

## Article

# When Heritage and Landscape Values Are Confronted by Planned Infrastructures: A Glance at ‘Public Debate’ (‘Dibattito Pubblico’) Procedures in Italy

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**Abstract:** Public debate procedures (“dibattito pubblico”, DP) have been recently introduced in Italy to provide an additional platform for public participation into infrastructure-related decision-making processes. Inspired by their French equivalent (“débat public”), these procedures sensibly differ from EIAs as they occur at a very early stage, i.e., before projects’ final drafting. Another significant difference, specific to the Italian context, is a provision dedicated to heritage sites and protected areas foreseeing a wider application of DPs in those contexts. This paper aims to further explore the different relationships between actors at play within DP procedures on the one hand, and heritage sites and landscapes on the other hand, through the analysis of dedicated reports and other documents. Heritage- and landscape-related values are commonly mobilized in relation to all infrastructural projects considered, although in various ways and sometimes with conflicting aims. The article highlights that environmental conflicts are likely to affect and mobilize heritage and landscape values, and calls for a closer dialogue between infrastructure planning, heritage and landscape planning, and political ecology.



**Citation:** Wacogne, R. When Heritage and Landscape Values Are Confronted by Planned Infrastructures: A Glance at ‘Public Debate’ (‘Dibattito Pubblico’) Procedures in Italy. *Sustainability* **2024**, *16*, 6218. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16146218>

Academic Editors: J. Marc Foggin, Daniele Brombal, Richard Gunton and Norman Wirzba

Received: 29 March 2024

Revised: 6 June 2024

Accepted: 19 July 2024

Published: 20 July 2024



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**Keywords:** heritage; landscape; infrastructure planning; environmental assessment; public participation

## 1. Introduction

Ten years ago, a report published by the World Bank highlighted the lack of evidence on infrastructure development’s impacts on welfare [1]. Conversely, a growing literature has been dedicated to (cultural) landscapes’ benefits in terms of well-being and ecosystem services [2]. Such a contrast suggests the relevance of environmental assessment and environmental participation at large, which remain largely undisputed despite their limitations and shortcomings. These have been highlighted with much insistence as for impacts on cultural heritage and landscapes. Indeed, although they have long been within the scope of environmental assessment and are explicitly referred to in the EIA and SEA EU Directives, the use of such concepts raises both theoretical and practical issues [3–8]. This has prompted the elaboration of alternative or complementary processes, such as Heritage Impact Assessment [7,9]. Conversely, the Millenium Ecosystem Assessment [10] states that “a large part of our cultural heritage is associated with ecosystems and landscapes with special features that remind us of our historic roots, both collectively and individually” (p. 461). From then, the category of “cultural ecosystem services” has been much discussed [11,12], with special reference to landscape management and planning [13–16].

Increasing reliance on renewable energies has significantly challenged heritage and landscape conservation and environmental participation over the last few years, as more and more renewable energy plants are being planned in Europe as elsewhere [17,18]. Broadly speaking, it has been estimated that infrastructure projects trigger almost half of the environmental conflicts in high-income countries [19]. Yet relationships between

such conflicts and participatory processes have been mostly discussed in terms of the “NIMBY syndrome” [20–22] and/or “social acceptance” [18,23]. Furthermore, much as the literature available on planned infrastructures’ impacts on landscapes focuses on renewable energy development [8,16–18,23–26] (see instead [4,5] and [7]), references to environmental participation are mostly dedicated to Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment [27]. Instead, the French “*débat public*” and Italian “*dibattito pubblico*” procedures have been seldom discussed in an international context [28]. As this contribution intends to highlight, their peculiarity may shed some light on the agency of cultural heritage and landscapes within environmental assessment and environmental participation. In particular, inputs from the public are free, in terms both of contents and of their authors’ position and qualifications, and thus express lay – or “non-expert” – values [29] in relation to the planned projects’ territories.

## 2. Materials and Methods

After several experiments in a few Italian regions, “*dibattito pubblico*” was instituted at the national level in 2016, following the French model of “*débat public*” [28]. It is intended as “the process of information, participation and public confrontation on the works’ rationale, on their design solutions, on projects and operations” corresponding to specific infrastructure typologies and exceeding dimensional and investment thresholds. Typologies and thresholds have been set by DPCM 10 maggio 2018, n. 76 (art. 2) and its appendix, which also instituted the commission in charge to oversee DP procedures and especially their onset, on the basis of the projects’ feasibility reports.

The scope of DP differs significantly from that of environmental and Strategic Impact Assessment [30]. On the one hand, DP applies only to public procurement foreseeing large-scale public works [28]. This excludes renewable plant development initiatives, usually proposed by private investors within a much-fragmented sector [31]. On the other hand, stakeholders’ inputs are not limited, and may question the very rationale and implementation of projects. Furthermore, the same decree which defines applicable projects’ typologies and thresholds sets a 50% reduction of the latter “with reference to special protection necessities” as for UNESCO World Heritage properties and their buffer zones, national and regional parks, as well as marine protected areas.

This special provision, which implies a substantially wider field of application when such categories may be affected, relates to the fact that Italy currently holds the highest number of World Heritage sites among the dedicated Convention’s State Parties [32]. Beyond the common epithet of “beautiful country” (“*il Belpaese*”), used to characterize the distinctiveness of the Italian environment, heritage, and landscape as a whole [33], the Italian Constitution states that “the Republic shall [...] safeguard the natural beauties and the historical and artistic heritage of the Nation” (art. 9) [34]. A recent Constitutional reform extended the same responsibilities to the safeguard of “the environment, biodiversity and ecosystems, also in the interest of future generations”. A State Party to the European Landscape Convention since 2006, Italy has more recently ratified the Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (or Faro Convention). Yet, urban and regional planning on the one hand, and heritage and landscape conservation on the other, are overseen by separate administrations whose respective procedures are sometimes at odds [15,35]. Regional landscape plans do require “co-planning”, but their development and implementation is slow and incomplete [15]. Conversely, Italian landscapes have triggered numerous civic movements and protests [36], notably in relation to infrastructural development [22]. According to the National Statistical Agency, the deterioration of the landscape is among Italians’ main environmental preoccupations, after climate change and air pollution [37]. In this context, DP has introduced new procedures that apply to a limited number of infrastructural projects, which in turn may affect a significant number of landscapes and listed sites across the country, including 7 World Heritage Sites and dozens of national and regional parks.

The cases analyzed comprise all DP procedures completed by the end of November 2023, a few months before the Public Procurement Code was reformed. In terms of typologies, projects at stake within those 17 procedures relate to the enhancement or (re-) construction of 7 high-speed railways, 5 state roads, 2 airports, 1 stadium, 1 tramway line, and 1 harbor breakwater, as follows (regions are indicated between brackets):

- New harbor breakwater in Genoa (Liguria)
- Trento high-capacity railway bypass (Autonomous province of Trento)
- High-speed railway between Salerno and Reggio Calabria (parcel 1a) (Campania)
- High-speed railway between Salerno and Reggio Calabria (parcel 1b) (Calabria)
- State road 89 ‘Garganica’ (Abruzzo)
- New tramway line ‘SIR 2’, Padua (Veneto)
- Quadrupling of the railway between Tortona and Voghera (Lombardy, Piedmont)
- Doubling of the Roma-Pescara railway (Abruzzo, Lazio)
- Orte—alconara railway (Marche)
- New stadium in Milan (Lombardy)
- State road 115—grigento Road bypass (Sicily)
- State road 16 Bari-Mola di Bari (Puglia)
- Review of Florence airport’s Masterplan (Tuscany)
- Closure of Rome’s northern railway ring (Lazio)
- Venice airport’s New Masterplan (Veneto)
- Road connection between A2 highway, state road SS18 and Agropoli (Campania)
- Road connection between Caserta and Benevento (Marcianise-Rotondi parcel).

Many of those projects are parcels of larger ones (“global projects”) and/or included in EU or national schemes such as TEN-T corridors.

Without adopting or excluding the conceptualizations and definitions of “heritage” and/or “landscape” evoked above, this contribution aims to provide evidence on the use of such concepts, as well as related values, by different actors within DP –both “lay” and “expert” [4–9,30,35]. Beyond the recognition of categories considered by DPCM 10 maggio 2018, n. 76, art. 3, which correspond to a rather formal or “expert” definition of cultural and/or natural heritage and (implicitly) landscapes, the empirical research has consisted in a word search of the terms listed in black in Table 1 among the documents issued throughout each procedure. Considering also the heterogeneity of materials, this qualitative approach allowed the capture of “lay” expressions related to the same concepts, and accounts for the complexity of the relationships between the actors involved, including heritage and landscapes, and the procedures themselves. Whilst such an operation does not allow to account for expressions and arguments referred to those terms and concepts only implicitly, other recurring related concepts (in gray in the table) can be identified within the same phrases or paragraphs including the five “core” terms (in black).

Documents analyzed include, for each procedure, the project’s presentation by its proponent (“Dossier di progetto”), the coordinator’s report (“Relazione conclusiva”), public meeting reports (when available), stakeholders’ contributions (“Quaderni degli attori” or “contributi”), and the proponent’s own conclusions, based on the latter (“Dossier conclusivo”). Only the first two of those as well as the proponent’s conclusions are formally required; instead, stakeholders’ contributions have become part of a “rather standardized structure” as for the management of the procedures [38], and indeed an average of 31 contributions from stakeholders for each procedure have been collected by their respective coordinators (see Table S1). The formula “actors’ books”, which derives from the French context, has not been used by all coordinators, and the collection, publication and format of such contributions has varied. On the other hand, they deserve attention as spontaneous responses from stakeholders, also compared with meetings’ minutes, compiled by coordinators (often with references to the meetings’ videos accessible online) but not available for all cases.

Once the documentation – which consists of over 300 pdf files – was collected and classified according to procedures and typologies, the paragraphs including the five terms

and their composites listed in Table 1 were copied and pasted into five corresponding text documents. In parallel, stakeholders who submitted contributions including at least one of those terms were classified following a typology adapted from a report presented to Parliament by the National Commission [38]. Occurrences of the same terms within the table of contents of the project's presentation, among the titles of thematic meetings organized within the procedures as well as within coordinators' conclusions were also retrieved. Finally, the synthetic frameworks ("quadro sinottico") included in coordinators' conclusions were compared with the proponents' as for the five terms considered.

**Table 1.** Key heritage- and landscape-related concepts retrieved through DP documents.

<b>protection tutela</b>	(beauty <i>bellezza</i> ) <b>(environment ambiente)</b> (park <i>parco</i> ) <b>protected area aree protetta</b>	(natural <i>naturale</i> )
	<b>landscape paesaggio heritage patrimonio</b> (assets <i>beni</i> ) (territory <i>territorio</i> )	<b>cultural culturale</b>  (UNESCO)

The following section presents contributions to DP procedures in relation to heritage and/or landscape values from three separate groups, characterized by their respective roles (which in turn correspond to different document types, indicated between brackets):

- The projected infrastructure's proponent, usually represented both by executive(s) and technical experts as well as eventual consultants (project presentation; own conclusions).
- The DP coordinator and his/her team (meetings' minutes; own conclusions; synthetic framework).
- Local stakeholders or participants in public meetings and/or through written contributions, generally labeled as "the public" (own contributions; interventions at meetings).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Proponents

With respect to "the public", the first two groups are significantly homogeneous: indeed, few proponents and coordinators are responsible for most projects submitted to DP. The former include in particular RFI and ANAS, respectively, the railway infrastructure manager and the company deputed to the construction and maintenance of Italian motorways and state highways, both being subsidiary of the state-owned holding company FS.

All projects' presentations but one – related to the review of Florence airport's Masterplan – include at least one thematic section dedicated explicitly either to heritage- and landscape-related prescriptions for the infrastructure's planning and/or to the latter's potential impacts. The first aspect is drawn mainly from planning tools, which map prescriptions both from the heritage administration and might foresee additional protection, especially in the case of regions which have adopted a landscape plan [15]. Impacts on heritage and landscapes are then in most cases considered in sections proposing a cost-benefit evaluation, and in some also in a dedicated section or paragraph. Only documents presented by RFI, with one exception, foresee a monitoring of the project's impact on landscape (other fields considered include water, air quality, and biodiversity), through photographic survey both at ground level and from a drone, before and after the project's realization.

Proponents' conclusions too are diverse in their format and contents; indeed DPCM 10 maggio 2018 merely foresees that they should "highlight the will to proceed or not with the [planned] work, as well as any eventual modification to the project and motivations for the dismissal of eventual proposals" (art. 7). Furthermore, the reduction of DP's statutory length for projects included in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan [38] led to the elision of such documents, which in 5 cases are thus substituted by the decision of the local planning authorities' conference ("Conferenza dei servizi"). In those cases, the special heritage authority responsible for NRRP projects may formulate prescriptions, which it has – independently from the DP – only in the case of the doubling of the Roma-Pescara railway.

Only in one of proponents' conclusive documents – that relating to the road connection between A2 highway, state road SS18 and Agropoli – an evaluation of project alternatives with specific reference to (archaeological) heritage is proposed, a conclusion which is at odds with other technical or financial considerations. As in most such documents, more detail on the impacts on heritage and landscape is either postponed to later phases of the projects' design and/or permitting processes, especially EIA, or referred to other authorities. If "improvements" or "optimizations" with respect to heritage and/or landscape are explicit only in two cases, the fact that these conclude the two most recent DP procedures may suggest that such measures are becoming more commonplace. Yet no project has been significantly altered or is being questioned altogether in the proponents' conclusive documents.

On the other hand, 7 of them express general considerations related to heritage and landscapes, often emphasizing the planned infrastructure's limited impact on the same. In the case of the projected redevelopment of state road 16 between Bari and Mola di Bari, ANAS even states that it "would be an opportunity to enhance the millennia of local history by improving accessibility to the outstanding historic and artistic sites of the metropolitan area, and to promote a green regeneration that contributes to cut emissions [...] but also to bet on culture [as] Bari is a lighthouse for culture, science and research". Instead, two of the proponents' conclusions refer neither to heritage nor landscape-related issues, even though some have been tackled during the respective DP and at least quoted in the coordinator's report. This is the case of the project for a new stadium in Milan, which several stakeholders argued should not involve the demolition of the "historic" Meazza arena.

### 3.2. Coordinators

All coordinators have been contracted (through the consulting firms they belong to), as foreseen by legislation when competent public officials cannot be identified. Of the few firms involved, Avventura Urbana and PTSCLAS have overseen 10 and 4 DP, respectively.

Their role as mediators between proponents and the public frames their approach to heritage and landscape issues, which stems both from the proponents' formal perspective and those expressed by stakeholders. Yet only 6 DP have included meetings dedicated explicitly to heritage and/or landscape, either in their theme and title – like, for instance, "Second follow-up meeting: Archeological, environmental and landscape aspects related to the implementation of the [project's] alternative routes" – or through the targeted public – like "The project and sustainability. Technical meeting with environmental and cultural associations". A higher number (11) of coordinators' conclusions and/or synthetic frameworks include a thematic section, box, or item identifying heritage and/or landscape among the respective DP's key topics, mostly in terms of the related project's impacts.

### 3.3. "The Public"

Summing up stakeholders' contributions and/or interventions in meetings dealing with the terms listed in Table 1 (H) and applying the total number of contributions for each DP as a coefficient (T), we obtain an average index of 0,6 (see Table S1). This simple formula can be summarized as follows:

$$\bar{x} = H/T$$

Considering single procedures, the minimum score (0,1) is reached by the new tramway line “SIR 2” in Padua (which consists in the extension of an existing network), while the DP pertaining to the state road 89 “Garganica”, Orte-Falconara railway, state road 16 Bari-Mola di Bari and the review of Florence airport’s Masterplan all reach or exceed 1.

Only stakeholders having expressed views on, or an interest in, heritage and landscape have been considered. Beyond their singular or collective participation, their contributions show diverse education and backgrounds, trades, or fields of specialization. Many of these stakeholders are private citizens, which account for most contributions mobilizing heritage and/or landscape values about state road 16 Bari-Mola di Bari, and for the only one in the case of the new tramway line in Padua. As for collectives, with respect to the informal classification proposed in [38] the most represented typology consists in local civic groups, mobilized in most cases consequently to the DP procedures’ onset and which may be labeled as “grassroots” [19]. Such collectives have ushered heritage- and/or landscape-related topics in 14 out of 17 DP, often in more than one single group. 11 DP have seen representatives of local, and in one case regional, administrations do the same. Almost the same number (10) accounts for national environmental associations or their local or regional sections. Other groups of stakeholders, which have all been represented in 4 or 5 different DP, include businesses, political groups, professional associations as well as consultants employed by other stakeholders. In the cases of the doubling of the Roma-Pescara railway, the new stadium in Milan, the review of Florence airport’s Masterplan and Venice airport’s new masterplan, coalitions have taken the form of collective contributions, undersigned by grassroots collectives and environmental associations but also political groups. Stakeholders’ positions towards the projects are even more complex, ranging from strong opposition to full support, and including many caveats as well as meliorative proposals. As a whole, they challenge any assessment of a shared ‘acceptance’ of single projects [4–9,17–26,29,35–37]. Remarkably, only one submission by a civil servant from the heritage sector (the director of the Museum district of S. Giovanni a Piro, in Cilento) has been retrieved.

Despite such limitations, the analysis of the various and numerous documents produced within DP procedures show that heritage and landscape are common topics across all infrastructural projects considered.

#### 4. Discussion

Beyond the common mobilization of heritage and/or landscape values within DP procedures, the intensity and the features of controversies vary significantly from one case to the other.

Preoccupations with heritage and landscape on “the public’s” part are often associated with the request for further information and/or documentation (including visual simulations) as well as the observation that specific knowledge and competence is lacking among the proponents’ technical teams. Technical and/or expert knowledge, as well as maps, are often produced to discuss projects, and proposals are formulated, such as the establishment of dedicated expert panels (“cabina di regia”) and/or a closer collaboration between the proponent and other public or private actors involved in infrastructural planning and development, or simply the concession of dismissed facilities like train stations. The perceptions and evaluations formulated by the proponent are often contested. In that sense, the analysis of DP procedures further questions the production of knowledge on, as well as the management of, heritage and landscapes – in Italy and beyond [7,9,29,35,39]. The Italian Constitution, and especially the recently revised art. 9, has been often mobilized against projects that are considered “distortions”, “catastrophes” or as “spoiling” or “devastating” in relation to the landscape or another, or several of the terms indicated in Table 1 as well as others, including in particular the environment, residents’ livelihoods, rights or dignity, and tourism.

Such preoccupations are sometimes expressed beyond single sites, in terms of projected infrastructures’ physical separation or the “edge effect” within and between settlements,

ecosystems, and/or protected areas. In some cases, the inclusion in DP projects' presentations of other infrastructures yet to be approved is pointed out as deceitful. In general, many single and collective stakeholders recall the existence of protection measures (listed areas, planning prescriptions), and/or refer to sites or elements that are either not (formally) listed, or differently labeled – e.g., rivers and mountains, or the views that inhabitants have from their homes. Conversely, expropriation and impacts on property and homes nurture discourses which relate not only deprivation of public goods with the alienation of peoples' livelihoods [19], but also heritage with patrimony.

Conflicting perspectives on heritage and landscapes on the one hand, and sustainable development on the other, are common, and diverging assessments of a project's potential impacts, sometimes accusing the proponent of "greenwashing". With respect to renewable energy projects [8,16–18,23–27], one recurrent dimension of such controversies in DP procedures, which may be especially sensitive in Italy and Southern Europe in general, is a given project's impacts on tourism [17,18,26]. Thus, in many DP the predicted impacts on local heritage and landscape have been associated at least by some stakeholders – not only those with specific interests as managers of accommodations or tourist guides – with a potential damage to the attractiveness or 'tourist vocation' of the area. Among incoming fluxes, many proponents include tourism enhancement among the projects' benefits. Instead, the case of the new masterplan for Venice's airport is remarkable for a strong opposition – expressed by the collective petition presented by over 20 associations – to the project precisely because the current tourist flow is already considered unsustainable. Reflections on "the tourism we want" have been raised in many cases, together with the value of "slow", "quality", or "sustainable" tourism. In inner areas like the Marche Apennine, tourism in association with cultural activities is considered by some to be an opportunity to counter depopulation.

DP documents alone do not allow to account for such processes' impact on heritage and landscapes; further procedural but also informal actions can indeed lead to significant revisions of projects themselves. A case in point is that of the Meazza stadium in Milan, which was eventually – several months after the relative DP – listed by the local heritage authority. Whether this decision was prompted by the procedure itself or not, it is remarkable that the proponent's conclusions but also the project itself became irrelevant.

## 5. Conclusions

Whereas renewable energy infrastructure development may be justified by the "incommensurable value" of ecological transition [21], in DP procedures – applied exclusively to transport and logistics infrastructure until now, with the exception of the new stadium project in Milan – the 'public good' pursued through projects appears as controversial as their impacts on heritage and landscapes. Furthermore, the "process of information, participation and public confrontation" experimented through the 17 procedures completed by the end of 2023 anticipate such impacts' formal assessment, and in general much of design implementation and authorization of projects. Yet, it allows for the expression of local communities' and other stakeholders' own evaluations of, and preoccupations about, heritage and landscape. The overall review proposed here highlights how common they are across different typologies of projects and territories. Whilst it may not account for the complexity of related values [2,17,24–26,29], it further emphasizes that "heritage is an actor in the environment, and thus in daily life" [39] (p. 213). In that sense, a closer dialogue between infrastructure planning, heritage and landscape planning, and political ecology appears desirable. The vast number of documents produced during DP procedures, including especially stakeholders' contributions, provides an opportunity in that sense.

The early stage at which DP occurs in the decision-making process has long been considered key for environmental participation [28] as well as for what has been termed as "landscape democracy" [40]. Further inquiry into single procedures, considering following design and authorization phases, would provide a better understanding of heritage and landscape-related values' agency. Indeed, conflicts and coalitions may still arise at both

scales [19–22,36] and, in turn, affect the very evolution of the DP “paradigm” [28], calling for further research in countries where it has been implemented – namely Canada, France and Italy. Focusing on the latter, learning from DP may contribute to facilitate decision-making processes in the field of renewable energy development [31], even though DP has never applied to it yet.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/su16146218/s1>, Table S1. Appearances of the concepts listed in Table 1 within stakeholders’ contributions and meetings’ minutes and frequency indicators.

**Funding:** Assegno di ricerca MIUR\_DIP ECCELLENZA ‘La partecipazione ambientale nel ‘Belpaese’: patrimonio culturale e paesaggio nelle procedure di dibattito pubblico’, responsabili scientifici M. Vanore, L. Fregolent, F. Musco, decreto DdDCP n. 72052 del 29/11/22.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** By 22 February 2024, almost all documents consulted were available on the CNDP website: URL <https://www.mit.gov.it/documentazione/cndp-commissione-nazionale-dibattito-pubblico> (accessed on 19 March 2024). The remaining ones have been retrieved on DP procedures’ dedicated websites. All have been downloaded by the author and are at anyone’s disposal upon request at [rwacogne@iuav.it](mailto:rwacogne@iuav.it).

**Acknowledgments:** The author thanks Margherita Vanore, Laura Fregolent and Francesco Musco for their advice and support, as well as all colleagues and stakeholders who have shared their experience and knowledge on “dibattito pubblico” procedure.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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