

Local Groups: Voice, Conflict, Knowledge Forms

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ABSTRACT

European cities are traditionally characterised by multi-faceted forms of community activism; among those, one widely diffused example are local groups and other organisations voicing their points of view about a number of urban issues, like the quality of local services, the quality of public spaces and the environment, urban safety or protesting against urban renewal and transformation projects. Of course the situation is highly differentiated across Europe, due to the different local democracy traditions, to the features of urban governance and the system of relationships between local institutions and civil society *vis à vis* planning issues. Nevertheless, such protests, as a rule, are considered an obstacle by policy makers and planners, because they tend to make local decision making processes more complex, and to extend them in terms of time, while literature in general tends to underline the positive effects of community activism in terms of the possibility to enhance local democracy and public debate and, accordingly, the overall quality of the decisions that are taken. While certainly being an important dimension of local public debate, local groups are normally poorly organised, they tend to be created ad hoc for single issues and to disperse again when the local struggle is ended. Their internal weakness is frequently an obstacle in making their voice heard and taken into account.

The paper aims at identifying possible ways in which such voices can become a resource for policy making and planning. There are a number of aspects that seem to play an important role in ensuring the possibility to use community activism as a resource for planning: the type of knowledge used by local groups, their capacity to go beyond Nimby approaches, their capacity of a strategic vision for the future of the city, even starting from very local issues. In particular, the combination of different knowledge forms in the strategies of local groups is a crucial resource, because it enables these actors to actively question the quality of existing projects in favour of more comprehensive approaches. At the same time, knowledge can legitimise the position and role of such groups in the face of the larger urban arena (local administration, private developers, etc.). The paper will thus examine different aspects impinging on empirical analysis in the Milan urban region in Northern Italy.

Key Words: community activism, urban governance, local conflicts