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Common Goods from a Landscape Perspective



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How Can Bottom-Up, Collaborative Practices Innovate Landscape Management and Governance Processes at the Local Level? Some Empirical Evidences and a Case Study from Italy

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Abstract: Landscape, as a common good, needs different forms of intervention and management, calling for social responsibility interplaying with policy support and expertise advocacy. This paper aims to discuss collective action approaches for agro-environmental and landscape management, within contexts of intensifying rural-urban interaction. It explores the enhancing role of civic society, community mobilisation and organisation in promoting innovative initiatives. They seem to be able to provide (new) common goods and services (such as landscape/environmental preservation) but also to enrich landscape practices of social and ethical implications, as offering immaterial and relational goods, improving identity and community building and creating civic welfare spaces.

The focus will be put on the emerging grassroots practices of land or landscape stewardship, read on two interpretative levels: 1) as opportunities to redefine some collective action frames in order to use, (re)produce and manage common goods in collaborative, participated and proactive way; 2) as laboratories for finding alternative patterns for local governance, moving out of the classic public-private dichotomy, towards a collective perspective.

Keywords: collective action, collaborative management, social responsibility, landscape stewardship, bottom-up practices

Introduction

Endorsing a collective and ethical (more than an aesthetic) viewpoint on landscape brings to stress the strategical importance of social action, interacting with environmental trans-

formations. According to the constructivist approach, understanding landscape as a social ongoing construction implies a shift of attention from the shape to the action that produces the shape. Community engagement, within a collective decision-making context, often supplies more effective integrative devices for common goods management at local level, especially from a landscape perspective. At the same time, its activation seems to offer new opportunities for different sense-making and organisational processes, leading the transition to more sustainable local development paths.

A rich and non-exhaustively explored contribution in this sense comes from innovative rural practices, increasingly contaminated with urban culture.

From grass roots rural innovations to caring practices: stewardship as a possible framework for dealing with common goods in a landscape perspective

In response to a multiverse of individual needs and social demands, in the last decades emerged a constellation of grassroots innovations, which the literature mainly refers to 'repeasantisation' and neo-ruralism dynamics, or to civic agriculture and alternative food networks building.

Multifunctionality in agriculture had already consolidated the consideration and valorisation of non-commodity outputs of farming, introducing new market/policy-based instruments for common goods and services co-production (not only offering sectoral replacement opportunities, but also vehiculating social and territorial responsibility).

This approach has been progressively driven through other social action fields, contributing to the elaboration of new frameworks for collective agro-environmental and landscape management. Indeed, keeping by-products or explicit caring attitudes are being gradually enacted into grassroots agro-food and leisure

practices. Connecting everyday life dimension and individual behaviours with territorial issues, they trace alternative land use and management patterns. By promoting environmental and landscape quality together with well-being and social inclusion, many different experiences stand for accountability in a collaborative way: farmer's markets, procurement schemes, nested markets, social farming, community supported agriculture, urban agriculture and community gardens, agro-environmental agreements, peri-urban parks, land trusts.

With different degrees of organisational complexity, they produce similar socio-technical, socio-economical, and socio-institutional novelties, overall forming an underestimated niche of innovation.

Among the most remarkable caring practices, it is necessary to highlight land stewardship: a specific strategy of environmental and cultural landscapes preservation, based on sustainable practices, acting as a voluntary mechanism in unison with regulatory tools, and in combination with other policy areas (such as agriculture, rural development and social cohesion). It directly involves landowners and users, together with public administrations, enterprises and organised civil society, in order to achieve common goals.

Stewardship represents a decentred and collaborative meta-governance approach based on responsible use, management and protection of resources, to be implemented through integrated and multilevel actions, calling for social accountability. Citizens engagement in decision-making and implementation processes tends to improve the quality of the policies, and also to help moving towards more deliberative and participatory democratic perspectives, sometimes offering alternative patterns for the local governance.

This approach comes across being versatile and adaptable, and its commitment and effectiveness degree varies in relation to the local and practical initiatives being enacted.

A case study from Italy: the bottom-up stewardship project "Adopt a terrace in the Brenta River Valley"

Turning now to more empirical aspects, we'd like to point out some evidences from the case study of the bottom-up project "Adopt a terrace in the Brenta Valley". Born in 2010, it regards the little municipality of Valstagna (VI), located in the highlands of the Veneto Region (northeast Italy). The project aims to contrast the heavy degradation process of the neglected terraced lands of the Brenta River Valley, whose mountain slopes are characterised by 240 km of dry stone walls (traditionally called "*masiere*"), supporting little level plots of land. The impressive terraced systems represent a very scenic landscape, but above all a collective, meaningful historical heritage, embodying the symbol of the excellent balance gained between the anthropic and the natural realm.

The terraces were built since the 17th century, at first as a basic answer to the desperate cultivable soil's scarcity on the narrow valley bottom, then evolving into the specific outcome of an emerging socio-economical local organisation: they were able to establish complex and rich relationships, on which the whole valley life was based. Especially due to the extensive tobacco growing, they reached their maximum extension and majesty during the 19th century, becoming known as "the magnificent terraced landscape". Of course, the maintenance of such delicate artefacts required huge, continuous and diffused land-care practices. This necessity prompted the development of specific skills and local expertises, shared by the valley's inhabitants or carried by specialised workers; besides, it encouraged the raising of a collaborative and mutual social model, highly capable to run the local governance.

However, after the Second World War, the great modernisation's consequences and the tobacco growing breakdown led to a steady decline of the terrace-based model of territo-



Fig. 1 Terraces in the Valstagna area, photographed by Guido Medici (2005)

rial use and management. So, it rapidly ended up to collapse, turning this land into the current “abandoned landscape”. During the last 50 decades, indeed, the combining processes of human neglect and of a runaway natural reforestation have been producing a serious degradation of the terraces, deprived of the fundamental care. Nowadays, only a few terraces are still actively cultivated or managed, whereas over the 50% of them are completely abandoned and overgrown, and nearly the 60% of the dry stone walls are in ruin. Because of this, important losses occurred, both on the cultural and on the environmental point of view: on the one hand, the compromising of landscape recognisability and territorial identity; on the other hand, the compromising of biodiversity, of ecological functionalities, of water drainage, of slopes stability and of bottom valley security.

After a long-running institutional inattention and planning inability to contrast the degradation process, the project “Adopt a terrace in the Brenta River Valley” is trying to experiment a social rescue of the threatened heritage, by reintroducing grassroots caring practices in a landscape perspective. In particular, it counts on the active contribute of new users in taking care of the abandoned or maintenance-lacked terraces (especially through horticultural uses and leisure activities), thanks to a particular “adoption” procedure. Given the owners agreement, everybody is also enabled to access and manage the terraced fields, complying with some basic rules of “good run”. The initiative is primarily oriented towards the nearby urban dwellers, who increasingly manifest an interest in accessing rural resources and spaces, but also carry a new perception of the terraced landscape as a collective heritage, rehabilitating some values from which the valley inhabitants had moved away.

The idea of adopting terraces was conceived within a research project of the University of Padua (conducted by the PhD Luca Lodatti and the professor Mauro Varotto), in collaboration with the Municipality of Valstagna and the local section of the Italian Alpine Club. It follows a decade of studies and territorial animation activities, which had been very important to address the public attention and perception about the valley context, its resources and values: new local and external actors entered the arena, territorial issues were reframed, and different forms of intervention were discussed. The “Adopt a terrace” initiative has also been able to reap the benefits of the previous re-discovery path, continuing walking through its trail; nevertheless, it fundamentally springs from the observation of some informal rapprochement and reappropriation practices, which were exploring new ways to enjoy the terraced mountain slopes as usable spaces in contemporary life. In particular, the inspiring spark has come from some successful spon-

taneous adoption experiences of abandoned, municipality-owned plots, occurred since 2009. So, the purpose of the project was to extend those isolated cases into a general, reproducible approach, within a larger territorial requalification project, valorising the grassroots contribution to the management of common goods - such as land, environmental and cultural heritage - in a landscape perspective. A remarkable merit of the project can also be seen in its capacity of recognising unexpressed forms of social projectuality and reshaping them into a concrete territorial policy device. In a short time, the initiative has met with a certain success, revealing good achievements in landscape requalification through collective action, and also showing the emulative power of good practices.

The organisational and juridical subject that promotes and manages the project is its own Committee, funded in August 2010. It both represents the adoptive members' association, and the 'Trust' whom the owners give the custody of their fields. Individuating the neglected fields, intermediating between the owners and the other privates, supporting the terraces rescue with training, counselling and collective activities, and monitoring the members' job, the Committee acts as a 'Custody entity'. At the same time, it allows interplaying on a horizontal level an articulated map of actors, including: the nearby urban dwellers, the local community, public actors and administrations, experts and university.

Two different adoption forms have been provided: direct or long-range. Contrary to the initial expectations, the former one is having the biggest success. The legal instrument of the direct adoption is a free of charge leasing agreement (with a last of 5 years, renewable), which guarantee the owners' property. Beside, a basic code permits to harness and regulate the forms of use and management of the adopted fields, making them converge on landscape and environmental quality goals: in this sense, it consti-

tutes an essential element of the terraces rescue project.

During the first 3 years of activity, more than 100 terraces - covering a total amount of over 4 ha - has been recovered by more than 90 "fosters". No particular dimensional, typological, structural, altitudinal or positional characteristic emerges as a preferential adoption requisite. Bad conditions, fields and water access difficulties don't seem to discourage the adoption practice: the custody of every available terrace has been given, and now the adoption demand overtakes the plots availability. Most of the "fosters" come from the nearby lowlands cities; smaller percentages come from the valley itself, but also from the provincial areas of Vicenza, Venice and Padua (up to 100 km off). Overall the distances, the time and travel costs, and the hard effort to run a terraced field, seem to place adoption behaviours totally at odds with any economical rationality.

Thus, the willingness to contribute to landscape preservation and to territorial quality improvement appears to be a very strong motivational factor among the "fosters". Although self-reliance in food production, horticultural leisure, and the opportunity of a direct relationship with nature are declared as the main adoption reasons, a more wide meanings' background is almost entirely shared by the participants: environmental sensibility, landscape values awareness, and orientation to common goods preservation without depletion.

The bottom-up, non-institutionalised practice of terraces adoption is producing significant effects on environment and landscape quality. Especially due to the collective decisional, organisational and working moments, they are also facilitating innovative forms of interaction and exchange between actors, which enhance relational resources, contextual expertise acquisition, social capacitation and social cohesion, among a newborn community of practice.

Conclusion

In summary, "Adopt a terrace in the Brenta River Valley" represents a winning example of common goods collective access and management without appropriation, implemented through grassroots, collaborative land-caring practices. Considering the complexity of the participants' motivational sphere and the variety of the generated effects, this experience may be fully framed as an innovative landscape practice. Moreover, it is totally involved in the reframing of broader territorial issues, such as: the relationship between urban and rural worlds; the construction of an integrative, civic welfare space based on the proximity agriculture's outcomes; social awareness and participation on environmental and landscape matters.

Although it represents a small experience on a very local scale, it suggests interesting openings to different conceptual and operational frameworks for collective action. Its peculiarity is to operate multiple shifts of focuses in the territorial intervention's *ratio*: from normative regulation to proactive social action; from landowners and properties concerns to user-oriented and access rights remarks; from functionalistic and productivity-based values to ethical, shared social visions, through whose lens reframing the common resources management strategies. In this case, the terraced landscape governance strategy operates in a collective perspective, in which the 'private' and the 'public', the 'individual' and the 'collective', the 'personal profits' and the 'social interests' are continuously redefined.

The analogies with similar experiences, such as the international ones of Land Stewardship, seem to reveal a little but growing drift of increasing civic engagement in providing complex public goods and services, calling for social responsibility in decision-making and implementation processes. In particular, community action and bottom-up collaborative practices

can innovate both landscape management and governance processes at local level, towards more sustainable, ethical and social-resilient scenarios.

The harnessing and harvesting role of policy support and of expertise advocacy still remains irrevocable.

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