

Call for Papers: Regional Resilience in the face of Natural Disasters and Climate Change

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Abstract: “Build Back Better and disaster resilience: insights from Italian shrinking territories”

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KEYWORDS:

BBB; disaster resilience; post-earthquake reconstruction; inner areas; Italy.

CONTRIBUTION:

Ancient and recent history and studies teach us how Italy is a high risk-prone country: 6,5% of urbanized surfaces are exposed at high hydrogeological risks; 58% of residential buildings were built before the first anti-seismic building code¹; more than 27 million people live currently in areas subject to earthquakes, landslides or floods (ANCE & CRESME, 2012; Di Giovanni, 2016; Trigila, Iadanza, Bussettini, Lastoria, & Barbano, 2015). Focusing only on earthquakes occurred since 2000, almost 700 deaths can be counted and about 35 billion euros spent or allocated for emergency, recovery and reconstruction phases (Centro Studi Consiglio Nazionale Ingegneri, 2014; Italian Government, 2017)². Post-disaster recovery is a challenging process bridging the phases of risk mitigation and preparedness, the emergency response, and long-term reconstruction strategies (Berke, Kartez, & Wenger, 1993; Chang, Wilkinson, Potangaroa, & Seville, 2010; Cheng, Ganapati, & Ganapati, 2015). The paper builds on the so-called “Build Back Better” (BBB) notion (Clinton, 2006) for discussing how post-disaster recovery processes should be aligned to sustainable reconstruction in fragile territories, affected by demographic and economic decline. The case study chosen to explain this alignment challenge is the complex ongoing post-2009 earthquake reconstruction of Abruzzo region (Italy), also in the light of the ruinous earthquakes that affected Central Italy between August 2016 and January 2017. In few years multiple disasters are overlapping different stages of emergency, post-emergency recovery and reconstructions. The complexity in spatial and temporal scale of this case allow to better reframing key questions about how to handle the build back better paradigm towards a more sustainable and resilient region.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

The notion of “building back better” (BBB) emerged especially from UN activities that followed the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. The report “*Key propositions for building back better*” (Clinton, 2006) indicated ten propositions to improve recovery practices and enhance local living conditions and long-term disaster risk reduction. The concept of BBB fosters an “holistic approach to post-disaster reconstruction, in order to [...] ensure that the affected community is regenerated in a resilient manner for the future” (Mannakkara & Wilkinson, 2014). Indeed, a demanding task of post-disaster recovery is to resolve the conflict between “the pre-existing city” (that is in people’s minds and whose pieces are probably still in place) and “the future city” (built on previous hypothesis and/or brand-new plans) with the purpose of not losing the characteristics of the first and the improvement possibilities of the second (Olshansky & Chang, 2009). Reconstruction processes highlight strong collisions between conservative and transformative goals and

¹ Istat census, 2011.

² The esteem has to be considered as indicative, due to the ongoing reconstruction processes.

approaches, both in cultural and political terms, both about technical and normative aspects. Those tensions and conflicts are plainly rooted in the Italian context, where each post-catastrophe circumstances recall the expression “*com’era dov’era*” (*where it was, how it was*) – one of the mainstream policy discourses of post-earthquake reconstructions since the ‘70s. Therefore, the emerging concept of post-disaster sustainable reconstruction reframes both the conservative and innovative goals of reconstruction processes by aligning them to a future in which transformation is leveraging forms of reduction and adaptation to risks, and persistency is devoted to the sense of place and attachment to the lost built environment and social practices. The challenge of fostering sustainable post-disaster reconstruction processes is key in cases of depressed areas, already facing population decline and with weak potential and capacities to attract investors and manage funding, before any natural hazard (Di Giovanni & Chelleri, Forthcoming).

EMPIRICAL APPROACH:

Supported by the theoretical framework illustrated above, the paper proposes a critical interpretation and clustering of BBB principles, applied to the case study of Abruzzo’s in-progress reconstruction – in view of the different processes of emergency and recovery currently ongoing in Central Italy, overlapping at different scales in the same area. Indeed, Abruzzo region was struck by a disastrous earthquake in April 2009, which heavily damaged L’Aquila (its capital city) and a vast neighbouring territory causing more than 300 deaths. The “Seismic Crater” counts 137.000 inhabitants in 57 municipalities, facing population decline and dramatic ageing index even before the earthquake. Indeed, 75% of these municipalities have been also classified as “inner areas”, namely characterised by large unused territorial capital, high social costs and limited citizenship (Barca, Casavola, & Lucatelli, 2014). To merge the physical rebuilding with social and economic recovery and long-term territorial development was openly stated as the overall goal to achieve with the reconstruction process (Law no. 77/2009, Decree of the Commissioner no.3/2010). In the light of the BBB principles, the paper illustrates how the reconstruction process has been shaped, and its goals met, with the main focus in the promotion of socio-economic re-development trajectories. The analysis is based on available data (e.g. opendataricostruzione.gssi.it) and on the official Reconstruction Plans, as well on interviews and empirical observations.

FIRST RESULTS:

The first results show how the conservative approach is still predominant in the post-disaster reconstruction phase. The earthquake worsened pre-existing disadvantages and fragilities of the region. However, the wide funds offered the (uncommon) chance to open up an important multidisciplinary and institutional debate about exploring new development paths for the area through innovative governance processes. The mid-term analysis undertaken by this work shows that interventions dedicated to socio-economic recovery and long-term scenarios have been postponed – within the practices of rebuilding the city – and only partially addressed, with the risk of achieving limited long-term benefits at high costs. This highlights a “lack of (institutional, regulatory, technical, social) innovation capabilities” and not of a “lack of chances”. Through the application of the BBB principles to this case study, the paper draws attention on “trade-offs” between short-term persistency goals versus potentially transformative opportunities and agendas; the current un-lucky multi-disaster regional context constitutes a unique case for learning about emergency, recovery and reconstruction processes overlapping at different temporal and spatial scales, and contribute to long-term sustainability and resilience.



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