Sustainable development and cultural environment

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The relationship between the human community and the environment is at the heart of geographical thought. The substance of any reflection on this theme is the cultural environment in its rapport with the ecosystem; the cultural environment that permeates, in different ways, every society in time and space. To this we owe our interpretation of reality and consequently the way the human community interacts with its territory.

Since the end of the sixties, a period imbued in structuralism which pervaded the general theory of systems, a new model has been proposed for the description of reality, any kind of reality, with the aim of creating a common ground between the natural sciences and social sciences. If, at first sight, such a theory might be seen as neo-positivism, having matured in biological thought, during the eighties it provided the opportunity for a more intense dialogue between the disciplines of organic life and society. In this new cultural context, the concept of structure, the basis of the structuralist theory, was replaced by that of organization, the concept of evolution by that of change, which presupposes the irreversibility of phenomenological processes. To this were added three new concepts: environment, conceived as internal to the system, to gain concrete knowledge of its effects on the organization of the subject and how it might react and objective, to know what plans the subject is developing, that is, towards what goal it is directed. At the same time there was an on-going debate about the concept of development, which, since the sixties, was interpreted through quantitative values (gross national product, employment and the elimination of underdevelopment) and where external environment, cultural heritage and ethical values constitute externalising effects with respect to the cognitive approach. The second
phase, that of human development, introduces ethical value by means of three new elements: the quality of life, the natural rights of the individual and political freedom, leading in fact to the internalisation of social objectives, but still excluding the natural environment and cultural heritage. Only with the advent of the concept of sustainable development, introduced within the program of UNESCO’s Man and Biosphere research, and the basis of the work of the Commission on Environment and Development, is there initiated a system of objectives that includes the natural environment and cultural heritage. This refers to three components: ecosystem, economy and society, and use is made of the concept of integrity of the ecosystem, economic efficiency (not to be confused with productivity) and social equity between the generations. In the light of this new cultural interpretation development is not identified necessarily with growth, though it does not excludes it. It considers the environment as an internal component of the economic system, and always involves qualitative improvement tied in particular to quality of life, to the landscape and to cultural heritage. It implies the recognition of values that concern both society and nature, recognizes the right of all members of the community to express their real potentiality and presupposes that the integrity of the ecosystem is guaranteed.

The application of the sustainable development paradigm in the territorial process has led to the identification of a third way\(^1\) tied to the assertion of a territorial model oriented rather more towards conceptual innovation, towards a definition of forms of community that will result in the rebirth of the territory. In this cultural approach sustainability becomes an actual quality of the genetic code of development. The key concept is that of local development, where “local” becomes a near synonym of self-sustainable, and where development refers to the resources of the territory and to the local identity. The decisive step, then, is the notion of the territory as a point of reference for sustainable development; by this is intended the territory comprising the

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\(^1\) The first way is tied to the concept of compatible development, which confronts environmental difficulties by means of technological innovation, the self-regulation of the market and the search for leaps of quality which permit the maintenance of the usual forms of development. The second way is a restricted sustainable development, which imposes limits, contextual parameters within which development ceases to be destructive of the environment.
natural environment (ecosystem), the human environment (the settled community with its
cultural, economic and political characteristics) and the constructed environment (the material
results of the relationship between the two environments, visible in the landscape). The next step,
from the concept of territory to the concept of region and local system, allows us to get down to
the grass roots and identify the different natural$^2$ and social$^3$ territorial resources.

As we go on to focus on this theme, we limit ourselves in this context to a definition of cultural
material resources as being all the cultural assets that constitute a strategic resource in the
process of territorialisation (F Dallari, 1996). At a global and local level in the last decade great
attention has been given to cultural assets. In addition there is also a precise political interest,
witnessed by the ample legislative corpus aimed at controlling the issue by means of regulation.
Cultural assets are considered to be any manifestation or product of the human intellect with
exceptional character or artistic value, any testimony of the material or spiritual evolution of man
and his civil development, any object or natural phenomenon that has scientific interest or moves
the soul (D. Ruocco, 1979). Mobile cultural assets are distinguished from localised and fixed
ones, which bestow cultural significance to the territory itself produced by human activity to the
extent that we can speak of a cultural locality. If then the cultural asset is interpreted as a
reference marker of culture interpreted in its broadest meaning, cultural heritage appears
considerably greater in extent than how it is conventionally understood. It comprises all the
products of man as it constitutes the materialisation of culture, and ends up entirely
encompassing nature itself. From this arises the difficulty of recognising and choosing from
amongst man’s artefacts which of them should be defined as cultural assets with regard to their
conservation, protection and development. This operation is based on a system of values that
varies greatly from one historical phase to another. Indeed the cultural asset, simultaneously
both a material and mental entity, while on the one hand suffering from processes of physical

$^2$ These consist of resources which are abiotic (minerals and energy sources), biotic (vegetation and animals) and
natural patrimony (parks and protected areas).
deterioration, on the other it has also a spiritual destiny inasmuch as it belongs to a complex body of ideas, values and highly varying beliefs; the expression of a community. The fact itself of having been created by the community and that such an action originated in western modernity is what emphasises the geographical importance of cultural assets in the organization process of the territory, or re-territorialisation.

The policy aim of producing a collective patrimony which originated in the eighteenth century, has progressively increased the number of cultural assets to the extent that it encompasses new assets such as industrial architecture and modern constructions, creating in the process, and ever more forcefully, the need to define a plan of action. To know and preserve the basic framework of the area means preserving the specificity of places, an aspect which is becoming more and more accepted as a basic premise of quality, before any human action whether it be social or economic.

In such an atmosphere the principle of conservation is forever being consolidated by means of actions taken for the protection of monumental and artistic assets, even banal ones, together with the need to defend spaces and natural resources being extended over the whole historical area, which in the Italian and European context means to the whole territory. Yet, from the small number of interventions on the land and the frequent failures of many of them, emerges the need to start with a systematic and thus complex approach: integrated regional development initiatives, which means territorializing the conservation policies regarding cultural and natural heritage. There has emerged, in fact, a complex interconnection, which seems impossible to

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3 These are: human resources (the native and imported workforce), material cultural resources, or development hardware (archeological remains, monuments, settlements, protected cultural zones), non-material cultural resources or development software (value systems, social activity, social reactivity towards external forces).

4 In France, for example the creations of a living architect are not considered to be cultural assets. In Italy we remember at the beginning of the sixties onwards the ever-lively debates about the identification of the historical centre to protect and develop. For some this was limited to old buildings from before Italian unification (The Institute for cultural assets, Regione Emilia-Romagna, 1979). We should also remember that a national law is being promulgated which states that all buildings which are more than fifty years old should be placed under protection. If this measure seems excessive, on the other side it is becoming clear how this planning field is encountering difficulties in expression and images-creation which require innovative and adequate means and methods, because cultural patrimony and assets tend more and more to constitute a basic component of what has become our society’s territorial project.

5 By “banal patrimony” we mean assets which are not considered monumental or historical, of the type of, and used as, modern residential quarters, as in the examples cited by Q. Sonderstrom (1944)
disentangle, between questions of tutelage and those regarding development and economic, social and productive transformation, which has created fierce clashes and territorial rivalries. Cultural heritage is the favoured expression for what actually bestows particular identity and thus culture, and shows the difference between one human group and another. This becomes a strategic opportunity in the territorial process and is even able to consolidate the stability of the local system.

Cultural assets represent the permanence that historical and archaeological research enables us to recognise. From all this it emerges how the recognition and safeguarding of cultural assets are not a strategic plan in themselves, but become one when they implicate the re-utilisation and development of the territory, the recovery, that is, of the historical territory in the fullness of its functions. In fact there follows a reconstruction of the area thanks to the newly-created conditions for a relationship among social, ecological and biological factors and agents: a new local territorial system charged with history and environmental awareness, the coherent expression of a cultural project of local development of the community rooted in the territory, which endeavours to reconstruct through the land its bonds with modernity.

The example of the wetlands is a fitting one because of the value of its nature, but even for the cultural value acquired due to the protective action taken by the local community, as in the case of the valleys of Argenta, which demonstrates the level of territorial awareness, of consensus and of social participation. The wetlands are particularly important for the maintenance of the ecosystem, for cultural values as a whole and as an expression of the world of the waters, not to mention the economic aspect, as a resource for tourist use.

The bond between wetlands and local community may be described by the use of three metaphors: unity, identity and network. The first is represents the vital bond between man and water, consolidated over a long historical process; the second refers to the awareness and recognition of unity, which leads to the will to preserve and protect; the third regards the interconnection of the wetlands system within a global network.
With regard to non-material cultural resources, we refer in practice to the community, which embodies the system of values, the desire to take an active role, and social reactivity to external forces. The community may be interpreted as all the territorial protagonists, consisting of individuals, families, social groups, the territory’s institutions, the state and businesses. They in turn are separated into regional and local entities, all participants in varying degrees in the interpretation and management of the territory. This last reflection becomes essential particularly with regard to human action, necessary and continuous, which recognizes, develops and preserves the territory, directed towards a model of territorial development indicated as the third way. The necessary environmental culture requires ever more commitment to education, which mainly involves all grades of school, but also new structures created for the purpose. The law adopted by the Emilia-Romagna Region in June 1996, entitled “The promotion, organization and development of information and environmental education” aspires to this objective, also by means of the creation of environmental education centres such as the one based in the ancient castle of Mesola, and of local environmental agencies.

Acquiring knowledge of one’s own territory, its problems and the implications of territorial development through exploitation of cultural resources should be, however, the first educational step, alongside learning Italian grammar, in producing human instruments for sustainable development.