

Power inequalities and conflicts in the areas of natural interest. The case of the "Sughereta di Niscemi" reserve in Sicily

Francesco Lo Piccolo¹, Filippo Schilleci and Vincenzo Todaro

¹Department of Architecture, University of Palermo

francesco.lopiccolo@unipa.it

This paper aims to investigate the relationship between land transformation and protection of natural interest sites. Its focus is the relationship between supranational and national policies, able to produce strong impacts on health of the people and environment, and local dimension, characterized by the presence of natural protected areas.

The paper demonstrate how the asymmetrical power relations can influence the effectiveness of planning systems at local level, producing severe forms of environmental and social injustice.

This will be explored through the case study of the natural reserve of Niscemi in Sicily. The reserve "Sughereta di Niscemi" (Caltanissetta, Sicily) is a natural protected area of the Sicilian Region, established on 1997. The cork forest ("sughereta") of Niscemi (3,000 hectares) is the most relevant relict of the oak forests that once covered central-southern Sicily. It is a habitat of relevant natural value (with over 500 species of plants and about 130 species of animals) so much that the area at European level is protected as a Site of Community Importance (S.C.I.) (ITA050007), in addition to being at local level a regional protected area.

In 2001 pursuant to an international agreement, the United States Navy (Department of Defense) has decided to install a M.U.O.S. (Mobile User Objective System) ground station for military communications satellite system in Zone B of the natural reserve "Sughereta di Niscemi", at 60 km from U.S. Naval Air Station Sigonella. Others three M.U.O.S. ground stations are localized in Western Australia, Southeast Virginia and Hawaii. The Sicilian ground station consists of three huge swivelling very

high frequency satellite dishes and two UHF helical antennas, covering a field of half a hectare.

In 2008, the authorization for the construction of the M.U.O.S. was given thanks to the "special" approval of all institutions present at a "conference of services" ("conferenza di servizi") (Legislative Decree n. 387/2003), among which representatives of the regional departments for landscape, cultural environment heritage, the managing authority of the Sughereta reserve, the entity for public forests, and the municipality of Niscemi. Therefore the construction of the Sicilian ground station, started in February 2008 without the traditional authorizations (the Environmental Impact Assessment was submitted only later start of the works, in the summer of the same year), was completed without respect for the natural heritage of the reserve and without observance of the local laws for environment and landscape, thanks to the procedure of the "conference of services".

This is a procedural model for administrative simplification and an instrument of co-ordination of public subjects called to express a (negative or positive) opinion regarding a specific procedure. This "conference of services" is the pivotal-point of the whole authorization procedure and at the same time, with regard to critical points emerging in the work, one of the principal causes of conflict. In fact, the decisions made by the "conference of services" replace the final authorizations from the single public institutions and have the objective of speeding up the tying-up of administrative procedure, especially when dealing with potential international or national funding (and interests). Authorization represents not only the right to transform the soil, but also an instrument for "automatic variation" of the planning instruments, as laid down in the so-called "urban-planning variants" ("varianti urbanistiche"), that the Italian planning system considers as a possibility for modifying approved plans through zoning modifications.

This state of affairs is further exacerbated because, in order to trim down administrative procedures for project approval, with the "conference of services", the required passage through the democratic organs (city council) and control (Sicilian Region) is not carried out (as laid down by the norms in force for approving plans and projects). In fact, with the "conference of services", these steps are evaded and the procedure

for approval of the “urban-planning variants”, from being technical-political, becomes exclusively technical. In this way the level of sharing and participation on the part of collectivity is also sidestepped, through having one’s own representatives elected to the city council. All this seems even more serious in connection with the relevant effects that these practices produce on the transformation of the local area and landscape and which the local community cannot share.

For this reason, construction of the M.U.O.S. was halted for nearly half of 2013 by protests of local associations "No MUOS" related to the health risks and environmental damage due to radio waves in densely populated areas, like the one adjacent to the town of Niscemi. In particular, local associations fight for the revocation of authorisation to the construction and operation of the system.

In spite of the controversy, the M.U.O.S. of Niscemi was completed, but now it is seized by the regional administrative court and this risks to threaten the diplomatic relationships between USA and Italy.

In relation to this point of view, the case of the M.U.O.S. of Niscemi, as well as the cases of Sigonella, Trapani Birgi, Augusta, demonstrate how Sicily always more frequently become logistic center of the wars of the Mediterranean Sea, but also of Middle East and North Africa.

If, at the political (and national/international) level, the issue is how to "please" United States respecting the Italian justice, at the planning (and local) level the question is directly related to social and environmental aspects.

In relation to these considerations, the paper focuses on the cause-effect relationship between international and national policies and planning instruments at local level highlighting that soil transformations through short administrative procedures can produce forms of inequality and injustice, as well as impacts on the health of the people and environment.

These conflicts and power inequalities highlight the ethical challenges and dilemma of planning in natural interest areas, where issues of social justice, sustainable development and suspension of norms are strictly intertwined.