

CITIZENS AND LAND PROTECTION. THE EXPERIENCE OF MEDIO VINALOPÓ (ALICANTE)

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In recent years, the substantive, inter-relational, symbolic and political dimensions of civic action regarding land protection have multiplied and evolved. Recent research has confirmed that this civic reaction stems from the nature of territorial dynamics in specific geographical contexts (Nogué, 2008; Romero, 2009). According to various analysts (Bobbio, 1999; Nel-lo, 2003; Alfama et al, 2007; Cruz, 2008), four factors influence territorial dynamics: the intervention of external actors in land use planning, the extent and nature of land use change, the absence of adequate directives concerning land use planning and the loss of faith in institutions. Understanding the factors behind the emergence of civic groups and actions aimed at protecting the land is important from a theoretical and, above all, applied perspective, since understanding the citizens' reaction to land use and land use policies is crucial for the new forms of territorial governance and participative land use planning recommended in European directives.

The aim of the present article is to explain the emergence and spread of land protection actions as a function of territorial dynamics and the factors involved in land use policies which affect citizens. To this end, the district of Medio Vinalopó was chosen as the study area. Located in the province of Alicante, this district has witnessed profound and multiple land use initiatives which were either started or submitted for planning approval in the final years of the recent period of urban expansion. A simultaneous emergence of new actors, associations and organisations has been observed which all demand a new approach from the institutions responsible as regards understanding and managing land use. Consequently, a second objective of this article is to identify the characteristics of these new actors through direct observation, thus enabling a deeper understanding of their experience, ways of organising themselves, values, forms of action and efficacy.

Understanding the emergence of land protection groups and subjecting them to an empirical analysis will help to identify the main problems and shortcomings in land use planning at district level whilst at the same time assisting in the formulation of useful

recommendations aimed at correcting these issues and moving towards rational, prudent land use planning involving citizen consensus and participation.

I. FACTORS IN LAND USE PLANNING DYNAMICS

Generally speaking, since the 1990s, the excessive and unrestrained nature of some urbanization projects, and the sheer number of initiatives announced have been of such a magnitude that these issues are becoming an increasing matter of concern for broad sections of the population (Romero, 2009). This phenomenon, which initially appeared mainly in coastal tourist areas, has intensified, extending into all contexts and demonstrating a high disregard for territorial considerations (Burriel, 2009). Nevertheless, in Medio Vinalopó it is possible to identify a series of specific factors which explain this phenomenon, such as its physiographic location and suitability as a transport corridor, its proximity to Alicante's coastal tourist areas and the existence of a euphoric atmosphere surrounding urban development based on the profits obtained during the last period of urban expansion, an aspect which has acted as a special stimulus for councils who need to generate high and immediate income.

A review of the plans and projects for intervention in the region which have either been started or are in the planning approval stage offers a future territorial scenario with unpredictable consequences for the district. An examination of the plans for urban development, projects for infrastructure and sectoral plans reveals a multitude of projects which could prompt a profound change in the territorial model. In particular, the route of the high speed train, the construction of two high-capacity dual-carriageways, the projects for residential areas with a total surface area extension of 25 million square metres and offering over 40,000 houses, the construction of 10 golf courses and the extra industrial land envisaged (almost 6 million square metres is planned, in 11 industrial estates), all present numerous uncertainties as regards the district's capacity to absorb such development and the social, economic and environmental imbalances which the territorial scenario could provoke in the medium term.

In summary, the district is moving towards a scenario which can be characterised by a vast increase in artificial land surfaces and significant change to land use patterns, a deviation from the traditional town planning approach taken by municipalities within the district, a demographic explosion accompanied by the redistribution of the population, and a notable increase in high-capacity transport infrastructures.

II. CITIZENS AND LAND PROTECTION

The model for land use and management currently employed justifies the growing concern shown by citizens. In Medio Vinalopó, an ever-increasing number of citizens have individually or collectively condemned the injustices of the planning model, and have proposed alternatives. The emergence of new associations and organisations and their consolidation around a citizens' movement to protect the land is still a hypothesis. Nonetheless, the signs of collective action and mobilisation observed in recent years demand in-depth analyses which attempt to explain the characteristics and opportunities they present.

The development of collective action to protect the land still raises numerous questions, including the creation of a social space and a certain stability over time before it is possible to talk of a genuine social movement. Nevertheless, it can be considered as the evolution of at least one aspect of neighbourhood, ecologist and sociocultural movements, the influence of which have combined to encourage the creation of attitudes favourable to land protection. Recent years have seen the articulation of diverse and wide-ranging initiatives of a noticeably political and social nature. Thus, for example, the «No se vende» (Not for sale) coordinating committee of various regions of Spain or the «Coordinadora Ciudadana en Defensa del Territorio» (Citizens' Coordinating Committee for Land Protection) with a state-wide presence, «Ciudadanos contra la especulación» (Citizens against speculation), «Salvemos el Territorio» (Save the Land) and the «Plataforma por una vivienda digna» (Coalition for Decent Housing) are some of the influential groups which have emerged in response to recent territorial dynamics. According to Nel-lo (2003), these groups are characterised by their specific organisation, independently of institutions and political parties, by their apolitical and autonomous nature, by their objectives which are normally confined to a single issue, by their focus on the environment and territorial equity in their analyses and by their pursuit of satisfactory results.

The existence of these groups has encouraged debate on land use and management, to protest or propose alternatives, demand greater transparency and more participation in land use planning. It is possible that their existence may also enhance knowledge of and respect for the land, and contribute to improving the tools and processes of land use planning since, in contrast to previous movements of a more reactive and locally-based nature, these new groups present a more proactive and generalised approach (Mata, 2007).

In Medio Vinalopó, up to thirty groups have been identified which could be associated with land protection, including neighbourhood and landowners' associations and the majority of ecologist and sociocultural groups in the district, which in some cases have evolved into genuine land protection organisations.

Applying empirical methods and participant observation, a sample of these groups was analysed with the aim of understanding their structure, objectives, forms of action and efficacy. The results obtained in this phase not only enabled us to understand the characteristics of these groups but also provided an interpretation of the main land use issues in the district and helped us to formulate proposals for territorial dialogue.

III. PROPOSALS FOR TERRITORIAL DIALOGUE

Civic action represents a rejection of traditional forms of territorial governance, which must be overhauled and adapted to the needs of present day society. Citizens are demanding greater representation in political life, and it is felt that the creation of effective participation channels represents the best option for a new approach to territorial governance. Moreover, participation in territorial decisions is probably the most exciting form of participation, as the decisions taken affect a large number of people and practically all sectors, due to their economic, environmental and social repercussions (Climent, 2009). However, citizen participation raises the question of the capacity of citizens to decide, act and then manage territory, and thus it is of great interest to assess their possibilities through a hypothetical case of participative land use planning.

Semi-structured interviews held with the groups enabled us to assess these abilities, and what emerged was a widespread and increasing desire among citizens to use the land wisely, to apply a long-term perspective and to diversify economic land uses. From the results obtained, proposals or recommendations were drawn up for land use management, urban and residential area planning, the design and routes of new transport and communications links, and forms of territorial governance.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The significant increase in the number of land protection groups and the cautious incorporation of participative processes into administrative procedures has already yielded some results which inspire optimism. For example, based on the experience of Medio Vinalopó, the most striking revelation has been that citizen participation needs the territory just as much as the territory needs citizen participation. Territory constitutes the basis for human activity. It is loaded with natural and cultural values of great significance to its inhabitants and consequently, decisions affecting the territory also affect the economic, environmental and cultural life of society. Therefore, in this more than any other issue, citizen participation needs territory. Likewise, citizens are aware of the reality which surrounds them. Their understanding and approach to the territory comes from their everyday experiences. They are capable of intuiting the possibilities of their region and detecting its threats and weak points. Consequently, the territory presents a reciprocal need for citizen participation.

The multitude of territorial conflicts apparent in Medio Vinalopó could have been avoided if certain processes had been carried out, including the proper articulation of participative processes with access to information and certain public functions on an equal footing, the joint assessment of all possible alternatives in land use planning and accountability for decisions. The vast majority of the proposals arising from consultation with civic action groups make a lot of sense, and should not be disregarded by land management officials. This is why we believe it is necessary to start raising awareness about this issue.