

SOFT COOPERATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ASO VALLEY IN ITALY

Luca Lazzarini

Politecnico di Torino / DIST Viale Mattioli 39, 10125 Torino TO Italy

Abstract

Aso Valley is among the most advanced agricultural contexts in Italy. In recent years it has hosted the experimentation of some policy tools whose innovation was given by the fruitful cooperation between public and private actors in promoting rural development. This paper aims at critically analyzing contents and aims of the spaces of cooperation in Aso Valley, demonstrating to which extent they have influenced policy-making processes and reconstructed the fragmented institutional panorama characterizing the local level. Emphasis is placed on the role that planning could play in supporting rural policies. It is demonstrated that the integration of rural policies into territorial planning could better sustain local farmers' activity, empower agricultural enterprises and reduce the conflicts between urban and rural land uses.

Key words: *local cooperation, soft spaces, rural development, rural policy, Aso valley*

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, the number of territorial governments and their relations have increased spectacularly. According to Lovering (2007), mutations are not just quantitative but also qualitative, for the many ways in which multiple networks of actors are continuously made and remade to carry forward certain strategies. Local level is indeed the ground where these institutional mutations becomes more visible, given the great impulse brought by the Welfare State to decentralizing functions to sub-national territorial administrations (Dente, 2011).

Cooperation at the local level has been widely studied in recent years, especially among institutional actors (Teles, 2016). According to many, the interaction among local governments represents a crucial field to analyze the neoliberal current dynamics and the decisional impacts on local communities set off by the long-lasting processes of *institutional rescaling* (Bracci, 2016).

Most studies on local interinstitutional cooperation have dealt with the effects and constraints of collaborative arrangements between local authorities (Teles, 2016), the efficient use of financial resources and fiscal decentralization (Finžgar and Oplotnik, 2013; Bolívar *et al.*, 2014) and the joint provision of public works and services (Wollmann, 2016). A good number of example working documents, strategies, plans, financial-juridical and organizational models was collected (VNG, 2010), also in comparative terms (Hulst *et al.*, 2007; Swianiewicz, 2011). However, studies of local cooperation have little investigated the collaborative patterns within the agriculture domain. This contrasts with the relevance that local level has in analyzing agricultural policies given the not often sufficiently target orientation of EU but also national and regional policies towards particular local situations (Vandermeulen *et al.*, 2006). One question that needs to be asked is how local cooperation works in rural contexts and in which forms and through which arrangements local authorities cooperate to achieve rural development.

In this article we would like to analyze the forms of local cooperation in a rural context, the Aso Valley in Italy. Using the *soft/hard* conceptual framework (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015; Haughton *et al.*, 2013), we would like to demonstrate that the soft spaces proliferation emerging in the last decade in Aso Valley has helped local authorities to overcome the current institutional fragmentation and to adapt to new institutional, social and economic conditions.

First, the conceptual framework, which is developed based on a literature review, is discussed. Then the emphasis is put on the local level as a relevant scale to study the soft spaces proliferation because of the processes of institutional rescaling and of the vertical subsidiarization of social policies. In paragraph four, the case study is presented. The different forms of cooperation are described in that context, putting

accent on contents and aims of the cooperation and on their distinguishing features. A survey on mayors' opinions is presented in the fifth paragraph with the purpose of investigating strengths and limits of local cooperation. In the sixth paragraph, after reflecting on the main constraints hindering the development of a large-scale planning policy in the chosen context, the Aso Valley, a scenario of structural planning framework is presented. Emphasis is put on the effects that this planning policy could produce on the existing soft spaces of cooperation in Aso Valley. The paper ends with some conclusions presenting a possible trajectory for the development of local cooperation in Aso Valley.

1. NEW GEOGRAPHIES OF SOFT SPATIALITIES

During the last thirty years, the global advance of Neoliberalism has produced a deep transformation of the spatial governance structure. In this context, the relational understanding of space brought by the post-structuralist perspective (Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006) has begun to deeply influence planning theory and practice. Planners have started to interpret space as a socially dynamic and experienced entity. The theorization of the «soft spaces of governance», which counterposed to the «hard spaces of government», is one of the results of this new influence (Luukkonen et al., 2012; Metzger et al., 2012; Haughton et al., 2013).

While the hard/soft spaces dualism has been adopted to describe administrative levels at any range of scale, those going from European and regional to metropolitan and local (Lovering, 2007) and at almost any context, the cooperative arrangements and the rooting in local politics processes are responsible of establishing a different relation of these spaces with the administrative and institutional backgrounds (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Haughton et al., 2013). According to Metzger & Schmitt (2012), soft spaces stands as those «informal or semiformal, non-statutory spatialities of planning with associations and relations stretching both across formally established boundaries and scalar levels of planning and across previously sectoral divides». Boundaries of these spaces have been defined “fuzzy” (Haughton et al., 2013) since they are dynamic devices that change according to the presence of territorial strategies which are often the result of a complex interaction between top-down policies and bottom-up practices. Moreover, these governance arrangements aim at generating new spatial imaginaries going beyond formal political-territorial entities.

When involving a wide set of local actors, soft spaces of governance can also create a *space for debate*. Elected and unelected actors can interact to share some kind of interest around a particular strategy, a development program, or a new territorial identity (Paasi, 2010). Drawing together stakeholders from a variety of spheres into new networks (Bevir, 2013; Denters et al., 2005) means also to enhance the consensus around a scheme, garnering private sector confidence and finance (Haughton et al., 2013). Beside expressing a new relation between state and civil society, the appearance of new actors in the scene of government has permitted to open up to hybrid and multi-jurisdictional governance processes and to the displacement from formal to informal techniques of government. In any case, according to Lemke (2002), this has not implied a diminishment or reduction of state sovereignty and planning capacities but a change in the ways in which governance territoriality is shaped by the interacting networks of actors.

Geographies of soft spaces, while transcending the existing political and administrative boundaries, have fostered a *new thinking* to emerge and to establish testing grounds for new policy interventions (Allmendinger et al., 2015). In same cases, as those regarding the UK sub-regional and local bodies following 2011 Localism Act, soft spaces have been the incentive to think strategically and spatially about the gap created in regional and large-scale planning by devolution processes.

Being strictly embedded in current socio and economics dynamics, soft spaces have emerged as a direct consequences of neoliberal spatial and scalar regulatory restructuring (Cochrane, 2012). Thus they are entrenched within the *neoliberal governmentality* and they often have been the ground on which carrying out neoliberal experiments. Although sometimes conceived as *spaces of resistance* (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Featherstone, 2008), soft spaces are more about maintaining the existing social order rather than challenging and transforming it, as instruments of market-based forms of policy rationality (Allmendinger et al., 2015). One of the evidence supporting this argument is that sometimes the

proliferation of soft spaces relates to the desire of some actors to avoid, minimize or manage conflict and opposition. In this way, more than geographies of resistance, they stand as spatialities aiming at speeding up certain statutory procedures, limiting as much as possible the emergence of tensions and bypassing obstacles.

2. LOCAL AS A RELEVANT SCALE TO STUDY SOFT SPACES PROLIFERATION

Being rooted in neoliberal governmentality, soft spaces have been deeply influenced by the reorganization of powers, actors and scales that contemporary territories are living. Soft spaces represent a fertile ground to measure the gradual transition from *government* to *governance* and to determine the implications in a complex slippery policy field. Accordingly, studying this transition means to evaluate and describe the development of dynamic boundaries and not always clear delimitations of competencies among different agents (Teles, 2016:4-5). Moreover, what Teles has stated is that «this paradigmatic shift from hierarchies and immovable borders to soft spaces and fuzzy boundaries [...] has obvious implications for local government» (Teles, 2016: 6).

The emerging dualism between *government* and *governance* is part of that broader phenomenon of *institutional rescaling*, according to which new orders have been shaped as the results of changes in the distribution of powers and responsibilities between regulators levels and actors (Bracci, 2016: 44). This process of rescaling is based on the idea that the transformation and spatial redefinition of the scales of government constitute a specific operation mode of the capitalist system (Bracci, 2016). According to Brenner (2011), this analytical approach implies an idea of spatiality as a dimension continuously produced, reproduced and reconfigured by social relations deeply affected by power differences. In this sense, the spatial units are no longer conceptualized as self-evident objects, but they need to be studied with respect to «the relationships they have with other scales and units of analysis» (Bracci, 2016: 35).

As part of the institutional rescaling phenomenon, a crucial role is given by the so-called *downscaling*, process involving the transferring of functions to local levels. In some countries, this downscaling process was linked to the path of reforms started in the late Seventies following the Welfare State crisis. This has led to a major reorganization of the regulatory power of the State, and to the multiplication of the actors involved in the design and management of social policies (Kazepov, 2008). Therefore, forms of *policy rescaling* have filled the municipal level with new functions, which previously were under national competence. This was defined as a vertical process of *subsidiarisation* of Welfare policies (Kazepov 2008). Accordingly, the growing importance of local governments' cooperation is given not just by the end of the State monopoly over public policy but also by the border crossing effect emerging from the *de-territorialization* of public policy (Teles, 2016). Though the territorial dimension of policies has been restructured (or de-structured) in the last decades, the local level has been conceived as the relevant field in which performing urban policies.

In recent years, we have seen local cooperation gaining more attention in the research agenda (Teles, 2016; Swianiewicz, 2011; Hulst *et al.*, 2007). According to Teles (2016: 7), challenges in current debate regard the *diversity* of municipal cooperation, which is given by institutional, cultural and administrative multiple traditions, numerous societal functions and dissimilar competencies.

In the next paragraphs, we will focus on the current practices of local cooperation in a context, the Aso Valley in Marche region, in the center of Italy. This context has been chosen because of the presence of a long-standing gap between territorial and institutional facts (Calafati, 2010), which has strongly affected the large-scale management and planning of the valley. This gap, together with the recent changes affecting territorial management policies¹, has been the main reason fostering institutional and non institutional actors to cooperate in order to respond to the changing economic and social conditions.

¹ The Law n. 56 (called Delrio from the name of the main promoter Graziano Delrio) was approved by Italian parliament on April 7, 2014 and it radically reduced the powers exercised by Provinces giving a new central role to municipalities in policy making processes.

3. INSTITUTIONAL FRAGMENTATION AND SPACES OF COOPERATION IN ASO VALLEY IN ITALY

The territory of the Aso Valley, in Marche region, is part of the Adriatic comb system linked to watersheds located orthogonally to the seacoast and marked by morphologically recent river valleys. Aso Valley is specialized in the intensive production of fruit, which concentrates nearly 60% of the production and transformation of fruit at regional level, placing the valley among the most advanced Italian agricultural contexts. In 2010, it was estimated that in the valley more than 2.800 agricultural enterprises were operating in a land surface of almost 26.000 hectares in total.

Although Aso Valley can still be defined a “rural valley”, in the last fifty years the valley floor has hosted several small urban expansions mostly regarding residential and industrial land uses. The resulting landscape is a *palimpsest* of different anthropic characters (Corboz, 1985), disseminated by numerous archeological remains of Piceno and Roman ancient past, and crossed by river natural areas, which are still today mainly untouched by men. In spite of urban expansions, Aso Valley in the years 2007-13 has had a slight negative demographic rate (-2,83%), with decreasing population from 31.792 to 30.893 units.

From the administrative point of view, the valley territory is a mosaic of 24 small municipalities, with a population ranging from 3.100 to 400 inhabitants (Fig. 1). This arrangement has historically fostered the cooperation between local councils in order to guarantee an adequate service provision to local inhabitants. In 2004 the situation turned to be more complex by the introduction of the new province of Fermo (FM), which juxtaposed to the previously existing province of Ascoli Piceno (AP). Accordingly, valley territory was spit into two provinces with the Aso river being the border between the two.

The background of these institutional and administrative changes has been the already mentioned process of *policy rescaling* running in the last 20 years, which was not followed by an adequate financial restructuring to give local councils the financial resources to fulfill to their functions. This already unstable panorama worsened in 2014 by Delrio law, which deeply restructured the Provinces, disempowering their role in coordinating and managing the territory at the large-scale. In Aso Valley the institutional fragmentation and the complexity in terms of decision making processes and multilevel governance (Dente, 2011) have fostered the emergence and proliferation of multiple forms of cooperation between local councils and different sets of local actors differently involved in promoting rural development. Below are presented the most relevant soft spaces of local cooperation in Aso Valley. Emphasis is given on the kinds of actors involved (Fig. 2), on the contents and aims of the cooperation (Fig. 3), and their influence on policy making processes.

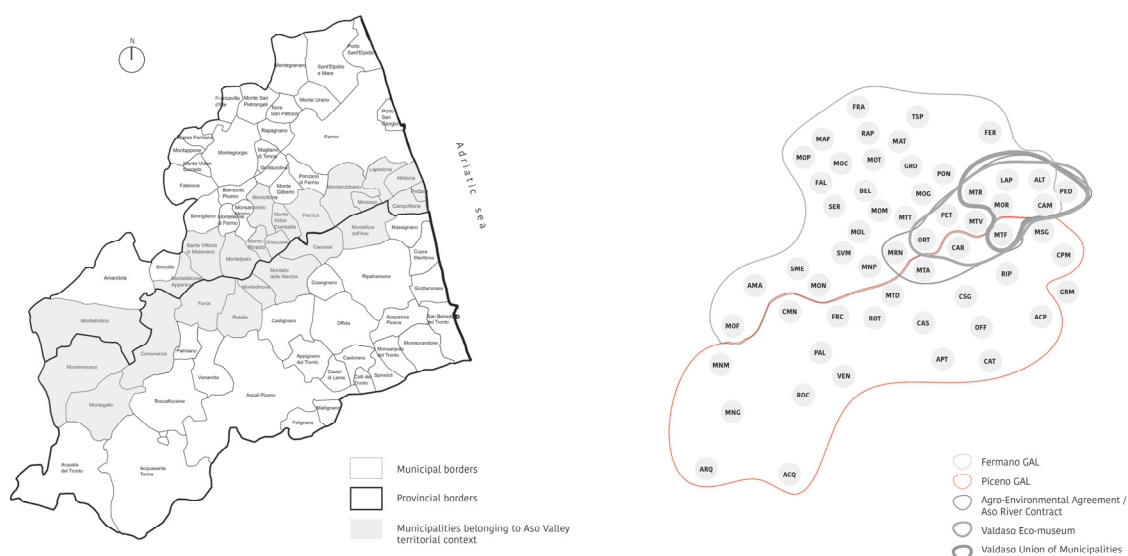


Fig. 1. Institutional and administrative spaces (on the left) and spaces of cooperation (on the right) in Aso Valley

3.1. The Valdaso Union of Local Councils

The Valdaso Union of local councils, established in 2001, includes seven local councils. These municipalities, responding to the need of reducing the management costs of public services and to maintain the same quality standards, decided to join in a union, giving rise to a body entrusted with statutory autonomy and acting as policy maker. As reported in its statute, the union's main objectives are to promote and pursue the socio-economic development of Aso Valley, to progressively integrate union's municipalities, and to maintain relationships with other local authorities in order to fully implement the principle of *subsidiarity*. The services that are currently devolved to the Union are the municipal police, the taxation service, the consultancy and assistance service for commercial activities, youth policy, the staff management and the press office. Rural policy and planning are not among the joint functions in charge of the Union, confirming a consolidated trend in Italy according to which rarely local authorities have been involved in sustaining agricultural sector (Cinà, 2016). Therefore, every local council is acting independently in drafting its own local plan and in deciding its own land use configuration concerning urban and rural uses. The Valdaso Union of Local Councils can be considered the only *hard space of cooperation* in Aso Valley. It is a statutory and established form of cooperation where local councils have given rise to a formal administrative structure. Although the Union has not a direct electoral basis, its field of action is strictly dependent to the elected tiers of the seven municipalities. Accordingly, the space of cooperation involves the seven local councils and the formal activity of the Union is not directly influenced by the contribution of other local actors.

3.2. The Valdaso Agro-Environmental Agreement

In the last decades, the intensive cultivations in Aso Valley implying an excessive use of chemical products have given rise to problems regarding the health conditions of local farmers and the high levels of pollution of water system. To answer to these problems, in 2008 few local farmers, supervised by an agronomist working for an environmental safety agency belonging to Regional Administration decided to start applying some alternative methods of cultivation in some portions of their land. Few months later, the idea to engage European funds to sustain these practices was launched by the Regional administration through the creation of the Agro-Environmental Agreement (AEA), a policy tool introduced by the Rural Development Plan (RDP) 2007/13 and proposed again by the current RDP 2014/20. Already defined as «one of the most innovative attempt of integrate planning in environmental policies» (Coderoni, 2011), the agreement is oriented to protect agricultural soils and to reduce water pollution from pesticides and nitrates. The Valdaso Agreement aggregates public and private stakeholders around a project, which is the result of a process of sharing environmental problems and objectives of agricultural protection and food security. This policy tool implies a specific agreement between a Promoter (a public body) and a group of local farmers which undertake to apply more sustainable techniques of cultivation. The project can be considered a good example of soft cooperation for its strategic, time-limited and target-oriented nature, around which a wide and heterogeneous group of local farmers cooperated with local councils and regional administration, driving local agricultural economy towards more sustainable methods of cultivations. Some innovative aspects characterize AEA nature and content. First, AEA is expression of the recent governments' willingness to integrate environmental conservation and protection and enhancement of the countryside in the new agro-environmental measures (Moir *et al.*, 1997). Accordingly, the integrated dimension of the agreement combines agricultural and environmental policies and it promotes the multi-functionality of agricultural enterprises, reorienting agriculture toward territorial management policies (Roggero *et al.*, 2006). A second aspect regards the originally bottom-up dimension of the agreement. AEA idea and aims were deeply rooted in local farmers' initiative, which later was able to raise the interest of higher institutions, such as the Regional and Provincial administrations. Last but not least, the key role played by AEA in shaping local governance processes, which was evident after the institutional changes in 2014 that radically reduced the powers of Provinces, giving a central role to municipalities in policy making processes. Moreover, in AEA second generation introduced by the current 2014/20 RDP, the restructuring of the Provinces has triggered the self-organization of a group of 13 municipalities whose cooperation has played a crucial role in managing the AEA beneficiaries consisting in more than 100 farmers operating in an area of about 8000 hectares.

3.3. The Local Action Groups

The Local Action Groups (GAL) are programming organizations gathering public and private actors to define a shared policy. GAL's field of action is the development of the rural territory through the Leader approach, employing mainly but not exclusively the loans coming from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). The GAL periodically implement its Local Development Plan (LDP), setting out the actions to be implemented in the respect of the measures provided by the Rural Development Plan (RDP) and in coherency with objectives of European Union and of the regional, provincial and local development plans.

The GALs acting in Aso Valley are two, the Fermano GAL and Piceno GAL. These are two complementary spaces of cooperation having within their organizations numerous local public and private actors that, in various ways, have an interest in promoting and contributing to rural development. The GALs activity, through the action of the LDP, is geared to enable a broad and comprehensive involvement of local communities in the definition of the actions to be implemented. This is reached through a *listening phase*, aimed to raise awareness on the opportunities for territorial development and to define the operative framework of local economic operators, associations and public authorities, and a *programmatic phase* where the demands scheme outlined by the previous stage is crossed with a context analysis, for outlining the objectives to be set up in local development strategies. The tool to achieve these objectives is a pragmatic and selective Action Plan including the identification of the technical solutions and the most appropriate types of measures ("misure") matching with the emerging local needs. These measures ranges from the transferring of knowledge and information (19.2.1), to the development of local farms and other enterprises (19.2.6), to the enhancement of main services and renewal of historical centers in rural areas (19.2.7) and to cooperation (19.2.16). For every measure, some sub-measures clarify the operative dimension of the strategy, with a scheme defining the main objectives, the thematic scope, the description and the efficacy of the intervention, the selection criteria and the eligibility. In this sense, the soft nature of the cooperation consists in the GAL's way of being a space of debate, where a variety of local public and private actors join together to draw the trajectory of development. In this sense, the range of action of the Local Development Plan is deeply selective and target-oriented since it aims at establishing the exact objectives to be achieved, the actions to be carried out, and the local actors potentially interested to implement the measures.

3.4. The Aso River Contract

The River Contracts are negotiated and participatory strategic planning processes aimed at protecting and managing in a sustainable way the water resources, enhancing the river areas and reducing the hydraulic risk. As reported in the National Charter of River Contracts (2011), the role of negotiation between public administrations and private actors involved at different levels in the contracts takes the form of multi-sectoral and multi-scalar agreements where the voluntary nature and flexibility of action is the connoting the character of decision-making processes. Another key aspect is the contribution of the River Contract in reorienting and integrating the content of local and large-scale planning tools.

The Aso River Contract, born in 2016, is the most recent space of cooperation in Aso Valley, as well as the one whose purposes and contents must be still fully implemented. The Contract brings together 11 local authorities and other public and private actors of the valley. The constitution of the leading group of Aso River Contract, formed by three local councils, by Legambiente (environmental association) and by the two GALs, took place during last April 2016. It has officially created a strategic participatory planning experience with the purpose of involving around some specific environmental issues (protection and correct management of Aso waters and the containment of hydrogeological risk), a set of local actors sharing a common territorial project. In the 'Manifesto of Intents' recently signed, the aim is to orient the activity of the River Contract and to share an operational methodology that responds to the definition and general coordination of the objectives at the scale of the entire river basin. The main purpose of the Contract is to frame some current ongoing policies, such as the Agro-Environmental Agreement, into a more general and coherent plan for the entire valley, defining amount and origin of the financial resources to be activated. Some constraints are currently limiting the activity of the Contract river. These are mostly given by the scarce availability of funding to coordinate the actors involved and to implement the contents of the policies. Unfortunately, some recent natural disasters (a

series of earthquakes started in August 2016 and a heavy snowfall in January 2017) have further slowed the activity of the Contract river, given the local authorities' urgency to deal with emergency issues.

3.5. The Valdaso Eco-museum

The Aso Eco-museum is a cultural project aiming at promoting the socio-economic development of the valley through the enhancement and networking of local cultural peculiarities, the creation of synergies with the touristic and economic sector and the integration of the system of touristic accommodations with local artistic and gastronomic heritage. The Eco-museum operates underlining the broad definition of the cultural values of a territory, fostering the multiple interrelations between the artistic and local traditional values. The proposed project has identified some places to be included in the Eco-museum, in order to improve their attractiveness to visitors. These are local museums, historical town halls, washhouses, small rural churches, old railway stations and small traditional fisherman harbors. The Eco-museum is currently joined by eleven local councils of Aso Valley. It is a form of cooperation in which municipalities operate synergically to improve the touristic attractiveness of the valley. It can be conceived as a tool for local authorities and communities to share and deepen their creativeness, but also to experiment professionalism and to realize animation activities for local inhabitants. The project, launched on an experimental basis during the biennial 2011-2012 by the Valdaso Union of Local Councils, has seen the initial involvement of 7 municipalities, as well as 14 local cultural and youth associations acting in the valley. The enthusiasm of the youth and cultural associations has influenced, in June 2012, the adhesion of other 4 municipalities in the Eco-museum, expanding the network of actors involved.

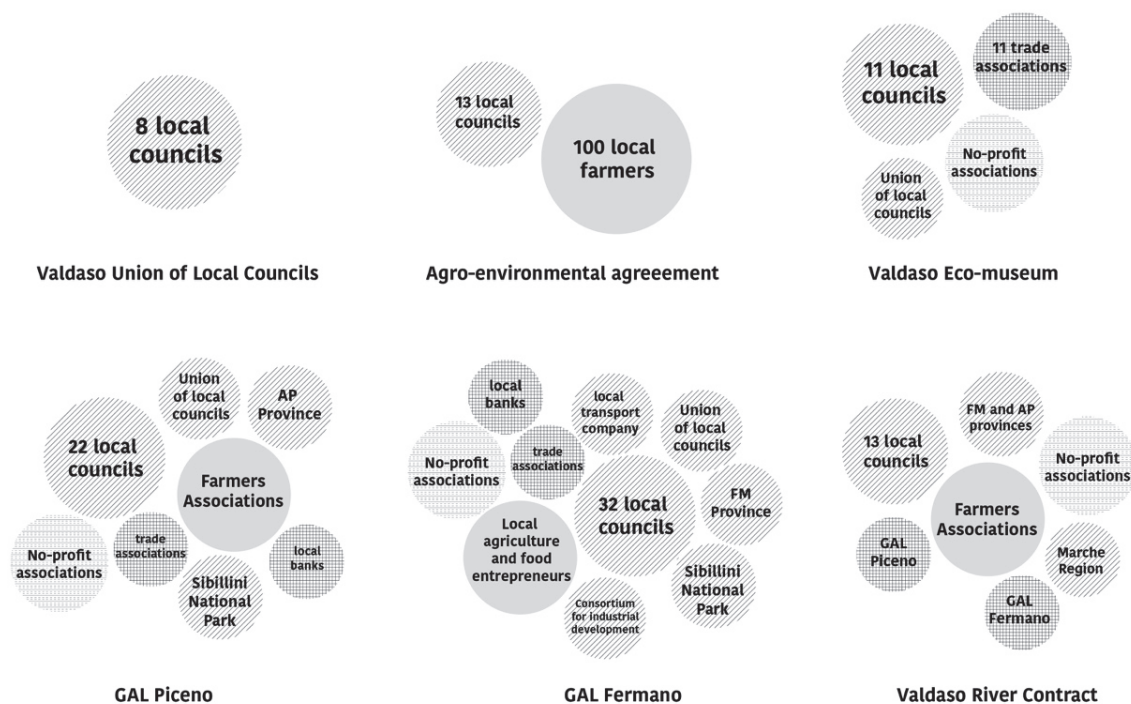


Fig. 2. Analysis of actors participating to the forms of cooperation in Aso Valley

	OBJECTIVES	POSITIVE FEATURES	CONSTRAINTS
Valdaso Union of local councils	Promoting the socio-economic development of Aso valley Fostering the gradual integration of the local councils of the union Fully implementing the principle of subsidiarity	Stable and formal cooperation Consolidated institutional relations Statutory structure	Territorial and vocational differences among municipalities Political concerns affecting the cooperation Scarce impact on rural development
Valdaso Agro-Environmental Agreement	Incrementing the sustainability of local agricultural productions Improving the health conditions of local farmers Innovating the methods of cultivations	Target oriented Incremental range of action Access to European funding Top-down / bottom-up interaction	Hard estimation of territorial impacts Lack of expertise needed for project design and implementation.
Valdaso River Contract	Perserving water resources and developing river areas Fostering the environmental impacts of agriculture Re-orienting the contents of local and large scale planning tools	Multi-scalar and multi-sectoral Mixed public-private partnership Voluntary and flexible range of action Strategic and participatory planning	Limited technical expertise Lack of financial resources Lack of coordination among actors Delays given by recent natural disasters
Fermano GAL	Supporting, encouraging and promoting rural development Supporting small and medium-sized enterprises and innovating the agricultural system Developing and commercializing local agricultural products	Mixed public-private partnership Wide representation of local actors Access to European funding Strategic and selective range of action Stable and consolidated cooperation Availability of technical expertise	Limited cooperation among GAL groups
Piceno GAL	Supporting and contributing to rural development Offering technical expertise to small and medium-size enterprises Creating, promoting and disseminating local products brands	Mixed public-private partnership Access to European funding Strategic and selective range of action Stable and consolidated cooperation Availability of technical expertise	Limited cooperation among GAL groups Few local actors involved
Valdaso Ecomuseum	Improving the attractiveness of Aso Valley Fostering the creativity of local communities Creating a networking of local cultural and historical attractiveness	Voluntary and flexible range of action Wide representation of local actors Target oriented	Scarce consensus on project activities Limited expertise and financial resources

Fig. 3. Objectives, positive features and main constraints of the spaces of cooperation

4. STRENGTHS AND CURRENT CHALLENGES OF COOPERATION: A SURVEY ON MAYORS' OPINIONS

The *soft* spaces of cooperation in Aso Valley have been studied through a series of semi-structured interviews done in early 2017 to local actors involved in different ways in local governance processes. Interviews were addressed to mayors of seven local councils of the Valley and to the two technical coordinators of the Piceno and Fermano Local Action Groups (GAL). They were oriented to investigate strengths and limits of local cooperation in Aso Valley, and to identify the main forces hindering the establishment of a large-scale planning policy.

Alongside the changes of the institutional panorama brought by 2014 Delrio Law, leading to the redefinition of the role of the Provinces within spatial governance (Ciapetti, 2014), the interviewed local administrators are still pretty skeptical and distrustful on the institutional changes introduced. The main problems concern the deep weakening of Provinces as administrative body in charge of coordinating local administrations and carrying on the large-scale territorial management of the valley. Some local administrators indicate the cooperation between local councils as an *inevitable* response (needed even before 2014) to fill this *empty* space between local and regional level, especially in contexts such as the Aso Valley, characterized by a mosaic of small and micro municipalities, most of them with less than 3.000 inhabitants. Only one mayor up to seven suggested the *amalgamation* of local councils (Teles, 2016; Hertzog, 2010a) as one viable possibility to respond to the progressive scarcity of financial resources. Accordingly, amalgamation stands as a delicate issue in a context where rivalry and competition between neighboring municipalities are still dominant. It seems that *local autonomy* is still a condition to be hardly questioned, confirming what some researchers have previously underlined about the obstacles to inter-municipal cooperation (Hertzog, 2010b; IMC Toolkit, 2010)

Local cooperation in Aso Valley is strongly rooted in the need to «*work together, because alone we can do little*». At the basis of the different spaces of cooperation there is the need to reduce expenses in public services management, running for obtaining European funds for rural development, promoting rural tourism, activating synergies with local actors, etc. Despite these advantages, some of the mayors stressed the often difficult dialogue between local administrators, which is the result of a lack of political

convergence on some issues, given by a skepticism about developing certain forms of cooperation, whose results emerge just in medium/long term. This supports the idea that political differences between municipalities may play a crucial role in initiating an activity of cooperation (Hertzog 2010a).

Among the experiences of local cooperation in Aso Valley, the Valdoso Union of Local Councils is the more formal and consolidated space of cooperation. Born in 2001, the Union was considered an innovative experience of intermunicipal cooperation, originated to respond to the long-lasting structural deficit characterizing the Aso Valley in terms of efficacy of public action and political representativeness. All mayors interviewed are not satisfied with the current activity of the union. They raise the need of deeply rethinking its purpose and scope. While recognizing to the union a *potential* key-role in replacing the Provinces for shaping spatial governance, some acknowledge that the union is under divestment or at least in the need of a deep reformulation. The main problems raised concern the deep territorial, economic and social differences among the municipalities included in the union, together with some political rivalries or interpersonal issues among mayors. The profound differences between municipalities are regarding especially those facing the Adriatic coast, that host a relevant number of seasonal tourists, and those of the hilly contexts, characterized by a lower mass of tourists yearly extended. Accordingly, as already shown by Nuvolati (2007), the number and characters of temporary populations deeply influence territorial and urban planning policies. Following this approach, also in Aso Valley temporary populations should foster the cooperation among local authorities that share the same needs in terms of management and service provision.

Differently from Valdoso Union of Local Councils, the more recent spaces of cooperation gain a higher consensus in their purposes and contents among the local administrators interviewed. Among these, the Agro-Environmental Agreement is unanimously defined as a successful experience because of the relevant benefits to local agricultural sector. All local administrators are strongly motivated to further develop this experience.

Also the Valdoso River Contract according to most of the interviewees is a good opportunity to deal with the integrated management of the river areas and to link inland and coastal areas within the same territorial strategy. Some believe that the agreement can be a useful tool only if conceived as a *strategic perspective* in which framing a series of actions, rather than as a superstructure overlapping to those already existing. Few administrators define the «Manifesto of Intent» signed in February 2016 a «farsighted document». Despite the common knowledge of the effectiveness of this instrument and the consistency between objectives, purposes and operational field, the lack of expertise needed to coordinate local actors and implement actions and projects is the most crucial issues that the River Contract leading group is currently facing.

As stated by most of the mayors, the Eco-museum is a useful experience to promote the cultural and historical attractiveness of the valley. However, some mayors do not prove to be satisfied because of the weak territorial impacts obtained so far. Therefore, some local councils of Aso Valley decided not to join this experience.

GAL experiences of cooperation is considered quite successful by the respondents. The main reason of this success is the close link between policy-making processes and production of territorial impacts. This bond is made possible by the presence of European funding that guarantees the implementation of incremental practices of development in rural areas. The GAL field of action is capable of transforming the rationality of policies into actions capable of producing incremental opportunities for the growth of the attractiveness and competitiveness of agricultural enterprises. From an operational standpoint, the GAL can be considered as a meeting table where local councils and other local actors draw together the trajectory of local development.

5. TOWARDS A LARGE-SCALE PLANNING POLICY IN ASO VALLEY

The survey on mayors about the state of the cooperation in Aso Valley reveals a panorama in which many are the factors influencing local governance processes and the ways in which the relational space is shaped by local actors. One among the many questions that needs to be answered is how these spaces

of cooperation could better contribute to rural development, fostering the farming activity and balancing the demands of the agricultural sector with those opting for new housing developments. One of the possible answer deals with what Moir *et al.* (1997) stated in the end of the Nineties regarding the importance of planning in rural areas:

« Even those who are critics of planning acknowledge that its role in the countryside is still fundamental. Nevertheless, planning cannot simply rely on the blanket approach to rural protection it adopted on the past [...] The challenge facing planning today is how to achieve a balance between encouraging development and protecting the visual amenity of the countryside »

The idea here proposed is to establish a large-scale planning policy for the Aso Valley. It is suggested that this could be an inter-municipal planning policy, that is to say a policy jointly implemented and shared by all local authorities with the supervision and mediation of a group of external experts.

We are well aware that planning is the field where at the moment it seems quiet challenging to think about developing cooperation in Aso Valley. Local councils cautiously cooperate and only if they are sure to have the full control of the impacts of the cooperation in their own local context. Although most local administrators do agree to establish a large-scale planning policy, some obstacles emerge and deeply undermine the achievement of the process.

The first and most important obstacle reported by mayors concerns the scope of the cooperation, planning, which is interpreted by the majority of respondents as a *«delicate and sensitive matter»*, hardly delegable to others and therefore to be managed at the municipal level. As emerged from the interviews, forms of cooperative planning would compromise local authorities' faculty to decide how many developments foresee and where to locate them within their municipal area of jurisdiction. Accordingly, a large-scale planning policy is seen as a restriction of their decisional autonomy. Despite this, recent studies show how planning could be one of the most relevant field of cooperation because of the need to rationalize other policies (housing, enterprise zones, roads...) and to deal effectively with issues that cross municipal boundaries (IMC Toolkit, 2010), especially when these needs are involving rural contexts such as the Aso Valley, where the maintenance of the visual and landscape quality of the countryside clash with demands for housing developments.

Another obstacle is the lack of *knowledge resources* needed to understand the major benefits of inter-municipal planning and, ultimately, to reach the success in the implementation of the policy. As recent studies on public policy analysis (Dente, 2011) and inter-municipal cooperation (IMC Toolkit, 2010) have already investigated, the lack of expertise and technical knowledge is one of the crucial aspect hindering innovation in local governance processes. What emerged from interviews is that some mayors are not fully aware of the pros and cons of inter-municipal planning, in terms of sharing resources, facilities, technical knowledge, cost reduction and management. This represents an important limit towards the implementation of large-scale planning policies.

Current uncertainty and lack of trust by local administrators force the gaze toward a scenario of intermunicipal planning which involves a radical move from current situation. In this sense, the *scenario-making process* is useful for building a new frame of sense to local government, according to a perspective that could drive current conditions towards a trajectory of change (Secchi, 2000).

The proposed scenario is alternative to the current *patchy* mosaic of planning tools, according to which each local council has planned its own land use forecast without looking at what is beyond its municipal borders. Therefore, during last decades, local plans have foreseen urban developments that have transformed fertile land into urban uses, creating an impact on agricultural areas, without any guiding large-scale policy or environmental assessment. Aso valley-floor is currently disseminated by a dispersed and incoherent set of small or micro industrial and residential settlements which have deeply impacted on the agro-ecological and landscape values of the territory. What we propose here is to consider the valley as a unique area to plan. The way to do so is to establish a large-scale planning policy that we define here *«structural»*, taking some recent research and planning works as references (Ricci, 2009; Cappuccitti, 2012). The structural planning policy should be conceived as a sort of non-binding policy reference expliciting the main principles and guidelines of spatial development in Aso Valley. This should set out the type, the scale and the broad location of where new homes, transport

improvements, industrial and commercial areas, open spaces and services will be located in the valley according to a long-term plan of ten-fifteen years. The policy does not set out site-specific proposals or allocations; instead it should look at the broad locations for delivering new developments. The structural planning policy should be shared and approved by all local councils. For detailing the structural planning, every local council will draft its own binding local plans. These, differently from the current plans, will have just to detail development management policies and draft building regulations. Moreover, local plans will be drafted in conformity with the contents of the structural planning policy.

To overcome the lack of knowledge and the local administrators' unfamiliarity to intermunicipal planning policies the setting up of information-sharing, research studies, seminars, promotion campaigns and confidence-building measures is essential to ensure the implementation of the policy.

To enhance the rural vocation of local economy, the large-scale planning policy will be oriented to minimize the *urban* impacts on agricultural areas, reducing as much as possible the consumption of fertile land. Previously developed land (brownfields, dismissed buildings, vacant lots, etc.) should play a significant role in meeting housing and other development requirements in the entire valley. According to this scheme, the identification of some strategic allocation sites where concentrating the development rights coming from all municipalities would required the employment of some planning tools in order to manage the rights among all actors involved. Thus the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) at intermunicipal level would be oriented to balance positive and negative benefits of new developments among the involved municipalities (Lazzarini *et al.*, 2016).

Within this structural planning framework, rural policies in Aso Valley could act in a terrain where agricultural areas preservation is a crucial issue in land-use patterns. The integration of rural policies into territorial planning could strengthen farmers' activity, empowering agricultural enterprises in front of land use pressures from urban expansion and reducing the conflicts between agricultural and industrial activities.

How this new structural planning framework would interact with the existing soft spaces of cooperation in Aso Valley? As previously shown, the strategic and time-limited orientation are important factors of the soft spaces of cooperation. Soft spaces stand as dynamic devices changing according to the achievement of a given objective. Thus one of the limits of soft cooperation is the often uneasy production of long-lasting territorial impacts and their difficult rootedness in structural conditions of territorial development. Therefore, soft spaces produce advancements in the strategic thinking and project making of local communities but most of these effects turn to be evanescent and short term. In this sense, a structural planning framework could turn the current spaces of cooperation into more consolidated governance processes, rooting the territorial impacts of rural policies in the current contextual conditions. A more consolidated land use pattern, a long-term perspective of rural development, a better coordination between interests and stakeholders, a selective vision of objectives are all factors that could enhance the positive effects of current cooperation, reducing the current political, administrative and territorial fragmentation.

6. A TRAJECTORY FOR IMPROVING LOCAL COOPERATION IN ASO VALLEY

During the last two decades in Aso Valley relations among local actors have been forging many spaces of cooperation. Different degrees of success are characterizing these spaces, in their way of contributing to rural development and of innovating policy making processes. Studying characters and structure of these relations is an essential condition for learning how local cooperation could better and more positively contribute to rural development. What the analysis of the forms of cooperation has demonstrated is that in Aso Valley the soft spaces proliferation has been carrying on a reconstruction of order of the fragmented institutional panorama. Accordingly, soft spaces are overcoming what Antonio Calafati (2010) has called the «gap between institutional and territorial facts», investigating the long-lasting discrepancy between the ways in which territory is spatially organized and the ways in which it is managed and administered. Indeed, soft cooperation understands « *cities [and territories] as a networked field of action rather than an administrative bounded construction* » (Reed *et al.*, 2016).

We have also seen how the soft spaces of cooperation have been promoting different but complementary strategies of rural development. The interaction between these forms of cooperation, namely the way in which these soft spaces were overlapping, was indicative of a *relation space* where local actors' wishes to cooperate encountered and deeply shaped local governance processes. Soft spaces proliferation in Aso Valley has been the way for local institutional and non-institutional actors to respond to the changing and unstable institutional and administrative context. They have served as dynamic devices through which local communities have tried to adapt to new conditions. Soft spaces have fostered adaptation but they also have affirmed a strategic orientation to development. The selective, targeted and time-limited nature of soft cooperation aimed at implementing actions affecting directly agricultural activities.

The analysis of Aso Valley's relational space has underlined some crucial factors of success for soft spaces in promoting rural development and in fostering positive impacts on local agricultural sector.

The first condition is the horizontal and vertical interaction with higher-level institutions and other local actors. The *horizontal/vertical interrelation* is an essential factor for soft spaces to respond successfully to the processes of *policy rescaling* (Bracci, 2016) characterizing the neoliberal governmentality in the last 20 years. Accordingly, while interacting simultaneously with top-down policies and bottom-up practices, the cooperation could gain a wider consensus among local actors, responding effectively to contextual conditions and promoting a more integrated vision of rural development. These factors have been crucial for the success of the Agro-environmental agreement in its way of shaping local governance processes and influencing policy making processes.

The analysis of the spaces of cooperation in Aso Valley has also shown how a mixed *public/private partnership* is a second relevant point for cooperation to increase its territorial impacts. This was evident both in the case of Fermano and Piceno GAL and in the Valdaso River Contract where local private actors, such as local businesses or companies have had an important role in influencing contents and aims of the cooperation.

Another condition for their success is their ability to run for extra funding. The GALs and the Agro-Environmental Agreement have shown how accessing to external financial resources is crucial to achieve project results. In the case of GALs, action implementation has been deeply dependent to the competition for accessing to European funds and its expertise was crucial for competition processes and in drafting a quite selective and deeply pragmatic proposal. In the case of the Agro-Environmental Agreement, the financial support coming from the European funds managed by the Rural Development Plan was the main factor influencing the achievement of project results.

Beside the elements crucial for soft spaces to be effective, some constraints are still limiting their ways of contributing to rural development. The informal character of soft spaces is reducing their power to root in local contexts and to affect everyday social life of communities. As long as *«lines on map will continue to matter»* (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015), a dimension of structural planning is fundamental to spatial practices. The implication of this is that soft spaces need to be anchored to and influenced by the realities of defining and allocating land-rights (Allmendinger *et al.*, 2015). In this context, the proposed paradigm of the large-scale planning policy could better anchor soft spaces to the need to produce territorial impacts in the local context of the valley. Soft spaces, far from being depicted as devices replacing statutory planning, are rather more effective if complemented by formal policy making processes and related to stable administrative structures.

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