

Organizing society

The experience of the Forum for Commons and Solidarity Economy in Friuli Venezia Giulia: new proposal for alternative economic models

1. Introduction

Faced with the economic crisis that is affecting in particular the Western countries, in many places people create new spaces of reflection (e.g. forums, blogs...) building alternative models of territorial development. These models are able to deal with a transition period towards an economic system different from the current one. This new proposed system will have to take responsibility of the issue of social cohesion and environmental sustainability.

According to Polany and Caillè (1944, 1998), these movements are looking for a new paradigm different from the market and State ones, a model that permits local communities to be resilient and to resist the effects of global competition.

Following this vision in 2012 in Friuli Venezia Giulia the experience of the "Forum for the Commons and Solidarity economy" started. It is configured as a laboratory in which different fields of knowledge, different subjects and different experiences confront each other, with the purpose of sharing some principles for the definition and legal recognition of new directions of local policy in different fields such as agriculture, energy, culture and housing.

2. The approach

From a methodological point of view the study analyzes this initiative and the process from the beginning of the "Forum" through an approach that applies some principles of action research methodology. According to Gilmore et al. (1986) action research aims to solve problems of a group of people by triggering cooperation mechanisms between the actors involved in the process of change towards a desirable and shared solution. This process requires the collaboration between the researchers and the people who are involved.

The essence of this approach is "learning by doing", that means a collaborative approach starting with the definition of the problems and going on with planning proposals, implementing (taking action), observing, evaluating, reflecting before planning the next action (Coughlan and Coughlan, 2002).

A working definition of action research (AR) proposed in 1989 (Altrichter et al., 2002) specifies the situations in which AR is occurring:

- people reflecting
- interlink between reflecting and acting;
- make the experience public and open to other people;
- data gathered by participants, in relation to their own goals;
- participation in making decisions;
- power shared and suspension of a hierarchical way of working;
- collaboration between members as a critical community;
- self-reflection, self-evaluation, self-management by responsible groups;
- learning by doing.

3. The experience of the "Forum for Commons and Solidarity economy" in Friuli Venezia Giulia

The Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG) region is located in the northeast of Italy and has a surface of 7,845 Km² and a population of 1,221,860 (2012) inhabitants. In the last decade, the region has been affected by a deep

economic crisis that has led to an increase of the unemployment rate and to the opening of numerous points of work crisis.

The experience of the "Forum" has begun with a small group of people belonging to different associations active in the region who had shared previous experiences on the right to water (2011 Italian Referendum against the water privatization). Due to the relationship established during that experience, it was easier to involve in the Forum different actors interested to reflect on principles and objectives for a new economic model: many associations, citizens, enterprises, cooperatives, common properties institutions.

Starting from an initial reflection about issues of the region FVG, such as unemployment, environmental crisis, the need for new resources and new patterns, based on socio-economic data analysis, the participants have shared a set of principles (Charter of the Forum) like solidarity, sustainability, recognition of common property and the right of local communities to self-management. It took two months for this first phase.

From the beginning, the Forum was open to all the people interested in this process Today there are more than 50 "territorial actors" (associations etc.) in the whole region that joined this experience.

Later, the goal of the Forum was defined as experimenting new economic and social models. From the definition of principles and goals they went on defining a draft resolution involving local authorities (Municipalities) as they are subjects closer to citizens and territories.

From Municipalities it has moved on to the proposal of a new law presenting a set of guidelines for regional policies. According to the principles of bio economy (Georgescu-Roegen) the Forum focused on the proposal to plan and create "Solidarity Economy Districts" that are new proposed territorial institutions based on the definition and implementation of short local supply chains, linking producers and consumers by an agreement. These chains are integrated through the creation of a network that connects different districts.

This proposal was discussed during a period of 10 months in which the participants themselves have contributed with gathering data on good practices that are being developed on their own territories.

The creation of districts started with the formation of district facilitators who will accompany the processes of building local chains and establishing agreements between consumers and producers. The first part of the course started in December 2013. More than 120 people belonging to different movements, associations and public institutions participated to this self learning course. In parallel people belonging to the 19 different districts of the region, started to meet to define a plan to build new economic proposals in different sectors..

The most important sector is the food production chain. Currently the Forum aims at the definition of this product chain through the collection and the networking of all the best practices within the region: social farming, urban gardens, purchasing groups, corporate sponsorships, neighborhood shops, common-pool resources system.

References

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