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We report here below the speech delivered by Claudio Perin of WetNet Project (from MED Biodiversity Protection Community) during Panel Session #3

## THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH IN WETNET PROJECT (with a little digression on biodiversity preservation)

Claudio Perin – Veneto Region, Territorial Planning Direction, Strategic Territorial Planning and Cartography Unit

I have worked on territorial spatial plans for a while now and I have seen many changes in the way of thinking and making territorial and spatial plans during about 25 years of activity.

Many of the concerns and issues that planners are facing nowadays are similar to those faced in the past, but some are quite different mainly as the result of two trends: a growing concern for the sustainability and the preservation of natural ecosystems and an increased recognition of the need of a bottom-up/grass-roots participatory approach to planning, managing and decision making.

We still know that wetland management should still be focused on controlling and mitigating the adverse impacts of floods and dryness and water pollution, on controlling erosion and sediment, on regulating water exchange as well as rivers and channels functionality, on protecting wild flora and fauna, on sustaining economic activities and community dwellings, but only if these and similar activities are fully compatible with healthy ecosystems.

Clearly, all these objectives complicates even more the conflicts and issues related to land and water management than in the past.

So, how can we manage all these conflicts?

In recent years, climate changes have made us more aware of the uncertainties of scientists' and experts' predictions (in Venice there was an exceptional high tide just some days ago - about 1 meter and 60 centimetres - and alpine forests in Veneto were seriously damaged by heavy winds and rain during the same days).

In addition, science offers no sufficient help in determining the best decision to make when facing conflicting goals held by multiple stakeholders – goals that have changed and will continue to change.

Professionals like engineers, wildlife experts, geologists, biologists, urban planners, often coming from public agencies or bodies (like the one I work for), NGOs, or even from universities, are merely among all the stakeholders having an interest in and contributing to the management of wetland areas.

Each governmental agency, consulting firm, environmental interest group and citizen typically has particular limitations, authorities, expertise and conflicts with other people, agencies and organizations, all tending to detract from achieving a fully integrated approach to wetland planning and management.

But, precisely because of this, the participation and contributions of all these stakeholders are needed.

All views must be heard, considered and acted upon by all involved in wetland planning and management processes.

This is precisely what we call an “inclusive approach” in WetNet Project, a dialectical path capable of supporting and guiding various actors towards a common and shared vision on most strategic issues regarding wetland protection and management: hydraulic risk, local development, environmental sustainability, landscape protection, ecosystem services preservation, etc.

Obviously, there are different engagement options for decision makers and different engagement expectations from stakeholders. Therefore, it is crucial to understand what the expectations of each one are and to link these expectations to the most appropriate involvement’s approach of.

In WetNet approach, five different levels of engagement are identified and tested.

The first one concerns the stakeholders that are not aware of the decision-making process or that do not want to interact. Decision makers have to keep them informed (INFORMATION level).

A significant number of stakeholders is interested in being heard and wants to advise the decision making process. Decision makers have to listen to them (CONSULTATION level).

The third level concerns those stakeholders who want to influence the outcomes of the decision making process. Decision makers have to properly consider them (PARTICIPATION level).

Others want to condition the outcome of the decision making process; the objective of is to bargain with them (NEGOTIATION level).

Finally, in the decision stage there are stakeholders that want to decide. Decision makers have to let them take such decisions by making them responsible of their commitments (EMPOWERING level).

The evolution in terms of active participation is not only sharing of individual decisions, but sharing the way of taking decisions, passing through processes of inclusion and integrated evaluation.

This means working more on the process than on the results. For a wetland contract, it is more important to set up a good governance scheme than to have an action plan full of things. We can also have not so much things to do, but they have to be certain and compulsory for the underwriters.

The benefit of a governance process as the one proposed by wetland contracts is creative because it does not propose merely mediation, but the evaluation of alternatives and – above all – the choice between different options by putting all the feasible solutions on the table.

Participation is not limited to the involvement of the public concerned by the regulatory framework, nor does it merely inform.

In the model of governance undertaken by WetNet, participation is a home-grown process, that is, it must permeate all the territorial levels by bringing out all types of conflicts without omitting or underestimating anything.

Wetland planning and management are not simply the application and implementation of scientific criteria nor the mere application of laws and regulations, but rather the creation of a social environment that brings who should be involved in a planning process from the start.

Nevertheless, the active participation raises a lot of questions and problems to solve. In particular, on how to deal with the inevitable group or groups of stakeholders who see it in their best interest not to participate in the planning process, but simply to criticize it from the outside. Furthermore, on who is in a position, at the local level, to provide the leadership and financial support needed.

All WetNet partners are currently dealing with such problems. Some of them found acceptable and shared solutions. Other are now starting to deal with them.

In some partner's regions, NGOs (like the Spanish Ornithological Society in Albufera) were instrumental in starting and coordinating this process at local grass-root levels.

The Veneto case is emblematic and explanatory of a model of participative process based on "Community Led - Local Development", where the regional initiative should guarantee conditions of neutrality in the arena of local public and private actors.

The participatory process is carried out through a continuous interaction between stakeholders, providing support and sharing information, training and capacity building in order to make them fully informed, effective and empowered.

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I am here as a member of the MED Biodiversity Protection Community. In my experience, as a territorial planner in a public organization, I have often noticed that it is sometimes difficult to explain the key importance of preserving biodiversity to some stakeholders, especially to those politicians who are deeply focused on economic development of the communities they administrate. The problem is indeed very serious.

The rapid loss of species we are seeing today is estimated by experts to be between one thousand and ten thousand times higher than the natural extinction rate.

These experts calculate that between 0.01 and 0.1 per cent of all species will become extinct each year. If the upper estimate of the number of existing species is true – that there are more than one hundred million different species co-existing with us on our planet – then between ten thousand and one hundred thousand species are becoming extinct each year.

As you know, in the Natura 2000 network, wetlands are very important core-areas and stepping-zones for migratory birds. The experts tell us that the extinction rate of the existing nine thousand bird species is at least two species per year.

Someone still dismiss these arguments arguing that they are natural facts, and that we have to care for the lives of our children before the lives of insects and birds. “At the end” – they say – “who cares if the beetles are extinguishing?”

However, we know the answer. As for all living beings, our existence depends in various ways on the existence of other species that produce the oxygen we breathe, absorb the CO<sub>2</sub> that we exhale, decompose our excretions, keep the soil fertile, provide us with food, wood and paper – just to mention the most obvious examples.

Even if we try to distinguish the “useful” species – the ones which perform those functions, and which we should therefore maintain – we would never know for sure whether these ones depend on other species, because the ecological chain is too complex to predict which “dominos” we can do without.

But how to convince our stakeholders, politicians and citizens of this very serious biodiversity crisis?

Some years ago, I found a very useful example to explain to sceptics why biodiversity is so important (the book is “The Rise and Fall of the Third Chimpanzee” written by the biologist and geographer Jared Diamond).

Imagine that you have to lose sixty grams of your body, taken at random by a good surgeon. In percentage terms, it is an insignificant percentage, one thousandth of your weight and if it were fat you probably would be happy to lose it. But if the surgeon did not know which parts are essential for your survival and in the sixty grams were included, for example, your urethra (which "is worth" about 60 grams)?

Similarly, we cannot know if the habitats or species we believe we can live without are important for our survival.

It is certain, however, that if we believe we can renounce most of our planet's habitats, as it is happening now, we will be virtually certain of losing our urethra.

Thanks for your courtesy in hearing me today.

