

Strategic spatial planning in Portugal: practice innovation and local governance challenges

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Abstract

The relatively recent introduction of strategic spatial planning in Portugal, as in many others European countries (Albrechts et al., 2003), has been envisaged as an opportunity for innovation in planning, beside the prevailing traditional planning practices. As structuring processes and framing exercises, strategies convey new meanings for facts and values that constitute the reality of a place, which are relevant for the coordinative work of local/regional communities. Spatial strategies have the potential to establish new relations between issues and new relationships among agents and territories, giving rise to learning and institutional capacity building processes. However, strategic spatial planning approach challenges the existing practices in a number of ways, some of them particularly relevant for the governance processes and results, such as: i) the central role played by planning teams in problems definition and their solutions side by side the residual inclusion of contributions from civil society; ii) the prevailing focus of planning action on physical matters; iii) the dominance of sectoral, functional and territorially atomistic perspectives of analyses; iv) the disjointed approaches to action delivery, reflecting both the relative fragmentation of, and the lack of coordination between, central and local administration, and the insufficient experience in private-public collaboration.

Considering the contextual circumstances of strategic spatial planning emergence in Portugal, three dimensions were selected to characterize the scope of these challenges: a) values conveyed through planning initiatives; b) territorial integration; c) efforts directed at the improvement of collective coordination of local/regional agendas. Those dimensions have been mobilized in a more extensive evaluation exercise of four strategic municipal planning initiatives, in which plans, processes and results were under examination (Nogueira, 2010). This research, aimed at the development of an evaluation methodology of strategic municipal planning initiatives, has taken into account the normative prescriptions and empirical findings of strategic spatial planning approach, mainly in Europe (Albrechts, 2001, 2004; Healey 1997; Healey et al., 1997), as well as literature on planning evaluation, combining conformity and performance perspectives (Talen, 1997, 1999; Mastop e Faludi 1997, Faludi 2000; Khakee 2000, Innes e Booher 2003, among others). The adopted performance approach to evaluation has proven helpful in apprehending the communicative role of plans, as well as on tracking the influence of both plan and process in the existing collective agenda and action within municipalities, and on the learning processes which eventually took place. The analysis of those strategic spatial planning episodes was based on documental analysis, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the mayors and municipal technical staff and with planning team's coordinators.

This paper presents some results of that evaluation, tackling the following main questions:

- i) Which values are brought to strategic spatial planning initiatives, how are they 'discovered' and shared, and how these values are reflected in concrete proposals and action?
- ii) What is the relevance of strategic spatial planning initiatives on promoting vertical and horizontal territorial integration?
- iii) Which forms of civic and private sector involvement took place and to which extent they were able, or not, to promote learning, institutional coordination and civic engagement?

Together with plan and process exploration, a general concern with results is kept in mind, in terms of process outcomes and material achievements.

The main findings of this analysis are: i) the important role played by planning exercises in introducing new perspectives and more integrated and relational views about the issues concerned, contrasting with a relatively slighter capability of planning processes in nurturing learning dynamics and durable connections between local institutions and agents; ii) despite the emphasis of the strategic spatial approach on the promotion of spatial and scalar interception and coordination, opportunities to foster and qualify inter-municipal collaboration, and to strengthen established ties, are often neglected, while central/regional-local alliances are rather exceptional; iii) unlike the collaborative and inclusive rhetoric, public-private partnerships are seldom carried through and public participation is, in some cases, merely palliative.

Keywords: strategic spatial planning, values, learning, institutional capacity