Repositioning the public in the social innovation debate. Reflections from the field
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Abstract

In urban studies, social innovation mainly means voluntary, non-statutory, citizen-led, or community-led initiatives implemented to respond to unmet or new social needs. Social innovation has been applied to many urban regenerations and territorial development initiatives, but in many cases overestimated its potential to come up with progressive solutions alone without the support of public action. In the paper, by critically discussing the case of the Simeto area in Sicily, we claim a shift from the concept of social innovation to the one of public innovation, and we assume social innovation as a social and territorial construct that requires to be mobilised ad hoc within particular spatial and institutional settings. From a strategic planning perspective, this process should involve the creation of trading zones, boundary objects, and agonist democracy, allowing specific and context-based interactions among community-based initiatives and institutions at different levels.

Negli studi urbani il concetto di innovazione sociale è stato ampiamente utilizzato per descrivere l'insieme delle iniziative dal basso che rispondono a bisogni non presi in carico dalle istituzioni o non ancora espressi dalla società. L'innovazione sociale è stata utilizzata per descrivere diverse forme di rigenerazione urbana e sviluppo territoriale dal basso, ma spesso sovrastimandone l'efficacia senza il supporto dell'azione pubblica.
Il paper, discutendo criticamente il caso del Simeto in Sicilia, sostiene che sia necessario passare dal concetto di innovazione sociale a quello di innovazione pubblica e considera l'innovazione sociale come un costrutto territoriale che può essere mobilitato in specifici contesti spaziali e istituzionali. Per la pianificazione strategica questo significa poter creare specifiche *trading zones*, *boundary objects* o pratiche di pianificazione agonistica e permettere forme di interazione tra iniziative dal basso e istituzioni a diversi livelli.

Keywords: social innovation; territorial development; strategic planning.
Parole Chiave: innovazione sociale; sviluppo territoriale; pianificazione strategica.

Questioning social innovation and repositioning the role of the public actor

After decades of debate and experimentations around the concept, processes and practices of social innovation (SI) (Klein and Harrison, 2006; MacCallum *et al.*, 2009; Moulaert and

Mehmood, 2019; Galego *et al.*, 2022, among the others), various criticalities arose (Swyngedouw, 2005; Bragaglia, 2021; Fougère and Meriläinen, 2021, among the others) due to several drifts that emerged from the field.

Social Innovation (SI) has been experienced, defined, and applied in several ways, in some cases stressing its role in contrasting neoliberal trends, in other cases stressing the risk to be a way to serve them.

Nyseth and Hamdouch give an exemplificative interpretation of SI in the first sense, as «a critical and political perspective on innovation [...] about empowering marginalized citizens and changing power relationships. It is a perspective that opposes neoliberalism and its devastating effects on urban development» (Nyseth and Hamdouch, 2019: 2).

However, the complexity and facets of the SI discourse, including its ambivalence in relation with neoliberalism, require a careful analysis of its evolution and various nuances, including a discussion concerned with the role of the public actor in relation with the emerging forms of *governance-beyond-the State* that have sprouted along the years.

As Moulaert and Mehmood point out, «the term SI had existed since the seventeenth century. In the 1970s social innovation research (re-)invented itself by way of a long research trajectory on socially innovative strategies in processes in local development and community development» (Moulaert and Mehmood, 2019: 12). In this framework, SI is conceived both in terms of practices and processes pushed by social actors, aside from – or complementing with – the ordinary function of public institutions. On one side, SI refers to those sets of collective initiatives aimed at fulfilling the satisfaction of specific needs in contexts of lack of services, socio-economic and spatial issues, crisis of the welfare state, scarcity of public resources and private investments, etc. On the other side, SI regards the possible paths and trajectories of changes in socio-political relations, and the opportunities of empowering people as well as strengthening governance dynamics (Moulaert *et al.*, 2005), in many cases following the capabilities approach (Nussbaum and Sen, 1993).

The link with governance dynamics is at the core of the most recent research focused on SI. Recalling the work of Galego *et al.* (2022):

«Governance understood as 'governing beyond the state' finds in citizen movements insights for new governance arrangements including collective participation in decision-making and co-production, especially at the local level. Social innovation, in turn, refers to collective actions and social relations addressing social problems neglected by the public sector or the market» (Galego *et al.*, 2022: 265).

As such, SI gives a prominent role to collective actors beyond the state, in the challenge of targeting the most pressing issues of contemporary societies through socially inclusive processes, often appearing as an opportunity to change the ordinary dynamics, especially when inefficiencies, mistrust, exclusions, and malfunctions in power's structures emerge in the public domain.

In this sense, along the years, the idea that self-organized groups can 'act alone' has gained ground in response to a growing disconnection between public institutions and people.

Beyond the conflicting relations pushed through social mobilizations, 'acting alone' in some cases turned to be a set of collective practices conducted regardless of the public actor, in other cases through loose relations with it.

In Italy, Manzini has affirmed that «instead of considering people as carriers of needs to be satisfied (by someone or something), it is better to consider them as active subjects, able to operate for their own well-being» (Manzini, 2015: 96), opening a slippery trajectory on the meaning of being 'active subjects'. Other scholars have considered social innovation as a force able to enhance collective power and improve the economic and social performance of local societies (Heiskala, 2007) or to solve new or unmet social needs (Mulgan, 2006). Some others have claimed that social innovation can produce social change that in turn can enable new social practices, namely impacting on the behaviour of individuals, people or certain social groups in a recognizable way with an orientation towards producing services that are not primarily economically motivated (Klein and Harrison, 2007). Mumford has claimed that social innovation refers to new ideas on how people should organize interpersonal activities or social interaction to meet common goals (Mumford, 2002).

Therefore, the variety of attitudes for 'acting alone' shifts the focus of SI on the role and agency of collective subjects beyond the state, while the role of agency of the public actor remained

diluted and behind the scenes.

Simultaneously, in the last decades a constellation of not-for-profit and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) has been appearing and acquiring legitimacy in the policy arena concerned with local development. Such a heterogeneous constellation is made not only of grassroots organizations, social movements, and civil society's coalitions with a history of opposition against "neoliberalism and its devastating effects on urban development" (recalling Nyseth and Hamdouch, 2019: 2), but also of a broader variety of subjects such as voluntary and cultural associations, foundations, social enterprises, philanthropic entities, etc., today grouped under the comprehensive definition of 'the third sector', that has recently gained attention in Italy through the issue of the Legislative Decree No. 117 of July, 3rd 2017[1].

Despite third sector organizations' key role – both as groups acting alone or in partnerships with public actors – they cannot be generically identified as a panacea for the pursue of SI without identifying several criticalities depending on the specific characteristics that each category incorporates within the broad definition of third sector. In addition, the same concept of SI necessitates a careful discussion in order to understand, and therefore trying to avoid, some of the drifts that have emerged along years of practice and research.

As already pointed out by Swyngedouw (2005) in one of his early critiques, in some cases SI risks to open and pave the road to the same neoliberal dynamics that it was originally trying to contrast, due to the Janus-faced character of the *governance-beyond-the-State* processes. In some cases, being led by private actors, social innovation could be used, and it has been used, as an excuse to dimmish public institutions' role and responsibilities toward the construction of a functioning welfare state.

This is only one of the possible drifts that SI might produce, alongside with the creation of new institutional settings that empower some actors but disempower other ones, with the difficulties of long-term survival and sustainability of SI initiatives at the end of each project's life cycle, etc.

The debate about SI has in fact many times oversimplified the relation between social innovation and urban inclusion. While one

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1 Code to Regulate Nongovernmental Organizations https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2017/08/02/17G00128/sg. (Last access: August, 16th, 2022).

major strand of the literature has assumed that SI is more likely to spontaneously emerge in most fragile urban areas where the spatial concentration of exclusion should lead people to react (Holston and Caldeira, 2008; Moulart *et al.*, 2013), other scholars have gradually started painting a different picture: most-deprived urban areas usually lack the very resources needed to trigger collective action, such as social capital (Putnam, 2004), spatial capital or the institutional tissue that enable people to connect and act, lack time and energy to spend in other issues that go beyond their basic survival (Sampson, 2012; Uitermark, 2015; Madden, Marcuse 2016, ed. It. 2020).

Jamie Peck (2013) has also warned of the many risks of uncritical thinking about SI. For example, there is the risk of instrumentalizing SI to justify the reduction of the role of the State and the consequent privatization of different urban services in the name of a more effective community-based action.

Not surprisingly the success of the concept of SI – especially under the Barroso European Commission Presidency between 2004 and 2014 and the subsequent EU funding cycle 2014-2020 – due to its broadness, normative attractiveness, implication of consensus, and global marketability, has turned SI into a 'magic' expression. In many cases, such expression hides some threats, such as the devolution of responsibilities of public institutions to civil society, or the incorporation and exploitation of its energies by the governments (Bragaglia, 2021), without producing, in turn, any empowerment effect and, in some cases, confirming the predominance of financial interests over the collective interest.

Considering such criticalities that emerged within the SI discourse, we argue that this is a consequence of a recent long history of pubic institutions' weakness in assuming their role as gatekeepers for guaranteeing the collective interest; more generally, this could be intended as a result from a long-lasting crisis of the democratic dynamics in Europe, and the consequent necessity of working toward the direction of improving such dynamics (Donolo, 1992) is for us a necessary precondition for making SI work. Hence, we call for the necessity of repositioning the role of the public actor in the SI discourse, that we try to problematize here. Assuming SI as a social and territorial construct, we argue that it requires to be mobilised *ad hoc* within specific spatial and institutional settings, specifically

when it is related to urban regeneration practices and territorial development[2]. In this process, the active role of public institutions matters (Ostanel, 2022). From a strategic planning perspective, urban regeneration through social innovation should involve spaces that enable the opportunity of activating trading zones, boundary objects, and agonist democracy (Galison, 1999; Mouffe, 2000; Mäntysalo *et al.*, 2011; Balducci and Mäntysalo, 2013; Mouffe, 2013), allowing specific and context-based interactions among community-based initiatives and institutions at different levels.

In next paragraph we reposition the engagement of the public sector in the social innovation debate – including a discussion on trading zones, boundary objects and agonism – as a possible way to reframe it. To this extent, we suggest shifting from the concept of social innovation to the one of public innovation as a process that can increase local institutions' resources, extend their reach, radically transform the way they operate, and be much more effective (Albrechts, 2013), although not without criticalities. In this view, strategic planning can be seen as the intentional attempt to create a trading zone (Balducci, 2018) described as the creation of an area of understanding, exchange, and translation between actors to produce partial agreements and innovations (*Ibidem*).

Social – and public – innovation can therefore facilitate the creation of multiple arenas of open confrontation on different urban scales, where local institutions can intercept very divergent objectives and interests, if they are able to be gatekeepers for preventing the demolition of the welfare state and to avoid neoliberal drifts.

Then, we offer an exemplification of the discussed issues and the potentialities of repositioning the public in the territorial development process of the Simeto Area in Sicily, an inner and marginal area[3] considered an interesting testbed for digging

2 In this paper we use urban regeneration and territorial development as synonymous by considering territorial development as a grounded process in spatialized communities (Moulaert et al, 2013).

3 In the paper we refer to both the expressions *inner* and *marginal* areas, going beyond the contested boundaries of the identified perimeters in the SNAI maps. Alongside, several other critical reflections around the SNAI emerged, converging into the necessity of implementing new sets of concepts and practical devices, usable for planners and policymakers to face the pressing challenges of such areas (Esposito *et al.*, 2021).

into the social/public innovation practices. In fact, it is an exemplification of fragile contexts characterized by a lack of those resources (not only economic, but also human resources, social and spatial capital, organizational infrastructures, etc.) that are needed to trigger collective action, as well as weak institutional environments, due to alarming trends of depopulation, and decades of lack of public policies dedicated to such contexts. In conclusion, the article offers a reflection on how this shift might impact urban planning practices with an aim to impact on the contemporary discussion within and outside the academia.

Re-engaging with public institutions

Within the extensive literature on SI, we refer here to those positions that question an optimistic and in some cases *naïf* interpretations of SI. In this framework, some of the limits and critics to SI are related with the fact that public institutions and the constellations of social actors engaged with innovative practices are not often able to co-produce synergetic actions, and organic planning strategies toward a horizon of more just and ethic societies. Beside the complex relation between social innovation and inclusion debated before, some scholars have also highlighted that dynamics for change pushed by social innovation emerge in a direction that can be either 'progressive' or 'regressive' (MacCallum *et al*, 2009). In this sense, a re-engagement of the SI discourse with the active role of the public actors might offer fertile ground to try to reconduct bottom-up practices to a dimension of public value.

However, such a re-engagement might be problematic for several reasons as well. In many cases, administrations and government structures are trapped themselves into the defence of partial interests, but also political judgement and often the involvement of groups keen to promote particular values and projects (Vigar *et al*, 2019), into the accumulation of power in the hands of few actors inside the institutional machines (De Leo and Bolognese, 2021), in the lack of transparency and accountability or pushed by the maximization of consensus (Meyerson and Banfield, 1955), by the lack of professional expertise or financial resources, and so forth. This often generates a widespread mistrust toward the public role as gatekeeper of collective benefits.

Thus, alongside with social innovation, we argue that a certain

degree of public innovation is necessary, to try to revert such dynamics, and to pursue the goal of more just societies, repositioning the role of planning as an opportunity for gaining ground in this sense.

Scholars in the field of sociology, political science, public policies and institutional studies – such as in Ansell and Torfing (2014), or in Torfing and Triantafillou (2016) – have pointed out the necessity of reframing the collaborative practices to foster innovation inside the institutional machines, as well as to explore the correlation between public innovation, the governance mechanisms and organizational structures of institutions.

From an economic perspective, Crevoisier (2011) stresses the importance of reflecting upon the territorial dimension of innovation, considering territories as the arenas where innovation happens with its dynamic, involving both the public sector and other social actors, as previously stated by Kazepov (2010), when calling for multilevel governance. In a recent article, Vigar *et al.* (2020) offer some interesting perspectives toward this direction, confirming the importance of extending the concept of innovation to the public domain, and identifying a framework and a role for planners in this challenge.

According to them, the concept of public innovation expands the one of social innovation, incorporating the original tension of the latter while focusing on the creation of public value rather than of partial interests. In this sense, strengthening collaborative and innovative dynamics into the institutional machines is necessary to foster their transparency, accountability and capacities, through innovative processes that might open and consolidate the public dynamics. To do so, still Vigar *et al.* identify at least five key factors that might help consolidating and innovating institutions.

First, they warn about «the significance of collective action across existing institutional boundaries» (*Ibidem*), meaning that collaboration is needed not only between actors outside the public agencies and actors inside them; above all, it is needed in terms of inter-agency and intersectoral collaboration, to break down policy silos and hyperspecialized sectorial approaches. Secondly, they highlight the necessity of advancing public innovation doing incremental steps through 'testing and probing', considering the use of pilot projects that may help digesting some

innovative hints into the most conservative environments. Third, innovation in the public domain necessitates a certain degree of flexibility and adaptation, meaning that rigid strategies do not work. Fourthly, it is important to give continuity to the processes of public innovation, otherwise the generated expectations over specific projects might end up in frustrations and withdrawals: in this sense, it is important to engage – in innovative processes – not only the elected component of public institutions, but above all, the permanent workers inside them, as part of the system that makes the gearwheel works. Finally, complementing all the precedent factors, Vigar *et al.* make the point for the central role of urban planning and design as opportunities to foster processes of public innovation for generating public value, rather than partial privatistic interests, engaging more gatekeepers outside the walls of public institutions to hold them transparent, accountable, and capable.

Hence, the work of Vigar *et al.* calls for opening windows of interaction, not only between the variety of non-governmental actors claiming socially innovative processes but, above all, inside the public institutions and between the public institutions and the world outside it. Such interactions could find some barriers in the diversity of values and interests that are involved and are at stake when different actors (both within the civil society and the public sector) are called to find windows of interchange.

In order to try to overcome such barriers, it could be fruitful to refer to the work of Mäntysalo *et al.* (2011) concerned with trading zones, boundary objects, and agonistic planning, that can offer some interesting spaces of experimentation.

Moving from Lindblom's theory of partisan mutual adjustment (1965) and Galison's epistemological studies (1999), Mäntysalo *et al.* (2011) propose the concept of trading zones as «the basic idea is that innovation or paradigm change does not require all the participants sharing the objectives of the action, but it may occur when a zone of partial exchange is built, termed a trading zone, which allows partial innovations ascribable to strategies which may even be conflicting» (Balducci and Mäntysalo, 2013: 2-3). In this sense, local trading zones between public institutions and social actors committed to generating innovation – as well as inside the public institution machine – could be intended as spaces of interaction and experimentation to foster mechanisms

of public innovation.

Looking for practical ways that might allow possible intersections between social innovation and public innovation, boundary objects can be intended as «specific devices that facilitate exchanges in a trading zone» (Mäntysalo *et al.*, 2011: 263).

Interactions among community-based initiatives and institutions at different levels – at the intersection between social innovation and public innovation – not only may lead to the coproduction of social services (Klein and Harrison, 2006), but also the coproduction of spaces in a strategic planning dynamic (Albrechts, 2013). Space itself can be framed as a trading zone, and regeneration projects framed as boundary objects, representing opportunities for experimenting such theoretical concepts to the testbed of practical dynamics.

Although the concepts of trading zones and boundary objects might appear promising ones, the same Mäntysalo et al. highlight the necessity for operationalize them through an agonistic approach to planning, recalling Mouffe's agonism (2000, 2013): acting politically (therefore, not neutrally), in a continuous «strife between one logic relying on individual rights and the legal state, and the other on equal citizenship in the public realm» (Mäntysalo *et al.*, 2011: 266).

In other words, opening local trading zones between the public actors and other social actors, through specific boundary objects, does not mean opening a neutral area of exchange. Rather, it implies engaging in oscillating dynamics and intersections, that might lead to coproduction and, ultimately, to certain degrees of innovations, both on the social and the public sides.

The next paragraph offers a practical exemplification of such dynamics in the case of an Italian inner area, where the necessity of provoking mechanisms for the enhancement of the institutions-society nexus fostering processes of institutional learning (Pappalardo and Saija, 2020) is urgent and grounded in specific local settings.

Public innovation at the test of Italian inner areas

Why does public innovation matter in inner and marginal areas: A practical example

We recall here the experience of one of the experimental areas of national significance identified by the National Strategy for Inner

Areas (SNAI), the Simeto area in Sicily, to exemplify the necessity of repositioning the role of the public into the social innovation debate, in the framework of the same SNAI. The details of the characteristics of this territory, as well as of the self-candidacy of the Simeto Valley for the SNAI, the genesis of the process and its early phases of implementation have already been discussed elsewhere (Saija, 2015; Pappalardo, 2019; Saija and Pappalardo, 2020; Pappalardo and Saija, 2020). Here we propose a reflection connected with the limits of social innovation, as well as with first attempts of experimenting trading zones and boundary objects, although imperfectly; then we discuss the possible open perspectives for this and similar processes, if public innovation will be pursued and regain a position at the core of new strategic spatial planning strategies.

The Simeto area has not been selected from the Sicilian Regional Board in the same way as most of the other inner areas of Italy, that have been identified by a process of concertation led by the Regions. Rather, it has been identified as an area of national interest directly by the Ministry of Cohesion, due to the proactive initiative of the civil society in an action-research partnership (Saija, 2016) established between a constellation of various socially innovative actors and a group of engaged planning scholars. In fact, before that the SNAI arrived in the area, such a various constellation of actors coagulated around not only the necessity of defending the territory from socio-ecological threats (Saija, 2014), but also around a common tension toward what could be framed as socially innovative practices.

Grassroots associations of environmental volunteers, spontaneous groups of neighbours, civic committees, alongside more structured NGOs, about two decades ago started actively to propose and enact several initiatives, many of them settled into specific spatial contexts, adopting, taking care of, and trying to regenerate various abandoned areas that yet had a value for these groups (Pappalardo, 2021). To name some of the most significative spaces at stake: one of the last non-privatized accesses to the Simeto river, a small derelict urban park in a peripheral low-income neighbourhood in the municipality of Adrano, an abandoned train station in the municipality of Paternò, alongside a constellation of specific initiatives in various other municipalities of the Simeto Valley.

Such practices emerged and experimented with various forms of 'governance-beyond-the state' attempts, with the aim of acting where the public institutions were inactive. Despite the initial enthusiasm, several criticalities emerged along the way, and in most cases the attempt to regenerate these spaces did not last for long in a structured and effective manner. This was due to all those limits – recalled in the previous paragraph – characterizing most of the socially innovative practices in fragile territorial settings, such as the lack not only of economic resources, but also of human resources committed to carry on such initiatives – almost voluntarily – in the long run.

In this context, the social actors involved in the Simeto area have approached social innovation – not always consciously – with different visions regarding the possibility of 'acting alone', due to differentiated levels of mistrust toward local administrations. However, the main tendency of the partnership has been to try to find 'a zone of partial exchange' (using Mäntysalo *et al.*'s words) with public institutions, in the light of an almost unanimous understanding of the limits of 'acting alone', and the awareness of the importance of making institutions work, assuming their responsibilities, not only in the regeneration of the recalled spaces but, more generally, in providing basic services, and leading a process of territorial development.

In fact, the partnership progressively evolved in what can be framed as a first attempt at constructing a trading zone with local administrations, proposing a new territorial governance structure and a bottom-up strategic plan for the Valley. Thanks to the existence of such a trading zone, it was possible to foster the process of self-candidacy to the SNAI, perceived as an opportunity of strengthening joint work between institutions, civil society, and the academia in its institutional role of the third mission, beyond the very opportunity of attracting resources for this territory.

Agreements and beyond, as trading zones and boundary objects
The process of constructing a trading zone in the Simeto Valley culminated, in 2015, into the shaping of a first (imperfect) boundary object: the Simeto River Agreement (the Agreement from now on), a new asset of local governance, and a bottom-up strategic plan of local development, concerned with the

territory of the medium sketch of the Simeto River, a territory for long subjugated under oppressive and wasting dynamics (Armiero *et al.,* 2020). The Simeto area could be considered a marginal area, including – in this territorial construct – at least ten municipalities grouped because of their territorial proximity, as well as geomorphological and historical common features, related with the presence of a specific territorial entity (the river) that connects them from a natural-cultural and symbolic standpoint. Despite that, only three out of the ten municipalities involved in the Agreement have been then identified and selected as beneficiaries of the inner areas' funds – in the framework of the SNAI – due to its (contested) criteria of selection, creating one of the first fractures in the brand-new formed boundary object (the Agreement).

Some months before the formal establishment of the Agreement, still in 2015, the constellation of social actors, that pushed for its creation, grouped together and formed a new Valley-wide association under the framework of the third sector, called the Participatory Presidium of the Simeto river Agreement (the Presidium from now on).

In about seven years of existence, the partnership between the Presidium and engaged planning scholars tried to keep pursuing the construction and consolidation of a trading zone with public institutions, and the implementation of various 'boundary objects': the same Agreement, but also other attempts of setting «specific devices that facilitate exchanges in a trading zone» (still using Mäntysalo et al.'s words), such as a dedicated governance structure for the construction of the SNAI first, a participatory observatory for the implementation of the SNAI later, and an Ecomuseum of the Simeto river more recently. In this sense, in the Simeto area there was a shift from social innovation as 'acting alone', to a first attempt of public innovation.

However, some criticalities emerged: the Agreement only lasted a triennium (2015-2018), and up to this moment it is in a phase of concertation for its revision and extension to another triennium (after being silent for 4 years). The other boundary objects – that had a specific focus on the SNAI process – were barely implemented, and today the SNAI itself has lost most of its original tension of being another possible trading zone, producing few significative effects on the ground yet.

Meanwhile, the evolutive trajectory of the Presidium led to reinforcing its character as a socially innovative actor, capable of designing projects and attracting a good mix of funds through various application to European and National calls issued both by public and private agencies. This has allowed the possibility of opening new local trading zones with some of the municipalities involved in the agreement, connected with specific funding opportunities. However, public administrations in the Simeto Valley are loosely learning how to innovate themselves, and to be agents of trading zones, although with some exceptions, that are opening new windows of opportunities.

Among them, for the sake of the paper it is important to recall a) the process of coproduction of the dossier and strategic plan for the institutional recognition of the Simeto Ecomuseum, according with the Regional Law 16/2014, and its early phase of implementation; b) the case of coproduction of the strategic plan of the municipality of Regalbuto, one of the municipalities that did not benefit from the funds of the 2014-2020 SNAI cycle but incorporates all those characters of marginality, and some attempts of reactions, that could be found in many Italian inner areas.

In the first case – the Simeto Ecomuseum as a boundary object –, it was possible to establish a new local trading zone around a common tension: the necessity of care and valorisation of territorial heritage and landscapes in the Simeto valley. The process of construction of the Ecomuseum started in 2019, pushed by the active role of engaged planning scholars, and it is still ongoing. So far, it has encountered the interest, enthusiasm and involvement not only of new numerous groups of people – hundreds between individuals and associations – living and operating in the Simeto area (including a dozen teachers that have pushed and acted for the formal partnership of the schools where they work), but also it has awakened the interest of municipalities, elected representatives as well as workers inside the institutional machine. This was evident in the phase of coproduction of the Ecomuseum dossier and strategic plan, that was an opportunity for fostering interagency collaboration, and for identifying a flexible tool aimed at producing public value around territorial heritage and landscapes, in continuity with what has started with the Simeto River Agreement, and some

phases of work for the SNAI.

In the second case – the strategic municipal plan of Regalbuto as a boundary object –, it was possible to not only to activate the political component of the local administration, but also technicians and other municipal workers from different areas and offices, that together had the opportunity of testing directly a process of coproduction for reverting the current trajectory depauperating the territory where they live and work. The process started in 2021 as a public initiative connected with the current EU and national funding opportunity, and was led in partnership with engaged planning scholars. In fourteen months of public activities led by public institutions – the municipality of Regalbuto in partnership with the university –, almost 400 people contributed to a process of coproduction, through outreach, community mapping, codesign workshops, etc. This led to the identification of a shared vision and a set of actions that were identified, discussed, disseminated, reframed and finally handed back to the responsibility of the public actor.

In both cases, the contribution of engaged planning scholars was related with the attempts of fostering innovation inside the institutional machines as a complement to the practices of social innovation pushed by the Presidium along the years. This required specific skills connected to the capacity of identifying those «zones of partial exchange» and «specific devices that facilitate exchanges in a trading zone», still recalling Balducci and Vigar *et al.* – as well as the capacity of staying engaged with continuity in such complex, long-lasting, unstable, and unpredictable processes. We think that these challenges – and the necessity of acquiring specific skills toward this direction – should be taken in consideration in the shaping of planning curricula, as well as planning itself could be framed as an opportunity of mutual learning between social and public actors.

Attempts to repositioning the public

The ongoing described process, and how it is trying to foster public innovation, might be discussed looking at the framework proposed by Vigar *et al.* (2020).

In the first phase of the Simeto River Agreement, it was difficult to foster inter-agency and intersectoral collaboration inside the local institutional machines, notwithstanding some tries

within the SNAI and other spot initiatives. This has not generally produced a widespread comprehension – inside administrations and amongst the public workers – of the importance of such initiatives, often leading to a lack of a fully sense of stewardship toward them in the public offices. The opportunities opened with the Simeto Ecomuseum in a valley-wide scale, and with the municipal strategic plan of Regalbuto at the urban scale, had shown a different path inside public offices, opening some windows of opportunities for the next steps of the process.

Secondly, in the initial attempts of the Agreement it was difficult to immediately show the potentialities of public innovation through incremental steps of 'testing and probing' and pilot projects, because of the novelty of a complex territorial governance structure that aimed to group at least ten different municipalities in a challenging context. The focus on more specific and agile boundary objects (such the Ecomuseum) or on a more delimited territory (the municipality of Regalbuto) have produced the effect of showing what coproduction between public and social actors means in practice. This helped digesting innovation even in some of the most conservative environments of this territory.

Third, probably the degree of flexibility and adaptability of the first version of the Agreement was not sufficient to guarantee its survival after the first triennium of experimentation. However, a new version of the Agreement is currently under approval (while we write this article, half of the involved municipality has formally adopted it through formal procedures inside the City Halls): a possible new cycle of experimentation will give the elements for understanding if this new version would allow enough flexibility to overcome the bureaucratic rigidities of the first version, benefitting from what has been learned so far through experiences such as the Ecomuseum or the strategic plan of Regalbuto. Fourthly, continuity within the process has not been always fully guaranteed by public institutions. However, it has been fostered through the efforts of some of the most tenacious involved actors (within the Presidium, but also within the group of the engaged scholars) that tried try to keep the process going without significative breaks. Finally, following the example of the municipality of Regalbuto, the central of role of urban planning – as an opportunity to foster processes of public innovation for

generating public value – should be better reconsidered more extensively within the entire Agreement requiring the effort of integrating innovative initiatives with ordinary planning.

Concluding remarks

Moving from criticalities that emerged within the SI debate, the paper has argued that repositioning the role of the public actor is a necessary precondition for making SI work. In the contemporary debate on SI, the role of agency of the public actor remained diluted and behind the scenes, while we have suggested a repositioning in order to understand how public innovation is key to guarantee more long-lasting territorial development processes – particularly in remote areas – as well as to produce public value. In the paper we have assumed social innovation as a social and territorial construct, and we have argued that it requires to be mobilised *ad hoc* within particular spatial and institutional settings. We have suggested to shift from the concept of social innovation to the one of public innovation in order to assess how social innovation can push local governments to transform how they operate and to maximize the production of public value. In the debate of strategic planning, following Balducci and Vigar *et al.* reasoning, we have considered social innovation as a force able to push for the creation of trading zones i.e., boundary objects conceived as an area of understanding, exchange and translation between actors to produce partial agreements and innovations (Balducci, 2018: 6).

In the Simeto case, we critically discussed the shift from the tendency to act alone to the one to support public innovation. In this shift, we have aimed to highlight which elements have limited the potential innovation in the public actor, together with considering possible fruitful lessons from some recent attempts, such as the Simeto Ecomuseum and the Regalbuto municipal strategic plan.

Even though still not completely structured, the Simeto Ecomuseum could offer some lessons in terms of interagency and multi-actor agile cooperation toward the common tension of valuing a fragile and distressed territory. Even though limited to one specific single area, the public innovation experience of Regalbuto could be replicated to other Municipalities, benefiting from the trading zones – as well as expertise, testing and lessons

learnt and collaborative relations – already put in place.

These experiences highlight the importance of reconsidering the engagement of public institutions not only as a support to the practice of social innovation, but also to foster a more integrated relationship between the public sector, public policies, and the constellation of spontaneous initiatives that emerge from the ground, using strategic spatial planning as a practical opportunity for testing such engagement. The limited impact of public innovation in other contexts testify how innovation is not a neutral and technical process, but more similar to a battleground where the interplay between institutional frames and social innovation practices as relevant components able to enhance or block processes of innovation, that is not simply top-down or bottom-up driven, but what matters is the capacity to design and manage a middle ground space of confrontation with a very complex mixture of ingredients, components, attitudes and also non intended consequences.

Finally, recalling Mouffe's lessons, in the attempt to foster processes of public innovation, the role of the actors such as the Presidium should be reconsidered, not only as generators of socially innovative practices, but, above all, as catalyser of agonistic democracy, acting politically (not neutrally) with the aim of producing public value and innovation inside public institutions, as one of the few possible ways out of the marginality for this and many other territories, challenging also the way university planning curricula are constructed in the light of such complex challenges.

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