

The City Strategic Plan as a Tool of Governance. Potential and Critique: The Italian Case

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Abstract

In the last decade, changes in the competitive environment have led a lot of municipalities to plan their activities by the formulation of a strategic plan.

The paper analyzes the characteristics of “governance” during the process of elaboration and implementation of the plan.

The work focuses on the Italian experience. The hypothesis is that the stakeholders involved in the planning process create a network organization with their behaviour.

1. Premise: Work Objectives

The globalisation of markets, the process of European integration, the devolution of power from the centre to the fringes are three of the phenomena that are making a contribution towards a redefinition of the role of the State, reinforcing local levels of government.

Change in the competitive context is certainly one of the factors compelling a number of cities to plan their futures by drawing up a strategic plan. This tool has been employed both in areas characterised by regeneration needs, consequences of the crisis in certain economic activities (this has been the case in cities such as Hamburg, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester), and also in very dynamic cities needing to tackle problems of strong international competition (such as Lyons, Barcelona, Amsterdam and Turin). In Italy, the introduction of the strategic plan as a tool of *governance* has led to the creation of a website (www.recs.it) which aims to foster the sharing of experience and the exchange of “good practices”.

Planning the future of a city or territory through the elaboration of a strategic plan which promoters often describe as “*an act of sharing*”, involving many actors, “*in a future desired for the territory*”, triggers models of *governance* that are different compared to the traditional oligarchic paradigm, requiring the definition of interventions according to a rigidly *top-down* scheme.

This work makes use of the concept of *governance* understood as the ability of governments to model socio-economic structures and processes (Mayntz 1999) in which the relationships between political authorities and other subjects are managed by adopting a cooperative and interactive style (Eljassen & Kooiman 1993).

This work then aims to analyse, based on Italian experiences, certain issues of *governance* that arise in the formulation and implementation of a territorial strategic plan. These issues are analysed by hypothesising that the stakeholders participating first in the construction and then in the implementation of a strategic plan operate by following *networking* models that give rise to a “network” model of organisation¹. The network model is therefore used as a lens with which to examine the relationships and connections existing between the stakeholders who participate in the strategic planning of a city in order to determine whether or not these peculiar characteristics are indeed found, which theory has shown for such organisational structures, or rather if and to what extent the processes and organisational structures fit in with or depart from the theoretical *framework*.

The problems generally posed by the formulation and subsequent implementation of a strategic plan for a city can be traced to the following aspects (Cavenago 2004; Mazzara 2006):

- Activation and management of the *stakeholder* network;
- Coordination of actions, interventions foreseen and financial dynamics;
- Managing measures and interventions;
- Control of the degree of progress of the plan.

2. Scientific Basis: Theoretical Reference Framework and Research Hypotheses.

The basic hypothesis of this work is that the network organisational structure is the theoretical model which the process of planning that characterises the construction and implementation of strategic plans for cities can be traced back to.

The choice of analysing the phenomenon of strategic territorial planning through a networking model derives from the flexibility of the concept of a network, which can easily be adapted to different situations (Barnes 1972), as well as the potential of such a model which, as is underlined by Collins (1992), allows us to connect the micro dimension (behaviour of the stakeholders involved) with the macro dimension (social-economic effects).

The network originates as a conceptual tool to describe and examine the social relations in a community, in groups and in institutions. This model is then applied to an investigation of relationships between enterprises, bringing with it part of the doctrine to consider it as a specific organisational modality (cfr. note 1).

The enormous category of organisational forms that can be traced back to the concept of networks has been examined by hypothesising a *continuum* of organisational, contractual and institutional structures that are placed in an intermediary position between the integrated enterprise (hierarchy) and the ideal market². Our studies therefore, have focused on the development of relationships, decision-making power, coordination tools and institutional and organisational differences (Grandori 1989, 1995, 1997; Grandori & Soda 1995; Lorenzoni 1997), putting

forward different classifications (Soda 1998) based on specific variables centring on the intensity and strength of relations, the degree of formalisation and the type of interdependence.

The relational aspect concerns the modality of network development. The network can be promoted by a subject who assumes a central position and plays a coordinating role and in this case it is called a *centred network* (Grandori & Soda, 1991, Ricciardi, 2003). In the absence of a central actor however, the literature refers to the network as a *joint network* (Grandori & Soda 1991) or *symmetrical network* (Ricciardi 2003).

Decision-making power is related to the ownership control exercised by the actor who is at the centre of the network (Soda 1998) while coordination tools³ are differentiated as a result of how the relations between actors are configured. Coordination may be formalised through exchange or membership contracts and this is the case of the *bureaucratic network* (Grandori & Soda 1995), which may be either a centred or joint network. Social mechanisms of coordination such as trust, information-sharing and temporal relationships are often associated with mechanisms of bureaucratic control (Soda 1998). The former networking forms, as theorised by Barney and Ouchi (1985), involve contemporaneous mechanisms of market and social or *clan* coordination.

The network therefore includes the development of a collaborative relationship between multiple actors working cooperatively towards achieving a common objective (Soda, 1998). This was also found in cases we examined of strategic planning for cities in which the involvement of the *stakeholders* is shown to be an objective of the process.

Elements constituting a networking structure are (Lomi 1991; Butera 1997):

- nodes or systems, represented by result-oriented entities;
- connections, or rather, elements linking the nodes;
- structures, which are the configuration of nodes and connections;
- operational properties, which are the rules governing the functioning of the network.

Planning the relations that need to be activated between partners (connections) is a task that falls to the subject managing the process (in the case of a centred network) who will define their quantity (frequency) and their quality (intensity) directly (Boldizzoni & Serio 1996). This subject therefore establishes the degree of openness and formalisation of the organisational structure and sets the decision-making rules which represent a central element in the functioning of the system.

The subject managing the network must also ensure the vitality of the nodes, selecting and developing critical connections and identifying suitable mechanisms for fostering the cooperative involvement of multiple subjects who are pursuing specific and personal objectives (Butera 1997).

With regard to the theoretical framework hitherto presented, this work refers prevalently to the model elaborated by Butera (1997) since it is particularly focused on the process of network construction and structural configuration. The model moreover includes many of the relevant aspects contained in the literature and described concisely in this study.

In particular, network architecture may have differing inner configurations which can be distinguished by the two types of categories that Butera (1997) defines as: natural networks and governed networks.

A natural network is characterised by the presence of agents with an elevated capacity for self-regulation and by the absence of a unitary hierarchical structure (Butera 1997). It can be assimilated into the joint network type. The managed network however, is of the centred network type, as defined by other scholars (Grandori & Soda 1991; Ricciardi 2003). It is manifested by one or two centres around which the other actors orbit and, in the taxonomy put forward by Butera (1997, p. 58), can assume the following configurations:

- *hierarchically-based*, in which the inner, hierarchical structure is dominant, however there are strong relationships of influence with other subjects;
- *a concentrated centre of gravity*, in which there is only one strategic agency that exerts influence over the other actors;
- *with multiple centres of gravity*, in which the system revolves around two or more strategic agencies, with relationships of influence that are complex and variable over time;
- *without centre*, in which a central structure is missing and the identity of the system is assured by the territory (districts, sectors etc).

From these premises we derived our first research question, of a purely descriptive nature, aimed at providing a frame for the phenomenon being investigated:

D1) into which theoretical configuration is it possible to collocate the general, overall experience of the strategic planning of Italian cities?

Having established this, it is therefore possible to proceed to an analysis of the relevant modalities characterising the process of decision-taking in the investigated phenomenon.

In his analysis of decision-making processes of a political nature Pettigrew (1973) criticises Simon's model, believing that excessive attention was given to the problem of uncertainty and little attention was given to the conflict of interests of the subjects involved. Decision-making processes of a political nature are characterised by competitive-type negotiation, based on strength and cooperative-type negotiation based on exchange (Mariani 2003). Even decisions undertaken in organisations are the result of interaction between the various actors involved and require, therefore, some kind of mediation among the conflicting objectives of each of the actors. The decision-making process of an organisational nature has, therefore, some of the characteristics of political decision-making and consequently, collective decision-making. One of the questions that March (1994) posed in order to interpret the functioning of an organisational system as a political system may help us in examining one of the aspects that this work tackles. This question concerns the system of partner recruitment and the ways in which agreements are defined and are made to be respected. In particular Hickson (1995) underlined how the main problem in collective decision-making is precisely that of its implementation, or rather, identifying the appropriate mechanisms for inducing actors to enact decisions. From these theoretical standpoints it is therefore possible to suggest the following initial hypothesis:

H1) activating a process of planning that involves multiple actors gives rise to a decision-making process of a collective nature which should anticipate mechanisms designed to stimulate the enactment of decisions.

Having ascertained, from the descriptive question D1, that there are network prone configurations, we attempted to check whether the cases that we analysed enabled processes that were congruent with theory, posing the second research question:

D2) have operative mechanisms been activated in order to induce subjects to carry out scheduled actions?

The creation of a network leads of course to the birth of a coalition between participants. The literature holds to the belief that coalitions are structurally unstable since they require (Mariani 2003):

- a) continual attention from the actors to the objectives (however, since individuals are not machines, such attention is difficult to guarantee over time);
- b) a stability of context confirming priorities and objectives on a time line (this hypothesis is clearly quite unrealistic).

This instability also characterises the networks where the lack of coherence between the actors' objectives and the conflict among them is typical of the norm and not transitory (Grandori, 1995). There is therefore the problem of constructing an organisational identity that attempts to prevent individual preferences from distorting collective decisions. An integrative mechanism, which is capable of making pluralistic organisations governable, and which has recently received much attention in organisational literature (Mariani, 2003), is negotiation. Negotiation favours the development, among the participants, of interconnections and raises awareness of their interdependence. In organisational studies (Crozier & Friedberg 1977; Grandori, 1991), negotiation is not considered an organisational process but rather a form of explicit and consensual government that at times is institutionalised and formalised. Negotiation is presented therefore, as a means of resolving decision-making problems which differ from the market. Negotiation is presented therefore as a way for resolving decision-making problems, which is different from the market, authority or war (Raiffa 1982). On this basis it is possible to formulate the following second hypothesis:

H2) negotiation is a mechanism that facilitates the government of a decision-making process involving multiple actors.

To verify this, the following question was asked:

D3) does the activation of a process of negotiation towards objectives facilitate the implementation of the plan?

Management of a network requires the activation of suitable organisational mechanisms. Butera (1997) maintains that in order to function properly, a network organisation needs operating systems, rules and a culture. With regard to the latter aspect, the author emphasises the importance of the management of the connections and knowing how to exchange and manage information so as to generate shared values. The relations represent the "... actual repository and regulator of economic and organisational processes" (Butera 1997, p. 54). This emphasis on the centrality of the processes of communication therefore, allows us to formulate the following third hypothesis:

H3) communication is a mechanism that facilitates the management of a planning process involving multiple actors.

To verify this, the following questions were asked:

D4) does failure to communicate the rules of consultation and the phases of the operative process lengthen the time for defining and approving the plan?

D5) does failure to communicate the rules of consultation and the phases of the operative process make implementation of the plan more complex?

D6) does failure to set out clear objectives increase problems relating to implementation of the plan?

3. Subject of The Survey

The analysis dealt with all those Italian cities involved in "REte delle Città con piani Strategici" (RECS) who were included on this association's website during the period of data gathering (10.01.2008-29.02.2008) and which could demonstrate the current state and development of the process of elaborating a plan through the Internet.

The RECS network was initiated to foster the development and consolidation of strategic and local government planning processes, stimulating, at the same time, a comparison between procedures and tools that had already been adopted at a European level by other urban administrations.

The main objectives of the network can thus be summed up as:

- a) the spread of strategic planning as a model of *governance*;
- b) the promotion of *benchmarking* activity in order to circulate, both among those responsible for development and *policy makers*, methodological applications and taking into account the results obtained and their impact on the development of the city;
- c) the realisation of an observatory to guarantee, among other tasks, access and use of all available documentation on local government policies to all interested parties.

Initially comprising the so-called promoting group, the network is made up of all those cities wishing to adopt the model of strategic planning, integrating within this model of government a long-term vision. In order to participate in the network therefore, it is not necessary to have a particular dimension in mind but just to have the will to experience new models of "*governance*" to share with all the actors in the process as well as with other members of the network itself.

In particular, during this period, thirty-three cities with special links to the website of the association were present (table 1). Almost 50% of these are located in the South of Italy and on the islands (respectively 7 towns on the islands and 7 towns in the South) while the remaining towns were spread out more or less equally between Central Italy (with 10 towns) and the North of Italy (with 9 towns, 5 of which are in the North-East and 4 in the North-West).

The survey was carried out on 18 of the aforementioned towns, or those for which there was availability of data and documentation on development of the process and its state of progress.

With regard to this network therefore, the survey examined 54,54% of the total which is nevertheless a significant percentage as concerns this phenomenon.

What in fact perplexed the authors is the distribution of the 18 towns which have given rise to a process of communication of their activities. There was in fact, a complete modification of the original distribution with a sharp reduction in the representativeness of the towns surveyed in the South and on the islands. Of the 14 southern towns, only 3 (one of which is located on an island) have enacted a concrete process of communication of activities connected to the elaboration of a strategic plan. The majority of the towns making up the sample are found in the North of Italy, which with 8 towns contributes over 40%. As regards the towns in Central Italy, it was found that only 3 out of 10 had not yet activated any process of communication.

Perplexity on the geographical distribution of the towns with regard to the process of communication does bring about certain considerations which, far from being descriptive of a current state (something which is obviously not possible given the aims of the present survey) allow us to elaborate some hypotheses on future research. The behaviour of the southern towns, which were in such a hurry to join the network but activated no real process of communication, may represent - where the process of elaboration of a strategic plan has been activated - mere inattentiveness, indicating on the one hand, a slight inclination to share *know-how* and therefore an active participation in the RECS *network*, and on the other hand, little or no attention to processes of communication.

This behaviour, in cases in which a plan has never been devised, might also hide an image-building exercise to create political visibility. The strategic plan in fact is a non-compulsory document and its peculiarity resides in the fact that administrators wish to involve partners and *stakeholders* in the process of government, sharing the complexities which characterise it. Not wishing to express judgement which is unsupported by documented proof, it can well be said that membership of the network, without behaviour that is consistent with achieving aims, is at least an indication of a certain inattentiveness to network models.

The survey then showed that the two towns in the South of Italy that have enacted a process of communication, have not yet constructed a plan. These towns were taken into consideration for answering question D1 (which describes the configuration of the network) and were then no longer used for questions from D2 to D6 (concerning aspects and problems stemming from the implementation of plans).

4. Research Methodology

The choice of research methodology depends on the characteristics of the phenomenon that one wishes to examine and the aspects that one wants to analyse. The use of a quantitative approach presupposes the identification of cause and effect relationships, reducing these to specific hypotheses and research aims, identifying suitable variables and their measurement and subsequent verification of the hypotheses and theory (Creswell, 2003). Quantitative methodologies presuppose a precise definition of factors to be examined before proceeding with the survey. Specifically this implies an *ex ante* identification of significant relationships and their generalisation.

The aim of this work however, is to verify whether the experiences of the strategic planning of towns has given life to a network, which operative mechanisms have been utilised and if these mechanisms have had a positive influence on the achievement of objectives. It was not considered significant to apply certain hypotheses of causal relationships, formulated *ex ante*, because the process of knowledge requires the assumption of a constructivist perspective, which searches for general commonalities in the different experiences examined. In this situation the literature recommends the adoption of a qualitative approach⁴ which is particularly suitable for investigating the nature of a phenomenon whose characteristics have not been well-defined *ex ante*.

In this work, the theoretical reference framework does not appear to have been characterised by consolidated modelling. As regards the phenomenon of networks, Lorenzoni (1993, p. XV) expresses himself thus: "the expressions 'network' and 'network organisations' have had considerable success in recent years, despite a certain imprecision as to their meaning and scarce information as to their application". Even nowadays, in the work of Cropper & Ebers & Huxham & Smith Ring (2008, p. 5), which is state of the art research as regards inter-organisational relations, there still remains the lack of shared theoretical framework and the absence of universally accepted terminology. Terms in common use like, for example, collaboration, constellation, network etc, are attributed with different meanings depending on the author being read. It is true that empirical surveys are widespread but it is also true that the factors that apply in the processes of constructing and developing a network structure are often interpreted in substantially different ways (D'Alessio 2002).

The research presented here set out to analyse a system that is delimited by time and space (towns with strategic plans at a given moment) and has been conducted by using two of the main procedures for gathering data through qualitative research recommended by the literature (Creswell 1998). In other words, analysis of documents and in-depth interviews.

The analysis of documents aimed to highlight the relations and dynamics enacted in the construction and implementation phases of the strategic plan, as well as the operative mechanisms activated. To this end, certain techniques of *content analysis* were employed, of a type that is not exclusively quantitative (Krippendorf 1980; Stempel 2003) subdividing the documents into paragraphs and searching for the necessary references for attributing a score.

This analysis allowed for the reconstruction of some significant relations on how the process of planning was managed, on the intensity of the relations enacted with the *stakeholders*, on the extent to which objectives were shared and on their coherence with regard to a general analysis of the competitive scenario. Moreover, the same analysis accounted for the emergence of certain issues of particular relevance and which were dealt with during the in-depth interviews carried out with qualified interlocutors who were representative of subjects who hold or had held roles of responsibility in the planning or in the management of the strategic plan for the town (see para. 5). The interview was used therefore as a tool for examining in-depth some deductions that emerged from an analysis of the documentation and to reconstruct, as recommended by the literature (Weiss 1994), a more complete framework of the phenomenon, searching, through open questions and answers, for relational aspects and mechanisms which do not emerge from a mere study of the documentation.

5. Organisation and Development of The Survey

The survey was developed in two different periods. The first stage dealt with gathering all the documentation published by each town on the RECS website and on their own websites. The lowest common denominator characterising this research activity was, as expected, the availability of a strategic plan or at least a rough version of one. In the majority of cases it was also possible to find other material (documents

illustrative of the planning process and its phases, protocols and/or conventions signed with the *stakeholders*, etc.) which allowed for a more in-depth study of the whole process of *governance*.

The next step was to elaborate a *check list*, with closed questions (of the “yes”, “no”, “not relevant”, “other” type), which focused on the elements believed to be relevant to a closer understanding of the issues.

The elements included in the *check list* concerned:

- ways of initiating, developing and managing the planning process (for this aspect the list contained ten survey elements);
- ways of elaborating a plan (for this aspect the list contained twenty-six survey elements);
- ways of implementing a plan (for this aspect the list contained four survey elements).

The *check list* was applied to all the documents gathered.

On the basis of the results emerging from a study of the documentation, as has already been mentioned (see para. 4), a questionnaire was administered through direct interviews with those responsible for strategic plans⁵. This second survey tool was composed of five open and/or guided questions and aimed to assess the extent of implementation and the degree to which objectives singled out and set by the plan had been achieved⁶, as well as problems of implementation perceived by the subject managing the process.

6. Description of The Phenomenon: Natural or Managed Networks?

All the towns surveyed (cfr. paragraph 3) retain that the process of strategic government of the territory lies with the involvement of the stakeholders.

In almost all the cases (15 out of 18), the initiation of the activity stemmed from the initiative of the Town Council. In over 30% of the cases however, once having started the process, the councils delegated the management of activities to other actors who are usually specifically convened for the purpose (associations or committees representing the main *stakeholders*). A different attitude was noted in the towns in the South of Italy where no process of delegation was seen.

Half of the plans examined started the process between 2000 and 2003 (9 plans). On average, the temporal horizon of the plans is 10 years, allowing us to conclude that at least there is the intention to continue the strategic plans beyond the period of a single electoral mandate.

The average length of the process of elaborating a plan was about 20 months, obviously implying the use of half an electoral term.

In 9 cases out of 18⁷ there was explicit information on work methods and in 10⁸ cases, a preliminary plan of the phases of the process were provided. An examination of the latter allows us to hypothesise that the phenomenon being surveyed represents, in the majority of cases, an attempt to build a managed network.

In order to try to understand if and which typology of managed network (hierarchically-based, concentrated centre of gravity, with multiple centre of gravity or uncentred) can be assimilated to the surveyed phenomenon, we based our investigation on the following assumptions:

- both in hierarchically-based and concentrated centre of gravity networks, there is a single subject who initiates the network and manages it over time;
- in multiple centre of gravity networks there are more subject who initiate and manage the network over time;
- in uncentred networks, management is spread out and not the responsibility of any one subject.

We therefore verified the existence of an eventual correlation (by building the Fischer index) between the subject who initiates the action, the subject managing the process of constructing the plan and the subject who implements it.

The results are shown in table 2.

Whilst there is substantial identity between the subject who initiates the action and the subject who manages the process, there is a diminishment of correlation in the phase of implementation. In this phase in particular, we recorded a change in the reference subject. The implementation of the plan is sometimes entrusted to external agencies (for example, stakeholder associations). In these cases the literature has shown how recourse to external agencies can generate (Martinelli 2005):

1. a weakening of active capacity, especially in those cases in which a “referent” for enacting a plan, with clear responsibilities, powers, resources and technical competence is absent;
2. a reduction in the capacity to give direction to the public actor.

From the data, cross-referenced with certain specific observations from the literature, we can deduce that the phenomenon being studied cannot be superimposed on an uncentred network and probably neither a multiple centre of gravity network. It can however, at least in the start-up phase, be assimilated to hierarchically-based network models or concentrated centre of gravity models. In the passage from the planning phase to the implementation phase, we noted, in some cases, a modification not of the architecture but of its architect.

The data on the preliminary identification of the *stakeholders* may be utilised as an indicator of the intensity of the management process. It is evident that whoever makes a preliminary selection among the *stakeholders* is, contextually, the judge and evaluator of those subjects who will participate in strategic planning. Such a preliminary identification⁹ was noticed in only 7 cases out of 13 where such indications were provided. It can therefore be stated that the intensity of the management process is not particularly elevated if the phenomenon is examined in its entirety.

7. Mechanisms Stimulating The Enactment of Decisions

Analysis of the plans allowed us to verify that certain operative mechanisms were often utilised to bind the other actors involved and to induce them to behave in specific ways. The mechanisms are the following:

- preliminary protocol (usually on general principles);
- a convention detailing specific behaviour;

- implementation of a control system for the plan;
- identification of subjects responsible, fully or partially, for large-scale projects;
- involvement of the *stakeholders* in defining large-scale projects.

In almost 70% of the cases surveyed (9 out of 12 since 6 cases were not possible to survey), the towns stipulate a preliminary protocol. This happens very frequently in the towns in the North of Italy (5 out of 6 cases recorded) and in the towns in the Centre of Italy (3 out of 4 cases recorded). This protocol aims to reinforce participation in the process through a sharing of aims, without entering into great detail. All the cases are characterised by the extreme simplicity in the wording of the protocols, an agreement on “general principles” and contain no mention of sanctions for breaches of contract.

In only three cases out of fifteen, all northern towns, the protocols went beyond mere declarations of intent, stipulating real and actual conventions with the *stakeholders* who undertake to carry out, within their area of competence, specific activities connected with the implementation of projects included in the strategic plan.

As regards the system of control, it was observed in 10 out of 18 cases that there was no mention of the objectives and results expected from the plan and in 11 cases there was no trace of any provision for control criteria¹⁰.

As far as the last two mechanisms utilised are concerned (cfr. above) it was recorded that the involvement of the *stakeholders* in defining large-scale projects only happened in 5 cases (3 of which are in the North) while the identification of subjects responsible for single projects/actions happened in only 3 cases (all in the North).

The operative mechanisms used can be placed into two typologies:

- contractual (protocol and convention);
- non-contractual (control system, identification and involvement of the *stakeholders*).

These mechanisms however lack any system of incentive/sanction. For this reason they can be considered reinforcing elements, which can be defined as “additional”, since they present a capacity which is not elevated for stimulating the enactment of decisions and accelerating the implementation of the plan. This is also supported by the data shown in table 3 in which the number “1” indicates the presence of the mechanism and “0” the absence of such. It is easy to find cases in which such mechanisms were not activated (or only some were activated) which, however, present a significant degree in the realisation of the plan. It can therefore be stated that the operative mechanisms utilised in different towns do not represent key elements encouraging the subsequent implementation of the plan. This probably depends on other factors which may even be of an immaterial nature¹¹.

8. The Process of Negotiation

The phenomenon of planning should be characterised by identifying the *stakeholders*, listening to them and consequently involving them in the planning process, as well as evaluating the contribution they bring to this process.

As regard the first aspect, it emerged that the *stakeholders* to be involved and contacted were not always identified during preliminary proceedings (this was recorded in only 7 cases). In some cases, the process of planning developed spontaneously without any mapping of the *stakeholders*: in particular, some bodies (in the central-northern area) allowed (through forums and/or panels) anyone who had an interest to participate in the initial phase of the process and/or in the diagnosis of the territorial system. This explains the reason why the *stakeholders* identified in preliminary proceedings account for a number which fluctuates between a minimum of 5 to a maximum of 70, with an average of 31, while the *stakeholders* who were heard or involved in the initial phase of the process, leaving aside their preliminary identification, range from a minimum of 12 to a maximum of 500. An increase was thus recorded in the numbers of *stakeholders* involved in the passage of the process.

On the other hand, leaving aside the preliminary mapping, almost always (13 times out of 15¹²) the *stakeholders* views were heard.

The means by which the *stakeholders* were heard was through individual interviews (7 instances out of 14 surveyed) or by recourse to forums or panels (7 instances out of 14 surveyed).

The most frequent motivation (6 out of 16¹³) for listening to *stakeholders* is represented by the identification and assessment of the problems and needs of the administered collective. In two cases such motivation lay in the definition of the *vision* and in another two cases the development of a *SWOT analysis*. One significant item of data is that in only one case was the tool of listening utilised to define the method of work together with the *stakeholders* involved.

In 7 of the 13 cases in which *stakeholders* were consulted, the latter played a merely “passive” role. By this we refer to “non-contributory”, receptive participation.

From the data that emerged after administering the questionnaire there emerged a highly diversified situation in regard to the extent of progress of the plans and the period of time since their approval. In order to enable the data on the extent of implementation of the plan to be compared at all, a mean annual value was calculated. This value, in the cases surveyed, oscillated between 10% and 15% and was generally higher in those towns where the *stakeholders* had a participating role in the process. This therefore is probably one of factors which has had a positive impact on the realisation of the plan (table 4).

In an examination of the quality of the planning phenomenon, a score was assigned every time the presence of a survey element was found. Obviously no score was assigned where the element was not present. As regards an assessment of contribution, in order not to degrade the analysis with arbitrary evaluations, it has been hypothesised that the “*stakeholder* behaviour” variable (though not of the present-absent binary type) could have only the following characteristics: passive behaviour (value 0), active behaviour (in which the *stakeholders* are restricted to participating in the process of analysis and diagnosis and to which was assigned a value of 1), participating behaviour (in which the *stakeholders* have also contributed, assuming full or partial responsibility, in the development of projects or lines of action and to which was assigned the value of 2).

To evaluate the problems of implementation we also made use of the results obtained.

9. The Process of Communication

Two properties were taken into account for an analysis of the process of communication:

1. communication and sharing in phases of the management/planning process;
2. declination and enunciation of the elements and components characterising the definition of an objective.

Property sub 1) was analysed in regard to the character of clarifying and communicating the method of work, the phases of the process of planning and the *vision*.

Property sub 2) was analysed by verifying whether in the different plans, the objectives/projects had been defined in relation to the characters: *outcome* (final impact), *output* (what to do), responsible subject (who must do), time (when to do), costs (economic aspect), resources (financial aspect).

Communication regarding the method of work and phases in the process of planning took place in about 50% of cases (respectively 9 out of 15 surveyed and 10 out of 16). In 13 cases, out of 17 surveyed, there was clarification of the *vision* of the plan even though it was to be observed that on 3 occasions the *vision* is defined wrongly, in the sense that what is declared does not concretely clarify the idea or the ideas of development included in the plans..

Similar observations can also be made in regard to Property sub 2. If it is true that 11 towns, greatly reflecting the geographical composition of the sample (respectively 5 cases in the North, 4 in the Centre and 2 in the South), define the projects with reference to at least one of the abovementioned characteristics, it is also true that only in the North a real attention was paid to the dimension of result (*output*), resources (financial aspect), time and responsibility, while in the Centre, more attention was paid to the dimension of impact on the collective (*outcome*), which evidently represents only a first step along the path to the measurability of objectives.

In the development of the analysis we also attempted to verify whether the variables showed any correlation with the implementation of the plan. To do this we proceeded with the criterion of verifying present/absent in each plan, assigning a score of "1" and "0" for each element found or not found.

Property sub 1) was surveyed respectively to the duration of the planning process (calculated in months and particularly, adopting as a *starting point* the date of the first document on strategic planning and as a *finishing point* the approval date of the plan) – cfr. table 5 – and issues arising during implementation (table 6).

With reference to issues arising from implementation, the interview verified if the subject responsible for enacting the plan had perceived any problems stemming from the excessively general nature of the objectives, the lack of time variables, insufficient knowledge of the resources in the plan, insufficient resources being set aside by the *stakeholders* involved, problems inherent in large-scale projects feasibility, difficult relationships with *stakeholders* (due to the lack of identification, or rather, the absence of a responsible subject or even for non-fulfilment of partner obligations or the bureaucracy of the public partner or the absence of coordination between partners) and in general from indications of other problem issues individually perceived in the interviews.

Property sub 2 was, conversely, correlated with the problem issues of implementation as previously described (table 7).

The data shown testifies to the non-existence of a significant relationship between clarifying the method of work, the planning process and *vision* and the duration of the process of elaborating the plan (reply rate of sample equal to 75%). Moreover, this statement is confirmed by the χ^2 calculation (which assumes a value of 3,675) and which has been normalised through a calculation of the Pizzetti-Pearson ϕ^2 index (which assumes a value of 0,15). The calculation, included in the appendix, was carried out by grouping together the approval times of the plan in three classes.

In other terms, the identification and communication of the work phases and clarification of objectives does not influence the necessary time for completing the process.

In the same way, the sharing and communication of methods of work, phases and the *vision* also do not influence the implementation of the plans (cfr. table 6).

Table 7 shows that clarification of *outcome* and *output*, specifying who does what and the time in which to do it, the assessment of costs and identification of resources to finance the project do not have a direct bearing on problem issues arising from implementation of the plan. The study of the motivation involved in this phenomenon goes beyond the scope of the present work. It is however, possible to ascertain in the interviews that on more than one occasion, the trust between the promoters of the plan, the *stakeholders* and the enacting subjects was a critical element for achieving the projected objectives.

10. Conclusions

It is quite evident that at least the intention of local bodies in the elaboration of their processes of strategic planning should assume the characters of the governed network. The data presented and commented on previously clearly points out that the phenomenon studied is unable to be superimposed on un-centred networks and probably not even on multiple centre of gravity networks. It can however, at least in the starting phase, be assimilated by hierarchically-based networks or concentrated centre of gravity models. This conclusion should imply, from a theoretical point of view, greater ability in managing relationships. Instead, governing intensity is certainly not raised with regard to the overall phenomenon, also because, as has already been stated, the person responsible for the process is often replaced (especially in the implementation phase). This aspect has also been highlighted by Martinelli (2005), who underlines the importance of a leader, often a "charismatic figure" rather than someone from the public institution, and thus posing "the problem of continuity of process when political rotation brings out the substitution of the Mayor (Martinelli 2005, p. 329).

The analysis has shown that the process of strategic planning in cities gives rise to a decision-making process of a collective nature which, as such, requires the enactment of mechanisms that serve as a stimulus for the subsequent enactment of decisions. Both Healey (2003) and Martinelli (2005) underline how in the process of constructing strategic plans, considerable importance must be attributed to the participation

and involvement of as great a number as possible of actors for defining objectives and strategies. Both scholars however, recognise the existence of certain factors that facilitate the achievement of results, such as, a cooperative attitude among the different levels of management and between public and private actors, as well as a climate of trust in both the government and other local actors.

The existence of at least one typology of implementation problems was found in all the cases when answers were given during interviews. The mechanisms experienced by Italian towns though, did not have a particularly high coercive capacity, in other words they did not succeed in influencing the implementation of the plan and seem to be more like support factors. They can, at the most, be considered as collateral factors to other factors that are probably more prioritised. The literature on networks refers, in these cases, to typical trust factors or connections based on personal relationships, generally speaking, to so-called social mechanisms (Soda 1998). There is a plan (table 3 case 1) in which all the tools are activated and in the fifth year, its realisation is at 73%: such a case would suggest that the tools have worked adequately. This data however, is in contrast with what was learnt from another case (table 3 case 6), which, after having only activated one of the tools identified in the fifth year, has already achieved 66% of the plan. There it is possible to assert that the tools selected by the "strategic towns" did not have a high capacity for stimulating the enactment of decisions. These tools had to be reinforced by other mechanisms which were maybe of an immaterial nature (trust in politicians and their ability to realise the project, political stability, identification of priorities for selecting actions and projects to achieve¹⁴, etc.) which probably represents the real critical factors in the implementation of the plan.

The hypothesis that negotiation is a mechanism facilitating the management of a decision-making process seems to have been mainly confirmed and has been better specified in the preceding paragraph 8.

The hypothesis, according to which the management of a network is facilitated by processes of communication, seems to have been disproved. In particular, the definition of the elements and components of the objectives is no guarantee against problems arising during the implementation of phases of the plan. There is no relationship between the process of communication/sharing and the occurrence of subsequent problems of implementation as there is also no relationship between the process of communication/sharing and the duration of the elaboration of the plan. As regards this latter data, there seems to be a minimum limit to the duration of the process that hardly ever drops below 18 months.

In conclusion, the research followed the same path traced by other Italian scholars who have dealt with the theme of the strategic planning of the town, like for example Cavenago (2004) and Mazzara (2006). In this article we have tried to overcome mere reference to behaviour such as that triggered by indications in the literature and/or learnt from successful cases in order to attempt a survey on adherence to behaviour found in reality rather than that found in books. This research is clearly not exhaustive (nor could it be due to the enormity of the phenomenon). It does not focus on other factors deserving of more in-depth study (such as, for example, ways of constructing *output*, *outcome*, means of control, the relationship between the strategic plan and other financial documents of local bodies, etc.).

The observations presented here however, contribute in their own right to a clearer understanding of issues raised by the process of construction and management of the strategic plan of a town.

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Appendixes – Calculation of Indexes

Table 1: Distribution of towns participating in the RECS network and those member towns that have activated a website and/or published material

RECS member towns	N°	%	Towns with websites and/or published material	N°	%
North-West	4	12,12%	North-West	3	16,67%
North-East	5	15,15%	North-East	5	27,78%
Total in North	9	27,27%	Total in North	8	44,44%
Central Italy	10	30,30%	Central Italy	7	38,89%
South	7	21,21%	South	2	11,11%
Islands	7	21,21%	Islands	1	5,56%
Total South and islands	14	42,42%	Total South and islands	4	16,67%
Overall Total	33		Overall Total	18	

Table 2: Process start-up, management and implementation

Subject initiating the consultation		Subject managing the process	
Local body (government)	15	Local body (government)	11
Stakeholder Associations	2	Stakeholder Associations	3
Others	1	Others	3
Not detectable	0	Not detectable	1
	18		18
Correlation index		0,991891	
Subject managing the process		Subject implementing the plan	
Local body (government)	11	Local body (government)	8
Stakeholder Associations	3	Stakeholder Associations	7
Others	3	Others	0
Not detectable	1	Not detectable	3
	18		18
Correlation index		0,630295	

Table 3: Stimulus mechanisms and plan implementation rate

Plans *	1	2	3	5	6	7	8
Mechanisms							
Preliminary protocols	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
Conventions with individual <i>stakeholders</i>	1	0	0	1	0	0	
Presence of a system of control	1	1	0	1	0	0	1
Identification of subjects responsible for practicable projects	1	0	0	1	1	0	0
Involvement of <i>stakeholders</i>	1	0	0	1	0	0	0
Total	5	1	1	5	2	1	2
Percentage rate of implementation on 31.12.2007	73%	12%	0	50%	56%	66%	30%
Average annual rate of implementation	15%	12%	0	10%	11%	13%	10%

* For reasons of confidentiality town names have been replaced by numbers

Table 4: Negotiation and implementation rate of the plan

Plans*	1	2	5	6	7	8
Aspects of negotiation						
Preliminary <i>stakeholder</i> identification	1	0	1	0	1	n.r.
Listening to and involving <i>stakeholders</i> in the process	1	1	1	1	1	n.r.
Role of the <i>stakeholder</i>	2	1	2	1	2	n.r.
Total	4	2	4	2	4	-
Implementation rate on 31.12.2007	73%	12%	50%	56%	66%	30%
Average annual rate of implementation	15%	12%	10%	11%	13%	10%

* For reasons of confidentiality town names have been replaced by numbers

Table 5: Relationship between communication/sharing and length of plan

Plans*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9	10	11	12	13
Aspects of communication/sharing												
Making work method clear	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	1
Making phases of planning process clear	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
Making <i>vision</i> clear	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1
Total	3	2	1	3	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	3
Length of process (months)	25	21	24	18	24	24	24	9	18	26	36	15

* For reasons of confidentiality town names have been replaced by numbers

Table 6: Relationship between communication/sharing and problems of implementation

Plans*	1	2	5	6	7	8
Variables of definition of objectives						
Making work method clear	1	1	1	0	1	0
Making phases of planning process clear	1	0	1	1	0	1
Making <i>vision</i> clear	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total	3	2	3	2	2	2
Typology of perceived problems of implementation						
- imprecise definition of objectives				1		1
- lack of time variable	1		1		1	1
- absence of resource identification in the plan	1		1		1	1
- no earmarking of resources by agencies involved						
- community resource use idea						
Existence of practicable problems	1		1	1		1
- lack of identification	1			1		
- lack of assumption of responsibility	1			1		
- non-fulfilment issues by partners						
- bureaucracy of public partner		1				
- absence of partner coordination	1					
Other problems in the implementation phase	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total	7	2	4	5	3	5

* For reasons of confidentiality town names have been replaced by numbers

Table 7: Problem of the correct organisation of objectives

Variables of definition of objectives	Plans*	1	2	5	6	7	8	9
- Time		1		1		1	1	1
- Output				1		1	1	1
- Outcome			1	1	1			
- Financial result						1		1
- Project cost		1						
- Responsibility							1	
Total		2	1	3	1	3	3	3
Typology of perceived problems of implementation								
- imprecise definition of objectives					1		1	
- lack of time variable		1		1		1	1	
Existence of financial problems								
- absence of resource identification in the plan		1		1		1	1	1
- no earmarking of resources by agencies involved								
- community resource use idea								1
Existence of practicable problems		1		1	1		1	1
Existence of problems with partners								
- lack of identification		1			1			
- lack of assumption of responsibility		1			1			
- non-fulfilment issues by partners								
- bureaucracy of public partner			1					
- absence of partner coordination								1
Other problems in the implementation phase		1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total		6	2	4	5	3	5	5

* For reasons of confidentiality town names have been replaced by numbers

Table 8: Relationship between communication/sharing and duration of plan – Frequency distribution by class

Values	Classes of duration (months)	0-12	13-24	24-36	Total
1		1	2	2	5
2		0	3	1	4
3		0	3	0	3
	Total	1	8	3	12

Table 9: Relationship between communication/sharing and length of plan – Theoretical frequency distribution

Values	Classes of duration	0-12	13-24	24-36	Total
1		0,416667	3,333333	1,25	5
2		0,333333	2,666667	1	4
3		0,25	2	0,75	3
	Total	1	8	3	12
	χ^2	3,675			
	ϕ^2	0,15			

Notes

¹ The literature contains numerous examples of those who consider the network an autonomous organisational form which is distinct and non-residual when compared to the market and to the hierarchy (Grandori 1989, 1995, 1997; Lorenzoni, 1990, 1997; Soda 1998; Ricciardi 2003).

² By enterprise networks one refers both to the case of legally autonomous enterprises bound by ties of association and to the case of agreements of a contractual nature and also to the case of enterprises which have a single ownership and organisational structure, but which are structures with an elevated degree on inner autonomy (Butera 1997).

³ A classification of coordination mechanisms has been advanced by Grandori and Soda (1991, 1995) who identified the following forms:

- institutional mechanisms;
- contractual mechanisms ;
- organisational mechanisms;
- social mechanisms;
- technological coordination mechanisms.

⁴ “A qualitative approach is one in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e. the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed, with an intent of developing a theory or pattern) or advocacy/participatory perspectives (i.e. political, issue-oriented, collaborative or change oriented) or both” (Creswell 2003, p. 18).

⁵ Concerned a civil servant in the council and/or an association *ad hoc* who was assigned the responsibility for the process of construction and implementation of the strategic plan.

⁶ The interviewees produced the global percentage data regarding the realisation of different actions/projects. The data obviously refers to the date of the interview and is total normalised data. This data was obviously only shown in those cases in which the town had implemented a monitoring process of the activities foreseen by the plan.

⁷ For 3 cases the data was not made explicit.

⁸ For 2 cases the data was not made explicit.

⁹ Preliminary identification was distinct from listening to stakeholders and took place, instead, in 13 cases compared to the 15 who supplied this information.

¹⁰ This aspect allows us to highlight how the prescriptions triggered by activities of management control have not been completely assimilated by the Civil Service. Control is probably regarded as a prevalently accounting tool and not as a methodology of support for decisional processes which are useful in verifying the wisdom of choices made, the correction of such choices, the assumption of future decisions and finally a stimulus for enacting decisions.

¹¹ Mutual trust and reliability could be some of these elements. In this sense the case of a town could be emblematic where change in the political majority has led to the dissolution of the strategic plan. Clearly a subject that must make an investment will pay close attention to the political environment, especially when the public body is involved in it either in financial terms (project co-financing) or in material terms (realisation of functional infrastructures).

¹² It was impossible to survey three cases.

¹³ In two cases the motivation is not explained.

¹⁴ Analysis has highlighted that plans have an average number of actions over 100. This data leads us to believe that the plans in some cases, have been interpreted as general and omnicomprehensive repositories for all aspects of governing the town.

If it is true that the high number in other cases is synonymous with greater will to specify ways in which to implement strategic lines, one cannot fail to observe that this could create difficulties in implementation as regards the temporal priorities to assign to each project and as regards which projects need more concentration of financial resources. In one interview it was underlined, critically, just how difficult it was to establish an order of priorities for projects and how to successfully implement them.