

Spreading EU Innovation into Mainstream Urban Regeneration Policy: a Neighbourhood Initiative in Southern Italy

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at highlighting changes in practice of neighbourhood regeneration initiatives in the Italian Mezzogiorno. It focuses on a specific neighbourhood regeneration policy initiative (Programma Integrato di Riqualificazione delle Periferie – Peripheral Neighbourhood Regeneration Integrated Programme – PIRP), targeting social housing neighbourhoods, promoted and funded by the Apulia region in 2006. The PIRP can be considered as an attempt to ‘translate’ the ‘innovation’ introduced (mainly) by EU within the urban policy instruments in Italy during the 1990s in the local neighbourhood initiatives ‘language’.

Area-based urban policy initiatives promoted and/or funded by EU Structural Funds have been acknowledged to have played an important role within the evolution of urban policy initiatives in Italy, which has been going on since the early 1990s. The latter involved a shift from a top-down and sector approach mainly based on physical interventions towards bottom-up and integrated initiatives based on the involvement of public, private and voluntary sectors. However, assuming a bottom-up and local perspective it is possible to highlight that beyond the ‘formal’ changes in policy instruments, it is not clear what kind of changes have been going on within local level practice. In other words, it is not clear if the ‘formal’ changes in the urban policy instruments imply concrete changes in the modes of tackling the complex problems of deprived neighbourhoods. Moreover, many doubts can be raised concerning the durability of these ‘new’ initiatives and their ability to influence local development paths.

In particular, in the Apulia region some experiences of neighbourhood initiative promoted and funded by EU were successful for some aspects. But this ‘success’ was limited to specific experiences (and the people involved in them), while the urban policy arenas were not opened to the ‘new’ bottom-up and integrated approach: many experiences of ‘mainstreaming’ often failed both within programmes included in the mainstream of EU Structural Funds and within national programmes.

In the Apulia region, these processes of ‘innovation’ have become particularly interesting to observe since 2005 when a new left regional government, willing to break strongly with the past government policy approach, was elected. This coincided with a ‘season’ of deep innovations introduced also by the regional level in the neighbourhood initiatives. The latter aimed at grasping the specific problems of

urban deprived areas in this region of the Italian Mezzogiorno, where neighbourhood regeneration is deeply linked to interventions in the social housing stock.

Key Words: EU, innovation, neighbourhood regeneration