a common understanding of the development challenge,
- integrate the views of the different stakeholders,
- understand the broader context of the challenge,
- state the desired changes that need to occur, and assess the different options that will to achieve the desired changes

On the other side, the AF provide "platform" bringing together the diverse groups of stakeholders, in order to:

- act as a bridge between the public authorities and interest group representatives and actors on the ground;
- support coordination, communication and capacity building among public authorities on all levels;
- help build capacity and develop common positions among actors on the ground and their representative bodies;
- help reach out to and inform a broader concerned audience of the benefits of the policy.

In the following sections, regarding the area of the "Valleys of Peloritani", we illustrate and explain the methodological approach developed for the purpose of surveying, analysis and processing of data relating to the tangible and intangible heritage of the area under study.

Enhancing the large collected data and information, then, are illustrated the main lines to achieve a desirable and sustainable development of the area under study.

Practically all transport models make use of Transport Analysis Zones (TAZ) for aggregate computations on groups of locations and individuals. Larger zones correspond to a greater degree of aggregation and therefore less precision and reduced computational cost.

2 Methods

2.1 Towards an Active Citizenship Education and Youth Entrepreneurship in the Strategic Programs Processes

One of the aims of the protocol of understanding in drawing up the Strategic Programs is to foster processes of active citizenship education and youth entrepreneurship development, by means of participatory paths of research, training and educational networks.

The construct of citizenship points to a complex, polysemic and *interdisciplinary* knowledge, to a dynamic whole of knowledge, mental processes, and decision-making attitudes (Kerr et al. 2009; Ten Dam et al. 2010): this is a rather differentiate dimension, made up of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values which bring to *effectively and constructively interact with others*, to *act in a socially responsible way* and *in a democratic way* (Eurydice 2012, 2017; UNESCO 2015). This whole of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values has to be learned not only through a formal curriculum, but also through non-formal and rather informal education, especially through holistic, participatory and whole-school approaches (Eurydice 2017; Perla et al. 2020).

The concept of youth *participation* constitutes the core of both conceptual models, that of *Competences for Democratic Culture*, proposed by the *Council of Europe* (2016), and that of IEA *Civic Education Study* (Schulz et al. 2008). The second one portrays – in an octagonal shape, on the basis of the development theories (Brofenbrenner 1988) and of the situated cognition (Lave and Wenger 1991) – multiple nested settings, in which the citizenship learning and the growth of critical thought by students take place (*family, school, formal community, informal community, peer group*). Young people interact with different but comparable communities, so that they can learn the citizenship not only within one context (family or school), but in any environment in which the opportunities of civic participation, democracy, promotion of the identity, social cohesion, and enhancement of the diversity occur.

The system actions scheduled for the social-economical and cultural development of the area of Peloritans' Ionian Valleys are based on the full participation of young people and on the development of their own *entrepreneurship.*

The *entrepreneurship* has long been considered to be a powerful driver for economic growth, innovation, and social liberation (Gibb 2002; Moreland 2006; CEDEFOP 2011; Blenker et al. 2014). Indeed, it is regarded as a basic form of mind for the development of civic competencies and essential attitudes within social contexts in rapid transformation: creativeness, strategic thinking, spirit of initiative, sense of responsibility, teamwork,

decision making, mobilization of human and material resources, effective communication and coping with ambiguity, risk and uncertainty, as well as *ability to transform idea into actions* (EC 2013; Morselli 2019).

These skills are even more important in the contemporary socio-educational context, for the emergency due to COVID-19, because pandemic containment measures – such as the closure of economic, productive, social, cultural and educational activities – have had an impact on material deprivation and educational poverty, with an increase in learning loss, inequalities and school dropout worldwide (Engzell et al. 2020).

In order to educate entrepreneurship, a deep and far-reaching cultural change is needed: in the Communication of the European Commission "Rethinking Education" (EC 2012) the need to renew teaching methods is stressed, enhancing the solution of authentic problems and active and experiential methods.

It is therefore essential for schools and educational institutions to open up to the community and local businesses, especially in rural areas or in geographically isolated areas. It is about breaking down the barriers that separate different learning contexts – formal, non-formal, informal ones –, enhancing their specificities and complementarity at once. The formation of an entrepreneurial mindset can take place not only *within* the school contexts, nor even only *outside* them, but needs an *educational alliance* between school, families, communities, work contexts. Entrepreneurial education needs an openness to outside world, to local communities and to all the learning opportunities that the local environment can offer through activities that enrich community life, which can offer innovative responses to the needs of local businesses and non-professional organizations, while providing real experiences capable of improving the entrepreneurial spirit of students (as occurs, for instance, in the "Service-Learning" proposal, Sigmon 1994; Furco and Billig 2002). This openness is necessary to combat early school leaving and to prevent youth unease, with a positive impact in terms of youth employment and combating depopulation, especially with regard to the so-called "NEET – Not in Education, Employment or Training", i.e. young people who are neither in employment nor in education.

The concept of youth agency (Sarojini Hart et al. 2014; DeJaeghere et al. 2016), closely linked to that of empowerment (Martínez et al. 2016), must be taken within multidimensional learning ecosystems (Schleicher 2016; Vinci 2019, 2020): partnerships and broad educational alliances between schools, educational services and territory, able to avoid isolation, to invest in capital (social, intellectual and professional) and offer young people a range of opportunities and differentiated resources.

Only within learning ecosystems can teachers express their entrepreneurial spirit more fully through the training of *Professional Learning Community* (EC 2018, p. 55), collaborative professional environments within schools, networks of collaboration between teachers, essential for the sharing of professional standards and the co-construction of artifacts functional to the teaching-learning processes (Lisse et al. 2007; Donner et al. 2008).

Teachers play a pivotal role in building school environments where creativity and risk-taking are encouraged and where error is reassessed as an opportunity to learn. For the role of teachers to be truly supportive, it is essential that the entrepreneurial skills of teachers and school managers are also implemented through specific training pathways

(Komárková et al. 2015), and the conditions are created to support entrepreneurship in schools, through the creation of networks of schools and partnerships in the community (UE 2014), in order to reduce the distance between education and the world of work (Draycott et al. 2011).

The importance of rethinking the education system of teachers is particularly felt in European education policies in recent decades (Eurydice 2015; Eurydice 2018; Darling-Hammond et al. 2017; Perla and Martini 2019; Perla 2020), starting with the *Green Paper on Teacher Education in Europe* (Buchberger et al. 2000), which highlighted a number of critical issues in the training courses in force in the Member States, focused on individualistic cultures and considered inadequate to the promotion of professional skills that relate to the complex capacity of mediation and educational transposition of knowledge. In Italy, the so called "Good School" (Law 107/2015) has made mandatory the in-service training: since it has acquired the character of a mandatory, permanent and structural right-obligation, universities, professional associations and educational agencies have been called upon to offer high-level specialist advisory services on the market (Perla et al. 2017; Agrati and Vinci 2020).

The intervention of the Mediterranean University, responding to this request, aims to encourage: the construction of networks of educational institutions, of all levels, engaged in quality improvement and innovation experimentation; educational alliances between universities, schools in network, local authorities, communities and families; the development and enhancement of professional skills of teachers, managers and educators; research activities aimed at improving the quality and effectiveness of schools; knowledge of the most recent school legislation and the opportunities offered at local, ministerial, European level; dissemination of the results of training and research-action experiences, in order to transmit and exchange good practices (including the policies).

The strategic action planned by the Mediterranean University is part of policies to combat the risk of educational poverty in the area and aims at strengthening the link between the university and the world of school, families and the community, ensuring quality training and enhancing geographically isolated, peripheral and at risk of depopulation and marginalization: places of strategic importance, educational communities with a high level of quality and social well-being, memory places, which guard historical, artistic, cultural and environmental heritage, that have not only to be protected through a joint effort of all the institutions of the territory, but whose beauty has also to be conveyed to the new generations in the perspective of enhancing Southern Italy.

2.2 Decision-Making Logics in Strategic Planning: The Role of Evaluations

In the case study of the Jonian Valleys of Peloritani, it is more correct to speak of a path aimed at developing a "Strategic Program", rather than "Strategic Planning" (Gänzle 2016).

The scientific literature identifies, unanimously, some peculiarities that distinguish Programming from Planning, especially in the field of urban and territorial transformations. The first, in fact, as many authors underline, identifies exactly "who" does "what" in "how much time" and with "what resources", thus overcoming the limits of tools too often full of appreciable contents and desirable objectives, which they have rarely translated into real facts in the many experiences carried out (Elbanna 2009). The two

essential and peculiar principles, therefore, to which the interventions to be planned must respond are effectiveness and feasibility. The other fundamental principle, sustainability, on the other hand, is also representative of other tools and, obviously, this must permeate programming too: in this case, however, another distinctive trait is the tendency to rebalance the weight of the different dimensions of sustainability, paying the necessary attention also to its economic dimension, alongside the environmental and social dimensions, which often tend to be given greater prominence.

In order for the interventions envisaged by the strategic programs to respect the fundamental principles of effectiveness, feasibility and sustainability, their selection must be made on the basis of careful evaluation (Morano and Tajani 2013; Morano et al. 2021). The ex-ante evaluation of projects, on the other hand, must necessarily be based on a deep knowledge of the dynamics existing in the area in which action is taken: first of all, the main critical issues to be addressed and the resources on which it is possible to focus, but also of what is already been implemented or planned up to now and on the basis of which vision (Nesticò and Maselli 2021).

The territories for which strategic programs are drawn up, in fact, are never at the beginning of a path aimed at promoting their development: over time, interventions have been conceived, proposed and implemented and even if they have not produced the expected results, certainly responded to needs and objectives that must be taken into account, even simply to replace them with others, the important thing is that the choices are made in a conscious way. This is one of the main purposes of project evaluation in the ex-ante phase: to provide the decision maker with information on the effective ability of the hypothesized solutions to provide answers to problems (Nesticò et al. 2021). Due to its nature and given these specific purposes, the evaluation of projects, aimed at selecting the priority interventions, will have a multidimensional character: therefore, different families of techniques will be used, both quantitative and qualitative, monetary and non-monetary (Del Giudice 2021; Nesticò and Galante 2015).

2.3 The Phases of Strategic Programming

Consistently with the above, there are four phases to be developed to design a strategic program of interventions:

1. Knowledge Phase
2. Proposal Phase
3. Evaluation Phase
4. Planning Phase

Phase 1, of a cognitive nature, is in turn divided into two parts:

– 1.a Analysis of the territorial system
– 1.b Listening and territorial animation

In detail, phase "1.a Analysis of the territorial system" has as its object:

- Geomorphology and hydrogeology
- Settlement system
- Infrastructure, accessibility and mobility
- Demographic structure
- Economic-productive system (also historically characterizing activities) and employment dynamics
- Natural and cultural resources – tangible and intangible
- Socio-cultural structure: associations and cultural activities
- Services for the quality of life and social equity
- Planning, governance and express planning tools – funded and unfunded
- Historical Background.

While phase 1.b "Listening and territorial animation" includes:

- Recognition of public and private actors
- Individual meetings with stakeholders and public forum for the needs' analysis and assessment
- Identification of strategic areas.

3 Conclusion

The research is in its first phase; the activities are still in progress, in particular as regards the cognitive aspects. In the continuation of the activities, particular attention will be paid to two aspects: the involvement of citizens and in particular of young people; inter-institutional dialogue and cooperation. At the same time, it will be necessary to refine the techniques to be used for the selection of strategic objectives and projects capable of pursuing them more effectively.

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