



RIVER AGREEMENTS: A STRATEGY FOR DE-GROWTH? COLLABORATIVE WATERSHED MANAGEMENT TOWARD RENEWED ECOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS.

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Abstract

Contemporary strategies and practices for environmental management are not always able to improve healthy ecosystems. Pollution, landscape degradation and resources' crisis are crucial issues not only for scientific community; they are also common topics among laymen and activists involved in various associations. After the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in 1992, for almost 15 years Sustainable Development paradigm seemed to be a suitable path to regeneration of local contexts taking into account global challenges. Then, some questions arose about the concept of Sustainable Development itself, about its outcomes and real effects on ecological matters, thinking ecology as a complex system of exchanges among humans organizations and their environment of life (Bateson, 1972).

Sustainable De-Growth is coming up as a possible alternative, with a variety of theories, hypothesis and discourses about it, inspired by groundbreaking thinkers like Georgescu-Roegen, Gorz, Illich, and Latouche (Martínez-Alier et alii, 2010). Beyond scholar debates, some people are starting to change their vision, expectations, and behavior, participating in "De-Growth inspired" movements in different parts around the world. The First International Conference on Economic De-Growth, held in Paris on April 2008, was a milestone about the topic: in its Final Declaration, it is underlined the needs for transition toward renewed ecological relationships, whose core can be synthesized through what Latouche calls "the eight R program": re-evaluate; re-contextualize; remodel; relocate; redistribute; reduce; reuse; recycle (Latouche 2007). Innovative strategies are required to accomplish this transition, starting from spontaneous movements already existent, but also interesting and involving people who are not inside De-Growth discourses, and above all, affecting institutional structures and decision-making processes.

Assuming that watershed management is a central issue for humans organizations and their environment of life, watershed policies and programs can be an opportunity to verify how De-Growth can be translated in practical experiences. A shift of paradigm is required: from a technocratic approach, to the active involvement of laymen, with their peculiar knowledge and their proposals about everyday life (Gorz,

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1975). In Italy, there is a school of avant-garde scholars that is experiencing watershed management through participatory processes and collaboration among associations and institutions: these processes are called River Agreements (Pizziolo&Micarelli, 2011).

This paper discusses if a River Agreement can be a De-Growth strategy, and how; it presents a body of literature to identify which families of practices can be considered “De-Growth River Agreements”, and why. The paper is also a working tool to reflect about an ongoing Participatory Action Research project in the widest watershed in Sicily, the Simeto River process, led by a partnership between the University of Catania, Department of Architecture, and a network of grassroots associations (Saija, 2011).

1. Introduction

“[...] The creature that wins against its environment destroys itself. [...]”
Gregory Bateson (1972), *Steps towards an Ecology of Mind*.

The last part of Bateson’s milestone is named after *Crisis in the Ecology of Mind* (Bateson, 1972). According to the author, ecology is a matter of complex relationships among human beings, communities, and their places of life. The crisis regards these relationships, and it is related to the concept of hubris, i.e. the extreme feeling of powerful that lets humans act as dominant beings, when they have a strong faith in their technological capacity in order to control other humans, other living beings and nature. In the section called *The Roots of Ecological Crisis*, a bill is reported. The bill was presented in 1970 to face Hawaii’s environmental problems related to DDT’s use; it describes how unaware human actions are able to affect ecosystems hardly, leading to the annihilation of the species if human arrogance is not stopped. To escape the crisis, the bill asked for institutional commitment in changing, involving all the community’s members in a deep debate about their common future. This is just an example of a lot of documents, essays, research, that came out during the 1970s; they all were worried about the destiny of Earth and its ecosystems, trying to deal with possible solutions. That decade was the starting point of a debate that lasts nowadays: even if some conditions have changed (like the DDT’s issues), the ongoing global crisis is still related to environmental degradation, persisting inequity between northern and southern countries, plus the recent trouble of economic recession and financial bubbles.

Bateson pointed out that a crisis can be an opportunity to re-think relationships inside communities, and to re-adapt them in a co-evolutionary and regenerative sense. Even Rifkin (1980) underlines the necessity of new organizational structures for societies that have to face their lack of resources; he describes the history of mankind as a sequence of entropic watershed, critical moments when communities have to re-think their institutional structures if they want to survive.

The 1970s were also the decade when Sustainable Development came out: the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* (1972), highlighted the need of a regulatory framework in consuming resources that were about to be exhausted in the short-medium run, according to its previsions. It opened the way for different policies and strategies in

order to allow development inside some limits defined by carry-on capacity indicators. In the meanwhile, ten years before Rifkin, Georgescu-Roegen had already introduced the concept of entropy inside debates on resources' management. *The Entropy Law and the Economic Process* (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971) underlined the necessity to change direction in the mainstream economic schemes of maximizing production-consumption, as this mechanism cannot last forever in a finite world that is regulated by the second principle of thermodynamics. Georgescu-Roegen's positions were more radical than the Club of Rome's ones, asking for a deep change of direction that was identified with the label of De-Growth. Even if Georgescu-Roegen and the Club of Rome had some contacts points (Levallois, 2010), Sustainable Development and De-Growth followed two different paths: the first one was recognized as the feasible one in the dominant culture, through a system of technological solutions and incentives, while the second one remained just a marginal hypothesis of changing economics organization.

Beyond the controversy about these two approaches (Kallis, 2011), and the disputes about GDP/GNP as proper indicators for well-being (van den Bergh, 2010), Sustainable De-Growth discourses are coming up again, at a scholar level, as well as at a grassroots level, with international conferences (Paris 2008; Barcelona 2010; Montreal 2012; Venice forthcoming), and international networks among people who are trying to explore and experience practices to overcome the crisis line. It is too general talking without entering a specific context, with its preconditions and characteristics, but it sounds reasonable to say that societies are still stuck on the line of an entropic watershed, at the global and at the local scale; so De-Growth movements are questioning how to reorganize life-styles around the idea that human beings cannot deplete resources more and more.

In this framework, urban and regional planners have the responsibility of rethinking the use of territories as an opportunity to regenerate communities. Following this perspective, rivers' ecosystems may be a test-bed to understand how to move practically toward renewed ecological relationships inside communities, and between communities and the environment. The choice of focusing on watersheds is related to the importance that water resources have for human life, culture, rural economies, and to regenerate healthy landscapes; the Bioregional Movement (Aberley, 1993) had already identified rivers as the vital circulatory system of Earth; furthermore, in the last years, international governmental and non-governmental organizations are increasing the attention on water, asking for an equitable and sustainable use of it.

2. Planning to Sustainable De-Growth? Some lessons from the current debate.

A recent article (Limburg et alii., 2011) on *Fisheries*, the Journal of American Fisheries Society, reports the necessity in stopping the depletion of water's ecosystems in order to protect the growing number of threatened or endangered aquatic species. Authors well explain the relationship between economic growth and the progressive decline for fishes and fisheries in the world, entering the debate about limiting the levels of growth. Authors ask for a "framework to assist society at large in re-directing lifestyles and satisfaction away from a consumptive perspective

toward a sustainable perspective”. In this hypothesis, it is central the role of laymen and NGOs, as well as institutions, in order to work on the cultural improving of behaviors, paying attention to social justice, corporate responsibility and ethics. Coming back at the 1970s, even Gorz (1975) had already underlined the necessity to approach ecology through practices deeply connected with people’s living and behaviors, rather than a technocratic way to eco-compatibility.

Furthermore, Kallis (2011) well focuses the importance of changing the collective vision toward less-consuming lifestyles; Jackson (2011) highlights the necessity of a cooperative approach, instead than a competitive one; Daly (1995; 2005), in his ecological economics perspective, underlines how stopping growth does not mean stopping development, rather it is necessary a qualitative improvement of the economic process toward efficiency, justice and sustainability. In general, there are different ways to embrace Sustainable De-Growth discourse, and Martinez-Alier et alii (2010) well trace the current articulation of the debate.

Besides different positions and labels, it is possible to point out some elements as raw indications to trace a planning approach, in order to overcome the limits that have characterized a failure in facing ecological crisis since the 1970s.

According to Gorz, the first step moves from the local knowledge, i.e. the system of values, memories, skills, hopes that people have about environment: if sustainability has to be an effective path, it is important to involve laymen (with their direct experience of their life places) in debates, working actively to improve everyday life-style and common imaginaries.

This fact leads to the necessity of collaborative practices among different members of a community, like laymen (and their different kinds of associations), researchers, experts, practitioners, administrators, and so on. Institutions like schools, universities, municipalities, public agencies, and environmental boards, play an important role to trigger and to speed up a democratic and constructive dialogue to reframe environmental management day by day, at a local scale, as well at a broader one.

The current debate also reminds that equity and quality of life are indefeasible characteristics toward the path of sustainability: it does not matter if GDP/GNP increase or not, or if other indicators for well-being are more precise, but it does matter if all the members of a community, and among different communities, develop their life-conditions, using resources in a responsible way; of course, differences between rich and poor contexts (in terms of personal income thresholds) have to be taken into account in a global justice perspective.

Lastly, Latouche (2007), with the “eight R program” (re-evaluate, re-contextualize, remodel, relocate, redistribute, reduce, reuse, recycle), inspires another important R: re-thinking urban and regional planning paradigms, policies, strategies, and tools, in order to renew ecological relationships.

3. How to re-think planning? Rivers Agreements as an opportunity for Sustainable De-Growth.

The paper’s research question deals with the possibility of applying Sustainable De-Growth discourses (as they have been traced in the last paragraph) in practical

experiences related to an aware use of rivers' ecosystems in a specific context. In Italy, these experiences are defined as River Agreements, i.e. collaborative strategies among laymen, NGOs, experts, researchers, institutions, in order to start a community approach for watershed management. They come out after some European Conventions and Directives, like the *European Landscape Convention* (Florence 2000), the *EC Water Framework Directive* (2000/60/EC), and the *Strategic Environmental Assessment* (2001/42/EC), whose core is the active involvement of citizens in public processes, in order to define which plans and projects are really able to revitalize landscape, according to inhabitants' visions and needs.

An example of a River Agreement is the Panaro River Landscape Contract, Modena-Italy: it is an open and evolutionary path that is built day by day thanks to the input of different actors (inhabitants, associations, researchers, administrators, and so on), leading to complex and articulated systems of proactive actions, organized in a structure labeled as a 'beehive'; this name underlines the relational character of all the actions (it is well known that everything is related to each other in ecosystems), and also the fact that every participant is asked to be active and to collaborate with others. The river is the central core of the Contract: it means not only working on projects for water quality, but also realizing a system of sustainable projects to enjoy the landscapes, to promote wholesome rural productions, to host visitors interested in the local cultures through a fair touristic network, and so on. It is a way to sustain a slow use of territories, to improve the quality of relationships among its users, and to enhance the 'genius loci', i.e. the soul and peculiarities of the context (Norberg-Schulz, 1979; Pizziolo & Micarelli, 2011). This example suggests some key elements: the participatory process, as a way to define what inhabitants really want to do with their places of life, takes advantage from supportive institutions, in order to realize concretely inhabitants' willingness; the active role of each participant means not to delegate, but to work concretely for a specific action; every small action, as a part of the complex 'beehive', takes actually benefits thanks to the fact of being part of the system.

Focusing on the participatory approach, research shows the importance of stakeholders' involvement in watershed management issues: through a variety of case-studies, the work of the Nobel Prize in Economics Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons* (1990), proves that a collective action may be able to change institutional structures in order to reorganize common goods' management, like rivers or forests. When there are some litigations related to a lack of resources or problems into the management system, partnerships can be an effective way to reframe and to improve the organization, but they have to be established under some important conditions, like inclusiveness and a deliberative character of the democratic process (Fisher, 2000; Leach, 2006). Other scholars (Mirghani & Savenije, 1995; Dube & Swatuk, 2002; Lennox et alii., 2011) have demonstrated the overall importance of stakeholders' involvement through widespread participatory practices in order to better distribute water benefits. It is not just a matter of water: all the connected activities take benefit from a genuine community-based watershed management. For example, agriculture moves toward a better quality production if it is located in a healthy watershed; of course it is necessary to pay attention to the

nutrient load that goes into the water courses: Amate & de Molina (2000) show how an organic and local farming system can avoid this problem, and become a key element for sustainability.

In synthesis, it is possible to define a 'River Agreement' as a system of collaborative practices among different stakeholders, inhabitants and institutions, established through participatory processes with the aim of improving local watershed and ecosystems. River Agreements can be a way to experience Sustainable De-Growth discourses practically, if they come out from the same perspective of enhancing local resources in an equitable way. It is the concept of applying the R-program to territories and lands, using derelict areas as an opportunity to test Sustainable De-Growth hypothesis.

In order to lead planning and environmental management toward this directions, institutions (like Universities and Public Agencies) are compelled in reframing policies, strategies and tools toward more inclusive and democratic practices, working actively with local inhabitants, with their local knowledge, and visions for the future. Someone can argue that it is obvious underlying the importance of collaboration among stakeholders, and inhabitants' participation into the decision-making process, since the aforementioned European Directives were passed, or the elder *UNECE Aarhus Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters* (1998) was ratified, as institutions are forced to involve laymen in their planning processes. Even the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* (1992), that contains the principles of Sustainable Development itself, underlines the vital role of local communities in environmental management "[...]because of their knowledge and traditional practices. States should recognize and duly support their identity, culture and interests and enable their effective participation in the achievement of sustainable development[...]" (Principle 22). Evidence suggests that this is still not completely acknowledged in some contexts.

An innovative aspects of emerging Sustainable De-Growth discourses is related to a deeper attention for everyday lifestyles thanks to the input received from grassroots movements (Martínez-Alier et alii, 2010); the forthcoming Third International Conference on De-Growth, Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity, is indeed paying attention to listening at territories' stories through activists' voices (www.venezia2012.it).

Besides these innovative discourses, and some avant-garde institutional processes, it has been shown (Gravagno et alii., 2010) that the direct involvement of local communities is not going to happen in contexts like Sicily, where the planning process is still anchored to a technocratic approach, and participation processes need to be explored much more. The proposal for a River Agreement in Sicily comes out from this necessity: it is a practical experiment to understand if it is possible, and how, to modify the ordinary planning procedures toward an effective collaboration among inhabitants and institutions. This paper tries to verify if the River Agreement can happen in a Sustainable De-Growth perspective, as a an opportunity to experience if a community is really able to take care of its place of life, to regenerate its ecological relationships and its economies, through a deep change in everyday life.

4. The long and passionate road toward the Simeto River Agreement.

To enter deep inside the practical experience in a specific context with its peculiarities, it is now presented a Participatory Action Research project, i.e. a research conducted through a mixed and open group that includes scholars and other different participants, in order to empower the local community (Whyte, 1997), revitalizing the spoiled context of the Simeto River Valley, Sicily-Italy.

In 2008, the partnership was established between the University of Catania – Department of Architecture, and a network of grassroots associations called ViviSimeto; since 2011, the partnership is enlarging through the involvement of municipalities and other institutional agencies in charge of regional planning, and it is leading a process toward a strategy for sustainability, called the Simeto River Agreement.

4.1 Methodology.

The partnership is led by a mixed research group, with researchers and activists as catalysts of the process, and open to different inputs from local people. Some scholars (Lewin, 1946; Whyte, 1989) have shown the validity of these groups that contribute to build collective innovative processes, linking research deeply with the context, and producing changes into the context. This is suitable for researchers to enter inside practical problems and evaluate their hypothesis during the action; and for participants to get capabilities in raising problems and building strategies. This research strategy is recognized as Participatory Action Research with a Service Learning perspective (Reardon, 2003; Gravagno et alii, 2010).

Service Learning is an opportunity for University in order to apply its theoretical skills and to contribute directly to local development; for Associations, in order to learn and to improve their action; for Institutions, in order to innovate themselves.

As research is connected to a practical experience, researchers themselves are active participants, not just observers: according to the complexity theory (Morin, 1994), they influence data during the action, and they are also influenced from the action.

All participants are invited to reflect and to reframe their issues and visions (Schon, 1994; Schon & Rein, 1995). Results are evaluated during the action, too; they are deeply connected to what is currently happening during the process, and they are subjects of discussions, focus groups, and public debate.

This paper, after contextualizing the research, presents some steps of the participatory process, with two milestones toward the Simeto River Agreement: the Community Mapping Project, and the Institutional Turning Point. The process is analyzed to answer the research question about preconditions and characteristics of a River Agreement as a Sustainable De-Growth strategy in a specific context. In order to evaluate some preliminary results, interviews in-depth have been conducted. Interviews in-depth are conceived as a tool for a self-reflective moment in order learn from the past and to understand how to go on, highlighting crucial issues.

Key-actors are identified as the ‘passionate participants’: they have been selected for their important inputs to the process, with their lives, stories, emotions, perseverance; the interaction among researchers and activists has been based on intense empathy, sharing the common feeling of working to improve the native context. According to Fisher (2009), this emotional dimension has to be highlighted to explain well the deep motivation of participating in an unusual end experimental processes in a challenging context like Sicily.

4.2 Snapshots from the context.

The local context is a rural area where the most important river of Sicily flows, the Simeto River (113 km/70 mi long; 4182 Km²/1614 mi² watershed). This place is very rich of biodiversity, traditions and agricultural productions, but it is losing its original characters due to a lot of factors. The local community calls the middle course of the River as the Simeto River Valley.

With five municipalities in two different Provinces along its path, plus eight more close to it, it is a significant area due to some features: rare elements of wildlife still existing; historical and cultural heritage places; peculiar farming systems (with some high-quality products into a fascinating rural landscape with ancient buildings and infrastructures, from different époques starting from Neolithic, continuing with Greeks, Romans, Arabic, Normans, Bourbons); a lot of springs from Mount Etna (rich groundwater system).

But there are also a lot of disturbing factors: water and ground pollution (cities’ depuration plants do not work; inefficient waste management system, illegal water pumping and chemical pollutants by some farmers and industries); derelict lands (young generations move from rural places into the cities and no one is taking care of fields anymore); inefficient and useless hydraulic infrastructures (artificial banks and dykes); so the context is badly changing and biodiversity is decreasing. For these reasons, it could be defined as an ecological challenging context.

Furthermore, there is a long-lasting crisis for the local agricultural market and rural economies, with few institutional plans and no well-defined visions to empower local communities. Different local agencies do not share land management information and, in general, laymen, associations, and institutions are not used to work in a collaborative way, as it is even difficult to say who is the local community. Moreover, political patronage is quite common and young generations suffer unemployment problems (they do not believe in better changing so they often go away from Sicily).

In the meanwhile, there is an active network of grassroots associations that wants to promote strategies and projects to revitalize derelict areas though responsible fruition and practices. They want to encourage public debate about these issues, with institutions playing their part in a responsible way.

4.3 Steps toward the River Agreements.

In 2008, partnership started from a specific need: defending a Special Area of Conservation (SAC Pietralunga) from the building of a big incinerator, that laymen

perceived as very dangerous for them, for ecosystems and for the economy of their life place. This incinerator was part of the Regional Waste Plan of Governor Salvatore Cuffaro in 2002 (some years later he was convicted of mafia affair), so that regional institution was perceived as an enemy to fight.

Laymen started organizing in grassroots associations that were able to affect decision-making process thanks to mass protests, for example mobilizing more than 5000 participants for a march, and also legal actions supported by some experts (Gravagno&Saija, 2008). Even if the fight against incinerator was successfully, it was not enough: partnership knew that NIMBY approach was not a proper way to face the question (Fisher, 2000), so researchers and activists started reflecting on a complex and more holistic level. It was immediately clear that the entire river system needs to be revitalized from deep changes, long-terms strategies, new and respectfully relationship human-environment.

The partnership highlighted some goals: promoting an inclusive debate about the environment, starting from local knowledge and common experience, involving also laymen that are outside grassroots associations; affecting decision-making process, building a community strategic plan as a tool for a meaningful dialogue with institutions; trying to overcome advocacy toward a shared responsibility, i.e. a process in which different actors play their part with their skills. The partnership was therefore starting to trace a collaborative strategy for watershed management improving renewed ecological relationship. It is reasonable to say that these goals are inspired by discourses about sustainability. The partnership never faced the debate 'Sustainable Development' vs 'Sustainable De-Growth', but the common issue was clear: how to make the Simeto Valley a beautiful place to live, for present and next generations, learning from the past ones? More than theories, the debate focused on practices: which could be suitable paths toward sustainability?

The first step was defined as the 'Community Mapping Project', built in a specific way suited to the local context, interests and needs. It explored the awareness to be part of an ecosystem where inhabitants share a 'common home' and its resources with other living being. Inspired from Bioregional practices, it focused the importance of mapping to create a community sense related also to natural environment, giving up a 'city-centered' vision to move toward a wider one, with the central role of rivers as symbols for respectful ways to live together (Aberlay, 1993); furthermore, it was a way to explore allocation and management of resources through an easy way of understanding land's features, as experienced in Participatory Rural Appraisal (Chambers, 1992). But the 'Community Mapping Project' was also something more. It was a simple and direct action able to put different people together in front of a huge map (1:10000 scale with the all river path, in a 3 m height, 10 m weight wall) and reflect together about future of their land. A 'serious play' was invented, without rigid rules, but just some guidelines, to sharpen 'mapper's' interest and action. In four months of work (carried on in four different cities), the partnership was able to involve 500 active participants (farmers, tourism operators, students, inhabitants, workers, users of the valley, and so on), plus some institutional representatives. This number is quite minor comparing with 5000 people involved into the protest against incinerator mentioned above, because it was more difficult moving 'from NO! to YES!', i.e. from the protest level to the proposal level. By the

way, the Map collected a lot of interesting contributes about the past, the present and the future of the river valley in its complexity, with a particular attention on water resources. After a 'Three Days Community Design Workshop', called 'ViviSimeto 2010' and focused on some topics arisen from the 'Community Mapping', a document was realized, with a system of values, wish and, above all, with a system of actions: something like a participatory strategic plan. Participants evaluated this phase as successful through public appreciations and the willingness to continue working together.

When the partnership focused which pilot actions and projects could be the starting point of practical landscape transformation and regeneration, it was immediately clear the necessity to start from derelict areas, places that are not currently used, apart from being illegal dumps. Two of them were chosen, where the partnership experienced a community design approach to build collective knowledge (Raciti, 2012): one near the river, to revitalize through planting trees and natural open furniture, promoting a responsible use and care of a fragile ecosystem characterized by peculiar birds; the other one inside a city in a poor neighborhood, to revitalize through a creative school-community garden, promoting intergenerational exchange between old people and young students, with experiential forms of education. These two experiments showed two critical points: voluntary action was too weak; institutional support was not effective. Reflecting during the action, the partnership focused the importance of an Institutional Turning Point, i.e. a more organized structure made of a deep collaboration among associations and institutions.

Synthesizing, in order to build the River Agreement, the Community Mapping Project was the first milestone as a voluntary experiment carried on by the partnership among associations and institutions, with its good results and some failures related to the pilot actions. In the meanwhile, the partnership decided to enlarge itself, enclosing different institutional representatives, with the aim of building a frame defined as a Community River Statement, the baseline for the River Agreement. This is still a work in progress, but it is possible to trace its characteristics. It is about to be realized by mixed work groups, with the institutional representatives as newcomers, and the purpose of clarifying the Simeto Community's system of values, common rules, and landscape managing. The process of realizing the Statement is a way to let institutions and citizens collaborate around the common issue of revitalizing their place of life. It is going to be structured like a 'puzzle', where different actors do what they can (and want) to do, in order to contribute and to exchange with others. For examples, old people want to explore the topic of memories and transmission to young generation; some institutional representatives want to exchange data and expertise related to the river system; farmers and touristic operators want to realize networks and promotional strategies for a sustainable rural economy; some activists and researchers want to continue a 'listening process', like the one started with Community Mapping Project, going deeper inside stories of people who live the river. All different contributes are going to compose the puzzle, if every participant does not delegate, but takes own responsibility of a small action for the large collective project. After this phase, expected results are related to obtain a mature process to build the River Agreement, with the crucial challenge of defining the 'stickiness factor' (Gladwell, 2000).

In which sense this process is going toward a sustainable de-growth perspective? To answer the question, interviews in-depth have been conducted, as exposed in next paragraph.

4.4 Evaluations from passionate participants: some preliminary results.

Four people have been listened to discuss paradigms, results, and next steps of the River Agreement process. They all are activist of ViviSimeto, and they represent four different points of view, that can also be assumed by other participants, but cannot exhaust the variety of points of views. According to the classification matrix of Deming&Swaffield (2011), this research strategy is subjectivist, i.e. knowledge itself is the product of a particular way to look at society where researchers are merged, and samples are not representative of general laws, but they are related to specific situations and contexts. The interviews are a tool to verify if the Simeto River Agreement can be an opportunity to experience De-Growth discourse, reflecting with people who are directly involved working actively into the process. Their lives are deeply related to their answers, so four stories are synthesized, together with their reflections.

More than 10 years ago, the President of ViviSimeto has been also the mayor of Paternò, one of the municipalities along the River; after that experience, she worked actively for the River, from the very first moment when ViviSimeto arose against the incinerator, till the ongoing process. Her point of view is very close the an institutional perspective, and her sustainability idea is related to promote a plain life-style and a responsible use of resources, consuming less and improving local economies. To her, the River Agreement has the potential to become a strategy for sustainability, but two preconditions have to happen: the first one is the ability of its promoters to affect the political sphere, transforming the Agreement in an effective tool for environmental management; the second one is the capacity to start the cooperation among different rural producers, in order to revitalize the socio-economic context via best practices for the environment. She is concerned not only for the natural ecosystem, but also for unemployment plague that is affecting the local context.

With her, another activist has already been involved in governing the Paternò's Municipality some years ago, and he also followed her into the ViviSimeto adventure. He declares not to be inside the De-Growth/Sustainable Development debate, but he has a clear idea: it is necessary to reduce consumption of resources and to improve the relationships between communities and their local context. For him, first of all there is a problem of democracy and values: it is central to start public debates in order to go deep inside the concept of community, to create the sense of community, and to highlight which values a community wants to share, with the awareness that the current direction will lead to destroy peculiarities and the real wellbeing of the context; he also underlines the central role of agriculture, reframing it toward a multifunctional conception. So, the River Agreement has to be an opportunity to enter this path.

They both sustained the Community Mapping Project (even with some preliminary doubts), and now they are very passionately involved into the Institutional Turning Point.

An organic farmer is an activist of ViviSimeto, too. He experiences De-Growth discourses in his everyday life, thinking De-Growth as a change of direction, from the obsession for quantitative development, toward the relaxed search for equitable quality. He was one of the passionate promoters for the Community Mapping project, hosting some public meetings into his rural farm (and house, that he calls 'La Casa delle Acque' – tr: 'The Water House', paying extreme attention to this important resource), while he is doubtful regarding in the Institutional Turning Point. He was enthusiastic for the working method used during the Community Mapping Project: it was led by an open group that met frequently in order to design and to organize the process, exchanging ideas in a very friendly way, and according to him, this exchange made the Community Mapping an original practice, rich of a variety of inputs. He believes in the strength of networks, at a local and at a global scale, so he is part of a lot of 'De-Growth' inspired networks, like the 'RESSud - Fair Economic Southern Network', based on the mutual support and trust among different producers and consumers. He supports De-Growth practices and tools, like the Participatory Guarantees System, to certify good organic productions through a community process of control, and he is aware of the importance of a rural network for the Simeto Valley. He sees in the River Agreement an opportunity to sustain these networks, if they are spontaneous, not addicted to fundraising, and composed of innovative farmers, who link agriculture with hospitality and, above all, with the aim of taking care of the land, transforming derelict areas in regenerated ones.

A Bioregional activist was one of the main promoters of the Community Mapping Project. He is very familiar with De-Growth discourses, that he started deepening during the Earth Summit in Brazil, 1992. He experienced fair and ethic economics systems, like the Time Banking and, at a certain point of his life, he decided to live very close to the Simeto River, as a sort of 'River Caretaker', with a very essential lifestyle, believing that rivers are the most vital part of earth. He was part of ViviSimeto while he was living his deep connection with the river ecosystems, being genuine concerned about its future. He knows that saving the earth is a matter of deep awareness inside every inhabitant, and of willingness in living like a community: it is a matter of ecological relationships. He thinks that the institutional support can be important, but before it is necessary to build a community sense, to build healthy relationships among people. Otherwise, according to him, it is like 'having beautiful cut flowers without a vase to contain them'. His dream would be to continue being a 'River Caretaker', with other young people as facilitators to renew ecological relationships. Institutional support can be useful in organizing the 'River Caretakers', so the Agreement can be an opportunity toward this direction.

These two last participants are inside De-Growth discourses more than the first ones: they were passionate promoters of the Community Mapping Process, and they are

not deep inside the Institutional Turning Point like the first ones, but they both hope it can happen as a useful frame for De-Growth practices.

5. Conclusions and discussion.

Beyond labels, Sustainable De-Growth is perceived like a feasible perspective in the Simeto Valley. Discourses about GDP/GNP, or decreasing production, are never been faced by the partnership, but it is shared the idea that local community has to rethink its economic system toward an aware and responsible use of resources. It is widely accepted that the sense of community has to be improved, and that ecology is not just a matter on healthy natural relationships but, above all, of healthy social relationships.

The Simeto River Agreement is coming up as a strategy to organize spontaneous De-Growth practices already existing, to speed up innovative practices, and to allow young generations revitalizing spoiled contexts, with a multifunctional approach to agriculture. Collaboration among laymen, association, experts, and institutions is necessary to improve a holistic sense of community; furthermore, institutional support is important in order to introduce effective changing in environmental management.

As this is still a work in progress, a question is open: how is the Institutional Turning Point going to end? Future development of this research will be related to explore the practical experience of building a Participatory River Statement, and to define concretely the River Agreement at a more advanced status.

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