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# WHEN GOVERNANCE REALLY MATTERS: STRATEGISING IN RURAL REMOTE AREAS

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The new governance paradigm has been assumed as an adequate way of doing things that really can make a difference for the future of places and communities. In the one hand, through the opening-up of decision-making processes to the civil society and by the search for new collaborative forms of interaction between public and private sectors. In the other hand, hierarchical styles of territorial coordination have been complemented with more bottom-up approaches, and with new and variable configurations of multilevel, horizontal and polycentric networks of governance.

Meanwhile, the re-emergence of strategic spatial planning, in the last two decades, which is generally associated to the establishment of collaborative planning practices, intensified the debate around two central topics: how to reduce uncertainty regarding the future, and how to use the results of participation processes in the thinking-up of that future. At same time, the ongoing emphasis on the importance of civic participation, has been sometimes perceived as an end in itself, and thus as a bottleneck on the decision-making processes.  In effect, the territorial planning literature is reviving the importance of public participation and of collaborative processes, alongside with a strong concern with their efficacy in terms of planning results. Overcoming a certain sense of "being stuck on the process" has become a major concern, revolving around questions such as process capture and arbitrariness of results.

Based on a recent strategic spatial planning initiative, in a remote northeast region of Portugal, this paper discusses how the adopted perspective on territorial governance did make a difference, as well as how structuring the public participation process and the collaborative work with stakeholders can improve the results of territorial planning. The involvement in the coordination of the Strategic Action Plan of the Agency of Development of the Schist Villages (ADXTUR), for the 2014-2020 programming period, was an opportunity to reflect on the above outlined questions, and to experiment new methodologies of planning collaborative work.

The adopted approach in this strategic planning initiative concerns above all the way the results of planning participation can be linked to decisions and trigger the action. Thus, the particular requirements of collective strategic design will be debated, as dealing with uncertainty intensifies the problem of the effectiveness of agents' involvement in decision-making processes. The implementation of a software tool to overcome the difficulties of getting a consensus on action priorities simply based on argumentative work is at the heart of this discussion. This debate is also on the way priorities were decided and how this make a difference on devising future action, as well as the advantages and shortcomings of the implemented solution.

After presenting the results, the main findings concern:

i)      The way the involvement of the stakeholders in the early stages of the design of the Action Plan can should be stressed, and that an excessive separation of the analytical and participatory processes can lead to an increased involvement of professionals in the identification of the problem, the construction of alternatives or the selection of the evaluation criteria, leaving participants to only choose among predetermined alternatives.

ii)     The advantages of the adopted decision making process, namely: i) the importance of participation becomes evident to the participants, since the exercise's outcome have a direct impact on their actions in the future; ii) the translation of the associates' dispersed knowledge and the planning professionals' expertise into information that is relevant for those who participate; iii) the combination of the participants' different and conflicting interests in the design of one action plan, based on the democratic participation of the associates, avoiding the capture of the process.

iii) The whole decision making process is marked by the combination of moments for argumentation in different stages of the process. This option allows, on the one hand, to recognize and to explain the interests of the participants and to understand the criteria that justify the design of different courses of action. On the other hand, it encourages overcoming conflicts of interest and enhances the convergence of opinions, allowing individual votes to be compared with the global results in the following stages.

iv) The decision making is tied to extreme scenarios, stimulating the reflection on the position of the ADXTUR in a context of uncertainty, on the medium and long term impact of the actions to be implemented, and on the robustness or contingency of these actions according to the evolution of exogenous variables framed by the two scenarios.

v) The debate on elements related with the design of the software tool. What is at stake is the development of systematic procedures able to cope with the complexity of decision making processes.

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