

An Operational Model towards Playful Public Participation

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1 ABSTRACT

After a brief review of e-participation potentials, principles and practices, this paper develops an operational framework for the conduct of playful public participation experiences. The operational model captures the key elements of traditional planning processes, but uses technological-driven decision making tools techniques as well as a “playful” approach designed to capture the motivations of both public administrators and the participating public. The playful participation model is parameterized using both SWOT analysis and a Logical Framework Approach. The last part of the paper illustrates the operational model in a case study conducted in a South Italy city, Potenza, over the past 7 months, concerning planning of public spaces for young people.

2 INTRODUCTION

Participation process arises from the necessity to break down cultural barrier both for administrators, like subjects placed before, in an institutional way, take a decision, and for subjects involved in participation process.

The administrators show mistrust of participation process because they are afraid that it could be cause of conflicts and because they generally do not want renounce to be the privileged decision supporters, retaining that their choice is the best decision, in fear it could be modified by participation process.

For subjects involved in participation process, instead, it has been noticed an insufficient and irrelevant use of active participation, that it can be translated into a general mistrust, caused by lack of participation culture.

In order that participation could be effective, it is necessary a cultural change both from administrators and from subjects involved in participation process; this change implicates ability and will to work in team, to make roles transparent and to share information in efficient way, but above all to debate and think back to own opinions and chooses.

To build this change it is important consider several aspects: in particular, what kind of tools to use, where to “participate”, how to participate.

Concerning tools, it has been noticed that decision making tools, and in particular technological ones, are effective to create a common knowledge base and to organize and manage the process, making it transparent and making possible to repeat in the time. In a reality like this, they can definitely help in order to manage communication and participation, even if they cannot - and they must not - replace contacts and relationships that can be created among people demanding direct connections and constant dialogue in the time.

Concerning where to participate, it is important to choose right place: comfortable environments where people can talk and have a confrontation; where it is possible to organize meetings, with different kind of people, making everyone at oneself ease; it is important organize special events in place where people live, finding local speakers; above all, it needs to do coherence to all these meetings, succeeding in making a coherent project, by different kind of input.

Sharing moments have to take into account, preferring an informal approach, based on the concrete representation and exemplification, in order to illustrate concepts and themes concerning the discussion; during these moments, it should take into account also maps and plastic models, and all kinds of communication that do not need complex texts reading.

Finally, in many cases, it is useful a ludic approach, that for instance takes into account moments for voting different alternatives through coloured coupons, or it considers simple simulation tools able to show “what happens if...”.

In light of these remarks, Playful Public Participation seems to find rich soil; it seems to be the most suitable approach to make close subjects involved in planning participation process. Even if Playful Participation is a good method to participate, and even if it could be effective in order to break down the mistrust barrier, with this paper we affirm that it is not enough in order to guarantee the effectiveness of participation process

itself; we propose therefore a new way to make planning and to make participation, a way that could join the rational planning approach, starting from context knowledge frame, to problems and objectives identification, and intervention policies predisposition, arriving to define intervention strategies, showing future and possible scenarios, with the Playful Public Participation approach.

The paper is organized in three sections: the first section starts with a brief review of participation and e-participation concepts, where we discuss about the new era of participation process; this section continues debating on a renovated approach in rational planning, introducing two methodological tools able to identify problems and objectives, to predispose intervention policies and to define intervention strategies, showing future and possible scenarios. The second section is the main section, because it's just in such part that we propose the new way to make planning and to make participation, a way that joins the traditional approach with playful approach, in the conviction that this "wedding" brings subjects involved in participation process near to planning. The third part of paper illustrates a case study, conducted in a South Italy city, Potenza, over the past 7 months, concerning planning of public spaces for young people. In the end we presents results, as a discussion focused on the integration between traditional and innovative way to make participation, through the reading of case study results.

3 PARTICIPATION PROCESS IN WEB 2.0

The increase of importance of communicative aspects in urban planning has been led the participation, and moreover the e-participation, to hold a role more and more decisive in planning process (Hajer, 2001). In the "Information Society", Public Administrations use new technologies more and more often, with the purpose of establishing a rapid, direct and transparent relation with citizens...or, at least, they are trying to do it! The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), therefore, play a fundamental role into building consensus in democratic processes, giving more relevance to citizens in need to be involved in decisional process (Tambouris, et al, 2007).

All around the world, e-participation projects are on-going increasing, and many Administrations are actively engaging in the use of new technologies in order to involve citizens in democratic processes; although this positive tendency, public participation quality is still making better.

Citizens involvement in policies is not easy as it seems to be. First of all, an effective participation has to be based on correct information that poin out rebounds on territory by scenarios building, able to simulate different choices.

The use of new technologies in urban planning processes, with the aim of improving communication quality and widening interation between all stakeholders, could, without doubt, enhance use of bottom-up approach (Knapp and Coors, 2008). It tries to stimulate less involved part in the process in acting and participating, with collaborative behavior. Citizens, who feel involved in planning process development, as shown in Tilio et al. (2009), feel that their initiatives could be appreciated and approved; various alternative solutions, elaborated thanks to practical sense that typically characterizes city user, could be identified from every citizen.

Now then so, participation process successful is attributable to citizens involvement in policies. Since 1969, when Arnstein developed his theory about Citizen Participation, it was introduced public involvement concept, as a way to redistribute decision-making power and as a key to determine whether public involvement is meaningful.

If participation process is devised and if citizen takes part in participation process, then there will be benefits for entire community.

In a participation process it is necessary to involve people at a very early stage, so as to create a dialogue between them. And just this dialogue allows participants to reach a consensus on something. Moreover citizens can identificate themselves with the project, because they have taken part in working it out. This can improve the preparation and realization of the measures (Krek, 2009).

Participation is something of objectively good for all community; mentioning Arnstein (1969) thinking, "The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you!". Or else, following Krek (2005) thinking, the word participation in general means something

positive; it implies that someone is cooperating, “playing” along with the group or an individual, working with others in order to achieve a common goal.

In a pilote study led by Conroy and Gordon (2004) it has been verified a higher popularity level in a meeting where participants used advanced technological tools, as GIS-based ones, compared to traditional public meetings. The measure in which information is really perceived from citizens and, thereby, the possible participation rank could be due to way in which information is presented (Simmons, 1987). A participation environment, where it uses internet technology like a tool to involve public part, is, as a consequence, an environment that facilitates knowledge and information storage; visual systems as maps and imagines are mainly recognized from participation processs members (Conroy and Evans-Cowley, 2006). The studies led by Conroy and Gordon (2004) demonstrate how e-government tools go on a promise to improve public participation opportunities; with passing of years and, consequently, with improvement and diffusion of technologies, that promise becomes more and more achievable. Like observed by Thomas and Streib (2003), citizens visit more and more websites, perceived as the principal mean to collect information and interact with Public Administration. According to Rodotà (2007), “Internet is the biggest public space that humanity has known a place where all people can express themselves, gain knowledge, get ideas and not only information, deny, dialogue, participate to common life and so, build a different world where everyone could feel equally citizens”.

Nowadays, infact, online social networks or communities have created a multitude of virtual spaces on which people can socialize (Facebook), share content (Flickr, YouTube) and expertise (Wikipedia). Through this virtual space it is possible exchange digital information and facilitate social interactions between users and organize different types of groups (Apostol, 2008).

More in general, Internet and World Wide Web are generating radical changes in the way we are able to communicate. Our ability to engage communities and individuals in designing their environment is also beginning to change as new digital media provide ways in which individuals and groups can interact with planners and politicians in exploring their future (Hudson-Smith et al, 2002). While citizens are becoming e-citizens (Prosperi, 2004), government must enable citizens to increase participatory skills through Internet, contributing to growth of references to e-society, e-democracy and cyberdemocracy: we assisted, in yers, in “collective intelligence” (Lévy, 2002).

Public participation based on online communication is become, in the last ten years, a real research field, and the innovative impulse in web-based application field, due to ICT, lead to new form of communication among citizens, planners and public authority. New generation tools are a lot and, if used opportunely, could lead to a good level of effectiveness; we can think to chatrooms, forum online, web surveys, workshops and virtual conferences, e-mails and discussion exchanges through online maps. An integration of geographic information systems (GIS) and public participatory tools represents one of the latest innovations in this area (Krek, 2008).

Therefore, the new technologies and the new way to participate to planning choices feel the effects of deep change, innovate themselves, get rich in contents and experiences and evolve towards the new era of the web 2.0, that seems to be attractive to promote participatory practices among citizens, because its tools are becoming more and more familiar to them, and just this familiarity could greatly increase potential participation (Lanza and Prosperi, 2009).

A concepts, proposed by research group of HafenCity University of Hamburg, that open the way to quality and effectiveness of participation process in urban planning is Playful Public Participation one. The key idea of Playful Public Participation (PPP) is to generate pleasure and joy for the citizens involved in public participatory processes, in particular for the interaction between citizens and planning experts.¹

With Playful Participation it is possible use the game as a stimulating computer-based tool that can potentially involve citizens in serious public participatory processes (Krek, 2008).

Following Huzinga (1995), who asserted that one of the most significant (human and cultural) aspects of play is that it is fun, with playful participation, discussions and comparisons can be stimulated, offering to all stakeholders a tool for “play to build” intervention alternatives through combination of action proposals.

¹ See <http://www.hcu-hamburg.de/geomatik/digitalcity/research-ppp.html>, last access on February, 2010

In the playful public participation concept, the union among dialogue, comparison, design and fun is the secret and special ingredient to let really involve people in public participatory process.

4 TOOLS FOR A RATIONAL APPROACH IN PLANNING

Until now we have exposed teorie about ICT tools, claiming how it is useful and fundamental a participation process in a decision making process and supporting Playful Public Participation principles. Well, we are convinced of this, we believe in this way to make participation. Nevertheless, our urban planning training impose to jump back into the past and retrieve some concepts that are at the early stages of a participation process: that concepts are connected to rational planning.

In the last decades, social processes have been changed, and interest in public decision sphere has been enhanced; “face-to-face interactions in the real time is the new model of planning“ (Friedmann, 1993), and the new planning is transactive, that is it asks for interaction between two kind of knowledge, that one of experts and technicians subjects and that one tested. Tested knowledge, that planners have to make explicit, is citizens’knowledge, important because citizens live experiences, situations and contexts.

Decision in planning is developed in a process where knowledge about ambitions and objectives is growing and where stakeholders and “les agis” (Roy, 1985) influence directly or not directly the choice, considering the importance of objectives and alternatives for each one. To address decision toward an optimal solution, respecting public interest, and considering the three principles of planning, that are equity in choices, effectiveness and resources preservation, concept of plan rationality is central (Las Casas and Sansone, 2004).

Rationality in planning supports the planning process in all its phases with several techniques and methodological approaches; in our vision, the reference term is to consider plan as a decision process, and to adopt a procedural approach (Faludi, 1987), where knowledge grows in an incremental way, considering logical consequences and linking decision evaluation to the strict process itself.

4.1 The Logical Framework Approach and the SWOT analysis as methodological tools for public decision

Planning process is based on objectives and problems identification, strictly connected to the context knowledge: the preliminary analysis of context becomes a fundamental element of planning process, and the urban survey carries out a double role: if on one hand survey is the technical essential requirement for plan, on the other hand it can be considered a learning moment concerning town problems recognition and a tool to re-build history, tradition, culture, starting from which designing future development (Fera, 2008).

4.1.1 The SWOT analysis

Urban survey can be carried out adopting analytical procedure, as SWOT analysis, in order to detect spatial and/or social situations relevant in planning process, enabling participation to analysis process and helping in problems and objectives identifications.

SWOT Analysis is used in business administration since 50s, to support choices through a rational approach and a transparent decisional process, and it is common also in public administration since 80s, to build possible economic development scenarios. Today, according to European Commitment Regulations (Guijt and Woodhill, 2002), evaluation of plans and programs must consider a SWOT analysis.

The name is the acronym of the main components of the analysis itself: Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities and Threats are the evaluation dimensions. The identification of these components, in the better way, and possibly with a large involvement of actors, is preparatory to the definition of strategies and actions necessary for the accomplishment of defined objectives. In fact, the four components of SWOT allow to highlight the characteristics of the analysis’argument and to understand the internal mechanisms to modify, and at the same time they allow to take into account the external context, able to influence the fulfillment of objectives; strengths and weaknesses have to be interpreted as the endogenous variables, face to the external ones, represented by opportunities and threats. This distinction is important because it allows to identify the elements on which it is possible to intervent and the elements not directly controlled. The SWOT matrix, containing the identified components, is the results of a detailed context study, often based on quantitative data, but simply achievable in a participatory context, where involved subjects can discuss about evaluation

dimensions. Moreover, today it is usual to represent spatially the SWOT analysis, identifying on maps, with help of GIS, the evaluation dimensions themselves, obtaining maps with high communicative potential: we speak about “geo-SWOT”.

4.1.2 The Logical Framework Approach

Starting from SWOT output, decision process needs a hierarchical organization of problems, in order to define a structure where objectives, intended as problems removal, are connected to actions, attended results and spent resources. From this point of view, the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) represents a useful tool. It is commonly used as a tool for management of development plans and it was initially developed in the “management by objectives”; recently, European Commission adopted LFA to manage international cooperation interventions.

LFA supports the analysis and understanding of components of program and plans, highlighting the logical processes that join them. In particular it allows to consider in an integrate way the following elements:

- Project’s objectives, distinguished in four levels: goals, purpose, output and input;
- Relations between cause and effect among the above mentioned levels;
- Analysis of external factors to justify the relations;
- Objectives verifiable indicators (OVI) and related tools to verify, manage and evaluate objectives’ fulfilment (Gasper, 1999).

With this structured approach it is easy establish priorities and determine attended results from a projects, considering a logic series of phases:

1. Identification phase: existent conditions are analysed, project pertinence is investigated and objectives and strategies are identified; this is an analysis phase, during the which several kinds of analysis are carried out. In particular, a stakeholders analysis, in order to identify and characterize potential major stakeholders and to assess their capacities; a problem analysis, in order to determine cause and effect relationships for identified key problems; an objective analysis, in order to develop solutions from the identified problems, and with relevant importance to means and end relationships; finally, a strategy analysis, in order to identify different strategies to achieve solutions and select the most appropriate one.
2. Formulation phase: project is prepared, through declaration of clear objectives and measured results; this is a synthesis phase, characterised by three main activities; first one, logical framework matrix is developed, so that project structure is defined, and risks and its internal logic are tested, indicators are formulated; the activity scheduling determines the sequence and dependency of activities, and supplies information about their estimated duration and the assigned responsibility; to complete, the resource scheduling develops input schedules and a budget.
3. Implementation phase: negotiation, operative phases and monitoring are controlled;
4. Audit phase: decision making process can be opportunely synthesized, and objectives achievement can be evaluated.

The approach promotes stakeholders participation and so negotiation (Coleman, 1987).

5 HOW TO GET BETTER PLANNING PROCESS? “RATIONAL+PLAYFUL” APPROACH

Into strategic-rational planning processes, knowledge represents a fundamental condition to define plan actions; in this strategic-rational vision, it is considered as “experted” knowledge, exclusive planner’heritage. On the contrary, into the strategic participated model, knowledge is produced into an interaction process between several actors. Consequently, context analysis can be considered as a result of expert scientific knowledge and reality-made knowledge, tested by citizens. In a community planning process, collective experiences and technical analysis interchange and interact continuously, and in reason of nature of community planning process, that is addressed toward the action, analysis methodologies are structured so to supply useful information in order to identify objectives and strategies. (Fera, 2008).

Therefore, we can consider on one hand a methodological approach to context analysis and strategies definition, that we can call “rational approach”, and on the other hand, a not formal approach to participation

in planning, that we can call “playful approach”, borrowing the term that Hamburg HafenCity University group has coined.

Here, we want to compare these two methodologies, starting from the idea that their combination can give strength and effectiveness to planning process, and, moreover, to the choices definition process. This is our conviction, this is our methodological proposal to tackle a participated planning process.

So, we are persuaded that the two different approaches, rational and playful, could become the new frontier into urban planning system: to analyze a urban context, identify one or several problems, define the objectives (like dual of problems) to reach, identify and carry out some strategic actions in order to solve identified problems. In all this process we think that citizen has a key role, because he could be fundamental in problems’ definition (as a real user of the city and so of its problems), and at the same time fundamental to take a decision about strategic actions (as future real user of city and so of its benefits carried out from the identified actions).

Figure 1 makes explicit our proposal: in a simplified way, planning process is schematically presented in its two macro phases: context analysis phase, more formal and structured (via SWOT Analysis and Logical Framework Approach), and participation phase, free and less formal (via Playful Public Participation).

Fundamental phase in a community planning process, is starting phase, that asks care and deepening, in reason of its being preliminary to planning process. But the question is: when does planning process start? It starts when a social subject (public or private), on the basis of observations, problems, instances, considers convenient to develop a transformation process, and he becomes promoter of transformation initiative.

And what about participation and its role in this planning process framework?

It is necessary activate participation process since planning process starts, when planners think about scenarios and visions of future. Participation, in fact, can not be limited to attuate already defined strategies: citizens have to be involved when strategic options start to be discussed. However, usually a great part of conflicts born during the transit from strategies to realization of strategies themselves, so that it is important that participation process is still alive in all process phases, also actuation and management ones.

In order that we can really talk about participation, so, it is fundamental that not all choices are yet done.

Public participation is an important part of urban development. If people are being integrated into planning process, the planner is able to see through different perspectives and gets to know new ideas and opinions, thus conflicts can be solved more efficiently. Furthermore citizens acceptance towards new developments and ideas increases (Krek, 2009).

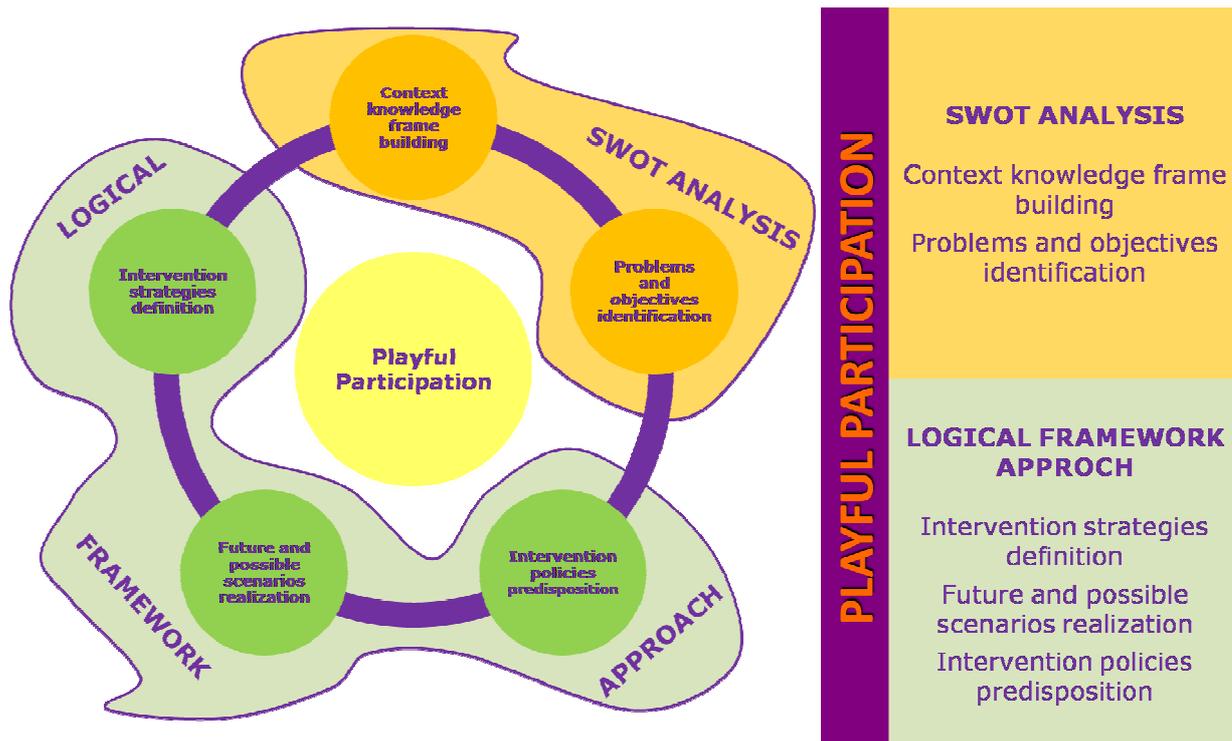


Fig. 1: Scheme for a "Rational+Playful" approach

Our thesis is to not consider the participation process as ex ante or ex post process, but as an on-going process, that must go with all the planning process; we intend planning process considering the traditional phases (context knowledge frame building, problems and objectives identification, intervention policies predisposition, future and possible scenarios realization, intervention strategies definition) as essential, but inserting in the core of the process playful participation, embracing all the phases; moreover, we would include in the process the use of traditional but always current methodologies, SWOT Analysis and Logical Framework Approach, as the way to introduce and guarantee rationality of process.

5.1 Case study: planning public spaces for young citizens

In this paragraph we describe an interesting study case concerning planning of public spaces for young people in a little town in South of Italy, Potenza. Research started from the detection of not coincidence between request and supply, in terms of spaces, from and for young people: relating to the presence of some public spaces for young people, not really used, and at the same time the discontent of young, not satisfied of life in the town, researchers rhetorically ask if there is a problem in planning so that results are not effective. In order to answer to the question, and, more important, in order to define a methodology to carry out a rational and effective planning in the context of young citizens needs, researchers have involved young people and several operators in the context of young policies into a simulated planning process.

Involvement required definition of several interaction forms; starting from light interactions forms, suitable in particular in brief and not strongly structured participation process (Fera, 2008), researchers planned a set of surveys, the creation of a focus-group, with the organization of several meetings, and the support, for all these activities, of social networking website.

Chosed social network has been Facebook. If in general this kind of virtual communities allows people to connect and interact with each other (Murray and Waller, 2007), Facebook has been considered the most suitable in reason of its spread diffusion, its daily consultation from main part of users and its nature of multi-sharing-functions (i.e. possibility to share moods, links, photos, events and so on). Researchers have created a facebook group, where they posted all information about the planning process, they communicated events, they published photos and videos registered during the events, and thanks to the pervasiveness of social network itself they succeeded to obtain a number of members on about 800 people, that is not negligible dimension in the study case context. According to Chiu et al. (2008), participation in online social

networks becomes a new communication and interaction phenomenon, so, Internet has been used as a communication tool in a group decision-making process (Hanzl, 2007).

Through the Facebook group, members have been invited to answer to an on-line survey, powered by Google-docs. Survey's aim was to better define the detected problem, considering the opinions of young people, divided into three different groups, in relation to their age. Concerning their needs, their customs and their capacity to express opinions, young people, considered from 15 to 35 years old, has been divided into three groups: 15-19 years old, 20-24 years old, 25-35 years old. Survey answers, presented during focus group meetings, helped into context analysis, in particular they have been the basis for the SWOT analysis.



Fig. 2: Activities for light interaction forms: focus group meetings, web-survey, Facebook group

During focus group meetings, SWOT analysis has been lead, highlighting the main aspects of problem and identifying the main instances to evaluate in planning process. Participants played to relate elements on their territory, and after a review of problems with the help of a bulletin board and a big number of post-it (of different colours, one for each element of SWOT), they used google Maps to localize. Relating the identified elements to tackle, avoid, exploit and transform (that is, the strengths, the weaknesses, the opportunities and the threats of a SWOT analysis) to concrete objects on territory, and building maps give more emphasis to the analysis, and make more effective the involvement of actors, thanks to the power of visual component into the process (see Figure 3).

Bullettin board and post-it have been used also to build problem tree and objective tree; after discussions, comparisons and observations, post-it have been finally positioned so that key-problem and key-objective have been identified. The prosecution of methodology was connected to the fulfillment of Logical Framework Approach through identification of strategies, interventions and actions.

The involvement into the understanding and evaluating process of subjects, as young people and operators in the context of young policies, able to contribute to discussion with a justified opinion (Grea, 2000) has been the essential requirement for the efficacy and utility of developed activities. Research conclusion and results interpretation are described in the following paragraph.

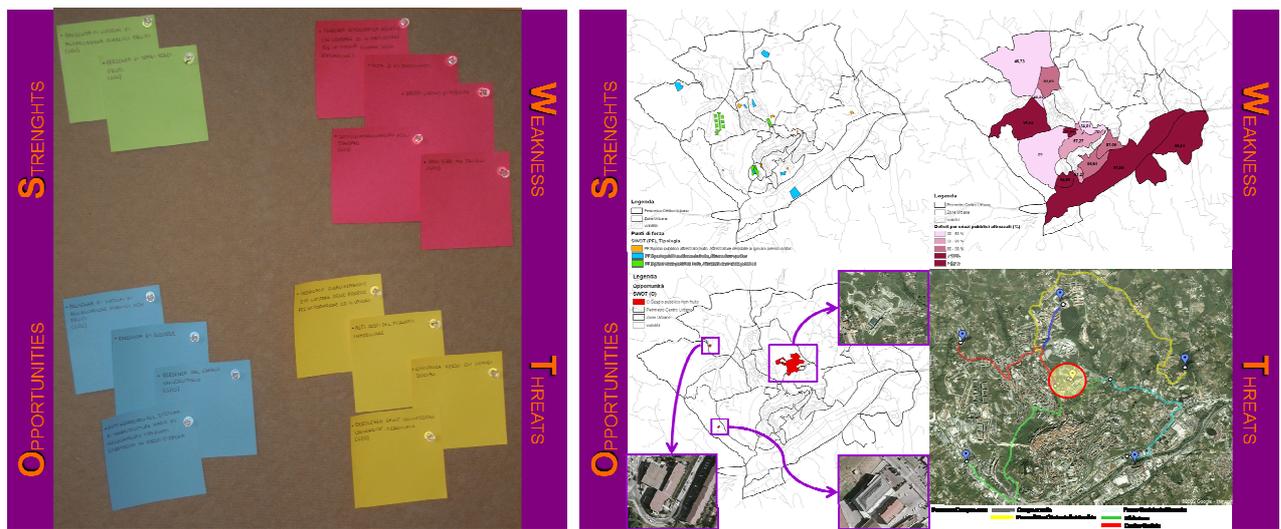


Fig. 3: From “post-it SWOT” to “GEO-SWOT”: experiment in a focus group

6 RESULTS AND FURTHER WORK

The result of the simulated process, at this moment, has been the formulation of a set of five strategies that, on the opinion of focus group, must be adopted to improve quality of young people life in the town. Surprising result is that participants have underlined that Public Administration can not work alone, but need the contribution of citizens themselves; young people have been positioned at the centre of strategies but, more important, at the centre of planning process. Participants expressed the opinion that their engagement can be strategic for success of planning activities.

Moreover, thanks to the friendly environment where focus group meetings have been held, thanks to the pleasant mood of meetings, thanks to the introduction of enjoy into participation activities, they seem persuaded into a future involvement in planning processes.

This planning process simulation shows that citizens (young citizens in particular) strongly contributed to the initial phase of planning process, when moderators guided and helped them into the context analysis, built through technical analysis (such as quantitative measures and so on) but also through citizens’ tested knowledge; moreover, citizens followed planning process and became strategic actors into participation phase. In fact, they where involved at the start point of planning process, they were conscious of process itself, thanks to the involvement in initial phases, they felt free to act into participation process, built in a not-formal environment, with characteristics of a play. Synthetically, citizens felt better and contributed to plan building more and better than with traditional participation forms.

The research has tested the interest of young people toward participation in planning process, also with a rational approach, normally considered boring and strictly technical. Experience highlighted the possibility to make amusing this rational approach, and his effectiveness thanks to the creation of a playful climate and the support of web 2.0 tools. Starting from this result, the future development of research will be the involvement of young participants into Playful Public Participation activities, with organization of role-playing games, experiences of planning for real, building of future scenarios, but also the use of Internet for electronic vote to evaluate strategic alternatives. It will be in that moment that we could start to experiment the “rational+playful” approach in participated planning processes.

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