

Transitions towards capable territories. Community development and Social development

Andrea Barbieri

researcher of Cnr-IRPPS [Institute of Research on Population and Social Policies]
and University of Salerno [Italy]

Good governance at the local level produce territories, that are socially cohesive and ecologically sound. Territories are endowed, with different potentials *vis à vis* the dilemmas and challenges of the transition imposed by the global change. It is very important to build up the capacity of any territory to struggle with new opportunities and risks. An elementary analytics for discussing about territorial capabilities is exposed together with arguments intended to criticize reductionist approaches to the governance of territories.

Most people who at one time or another have been involved in community development projects are apt to think back and try to discover the meaning of such an experience, particularly as for many of them it was a time for a special moral and professional commitment, and for some it represented a real turning point in their personal development.

Some ambivalence is unavoidable in considerations of this kind, as the history of the projects is not such as to leave room for great self-satisfaction, when one tries to assess results and failures; but at the same time, even the most critical person cannot help feeling that it was worth while, and that something useful could still be learnt from these experiences.

It is quite possible, of course, that the underlying reason for this feeling lies in the natural tendency to justify one's past with a vague *quand même*. I feel however that it has some objective grounds and that even a completely neutral observer would find in the history of the projects some concrete teachings on the problems of social development, far beyond any vindication or justification for the existence and history of the projects themselves.

Our real aim is to define the terms for an objective and realistic assessment of what has been left of the community projects; of their positive and negative teachings, without indulging in any nostalgic wish to repeat today the same experiences in the same form.

If this scrutiny does not spring from the hope of a possible resurrection of community development at a local level, one may wonder whether its only interest may not be an historical one. The answer is probably to be found in the fact that both at a theoretical and at an operational level, specialists seem to suffer from a loss of perspective in the field of socio-economic development of backward areas, in Italy as well as elsewhere.

Most development seems to have been marked by a technocratic empiricism, a lack of ideological framework, and a compulsory optimism on the part of those in charge, while the gap between rich and poor areas has remained the same, or even increased: this has created a widespread impatience and lack of interest for problems that appear to persist in spite of every effort to solve them.

This impatience felt by the public, and the lack of commitment of politicians cannot be overcome by appeals to brotherly love; action is needed to help people feel that backwardness is not a tumour in the body social, to be eliminated by surgery, but rather the symptom of a malfunction of the whole organism; and that it is not only exceptional measures of a material nature that are called for, but in the first place a clearer setting of goals and a greater precision in the intervention methodology.

The example of Southern Italy, which we can quote more easily, shows us how our anxiety to foster faith in an impending solution of the remaining problems has in fact created a form of exasperation, expressed in a distrust of the organizations in charge, or even worse, in a return to a fatalistic attitude, based on racist considerations.

These attitudes can undermine new development initiatives in the backward areas before they get started, and because they exist it is necessary to confirm the value of all experiences capable of enlarging our conceptions of these problems.

However, the need to mobilize public opinion would not be by itself reason enough to reconsider the community development experiences. In the special after-war atmosphere and during the fifties, the desired goal was that the State, under pressure from qualified public opinion, should commit itself to the amelioration of the depressed areas. Today, the problem is not to stimulate such intervention, but rather to support and qualify an existing one, in the various field of socio-economic development, and in particular, to avoid that such efforts be distorted or nullified by a bureaucratic and technocratic conditioning. Today, more than ever, politicians, scientists, intellectuals in general ought to be on the alert, to see that such interventions do not become a perquisite of some, to the exclusion of all others.

The only guarantee that this laborious transformation of our society will not proceed haphazardly, as it tends to do, is to be found in a continuing discussion on goals and methods of socio-economic development.

1. The Teachings of the Projects

We have now reached a point where at least one of the major premises of any community development project has been generally accepted: the essential role of the social aspects both of backwardness and development has now been recognized. Even law-makers have acknowledged this, more and more explicitly, and have provided for specific interventions in this sector, in order to condition society's development.

Hence, several of the problems that community development projects tried to solve in an experimental way in their limited areas of operations, are now considered again at a national level, as the subject matter of long-term reforms and legislative measures: education and occupational training, local authorities' functions in the educational and social fields, administrative decentralization, urban planning, social security, mass communication media and educational tools, etc. However, these measures still have a diffusive character, because what is lacking is really an overall conception of the goals to be reached by an improvement in social services and institutes; that is, a social development policy.

Though both the National Economic Plan and the new Law for special interventions in Southern Italy contain generic statements on the «social objectives» of these plans in the end these general proposals are translated into operational directives bearing on very limited areas (social security and social welfare measures; specific interventions in the cultural and educational field) while the desirable coordination with more substantial measures (where these prospects of social development would have found a more concrete expression) as e.g. school reform, public administration reform, institution of the Regions, etc. was conspicuously lacking.

At first sight, one might think that this increased presence of the State in the field of social problems renders any further discussion on community projects (or other private projects) useless. At most, one might say, the community approach might be of interest to public agencies in Southern Italy, as a contribution to the operational stage of the socio-economic programs now existing.

This level, however, is neither the only one, nor the most important at which one can profit from the community projects experiences; at this level it would just mean a resumption of approaches and methods which have already been widely experimented with at a local level, both by the projects and by several agencies working in the socio-educational field, and which can easily be reproduced in the same form. This is particularly true if State intervention is going to be limited to a cultural action in the backward areas: the cumulative experiences of private agencies will have some guiding influence on public administrators, but most of all in the sense of reminding them of the very little usefulness of such actions, unless they are supported by different interventions of more direct impact.

Rather than attempting to extract from previous experiences such as the c.d. projects only methodological indications, it would be much more urgent to use them to clarify the problem which has always been the key one for the success of such initiatives: the relationship between development activities and the political and administrative set-up at regional and local levels. The isolation in which, for various reasons, most community projects had to live cannot be reproduced in the public agencies' interventions. It is easy to foresee that even though public action (because of its more authoritative position and fewer financial worries) will not meet with the same difficulties, it will still have to face the usual tendency of some local communities to reject – or at least accept with great difficulties – the new contents of the socio-educational activities. This more or less open resistance must be foreseen and faced as a normal obstacle to any valid innovation. The main point is not to avoid the issue by the simple expedient of rendering the content of the innovation as harmless and undebatable as possible.

We will deal with this problem more concretely towards the end of this paper, as it is one of the many examples of what we can learn, in a positive or a negative way, from the, community projects, though indeed it was one of the key problems for the success of the projects at the practical stage; but what it is really essential is to come to appreciate the absolute need for any intervention aiming at social development to be planned and carried on in an organic context, never to remain an isolated action. First and foremost what is needed is a clear perception of the problems to be faced, and an equally clear conception of the goals to be reached, with what means, at what costs: in short, a development policy.

The broad outline of this sort of problems, regarding not the details of intervention in a specific area or field, but the aims and perspectives of social development, the possibility of stimulating it with specific initiatives, are really the central concern of development planners, quite independently of the methods and organizational form one may use. Our aim is to show that the experiences of the community projects, however much they may have been linked to an historical period now past, and to operational instruments which today may appear outdated, retains its validity in respect to this order of problems.

It may seem a paradoxical statement - and a sad one for those of us who believed in their direct usefulness - but the projects are perhaps more relevant today than at the time of their heyday. Maybe now the conditions exist for some of their teachings to, be acceptable at the decision - making level of the higher public authorities - at least as warnings not to underestimate the complexity of the problems, and to indicate how easy it is to «do», and how difficult to «do well» in this field.

Today perhaps there is a hope, which the projects always saw as a receding one, that it may be possible to graft some of the principles of community development onto larger and more massive programs than the projects ever were. It is still a distant hope, but the converging consensus on the importance of social factors in the development processes opens up the possibility of a dialogue, so that these private experiences may be of value to those engaged in public programs for socio-economic development.

2. Development and Change

In recent times - especially on the occasion of the new programs of the «Intervento Straordinario per il Mezzogiorno», and the discussions on the results of its first fifteen years of special intervention in Southern Italy - it has often been emphasized how, due to this same intervention, and due also to some spontaneous phenomena that have taken place in the meantime (e.g. emigration), social conditions in Southern Italy, and in general in depressed areas have undergone a change. «Economic growth, with its attending phenomena of industrialization and emigration » states the Coordination Plan - «have induced a series of innovating factors in the social and cultural structures of Southern Italy, some of them in mutual contradiction, that have all helped to break up the old and traditional patterns of social relationships».

This statement, *per se*, is quite correct and unquestionable: it is not even necessary to have a direct knowledge of the conditions mentioned, to accept intuitively that twenty years of history could hardly have passed without leaving some trace, especially in problem areas, being parts of a nation in rapid economic development. We can, on the other hand, feel more doubtful about the uses to which this kind of statement can be put, especially on the issue of further direct interventions on social reality.

It is necessary to distinguish between the two elements of which this statement is composed. The first consists in affirming that some socio-cultural changes are in fact taking place even in the most backward areas of the country; the second in attributing a positive value to the effects of these changes, which are then receiving the connotation of "progress" rather than of simple "change".

The first statement is so obvious, that nobody would have needed to emphasize it without a specific reason. We might surmise that this reason might be to contradict some other interpretation, which starts from the assumption of such static conditions of the social and cultural system, that each registered change appears as a remarkable fact. No doubt there have been some tendencies to interpret the reality of Southern Italy in this way, especially by anthropologists and sociologists.

But it looks rather unlikely that this accent on change is due only to the wish to contradict such marginal interpretation. We feel, rather, that this emphasis on the fact that "something" is changing is to be put in relationship to the second element: having made a rather obvious fact appear as a remarkable event, our attention is drawn away from the really debatable point - whether or not the changes that are taking place ought to be considered as positive; as facts showing a social progress or a social disgregation.

It is too easy to pass on from this interpretation - which we find in almost every statement concerning the socio-educational intervention in backward areas - to the conclusion that, as a process of "social development" is already taking place, public action should simply follow its course, without worrying unduly about guiding this process or defining its aims. On the whole this is a *laissez-faire* interpretation of social development, based on the idea of an "invisible hand" which guides both spontaneous and induced changes in the right direction.

Arguments of this type are responsible for keeping up a dangerous optimism about the beneficial effects of development interventions; and as it becomes more and more evident that these beneficial effects are far from automatic, this attitude becomes more and more harmful. At the same time this way of considering problems prevents an objective comparison between what the State now aims at, and what others have already experienced in similar situations.

Public intervention appears as if it were simply geared on to a process of social transformation whose direction is known, and whose desirability has been assessed: only a modest encouragement on the part of the State, and a lot of patience on the part of the people involved are needed, for solving everything in a natural way. The fault of community projects and other private interventions in this field would then be that they were utopian, based on contesting the natural order' of things and on wishful thinking; therefore, even if they had had those resources (to, the lack of which they attribute their failure) they couldn't in any case have been successful. This appears then as a different approach not only in its form and dimensions, but in actual essence.

The truth of the matter is quite different. Knowledge of what the projects really were about, and of their mode of action has always been restricted to small groups of supporters. Only some of the more "picturesque" episodes of their life history are known: of course the projects were talked about only when they happened to "swim against the tide". But none of the projects - from the ones most based on 'contestation' to the most conventional ones - ever attributed an absolute value to the fact of following the natural trends or going against them. One tried to act on the basis of a realistic evaluation of the available facts, quite prepared, if necessary, to go "against" some trends, or to follow them, according to the situation. Any pre-established formula like the one of "supporting emerging trends", would condemn the intervention to remain at the margin of reality, as it would be based on the utopia of a progress somehow guaranteed by the nature of things.

3. Progress is not Automatic

Public intervention will have to face fundamentally the same problems as the projects had to face, but on a larger scale. The projects were concerned with supporting only those spontaneous social processes that were thought valid within the developmental aims: they wanted to carry out a qualitative change, that might really become "development". The issue of 'participation' shows quite clearly how well founded was this concern. The projects did not intend to create substantially new social facts, but to qualify the gradual immission of people into social life, so that the traditional life patterns in backward areas - clientelism, familism, the interplay of friendships and influential relationships - should not corrupt public life as well. "Participation" was never meant to be an end in itself, never conceived, of as an absolute value, but should have been instrumental for the building up of new forms of social interaction. Its validity would entirely depend on *how*, and particularly on *why* people participated in the life of their society.

The events of the last few years show us that, though the attempts made by the projects to initiate new participation patterns did fail, this problem. is still very much with us. It appears that the greater participation of people in the life of the nation, which now exists in comparison to ten years ago, might be due to a greater need of the power centre to reach some general consensus about their decisions, rather than to a greater sensitivity of people about their duty and rights to participate. It is enough to consider the gradual involution in the relationship between the electorate and the political power centre, even within those political parties democratically oriented by tradition, to see the outlines of a process which may have been inevitable, but can hardly be considered to be a factor of "progress" in social life.

The development policy of the community projects was based on two main assumptions: a lack of faith in the automatic nature of progress, and a consequent concern for methods and contents of the intervention, that would guarantee a certain "quality" to the induced changes. True enough, sometimes this concern risked transforming itself into a contemplative involution, paralyzing concrete action. There have also been phases in some projects, during which the anxiety to "do something" overrode any concern about the general aims of the intervention, and, temporarily, a frantic activity developed, with a corresponding decline in quality. These two extremes - luckily they only happened in a few instances - can illustrate the risks to which all interventions in backward areas are exposed.

Where public activities are concerned, however, it is easier to draw some teachings from the second case than from the first. The lack of theoretical and ideological elaboration of concepts related to development problems, and the dearth of appropriate administrative structures, free from political and bureaucratic conditioning, and free to plan their work having regard only to the objective needs of society, involve a permanent risk of having the socio-economic initiatives insufficiently related to development aims. This myth of progressive dynamics taking place of their own accord, which only need some incentives to accelerate their own pace, can easily make one forget how the traditional socio-economic and cultural system of this country is capable of absorbing and neutralizing even massive stimuli toward innovation.

We should remember, on this score, a few examples of incomplete and diffusive initiatives, or problems still unsolved though they are essential to the creation of a more civilized society: the agrarian reform, which proved

such an unsuccessful instrument for social change in rural life; the industrialization of the South, with methods akin, sometimes, to those of neocolonialism; the 'development of cultural services and structures without the necessary accompaniment of equally substantial interventions to facilitate the influx of newly trained people in the production cycle; the total absence of any policy directed to such a dramatic problem as emigration; the maintenance of a fiscal system which inevitably condemns local authorities to paralysis. The common denominator to these deficiencies is the lack of an overall vision of the needs to be satisfied and of their interrelationships, so that even had the political and administrative structures been there, stronger and less prone to compromise than they are, it would not have been possible to ensure an organic and reasonably rapid development of society.

In the meantime, the current opinion is that recent Italian policy in the field of economic planning and intervention in backward areas is a distinct improvement on previous attempts, because the main issues to be solved have been defined and a "development policy" has been formulated, providing for a concentration of efforts in the more productive sectors and in the more industrialized areas. The State, in other words, intervenes where public investment has a better chance to accelerate the expansion already taking place. There is also, it is true, an intervention policy in the underprivileged sectors and areas, but these interventions have a different nature, and the quantitative proportion between the latter and what is given (directly or indirectly) to the more advanced areas, is deliberately different.

It cannot be denied that the adoption of selective criteria, if compared to the diffusive character that State action has often had in this field, must be considered a step forward. But it should be equally clear that we have here not a reasoned out choice of a different set of criteria considered more valid than the previous ones, but rather the belated adoption of a development policy where before there was none.

The striking fact, however, which looks very significant, is the great similarity between some of the ideas now considered outdated, and some of the principles of community development. It rather looks as if the ideas on which the projects were based and that at the time were considered too eccentric to be seriously taken into consideration, are now being used as landmarks to point out the advance implied by the choice of selective criteria for public intervention.

We certainly do not want to attribute the sole paternity of some ideas to certain people or groups, nor do we want to fight to the bitter end for approaches which were valuable in a given historical period and in a given context, but may not be equally valid today. Many of the principles on which the projects were based were imported goods, not always so easily adjustable, to the Italian situation as one believed at first. Many of them are probably superseded or at least would require deep modifications of content and applicability, if they had to be experimented with again in the present situation. Still, they were principles and ideas which deserved a better fate: they could be used as guideposts in the difficult process of elaborating a development policy, and they could certainly contribute to public intervention at least some of that earnestness of purpose and intent, with which even the less successful of the projects was pervaded.

There is in fact reason for concern about the superficiality with which some essential problems of development are treated, particularly in the form of arguing about words, theories and schemes rather than about facts and realities. We will deal with some of these schemes, because we want to suggest that once one has been able to do away with the "slogan" aspect (which really makes any discussion impossible) what remains is really a further and necessary elaboration of those principles of social development which were at the basis of the community projects. Once this point reached, a real dialogue becomes possible about the use of our previous experiences in today's reality.

4. "Vertical" and "Horizontal" Development Criteria

The two theoretical schemes we want to deal with, concerning the dynamics of socio-economic development, are the ones usually referred to by the terms "verticality of intervention" and "unbalanced growth". These schemes have not yet been dignified by the name of principles of the official development policies, but there is a risk that they might appeal to politicians, just because they are a simplified interpretation of problems, and seem to offer the line of least resistance for their solution.

In the first place, the fact of concentrating efforts and funds in the more advanced sectors corresponds to a "vertical" conception of development dynamics, as opposed to the outdated "horizontal" criteria that guided previous private and public efforts. According to the latter, the object of the intervention is a social entity, within a given territorial extension: a community, a group of "comuni", the region, or even a whole area like Southern Italy. "Vertical" criteria on the other hand consider the social and territorial dimension as an adjunct to the definition of the object of intervention, which is the sum total of the socio-economic and cultural institutions operating in the country.

This sharp contrast between the two approaches is really overemphasized because of conceptual misunderstandings and factual confusions: it ought to be clear that a development process cannot be conceived of either in purely "vertical" or in purely "horizontal" dimensions. We should not forget for instance that: a vertical factor like State education is not an abstract entity, but in actual fact it consists of definite structures, habits and behaviours which are conditioned by the social context, and are modifiable only in that context. Any reform will have to concern itself with *those schools*, operating in *that* society: state education like any other social institution does not exist in a vacuum, and cannot be changed "as such".

On the other hand no social entity in its totality can be by itself the object of development. Even the most static and traditional rural community is too complex a phenomenon to be conditioned in a global and uniform way by outside interventions. This statement may seem to be in conflict with some of the theoretical tenets of community development, but is borne out by the realities of field work where it has always been necessary to formulate a selective strategy, directed to those phenomena which looked more relevant for a gradual process of change of the total community.

It is therefore nonsense to speak of "vertical" and "horizontal" strategies as if they were two separate development hypotheses. Any intervention must perforce take place in definite vertical structures (like the school, the public administration, the production system, the legislative system) and at the same time in the horizontal context of the society where those structures operate.

It is of course possible to give a different weight to one or the other dimension according to the different angle from which development is viewed. It is quite natural that the field worker may attribute more importance to the way in which a given measure of reform will be put into practical operation in the community he is interested in, and will judge its results in terms of the social reality in which he works; while the expert or the politician is more likely to consider the same factors as they relate to different sectors: so many schools built, so many acres

of land distributed etc. But these different angles do not prevent a substantive agreement on aims and methods of the reform.

5. States of Imbalance

This concept of "unbalanced growth" induced by development processes is a recent conquest of some sociological theories, in contrast with previous static or organicistic conceptions. Social change is seen as an event disturbing the balance that any society tries to keep within its body; consequently, induced development will necessarily lead to a breaking up of equilibrium patterns, which must be foreseen, and the cost of which must be reckoned when evaluating the total cost of progress. Obviously this is an interpretative theory, with no direct bearing on normative indications for development.

But while it is undeniable that for instance, the economic progress in a rural and overpopulated community is linked to a substantial diminution in the rural labour force, and this process can hardly take place without some temporary social "imbalance" we must not infer from this statement that *a particular type* of imbalance is necessarily inevitable or, even less, desirable. The diminution in the rural labour force can happen through a number of mechanisms, according to what is done or not done to modify the process with specific means; the "imbalance" theory can only give an indication of what will probably happen in a given society *if* the process is left untouched, while it cannot logically come to any conclusion on whether or not corrective interventions are possible or appropriate. Of course, even if quite a number of measures had been taken to counterbalance the effects of emigration out of rural areas - creating more opportunities for extra-rural work in the receiving areas, offering a better qualification to emigrants, helping them to adjust to industrial society conditions etc. - these same measures would have created some "imbalance" elsewhere. This simply means that there is a definite cost attached to progress, which is rather a platitude. The problem is rather *which* costs society is prepared to, pay in order to arrive to given goals, and even more important, who is going to pay for it.

When we say that any change, spontaneous or induced, has a social or a psychological cost, we really mean to remind ourselves that there is no "invisible hand" to restore the equilibrium once we have created, or allowed to happen, a state of imbalance in our society. If, in order to keep up a certain rhythm of economic growth in the more advanced sectors, we have avoided investing in those sectors giving a delayed return - schools, housing, new industries in the developing areas, etc. - and we have allowed massive migration of labour from one area into another, we have not been obeying a law of nature: we have made a political choice. The fact is that the costs, the unbalancing effects of progress in this case are not felt by the production system, nor by those who profit from progress, but mostly by the areas and populations affected by emigration.

The most dramatic example, which fortunately does not concern Italy, is the effect of massive intervention in the medical field in underdeveloped countries. As is well known, the use of antibiotics and other cheap measures for the reduction of endemic illnesses and premature mortality has suddenly increased the population's life expectation, and has largely contributed to the population explosion, which in turn has made it extremely difficult to raise the life standards in these countries. The fact that this action was undoubtedly inspired by noble humanitarian feelings does not do away with the other fact that this was a selective intervention, and that there has been a lack of equally massive efforts to balance the situation: the total value of this medical intervention is therefore rather doubtful for humanity as a whole (though not of course for the people whose life has been prolonged).

It is not possible, confronted with examples such as this, to continue to talk in a fatalistic fashion of the unbalancing effects of any intervention, as if they were a necessary adjunct to action: this would really mean that the fight the world has been waging in the last twenty years to solve the problems of backwardness is a lost battle, from the start, as each problem solved creates a new and perhaps more serious problem again. What can really be inferred from the examples quoted is rather that a lack of accurate forecasting and a lack of will and/or means to counterbalance the negative effects of rural migration or medical progress - in short a lack of a development strategy -- are really responsible for the fact that such necessary and desirable actions have, in the long run, left the total situation unchanged, though they may have solved some serious sectorial problems.

It is therefore absolutely necessary to ensure that any development policy be based on clear strategic choices, in order to restore conditions temporarily thrown out of balance: for instance, it will be necessary to plan an expanding economy in such a way that the increases in income will be distributed according to justice rather than allowing them to further enlarge the gaps already existing in the economic system.

This was the fundamental outlook of the community projects (of course with different emphasis according to different cases): they first defined as their object the social entity in its totality - first the local community, then the more comprehensive group of "comuni", then the "homogenous area" - and then they directed their efforts to groups and institutions that constituted the texture of that society, with the final aim of guaranteeing an organic development and of counterbalancing the ill effects - i.e. the injustices - that could accompany an unguided development process.

6. Integration of the Approaches

The two theories outlined here are not necessarily mutually exclusive, nor is it too difficult to imagine a theory including the most valid elements of both, as a basis to an effective development strategy.

The theory of the essential "organicity" of every social system, which often inspired the initiatives in the community development field, should be differentiated from the ideological superstructure which attributes a special value to the harmony and social integration characteristic of more archaic communities (and which in fact would prevent any successful attempt to influence their socio-economic processes). The "imbalance" theory on the other hand, should be freed from the tendency to justify any negative effect indifferently as a necessary cost of progress. In short the whole question, should be faced in political terms, with full awareness of the costs and benefits involved in the development of backward areas, as well as of the possibility of choosing different strategies, on the basis of definite normative criteria responsibly adopted.

The responsibility for the theoretical elaboration and gradual formulation of a development policy belongs not only to the experts and the professional politicians but also to all of those who have had experience and knowledge of this field. One of the mistakes of the people who worked in the community projects was perhaps to have restricted their field of communication to a limited group of people who were following their efforts with interest, without having been able to find the subjects, the arguments, and even the language for capturing the interest of a larger audience. There is still a lot to be done to overcome the marginal position taken for various reasons by the community projects, as if they refused the dialogue with the other forces operating for society's development, and had allowed some misunderstandings to remain.

On the other hand it would also be wiser to do away, in a new dialogue, with the superficial and technocratic approaches which characterize some international experts in the development field. Often the importance of the social aspects of development is given a formal acknowledgement, and is affirmed in some initial statements, but very little interest is shown in the deeper theoretical and operational issues deriving from them. Thus we find suggestions and proposals apparently based on the assumption that intervention in sectors defined as social, (schools, occupational training, social security and social welfare) will imply a guaranteed progress of society as a whole. This is a new version of some of the utopias that have always made it extremely difficult to debate in a realistic way major Italian problems, from the "southern question" to economic planning. Perhaps what the community projects (and the other experiences in direct contact with social realities) have left us could also be put to use here: to gauge the extreme complexity of the social problems still unsolved, and the commitment necessary to overcome them.

7. The Projects and their Counterparts

If we maintain that something, whether positive or negative, can be learnt from the community projects, this must also mean that though the projects had correctly interpreted the objective development needs of the country, they had undervalued the obstacles put up by those same forces they had counted upon as natural allies. It is probably wrong to accuse the projects of scarce realism about the fundamental development problems, as nobody really believed that much could be done with such limited resources; but it would be right to attribute the projects' failures to an exaggerated faith in the willingness of other forces in society to cooperate with and support them.

The projects were conceived as exceptional outside agents, who would define the most urgent needs in the operation areas and the most appropriate means of intervention, and would then undertake the task of stimulating the indispensable participation of other forces, public and private; in other words, they would act as catalysts in a development process whose major actors ought to have been the State and the public agencies on one side, and the local population on the other. On the whole the actors missed their cues, and so did other forces generally considered potential development agents. This was the major mistake, and also the most important teaching of the projects: in such a complex reality as the one we find in Italy, it is not possible to make such a distinction between the problems to be solved and the instruments with which to solve them, because the problems are so deeply embedded in the texture of society itself, that they condition even the potentially available instruments.

For instance, the issue of participation has often been conceived of exclusively as a problem of involving the population as such in the various processes taking place, as if one could have relied implicitly on the support of all the other forces allegedly aiming at the same objectives. On the contrary, while people in general were usually available it was these forces that were missing: the raw materials were there, but the tools to work them were lacking.

A remarkable instance is the total absence of the trade union movement in the problems dealt with by the community projects. While it is true that some of the projects bent over backwards to avoid any political involvement, and therefore cautiously refrained from involving the trade unions in their work, it is also true that when such attempts were made, for various reasons they were always unsuccessful. Even a problem of obvious common concern like the formation of cooperatives, never succeeded in breaking through the initial diffidence against initiatives which could not easily be described in political terms.

Another major support, which might have qualified and sharpened the planning and the operational activities was found lacking: the support from the academic world. Except for a few individual cases, experts and research workers in this field only occasionally paid any attention to the work being done by the projects. It is clear that in order to avoid the amateurism always present in this type of work, the participation and support of the most qualified economists, sociologists and paedagogists would have been invaluable.

Even more serious was the absenteeism and sometimes the deliberate obstruction of those public institutions that ought to have been the main allies of the private agencies concerned in the development programs. The byzantine slowness of public administrations, the insensitiveness of civil servants to any social problem not already laid down in the regulations, the impossibility of getting the political forces interested in anything that was not of direct electoral concern, the clumsiness of the public development interventions, that tended to mortify local initiative rather than to stimulate it, are issues well known to everybody, and particularly exasperating because they seemed to concern the instruments to solve the problems rather than the problems themselves.

This absence of one of the major actors had as a consequence that many initiatives that could have been brought to a conclusion never were, as they really implied a process of structural reform of public life. And the same fact also invalidated the relationship with the other necessary participant: the population and the local agencies. This was not due to a lack of the security and prestige that always go with authoritative backing from central authorities, but rather because the participation offered to the local forces could not be properly called "public participation". As the State was absent, the implication was that the problems with which the projects were concerned were not really "public", i.e. problems in which everybody should be interested. The local agencies, already in a very difficult position, both for financial and jurisdictional reasons, and the population itself, could not consider the community projects as valid participants in a dialogue, as they were felt to speak only in their own name, and to represent nothing but their good intentions.

We must keep all this in mind when we think of the rather poor response of the population to the opportunity offered by the projects to participate in local affairs and of the little reaction they showed to changes of policy, or even to the actual end of the activities, even when they had been directly interested in the projects objectives. It would not be true to say that there was no participation, as some have said. In fact, at times it was even too zestful, especially in isolated areas where people are curious about any unusual activity. But very often it was participation at a very elementary level, as people seemed to realize that the various actions suggested would eventually come to nothing, as they were not supported appropriately. It was more leisure time activities than true civic commitment.

If the community projects had devoted the same attention they gave to the problems to be solved, to the forces which constituted a logical first step in their solution and had they recognized that public agencies, trade unions, political, academic and professional groups were all showing the same resistance to change that had been foreseen in the local population - resistance which needed to be dealt with the same patience - perhaps the projects might well have represented that "bridge" between the two, according to the basic principles of community development.

A significant fact was that the relationship with local authorities and agencies, who should have been the natural partners as they operated at the same level, half - way between the population and the central administration, was always a laborious and discontinuous one. It is possible that this was not due to unwillingness on their part, or to lack of common interests, but to the fact that local agencies suffered from the same insecurity and doubts about their own identity in backward areas, concerning their proper sphere of activity, as the projects did. Local administrations, school authorities, health and social services are strictly controlled from above and traditionally find it difficult to be open to the few demands coming from the population - therefore they cannot usually participate in exceptional initiatives, lacking in formal authority, and needing a different relationship from the usual one with population and central State authorities. It is also significant that where it has been possible to establish a beginning cooperation with public agencies, as for instance with school authorities in some areas, this was with a structure that was in fact looking for new orientations and methods of operation. The local school authorities that were more sensitive to the reform tendency shown by the higher structures, felt entitled to start a cooperation with external forces appearing to have similar aims and objectives. But even these approaches, because unforeseen by current regulations, were cautious and subject to conditions.

Even if today it is possible to make an effort towards greater clarity about defining the problems to be solved and the development strategies needed to solve them, this issue of a dialogue between the different partners is still quite open, in the same terms in which the projects should have faced it. The State is no longer uninterested in starting development initiatives in socio-educational and cultural sectors, and people will be available as long as it will be possible to offer them real opportunities of "civic progress" provided they are not intended as instruments of diversion, or of passive adjustment to the social processes under way. But if the structures represented by agencies and institutions guided from above, by the traditional rules of the normal public administration, remain intact, even State intervention in this field will not be successful, and will repeat on a larger scale one of the major deficiencies of community development projects.