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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 223 (2016) 456 – 461

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

2nd International Symposium "NEW METROPOLITAN PERSPECTIVES" - Strategic planning, spatial planning, economic programs and decision support tools, through the implementation of Horizon/Europe2020. ISTH2020, Reggio Calabria (Italy), 18-20 May 2016

Polycentric development policies: a reflection on the Italian “National Strategy for Inner Areas”

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Abstract

The concept of polycentric development has attracted much attention of both scholars and policy-makers. In recent years, there has been growing acknowledgment of the relevance of the topic in geography and regional and urban studies. The debate has gained considerable momentum in 1999 due to the ESDP, which identified polycentrism as a key issue. From a spatial planning perspective, but also from an academic one, the more intriguing question is whether the polycentric model can offer new insights into how to trigger regional/local development, by investigating some themes which are directly related to it: the need to overcome the urban-rural dichotomy in policy and the best scale for governing inter-urban spaces.

This paper, after briefly reviewing the international literature and highlighting the findings of the academic community and various organization positions and interventions on it, presents the rationale for an examination of the Italian “National Strategy for Inner Areas” (SNAI) according to the more widely accepted conceptual and practical categories. Starting from an analytical reading of the planning document, it aims at assessing how much of the knowledge produced so far is indeed embedded within it and how these issues are addressed by it, ultimately providing some hints of the hindrances and opportunities the implementation of such a strategy entails. As final remarks, it identifies key issues that need to be dealt with when reflecting on SNAI within the framework of the debate on polycentricity and which are likely to open up new, much intriguing research avenues.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of ISTH2020

Keywords: Polycentric development; Rural-urban partnerships; Peripheral/Inner Areas.

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1. Introduction

The concept of polycentric development has been a key debated issue in both the academic and the policy-makers community, in its analytical as well as operational meaning. It is indeed used to describe the structural (urban) system of many European regional spaces and it seems there is universal agreement that polycentrism is an essential implementing tool for reaching what is being described as “territorial cohesion” (Salone, 2005; Faludi, 2005). In recent years, there has been growing acknowledgment of the relevance of this topic in the academic literature on economics, geography, urban studies and regional planning, and also a gradual change in the policy orientation towards that direction. The debate on it has gained considerable momentum due to the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (CEC, 1999), published in 1999, strongly influencing the way of thinking about spatial planning across Europe. The argument is that polycentric development is likely to make centres – which are linked in networks and complement each other – functionally produce a greater critical mass than by operating in isolation, and so increase their overall competitiveness. This would be possible by combining the efforts of smaller urban centres and by fostering more co-operative urban-rural relations (after a long tradition which saw “rural” and “urban” as opposites, with little or no consideration of the interrelations between the two). This is supposed to favor a distribution of economic and/or economically relevant functions over the urban system in such a way that a multitude of urban centres rather than one or two gains significance (Meijers, *et al.*, 2005) as nodes, thus leading to territorial balance. Polycentricity, being a rather fuzzy concept (Meijers, *et al.*, 2007) means different things when applied to different spatial scales (Davoudi, 2003). The inter-urban one, more particularly, immediately recalls the conceptual and practical category of “Polycentric Urban Region” (Parr, 2004) – a region having two or more separate though well connected cities, with no one single dominant centre, increasingly considered as the more “appropriate” scale for the implementation of development policies also by urban elites. Polycentricity and city-region, in turns, evokes the issue of rural-urban interactions, which is still largely ignored in the literature on the topic (Harrison & Heley, 2015). Urban and rural areas have for a long time been treated as separate spaces from an administrative point of view and consequently separate, not integrated policies have been developed (Zonneveld, & Stead, 2007). The ESDP instead proposed a co-operation between the two (Bengs, & Zonneveld, 2002), broadening the scale and the scope of the policies addressing them, adopting a regional approach (Hague & Kirk, 2003). The concept of polycentric urban region – or more generally polycentrism – is suitable for theoretically and empirically investigating what seems to have become one of the defining characteristics of the urban network: the existence of multiple centres in one area (Kloosterman, & Musterd, 2001). The Italian “National Strategy for Inner Areas” (SNAI) provides an intriguing starting point for broader reflection on crucial topics related to it, such as the appropriate scale for a polycentric development, the enhancement of rural-urban interactions in the context of peripheral areas, and the related governance issues. Through the case study of SNAI, drawing on the examination of official documents and field observation in some of the pilot areas (Basilicata and Puglia), this paper provides a lens on to the pursuing of polycentric development in Italy. Investigating motives for invoking it, the ways of conceptualizing and of implementing it in practice, the paper goes on to explore the challenges surrounding the strategy and to further identify some controversial points which are worth being discussed. Connecting this to the emerging debates around polycentric development strategies, it concludes by suggesting some key questions arising from this preliminary, ongoing analysis. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly reviews the international literature on these themes and the main findings of the academic community and various organizations. Section 3 presents the rationale for an examination of the Italian strategy according to the above-mentioned theoretical and operational categories, providing some hints of the hindrances and opportunities that implementation of such a strategy entails. Section 4 concludes, by identifying key issues which would be worth dealing with in order to enrich the existing debate.

2. Polycentric development: a call for policies from Europe and for reflection from a lively academic debate.

The ESDP has coined specific normative notions such as rural-urban partnerships – if well managed, supposed to help improving services provision, as well as increasing growth opportunities and quality of life for people (See also OECD Report, 2013) – and polycentric development – claimed to stimulate economic growth, be more environmentally sustainable and support territorial “coherence” – that have been since then embedded into various

policy documents at all scales in many EU countries. In continuation of the new approach launched by the European Commission, polycentric development was reiterated as a paramount priority in the EU Territorial Agenda 2020. It seems that EU embraced this assumption that polycentric development is a vital stepping-stone towards territorial cohesion. In the new EU Cohesion Policy 2014-2020 there is no explicit reference to polycentric development, though, in line with what was stated in the Lisbon Treaty, special attention is to be given to the outermost regions and sparsely populated areas, and to an integration of policies within urban areas, evoking the rural-urban cooperation issue. Therefore, the assumptions underlying the concept, though it is not clearly mentioned, are still there and did not seem to have lost political momentum. In the academic literature, too, the debate around these topics has been relentless since the last decade or more. City-region, Polycentric Urban Region, and polycentric development have become the focus of several interesting collections of studies. One of the first one, the year before the ESDP, was the special issue of *European Planning Studies* in 1998, with a policy concern about new forms of governance for a more integrated, interconnected urban system (interpreted as a network of city networks) and about the issue of scale. The scale of governance has always been a main concern of both policy makers and scholars. Concepts like city/metropolitan region, PUR and the practical ones of FURs/As are cases in point and reveal the need for a broader, systemic interpretation of place, including semi-urban, rural areas, in the belief that their development cannot unfold without a relevant node, the city. Some years later, in 2001, *Urban Studies* (38, 4) collected a series of papers offering a number of concrete interpretations of the concept of polycentricity, with a special emphasis on interurban patterns. 2005 was a turning point in the knowledge production on the theme. Three special issues were published on *Built Environment*, *European Planning Studies* and *Town Planning Review*. This extraordinary interest could have been also favored by the ESPON call on the role of urban areas as nodes in a polycentric development and by the related final Report (Nordregio, 2005), whose focus is the European scale and whose perspective is a purely top-down one. In presenting the analysis of the Czech urban system, within another important special issue of *Urban Research & Practice*, Šýkora and Muliček (2009) found a major discrepancy between local results and the ones presented in the ESPON 1.1.1 Report. They argue that any conceptualization and delimitation of FUAs must reflect their formation on the micro-scale and detect the smallest complex, organic territorial units where the daily life of population is organized, which is often neglected when a top-down approach is applied, leading to incomplete representations of reality likely to misinform territorial policies. What emerges from this rich literature, and which is relevant for the purposes of this study, is first of all the acknowledgement that the concept and policy instrument of city-region reveals a new sensitivity towards rural-urban interactions, though it is strongly unbalanced in favour of the urban counterpart. Secondly, we gain an overview on the objectives of national polycentric development policies and on the various ways they were pursued in practice. Some preliminary conclusions (where they existed, polycentric policies were often only in a first stage) by Waterhout *et al.* (2005) revealed how polycentricity proved to be very weak in terms of its implementation, showing that a successful application depends on horizontal co-ordination between spending departments and on vertical co-ordination between public actors at different administrative levels. Stimulating these types of co-operation is supposed to be best achievable if actors at both national and sub-national level act as facilitators (as it is supposed to be in SNAI). An improvement in governance capacity at lower levels of government could be supported by bottom-up instruments, such as contracts or covenants with central government, as was the case in countries like France, Germany and Switzerland and now Italy. Some first distortive consequences linked to city regions are highlighted by Herrschel (2009), too, who claims that being spaces subdivided into “corridors of connectivity” and city-regional “nodes”, then into bundles of separate linear territories instead of contiguous economic territories, they leave “in between” less well connected, marginalized spaces and actors aside, assuming they benefit from secondary “trickle-down” effects. According to him, the result is “a perforation of territory by nodes, acting as centres of policymaking and decision-making, which are connected by thin, even invisible relationships, leaving the unconnected spaces ‘in between’ with no obvious access to policymaking and communication networks” (Ivi: 241). Herrschel also stresses the case of urban-rural connectivity, which would be based on complimentary objectives; therefore, the recognition of rural actors’ ones are deemed of little interest or benefit (as well as their agendas) to the goals of the key policy-makers who are part of, and shape, the dominant decision-making network. The failure of this kind of city-first approach in addressing these tendencies was well pointed out by Harrison and Heley (2015) in their very recent work on the English case, where a decade of city-regionalism has led to a paralysis of policymaking, and to the lack of that

type of innovative framework for managing urban-rural interactions necessary to consider whether city-regionalism, as a policy strategy, can actually produce development in and beyond the city. In essence, what is contested is not the paradigm of city-regionalism per se, but its city-centric approach, arguing that there is “an alternative conception of city regions which does not presume such a dominant role for the city” (Coombes, 2014: 2429), that is a “region-first” perspective. By the same token, the same holds for polycentric policies intended to strengthen the competitiveness of urban nodes as opposed to those aiming at cohesion and territorial balance which are in principle supposed to produce a more egalitarian form of regional development. A recent special issue on Urban Studies in 2014 (51, 11), mainly concerning the dilemma of an equilibrium point in rural and urban governance, shows the great interest the topic keeps on attracting. The next paragraph presents general findings on the objectives, the instrumental equipment and working practices of SNAI, underlying, in light of the above debate, its main potential attainments and pitfalls.

3. Governing without a “node”: the case of the Italian “National Strategy for Inner Areas”.

In 2012 the Italian Minister for Economic Development launched the “National Strategy for Inner Areas” (SNAI). The latter are areas located at a considerable distance from urban hubs providing essential services (namely education, health and transport), which have undergone a process of marginalisation and de-anthropisation since the ‘50s. Its aim is to improve populations’ wellbeing, which should lead to an inversion of the current negative demographic trend. By means of an initial screening of the national territory, 20 areas have been selected to enter the pilot phase. The novelty lies in that its objective is twofold: *i*) improving essential services (considered as a prerequisite for the second goal) and *ii*) triggering local development processes. SNAI’s assumption is the acknowledgment of the morphological polycentrism of the country (Dematteis, 1999), with an urban system made up of medium-sized and small cities on the one hand, and small villages and mountain settlements on the other hand. The latter are a relevant concern, as Maier (2009: 326) highlights: “the most pressing issues with respect to sustainable polycentric development are to be found in areas with two extremes: suburbanization hinterlands of major cities and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, remote rural peripheries”. Relying on the matter of fact that in Italy polycentrism “just needs to be maintained” (SNAI, 2012: 42), SNAI takes a functional approach to it (Nordregio, 2005), clearly relying on the EU policy orientation (See, *Ivi*: 9). It is a very interesting case in point because it is the first strategy that explicitly aims at sustaining polycentricity in Italy. Before, this focus came about in a rather implicit way through various sector policies – and could be inferred by the importance given to integration among policies, inter-sector actions, inter-institutional cooperation (Governa, & Salone, 2005) – that, though embedding the polycentric development discourse, individually take the development of middle-sized cities as their starting point (Salone, 2005; Meijers, *et al.*, 2005). This study starts where Governa and Salone (2005) chronologically stops, developing a theoretical reflection on SNAI’s official documents. The novelty of this policy project lies in some critical innovations on both contents and methods. Firstly, its attention to local development preconditions and the awareness that these must be guaranteed by national interventions. Secondly, its experimental and selective approach: it will initially be carried out in a limited number of pilot areas, chosen by regions according to the mapping produced by the central government. This marks a significant departure from the past, since the follow-up will be influenced by the outcomes of this initial phase, once properly assessed. Finally, what characterizes SNAI is the marked distinction between these two levels of intervention: its overall success rests on the synergic intersection of the effects produced by both. A preliminary critical assessment raises three major themes, one logically including the previous one and framing it within a broader reasoning: the definition of the “node”/“centre”; rural-urban partnerships; and the scale of governance. A series of actions aiming at creating new centralities are envisaged in SNAI, ultimately enhancing the service networks on a polycentric base. After the partition of the national territory according to the accessibility criteria selected by central government – i.e. the number of minutes taken to get to the nearest hub – a “service provision centre” was identified as a municipality or group of neighbouring municipalities simultaneously providing: a full offer of secondary schools, at least one emergency care hospital and a railway station (see SNAI, footnote 4; 5). Providing that polycentricity has different interpretations and levels on which it can be pursued, it is therefore widely accepted that “centres are assumed to be urban in character” (Parr, 2004: 232). Though overcoming the antinomy hierarchy/polycentrism, one can not ignore that “some hierarchical elements can be not only inescapable, but also desirable in order to exploit critical mass effects and to give rise to diffusion processes in regions where the spatial system is weak and dominated by one or few urban centres” (Governa, &

Salone: 265), as is the case for inner areas. In a sense, at least theoretically, SNAI's choice of strengthening a network of small villages with limited "central place" functions could be interpreted as a counterfactual experiment opposite to that city-first approach which was deemed to be a failure (Harrison, & Heley, 2015), where the city dominates its surroundings in term of policy choices and where the rural-urban interaction is strongly unbalanced in favour of the latter. Among the first pilot areas (2015), excluding Val Simeto in Sicily (the only one with 2 big centres with 24,000 and 35,500 inhabitants), the mean of the population size of all remaining municipalities is around 1,800. They mostly are very small local systems with 13,600 (Piedmont), 12,100 (Basilicata) and 10,500 (Sardinia) total inhabitants split into respectively 18, 8 and 20 municipalities (See "Selezione aree progetto" on www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/it/arint/). Following Dematteis' (2009) reflections on the remote Alpine areas and his contention that the penetration of specialized high-value-added urban-metropolitan functions into the Alps is a prime condition for their future development, we take note that, within SNAI, cities – which, according to the author, are to be considered as the main actors in a form of development based on local resources – are excluded. This raises a first, intriguing question: can periphery be governed without an urban "node", that is a focal centre? This entails another key issue connected to polycentrism: the one of rural-urban co-operation, also a very focus in ESDP and still in the more recent OECD Report (2013). Excluding even small cities from the local systems "built" within SNAI, a risk may be envisaged: the one of unbalancing the mutual partnership completely towards rural/mountainous areas or even totally overlooking the potential virtuous interactions stemming from a shared governance. Such discussion is part of a much broader reflection that could be developed around the strategic policy options pointed out by the Italian government in the Partnership Agreement with the European Commission on how to use funding from Cohesion Policy 2014-2020, which, taken together, do not seem to strategically integrate to promote an effective implementation of polycentricity. The issue of a rural-urban co-operation seems in fact to be rather ignored within the policy instruments specifically addressing cities, i.e. "NOP Metro" and the interventions for medium-sized cities or minor centres within the regional ROPs. This comes from the widespread emphasis on cities as economic nodes, reinforcing the view of networks stretching through space, with all else being "in between" and "little concern about the connectivity of those 'in-between spaces', and thus, their likely economic opportunities" (Herrschel, 2009: 241), presuming they may simply benefit from "trickle-down" effects. Cities and inner areas are targeted by separate policies, thus keeping on being dealt with as separate spaces from a strategic point of view, missing the chance for a partnership for win-win solutions, this inevitably affecting the quality, potential and effectiveness of their alliances. The question here is: how "rural" and "urban" can better mutually interact if their relationships are not governed within the framework of a more or less formal partnership which substantiates in a common agenda? A still more complex, highly debated theme opens up from these two issues: the scale of governance. SNAI intends to overcome the spatial mismatch between functional ties and the administrative boundaries of municipalities, fostering cooperation among them: they are asked to join together in a formal entity ("Unione dei comuni"). The topic there is one of conceptualizing the relation between the two levels of the strategy (ensuring the access to basic services and triggering local development), which may have different scalar expressions. Though a full assessment is prevented being the strategy at its early stage of implementation (still no pilot area signed the Partnership Agreement on the final strategy – see "Stato di attuazione" on [//www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/it/arint/](http://www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/it/arint/)), we glimpse a criticality in the overlapping of catchment areas of service provision centres (with no consideration for upper-level functions) with "place" as meant in place-based policies as the proper scale for pursuing self-centred local development. It seems SNAI takes for granted these two scales exactly correspond. Just like theoretically ensuring pre-requisites for endogenous development does not necessarily imply it unfolds by default, the scale for planning a coherent development project, especially in the case of marginal, weak areas, may be larger than the gravitation area for citizenship services so as to include actors, flows, dynamics unrolling within other networks ("urban" ones, for instance). The question arising there is then: is the scale for ensuring the access to essential services the same as the one for planning self-centred local development projects?

4. Conclusion

The Italian version of polycentric development strategies relies on some well-accepted categories that need to be carefully taken into consideration when analyzing a networked urban system. SNAI is focused on an increased

centrality of the role of local actors, mediated by the regional and national level in a multi-governance model, simultaneously providing essential services and fostering local development. A first provisional, critical remark we made based on planning documents is about the taken for granted scale overlapping for pursuing the two different, though in a complex way interrelated, objectives. Its effectiveness implies much debated issues, such as the ones of scale/borders, organizing capacity, leadership and governance structures, inter-municipal cooperation and coordination at local, regional and national level, which would be worth exploring. Following the strategy in its implementation, we will be able to shed light on its impact on the functional pattern leading to balanced access to services and endogenous development and to produce knowledge from a longitudinal, diachronic perspective.

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