

Shaping Territorial Governance: A Comprehensive Overview of the Sicilian Regional Urban Reform

Abstract

The Sicilian regional urban reform, anchored by regional law no. 2/2021, evolves into a paradigm shift from urban planning to territorial governance. This transformation, epitomized by the Regional Territorial Plan (RTP), integrates socio-economic and environmental objectives. The RTP, a product of innovative collaboration and strategic co-planning, is a comprehensive framework aligning regional missions, fostering sustainability, and guiding territorial transformations. Despite resource challenges, the Region remains committed to RTP implementation, emphasizing dynamic data updates and participatory strategies. This paper provides a succinct overview of the reform's essential features, exploring its potential impact on territorial governance and sustainable development.

Keywords: Sicily, territorial governance, regional planning, sustainable development, RTP.

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Introduction

On the approval of regional law no. 2/2021, the Sicilian regional urban reform started and was completed with the last implementing decrees outlined in regional law no. 19/2020 related to general urban plans (PUG) sizing, replacing the previous PRG of regional law no. 71/1978. The latter law was part of the trio of laws (urban planning, cultural heritage, and tourism) that Piersanti Mattarella alternatively promoted between 1976 and 1980 before his assassination by the Mafia. In 2021, the Sicilian regional government approved the directive act, serving as the guiding document for the new regional territorial plan with social and economic implications. This approval marks the first step in regional planning since establishing the Special Statute of Sicilian Regional Autonomy. There are no previous acts on the same subject, both in terms of content/expected results and the chosen procedure of resorting to external consultations for technical assistance in drafting the plan. The directive act confirms and consolidates the highly innovative structure of the 2019/2020 urban reform law. Two main reasons underlie this innovation: a) the regional law no longer has an 'urban planning' character but, above all, a 'territorial governance' character exclusively; b) the role of the regional urban planning department shifts from being a technical-administrative control nucleus of municipal plans and variations to a proactive role, assigning the task of the procedural construction of the regional territorial plan's knowledge framework, with direct effects on municipal planning. This role is assigned to the Regional Territorial Information System (SITR), which simultaneously becomes the organizational, processing, selection, and design interpretation service unique for all other (21) departments of the Regional Authority. The SITR becomes the operational hub for coordinating and spatially integrating the actions of all other regional departments: cultural heritage, transportation, infrastructure, energy, agriculture, productive activities, and especially the programming department responsible for the resources of the EU Structural Funds (including the National Recovery and Resilience Plan).

In addition, the directive act portrays the new regional territorial plan (PTR) as a structural framework for assessing the potential integration of the actions of different departments as missions that compose the Regional Economic Financial Document (DEFER). In the PTR, all DEFER missions are considered concerning the Regional Sustainable Development Strategy (developed by the same department responsible for drafting the socio-economic PTR), making it coherent with the content and objectives of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda (17 SDGs goals).

Evolution of the PTR

With a socio-economic focus, the RPT transcends traditional urban planning, emphasizing 'territorial governance.' The directive act's innovative structure expands the role of the regional urban planning department and establishes the Regional Territorial Information System (RTIS) as a pivotal coordinating hub. The RPT emerges as a structural framework, linking regional missions and integrating various departmental actions. An initial working group, led by the Urban Planning Department and research groups from the Architecture Department of the University of Palermo and the University of Catania, mobilized to construct the directive act. Following approval by the regional government, the relationship between the RPT and subordinate planning, which includes plans, programs, and projects related to the VIA-VAS office of the Sicilian region, is structured. This office remains in close contact with departmental offices of the competent ministries for sectoral plans, local development programs, and significant projects concerning the island's territory.

Co-Planning and Integration

The aims to nurture and fuel project and governance relationships in close connection with regional landscape planning: a) by pursuing and verifying a clear strategy of intersectoral co-planning between territorial and protective aspects, and b) by proceeding with the integrated definition of the general framework of objectives to create an "active interface" between the two instruments. This way, the two instruments, safeguarding their respective autonomies and competencies, are finally able to activate an integrated path that a) accompanies protection with social and economic enhancement, b) pairs the conservation of cultural and landscape values with the transformation of uses, and c) aligns the identification of protection regulations with guidance on possible sustainable development trajectories.

The RPT establishes relationships with regional sector plans to pursue co-planning and territorial coherence extended to various sector plans of regional initiative (water, waste, transportation, ecological network, etc.), for which the regional administration's willingness to encourage interdependencies must become more apparent. According to the new regional law, the socio-economic RPT must respect coherence with the need to protect local landscapes and the plans to protect and prevent environmental risks of natural and anthropic origin.

Given the socio-economic relevance of the RPT, the urban planning department should engage in dialogue with the department responsible for economic planning despite there being no precedent for such interaction in the past. This is the first time such a thing has happened. The approved law provides a framework for interdependencies between conservation and transformation, protection and enhancement, territorial policies and sensitivities, settlement development, and territorial rebalancing in a medium and long-term perspective. The socio-economic RPT cannot just be a coordination tool between what other departments plan but rather a hinge for integrating various tools that, in turn, benefit from the added value of their integration. The guiding principle for the new regional governance is the principle of 'transition management'

(Loorbach, 2010) and the Living Lab model (Liedtke et al., 2012; 2024; Keyson et al., 2016) as a characterization of processes for controlling/supporting place-based public policies and directly supporting business network initiatives.

Compared to municipal or large-area strategic plans, the RPT must directly relate to realize, dynamically, the content of visions, lines, and objectives built through strategic planning processes on the island and assume an indicative value and possible guidance as well as a systematization of strategies that territories have set for themselves. Thus, the RPT will enhance the significant contribution of knowledge and shared perspective of what various territories have formulated as their specific horizon of meaning and development trajectory. Municipal and territorial strategic plans are missing; only the RPT's regional reference framework can be provided. The new law requires that the content of the socio-economic RPT constitutes the basis for the directives that each local and territorial plan must include at the start of planning processes.

The RPT establishes relationships with large-area plans (Metropolitan et al. Plans) to ensure sustainability and complementarity of the two levels in the governance of regional territorial transformations. The RPT must set up a primary consultation table around major conservation, enhancement, and regionally significant development themes found in large-area plans (subordinate). The regulation of uses and infrastructures must be consistent with and consequent to identifying values and sensitivities. Conversely, large-area plans are responsible for activating and animating subsidiary tables to build consensus around choices relevant to the metropolitan city and free consortia government levels. The condition for developing co-planning is to identify in a shared way what plans should do at different levels, with mutual autonomies but also necessary interferences and overlaps. The territorial plans of metropolitan cities (PCM) and those of free consortia, therefore, define the strategic objectives related to the structure and protection of their territory, connected to supra-municipal interests, or constituting the implementation of regional planning as defined by the RPT and of which they constitute a structural deepening.

The RPT establishes relationships with municipal general urban plans (PUG) so that the locations of works and infrastructures of regional relevance can be adequately located. This RPT does not overlap with additional powers of land use regulation and shaping property rights, which should be reserved primarily for the local level. However, thanks to the co-planning method, there is congruence between the forecasts formulated by the main territorial governance entities (Region, Free Consortia, Metropolitan Cities, and Municipalities) within their respective planning tools.

From an environmental sustainability perspective, according to one of the principles of the new regional law, the RPT indicates the criteria to be used in formulating PUG to reduce soil consumption by reusing existing building heritage and promoting urban regeneration.

Finally, this relates to the Unified Programming Documents (UPD), in which the RPT- in exercising the powers attributed by the law in directing the programming of Local Authorities - exercises this faculty by directly guiding the governance of local entities and territorial systems, indirectly guiding management through the executive management plans.

Following the approval of the directive document, the working group was subsequently completed with support for the transport sector from the University of Enna Kore and the geological studies at the University of Messina. To this, the economic and social studies working group was integrated with the Economics department of Palermo University.

The RPT fosters co-planning by aligning with regional sector plans, large-area plans, and municipal general urban plans. It acts as an interface between conservation and transformation, safeguarding cultural and landscape values while supporting sustainable development trajectories—the RPT establishes congruence between territorial governance entities, creating a comprehensive regional reference framework.

4. Environmental Sustainability, Participatory Approach, and SDG's attainments

The RPT emphasizes environmental sustainability, providing criteria for formulating general urban plans to reduce soil consumption and promote urban regeneration. In the participatory phase, the Region synthesizes preliminary strategies for discussion with regional departments, metropolitan cities, free consortia, municipalities, and social partners.

5. Towards Implementation:

Despite resource constraints, the Region remains committed to advancing the PTR. The research collaboration and contributions from various departments illustrate a multidimensional and transdisciplinary approach, emphasizing the dynamic georeferencing of data for ongoing updates.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions:

The construction process of the RPT is at a critical juncture, balancing creating a comprehensive regional plan and initiating a selective and strategic co-planning process. The Region's ability to navigate potential conflicts will determine the success of starting a strategic path for the PTR, aligning with territorial socio-economic trends, and building a vision for development. The discussion analyzes the challenges and opportunities associated with the PTR's construction, highlighting the importance of regional cooperation, stakeholder engagement, and the Region's role in shaping a resilient and forward-looking territorial plan. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the Sicilian regional urban reform, offering insights into the evolving RPT and its potential impact on territorial governance, sustainability, and socioeconomic development.

Basic Bibliography

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