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Innovating the Local Plan through Co-Creation and the Public Sociology Approach toward Urban Regeneration: An Italian Case Study

Valentina Polci * and Ilenia Pierantoni

School of Architecture and Design, University of Camerino, 63100 Ascoli Piceno, Italy;
ilenia.pierantoni@unicam.it
* Correspondence: valentina.polci@unicam.it

Abstract: This paper examines the role of social research and communication methodologies in fostering substantive democratic participation and policy co-production within the context of urban regeneration initiatives anchored in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. This research critically analyzes the "becoming public" of sociology and social research in participatory design processes related to traditional urban planning instruments at the local scale (Regulatory Plans) in the Italian context, specifically through the case study of the Municipality of Appignano. It questions the role of sociology in activating a competent public sphere and promoting deliberative democracy at urban and territorial design levels and whether we can identify the traits of public sociology in facilitating the different stages of these processes. This paper details a participatory process in Appignano that sought to innovate urban regeneration within complex legislative frameworks, emphasizing community engagement and interdisciplinary approaches. The findings reveal a community actively participating in the regeneration process, demonstrating a high level of agreement on various urban development strategies aimed at sustainability. This study underscores the capacity of public sociology to facilitate public debate and democratic dialogue and suggests that such participatory approaches can significantly contribute to sustainable and resilient urban development, highlighting the potential of sociology as a moral and political force in urban planning.

Keywords: urban regeneration; co-creation; place-based approach; public sociology; urban planning; participation

1. Introduction

Urban regeneration initiatives have garnered significant attention in practical and academic contexts in recent years. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals introduced in 2015 identify urban regeneration as a crucial strategy to achieve sustainability in urban development [1–4]. Furthermore, many recent public initiatives at the local level, explicitly aimed at urban regeneration, fit within the framework of national and European financial instruments, such as the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) (https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/PNRR.pdf; accessed on 27 March 2024) anchored in the Next Generation EU for a dual digital and green transition, requiring substantial changes in governance processes [5]. Urban planning, particularly that related to the post-earthquake reconstruction of Central Italy and the post-pandemic phase after COVID-19, aims to identify new functions for available spaces but also wants to represent a trigger for actions that produce impacts on the territorial context in terms of economic reactivation, social promotion, environmental enhancement, and cultural revitalization [5–7]. In this framework, urban regeneration has become a relevant topic not only in disciplines that focus more on the transformation of the territory (i.e., urban planning, environmental management, and geography) but also in other branches of study less directly involved in this issue (i.e., sociology, economics, political sciences, and public management) [8,9].

The objective of this paper is to investigate whether and how the tools and methodologies of social research and public communication applied to local participatory processes related to traditional urban planning tools can lead to a new role of participation of the inhabitants, enabling them to make a proactive contribution to the decision-making process. The hypothesis is that this combination of competencies can lead to a potential level of co-production of territorial public policies in a "substantial" and not merely "procedural" conception of democracy, outlining a new "power category" of citizens [10] (p. 62).

Specifically, the following research questions drive our study: Can we find the characteristics of public sociology in the activation of a competent public sphere and in the promotion of deliberative democracy, specifically in urban and territorial planning? What is the role of public communication in facilitating these processes at different stages?

In this paper we present and assess the case study of the small town of Appignano, in the Marche Region—Italy, and the participatory process behind the revision of the Local Plan. This case presents originality in integrating urban regeneration strategies into a dated and particularly complex urban planning legislation through punctual variants to the current Local Plan. In detail, the variants and specific projects were developed from the perspective of regeneration toward sustainability, making use of participatory approaches and multidisciplinary expertise from architects and spatial planners to professional technicians and a sociologist, introducing some phases of typical methods of empirical social research (identification of survey instruments; data collection; processing, data analysis, and interpretation of results; the presentation and dissemination of results). Also, this case shows public communication as an effective open government tool. Based on these reflections, we present this case as an attempt to apply the public sociology approach combined with spatial planning with a perspective from the inside. One of the authors had the role of a sociologist expert in communication involved in the various participatory phases, and the other had the role of urban planning researcher and consultant.

We consider this case pivotal of an intermediate step aimed at testing in place/community-based urban regeneration and sustainable development strategies to proceed in the future with the definition of a new general Strategic Plan once the new regional urban planning law is approved (We acknowledge to the reader that the new Urban Planning Law was approved at this paper's writing date. More information is available at this link: https://www.consiglio.marche.it/banche_dati_e_documentazione/leggi/dettaglio.php?idl=2298 accessed on 19 March 2024).

2. Theoretical Background and the Public Sociology Approach

In recent years, many planning and governance initiatives in small cities and villages in Italy have attempted to experiment with actions of maintenance for the reuse and re-functionalization of public areas and existing public buildings for purposes of public interest [11,12], including the demolition of unauthorized works carried out by private individuals in the absence or total non-conformity with the Local Plans and regulations; the improvement in the quality of urban public spaces and the social and environmental assets, including building renovations of public buildings, with particular reference to green infrastructures [13–15], the development of social–cultural and educational services, and sustainable mobility and transport. If it is evident that urban regeneration is essential to meet major cities' challenges, intervention models to address these processes are not yet consolidated. In this framework, the planning process constitutes an institutional activity of government and governance that sets up reference development frameworks to coordinate policies and actions for cities and territories [16]. In some cases, the urban regeneration process must fit into complex contexts, regulations, and administrative planning procedures grounded in legislative frameworks that require updating to address contemporary challenges. This difficulty is particularly recurrent in the Italian case, where the number of small towns (with populations of up to 5000 inhabitants) is 5544, representing 70% of Italian municipalities, 54% of the territorial surface area, and 16% of the total population [17,18]. In these cases, particularly in Italian regions without recent urban planning laws, munici-

palities often operate with traditional urban planning instruments based on the concepts of zoning and heritage protection vs. urban growth antinomy. Contemporary challenges require moving toward a new paradigm, integrating development, identity, and landscape in the historical, cultural, natural, and rural values as relevant components of territorial governance and local-based innovation initiatives [19]).

A close interaction between science, local governments, and local communities has also been configured as central, in this regard, exactly in the vein of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (https://www.preventionweb.net/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf; accessed on 27 March 2024), which promotes the tools and methodologies of the community-based approach, directly involving local communities in identifying and outlining answers and solutions to their needs, problems and requirements [20,21]. In this, the activation of a public function of the social sciences toward that "public sociology" invoked by Michel Burawoy in his inaugural speech as president of the American Sociological Association in 2004 [22] seems inevitable: "making public issues out of private troubles, and thus regenerating sociology's moral fiber. Herein lies the promise and challenge of public sociology, the complement and not the negation of professional sociology" [22] (p. 5).

Several studies and experiences in the national and international arena have focused on public engagement phenomena as an expression of public sphere development in creating forms of open government and open policies [23–27]. In the meantime, different cultures and practices of civic participation in urban regeneration and collaborative management of public goods [10,28], as a top–down practice, have also expressed the search for new forms of ritualization of trust in institutions to be proposed to citizens in "exodus from citizenship" [29]. On the other hand, the binomial "participation power" is one of the fundamental categories defining a community-building process [30], in which capacity building is generated [31–34].

Since the early 2000s, meetings with citizens have multiplied in the context of local planning, in the urban and environmental spheres, and in the social sphere [28,35]. However, the results of these participatory processes have often been disappointing. This is because these processes have tended to focus on small, isolated issues and have been fragmented, technocratic, and lacking in significant conflict. They have also often been parallel to pre-existing decision-making systems [36]. In our case study, we identify a new reference size: not the neighborhood, often used as the physical place where citizenship anchors, but the small town of the Italian middle ground, not coastal but not inland area either. The process of bringing political debate down to the local level helps to create new forms of participation and extended civic action [37]. When citizens know the space personally, it becomes easier to process knowledge about problems, develop analytical skills, conceptualize possible social conflicts [38], and aspire for change. At the same time, re-framing activity is important, resulting from feeling part of something politically broader, comparable with other neighboring realities, or similar in characteristics, highlighting peculiarities and cross-cutting elements.

Themes such as urban regeneration, environmental sustainability, and community resilience now stimulate different areas of public communication [21,39–41] and emergency and risk communication [42–44] that are configured as strategic in consensus management and participatory citizen response. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how sociology and public communication shape public sociology, which activates the public sphere and public policy co-design processes [23,45]. Social scientists, in fact, make visible the connections between individual micro-experiences and macro-structures in an exercise of "sociological imagination" and also assume a public role in "consolidating self-educating publics", supporting the development of capacities that incorporate a reflection on how one wants to live and that become the production of debate [10] (pp. 63–64). Sociologists involved in urban planning processes are not only "experts" in the service of institutions (policy sociology) but create a process whereby the actors themselves may be able to observe and interpret reality [46] as a minimum expression of action research [47]. In this framework, sociologists are also "practitioners" because they are directly involved in the very design of a participatory project through methodologies proper to the social sciences, and they

are "dialogical sociologists", whose dialogical process with the public must take place at different stages of the research.

3. Materials and Methods: The Community/Place-Based Urban Regeneration Initiative of Appignano

The municipality of Appignano required specific revisions to its Local Plan, which was approved in 2011. The Plan needed to be updated to address the local community's current challenges and needs. To achieve this, a process was initiated to define a masterplan for the territorial development of Appignano. Punctual variants to the Local Plan (Piano Regolatore Generale) were also defined under the current regional law. These variants only apply to specific areas of the municipality based on requests from the local community, which was actively involved in the process. This Plan, therefore, takes up the challenge to innovate a planning process experimenting with community engagement and participatory urban design process by moving within "traditional" planning legislation (the Regional Law 5 August 1992, n. 34 "Regulations regarding urban, landscape and land use planning"), anticipating the new regional urban planning law that later made the introduction of participatory processes in planning activities mandatory (new Regional Law 30 November 2023, n. 19 "Planning rules for territorial governance").

The planning participatory process was developed in six steps (Figure 1) and conducted, as mentioned above, by an interdisciplinary team composed by professionals (experts in the fields of urban planning, economy, and environment) and the sociologist (Figure 2): (1) study, analysis, and a first draft of the masterplan by professionals, in consultation with local authority representatives and competent sovra—local authorities in environmental and landscape matters; (2) first assembly with citizens in the presence of all local actors and stakeholders for the discussion of the local needs and stakeholders perspectives and presentation of the questionnaire; (3) online and offline questionnaire administration and data processing; (4) redefinition of the masterplan based on the results of the questionnaire; (5) second assembly with citizens: presentation of the questionnaire results and debate on the masterplan strategies and actions based on the results; (6) final adjustments of the masterplan, presentation, and approval of variants.
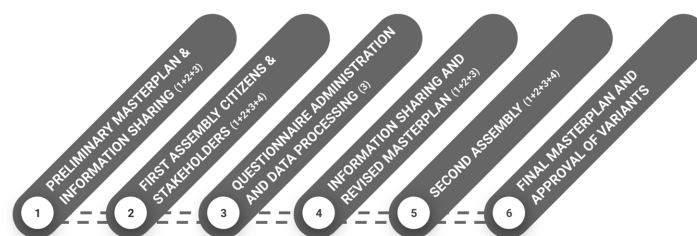

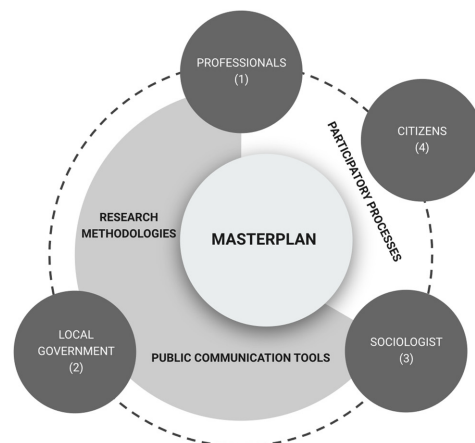**Figure 1.** The process flow diagram (authors).

Figure 2. The planning participatory process: leading actors and tools (authors).

3.1. The Preparatory Document: The Masterplan for the Territorial Development of Appignano and the Partial Variants in the Local Plan (Steps 1–4–6)

The Plan's first phase focused on converting saturated residential expansion areas into residential completion areas. This study and the analysis of the residential expansion areas helped understand the potential development for the residential-type zones and apply the provisions of the Italian Ministerial Decree 1444/68. The goal was to convert already completed (saturated) expansion areas into residential completion areas while keeping the building capacity of the few vacant lots unchanged. Then, during a specific phase, a public call was made to collect requests from private individuals, companies, and public bodies in reference to the presentation of intentions to express the will to proceed toward urban transformation, construction, and modification of the intended use of properties or proposals in the public interest. The result (Figure 3) was a collection of about sixty applications from private parties (62), including citizens, businesses, and associations, who expressed their interest in changing the current Local Plan. Out of the total 62 applications received, 12 requested a change in zoning from building areas to agricultural areas to limit building development. On the other hand, 21 applications requested a change in the use of certain areas to allow for increased urban development. Another 16 applications aimed to downzone their rural buildings, which were previously surveyed, to expand the range of possible building interventions that could be carried out on a property. Lastly, five applications aimed to change the functional use of their area, mainly from industrial to residential.
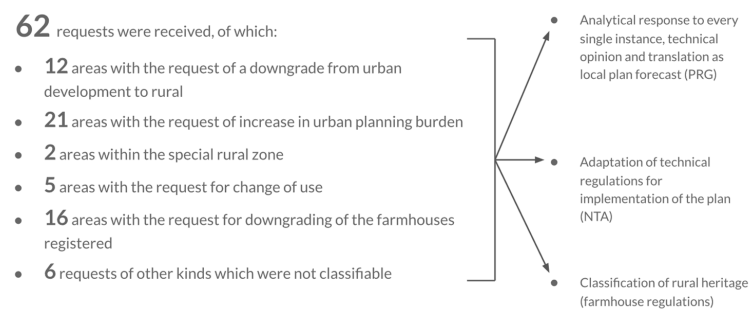

62 requests were received, of which:

- **12** areas with the request of a downgrade from urban development to rural
- **21** areas with the request of increase in urban planning burden
- **2** areas within the special rural zone
- **5** areas with the request for change of use
- **16** areas with the request for downgrading of the farmhouses registered
- **6** requests of other kinds which were not classifiable

- Analytical response to every single instance, technical opinion and translation as local plan forecast (PRG)
- Adaptation of technical regulations for implementation of the plan (NTA)
- Classification of rural heritage (farmhouse regulations)

Figure 3. The number of public calls and the procedure for the variants to the Local Plan (authors).

The entire process included classifying, filing, and sizing the variant areas through technical analysis and joint evaluation of the local community's acceptance or rejection of the proposals.

Table 1 shows the effects of the defined variant areas on potential building volume. It is clear how the private requests, received through expressions of interest from the public and private sectors, were translated with new provisions aimed at conceiving a new planning instrument capable of supporting the sustainable transition and the zero soil objective in line with the principles of the green and digital transition and the sustainable development goals.

Table 1. The number of public calls and the procedure for the variants to the Local Plan (authors): evaluation of the impacts in terms of potential building volume.

Title 1	Request for an Increase in the Building Volume (m^3)	Request for a Decrease in the Building Volume (m^3)
Areas for residential development	36.670	36.700
Areas for tourism development	0	22.450
Areas for commercial, industrial, and artisanal production development	3.900	57.000

Considerable effort was invested in conducting a census of buildings outside the urban settlement, particularly farmhouses in rural areas. We initiated this process by conducting on-site inspections, followed by an analysis and evaluation of all structures. Each building's evaluation was documented in a catalog that included the following: (i) descriptors of the property, including the time of construction, the building type, the original and current functional destination, and other information regarding the surrounding context and the planning regulations in force; (ii) levels of accessibility to the property; (iii) the specific "Characteristics of the rural building heritage" through the recognition of the "Formal Typological Elements". This classification system categorizes buildings into five classes based on their asset value, cultural significance, degradation, and potential disappearance. The first two classes, A1 and A2, include buildings that have high historical and architectural significance (A1) or landscape significance (A2). These buildings require conservation and protection, and some of them are restricted under Legislative Decree 42/2004 (A1). Class A2 is further divided into three subcategories (A to C). Subcategory A2.A includes buildings with high value, including their building, annexes, and surrounding landscape. Subcategory A2.B includes buildings and landscapes that have high value, but the annexes are degrading elements for the rural building complex. Subcategory A2.C includes buildings with a high level of testimonial interest, but the surrounding context has degradation elements. After Classes A1 and A2, Class B includes buildings of limited interest (B1) that have irreversibly lost their rural characteristics and highly degraded buildings (ruins) (B2). Finally, missing buildings are identified with the letter (S). These are the buildings that have been registered in the current Local Plan but have been demolished and disappeared in recent years. This new classification system enables specific regulation of interventions for each class and its subcategories based on assessed value.

The Local Plan's partial variant (Figure 4) was developed with the active participation of citizens. This process resulted in creating a masterplan (Figure 5) with eight shared strategic objectives regarding urban regeneration and sustainability. These objectives include (1) the regeneration of the former industrial area, (2) the redevelopment of areas with education facilities, (3) the regeneration of two existing industrial areas, (4) the redefinition of a more secure and functional access road to Appignano from the south, (5) the redefinition of the industrial and productive development site in line with the principle of the green and circular economy, (6) the redefinition of residential development and community services toward sustainable and energy-efficient solutions, and (7) the new green infrastructure and (8) the network of cycle/pedestrian paths toward the territorial context.
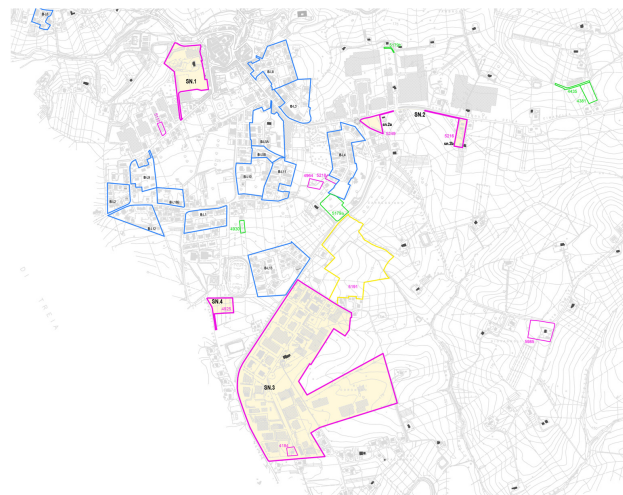

Figure 4. The distribution of the variants to the Local Plan. The different colours refer to the specific characteristics of the variants: green, areas requesting a downgrade from urban development to rural; yellow and blue, areas requesting a change of use; and pink, areas subject to specific projects aimed at decreasing the building volume and supporting the green transition.
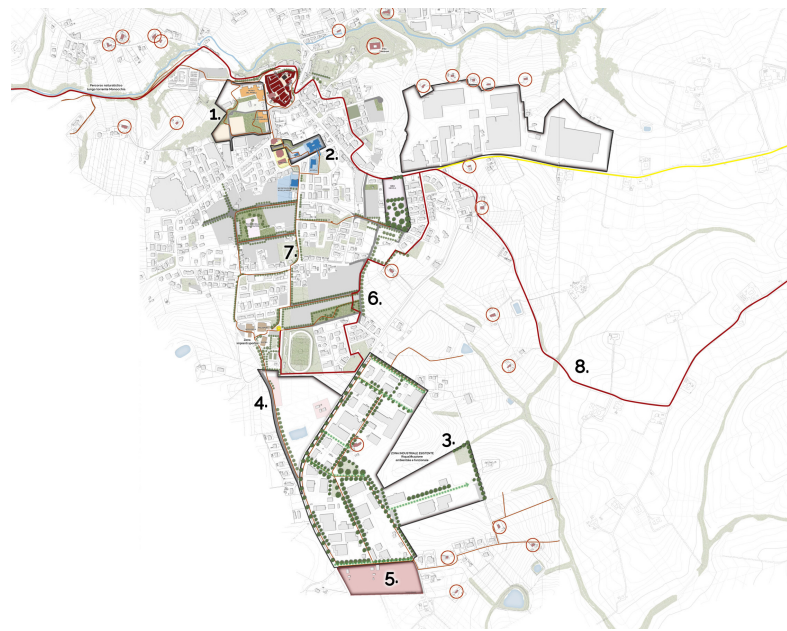
Figure 5. The masterplan and the eight shared strategic objectives.

3.2. Public Communication and Social Research Methodologies toward a Public Sociology Approach for Urban Planning (Steps 2–3–5)

After the preparatory masterplan was defined, the administrators, technicians, and sociologists met to determine which research methodologies to use to consult the population on the different variants proposed for urban regeneration and sustainability. This helped identify the most suitable public communication and open government tools to engage citizens and nurture their willingness to participate in these critical issues. During this meeting, technicians and local administrators acquired new skills and knowledge about the tools required for a participatory democracy. Two public assemblies were scheduled, and the different stakeholders to be involved were identified. A questionnaire was chosen as the primary tool for listening, and its administration was planned, including the timing and method of its delivery. The process of returning the results to citizens was also decided, and it was noted that the questionnaire results would determine the decisions on variants.

The participatory process, in the strictest sense, thus developed in three stages: two assemblies and a questionnaire.

Assemblies. During the first assembly, the architects presented the masterplan and its individual variants, explaining each one's characteristics and acquainting them with the planning stages and processes. Municipal technicians explained the current urban planning legislation and administrators shared their vision for the future of the city with a focus on sustainability. Additionally, the sociologist, an expert in communication, presented a questionnaire to the citizens to gather their thoughts on the masterplan and other general issues related to the city and the community's future. Following this, a debate was held with the community, facilitated by the sociologist. In the second assembly, the sociologist presented the questionnaire results to the citizens, highlighting the percentages of each response. The professionals then demonstrated how the variants had been modified based on the questionnaire's outcomes, accommodating the different proposals included in open-ended questions where possible. Finally, another dialogue with the community was facilitated by the sociologist.

Questionnaire. The sociologist drafted the questionnaire "Appignano, how do you think of yourself?" after consulting with proponents of the Partial Variant and the responsible for implementing the Local Plan. The questionnaire was based on the analysis of good practices and experiences of similar citizen surveys conducted at the national level (https://www.osservatoriopartecipazione.it, accessed on 27 March 2024).

The questionnaire was designed to serve two main purposes. Firstly, to analyze and evaluate eight different variants with regard to sustainable development, new green and urban public spaces, and the improvement in services, economies, and the quality of life of the inhabitants. Secondly, to activate a public sphere focused on these issues, fostering a more cohesive and resilient community. The questionnaire was divided into four sections. The first section addressed the most significant challenges for the future, such as sustainability, welfare, jobs, quality of life, mobility, accessibility, and services. The second section was specific on the variants and individually addressed them. The third section was structured as a SWOT analysis of both the territory and the historic center, focusing on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and obstacles. Finally, the fourth section was related to the sociodemographic profile. Interviewees were also asked to indicate the level of priority and importance attributed to the variants. The questionnaire was administered from March 4 to March 25, 2023, both via paper form, distributed in various strategic locations, and through online institutional channels, from the Appignano municipality website to social media (Facebook) and to instant messaging systems (WhatsApp).

4. Results: From Questionnaire and Assemblies to Project Redefinition

4.1. The Activation of a Competent Public Sphere

A total of 159 citizens responded to the questionnaire, which was available online and on paper from 4 to 25 March 2023. Considering a municipal population of 4100 units (Istat 2021: 4065 inhabitants; https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/285267, accessed on 27 March 2024), the number of respondents forms a fully representative sample, with a confidence level (i.e., the probability that the sample accurately reflects the attitudes of the analyzed population) of 95%, as is the sector standard. The sample includes a diverse range of sociodemographic profiles, including all occupations, various levels of education, various age groups (16–17 years up to 70–79), and number of household members (1 to 5). There is an equal distribution between men (45.9%) and women (54.1%). The whole process met with the approval of the community, which not only participated in the survey in a significant way but also took part in the assemblies with an overall attendance of 120–130 citizens. The questionnaire was designed to collect quantitative data, as well as to help citizens focus on and delve deeper into issues related to sustainable development in general and, at the same time, strictly connected to the urban planning choice of their territory. The questions aimed to highlight that public policies toward sustainability should focus not only on environmental issues, circular economy, mobility or land use but also local issues such as the welfare state and workplaces, urban quality, and public spaces for the community.

About major challenges. The citizens were asked to identify the major challenges faced by their community. The respondents agreed that the core areas of concern are sustainability and environment, common goods and welfare, and economy and workplaces. The majority of the respondents (55.3%) believe that urban regeneration and containment of land consumption (reuse and redevelopment of abandoned buildings) are the most fundamental trajectories to be identified. A total of 49.7% of the respondents believe that the redevelopment of the building stock (seismic safety, energy efficiency of buildings, living comfort) is of utmost importance. Other critical areas include actions to adapt to climate change (green and tree-lined paths, urban forestry, green parks, countryside–town connections) (45.9%); improving the balance between man and nature (increase in soil permeability, sustainable management of urban rainwater, actions for air quality, increase in biodiversity) (45.3%); enhancing rural territory and agricultural landscape (spread of quality agriculture, landscape protection) (41.5%); and redeveloping public spaces and vacant shops in the historic town (redevelopment of public spaces, reactivation of shops and vacant spaces) (41.5%).

In relation to urban quality, identity, and public spaces, participants have expressed their desire for "greater care and civic sense towards the environment" (77.4%), "greater care of streets, walls, lighting" (69.2%), and also "better accessibility" (32.7%, among the

highest percentages). The places indicated as most frequented by the inhabitant and, therefore, representative of the community spaces identified as central were the sports field and sports equipment, the public gardens and a park, the school, and the parish. A negative opinion about the limited presence of commercial activities and shops emerged.

Regarding mobility, traffic and the number of parked cars were not perceived as problems. However, participants expressed concerns about the width, signage, and safety of pedestrian paths, with 73% of respondents giving low marks (1 and 2 on a scale from 1 to 5). Additionally, 79.8% of respondents considered the accessibility of pedestrian paths for disabled people to be problematic. While squares are considered more accessible, safe bicycle travel is considered absolutely critical, with 65.4% of respondents giving low marks (1 and 2 on a scale from 1 to 5) and 23.3% being uncertain. Finally, connections with the town's services and the routes to reach the bus stops were also viewed as critical.

About visions for the future of Appignano (SWOT). The strengths of the area identified are the quality of the landscape and the hilly/wooded area (49.1%), the quality of the food and local products (49.1%), the quality of life in general (climate, safety, healthiness, sociability, culture, etc.) (49.1%), the redevelopment of the existing industrial area (24.4%). On the other hand, the weaknesses include the inadequacy of road connections and public transport (36.5%), the lack of services (28.3%), the poor valorization of the historical, landscape, and environmental heritage (27.7%), the limited presence of job opportunities (23.9%). Participants also highlighted several opportunities and concerns for the future: protection and enhancement of cultural, environmental, biodiversity, and landscape heritage (56.6%); development of energy production from renewable sources (45.9%); agricultural development (40.3%); development of cultural, associative, and recreational activities (37.1%). The biggest obstacles and concerns identified include the aging population (54.1%), decline in some specific economic sectors (49.7%), abandonment of the center (42.1%), and diffusion of forms of pollution (37.1%). Finally, participants affirm that certain issues should be addressed with particular attention. These issues include environment (52.2%), energy and renewable sources (42.8%), safety (hydraulic, geological, seismic risk) (41.5%), and mobility (cycle paths, pedestrian paths, paths) (34%).

Different sections of the questionnaire guided the residents of Appignano through reasoning about sustainable goals and their relationship with urban planning and regeneration. They showed sensitivity and decisiveness in identifying the necessary steps to take toward new paths of development for their town.

The activation of a competent public sphere occurred via the survey and the participatory process was developed for the two public assemblies. In both assemblies, the sociologist played a crucial role in bringing forward both macro and micro issues related to urban planning variants. In doing so, the aim was to encourage citizens, administrators, technicians, and all involved stakeholders to reflect on their own future, foreshadowing possibilities for change [48]. Both assemblies were moments of information and skill enhancement, especially in areas that are generally challenging for non-professionals. At the same time, there were moments of dialogue and negotiation where different participants could discuss and exchange their views on public issues with long-term effects. The aim was to depoliticize certain choices and promote awareness and understanding of different perspectives.

4.2. About the Variants: A Co-Creation Process

The questionnaire and assemblies led to a consistent co-creation process to identify strategic visions and actions with a community-based approach. These strategies and actions are described below:

(1) *Regeneration from Former Accorsi Area.* The undemolished buildings will undergo architectural, structural, and energy upgrades for repurposing. Notably, 78.6% of residents rated their approval between 4 and 5 out of 5, envisioning these structures for socio-cultural and tourist uses benefiting the community. Moreover, vast sections will transform into urban green spaces featuring walkways and leisure zones (like

playgrounds and fitness areas), garnering 91.2% approval from the populace, with 62.3% awarding the highest score;

(2) *Education Zone Enhancements*. Bicycle and pedestrian pathways will be enhanced, including safety improvements for children, cyclists, and pedestrians, which received an 80.5% approval rating. Additionally, the area's greenery will be increased, supported by 86.8% of participants

(3) *Revitalization of the Existing Industrial Zone* (P.I.P. Santa Lucia, Via E. Fermi). Plans include repurposing abandoned structures for residential and ground-floor commercial uses, including dining and services, with 82.4% approval. This strategy also aims to significantly improve the area's urban and infrastructural frameworks, with 78.5% of responses in favor;

(4) *New Southern Access Route to Appignano*. Introducing "soft mobility" paths will ensure connectivity with existing urban routes, facilitating access to the valley and the historical center; 69.1% of respondents agreed on this;

(5) *Industrial Expansion*. A proposal was made for a new industrial expansion zone near the P.I.P. sector. However, 61% of the people were skeptical about its alignment with local artisanal traditions. On the other hand, 69.8% of the participants agreed that this process must follow the principles of the green and circular economy. This represents a positive move toward sustainability;

(6) *Residential Development and Community Services*. Adjustments were made to slightly reduce land use and improve community services, such as parental support and educational activities, based on public feedback with a 73.6% approval rating;

(7) *New Green Infrastructure.* The development of bike and pedestrian paths linking different urban and peri-urban areas, including a route to the industrial zone, has received widespread support (86.8%);

(8) *Paths to the Countryside*. There is strong support for developing a network of gentle infrastructure extending from the city center to the countryside and adjacent towns and along the Monocchia stream.

The key focus areas identified by the population include the regeneration of the Former Accorsi area (76.1%), the school zone redevelopment (50.9%), the new green infrastructure (41.5%), and countryside pathways (43.4%), highlighting community priorities in urban renewal efforts. On the basis of the percentages of community approval/disapproval, with respect to punctual actions on each variant, some changes to the original masterplan were made.

After the participatory process, some initial decisions were modified to better reflect the feedback received from the questionnaire. Specifically, the size of the areas was adjusted to minimize land consumption, and more surface was allocated for public and gathering green spaces. Furthermore, the construction development forecast for the industrial area was also reduced, and guidelines were included to improve the safety, efficiency, and attractiveness of the urban context.

5. Discussion: Toward a Deliberative Democracy on Urban Regeneration and Sustainability

This paper demonstrates that Central Italy's small towns, particularly those between the urbanized coastal areas and the less populated inner regions, require a development model that prioritizes environmental protection and sustainability while enhancing productivity and attractiveness. However, some regulatory instruments related to urban planning have been slow to adopt participatory democracy and multidisciplinary approaches to support the green and sustainable transition. The case study of Appignano, presented in this paper, is emblematic and worth attention for this reason. These principles align with the characteristics of the European city defined in the new Leipzig Charter of 2020, approved by the Informal Council of European Ministers for Urban Development: an ecological, inclusive, cohesive, productive and connected city (https://www.consiglioregionale.calabria.it/upload/istruttoria/Carta%20di%20Lipsia1.pdf, accessed on 19 March 2024). The vision put forth by the new variant of Appignano's PRG

also revolves around eight nodal points that seek to achieve these goals. In general, the Appignano community has shown itself to be very sensitive and attentive to issues related to the enhancement and protection of the landscape, with particular attention to green infrastructure, including the development of soft mobility routes, and to the maintenance of biodiversity, especially related to local agricultural production. The issue of urban regeneration, connected to the theme of the historic center, was also of great interest, specifically in the former Accorsi area and areas for education functions. More controversial were the issues related to productive development and access roads.

The data collected with the questionnaire, also supported by the public discussion during the participatory assemblies, found application in some adjustments to the proposed PRG variants, which were publicly explained by the technicians. In general, all stages of the participatory process were conducted and constructed along lines intended to foster the development of a competent public sphere and act as a stimulus for social responsibility and citizen participation in protecting and enhancing their territory and landscape, both natural and cultural. Accompanying the reflection of communities on complex issues, such as the challenges of urban and territorial sustainability, the regeneration of places and spaces, the analysis of the needs of the territory, up to the more technical ones, such as the variants to the PRG at the planning stage, is a role that sociology can and must take on in its "becoming public" and can represent an opportunity in terms of civic agency [24] to build community [28].

The various dialogic and confrontational moments typical of participatory democracy have stimulated the local government to reflect on the adoption of strategic development guidelines for Appignano, shared and to be shared with the community. The participatory path put in place on the occasion of the variants to the PRG confirms both the willingness of citizens to be active participants in matters of public interest and governance, even on complex themes and issues such as urban and territorial planning, and the emergence of a new sensibility among public administrations toward new systems of government, increasingly "open" and participatory, involving all the stakeholders of the "quadruple helix" (quadruple helix of innovation), namely, local governments, citizens, technicians/businesses, and academia. In the background, it is crucial to exploit the full potential of institutional public communication in the engagement processes with the various stakeholders and the community. Some criticalities have emerged in participatory moments, on the one hand, because of the difficulty of involving ordinary citizens (non-technical, non-opinion leaders) in an urban planning process, and on the other hand, because it is not easy to trigger a competent public sphere in the face of certain complex issues. Furthermore, the presence of various local political forces, including councilors elected in the ranks of the minority and opponents of the current administration, has, nevertheless, left a political imprint on some considerations. However, this attempt at deliberative democracy, this opportunity to produce shared choices, appears interesting and potentially among the best practices in future planning in similar territories.

6. Conclusions

At this critical juncture in spatial planning, there is an opportunity for a new process of institution building that can lead to capacity development. Capacity development refers to the process by which individuals, organizations, and societies acquire, strengthen, and preserve abilities to establish and achieve their own development goals. Precisely, the democratic and conflictual dimensions of these public arenas can transform an "institutional bid for participation" [25] into a form of deliberative democracy in which governments, experienced citizens, aspirational capacities [31], and possibilities for change [48] are confronted.

In this framework, public sociology could facilitate conversations on values, agendas, and purposes not automatically shared between local government and community, thereby fostering public debate and democratic dialogue. Among the tasks of sociology, it is undoubtedly important to investigate and identify the labile boundaries of the depoliticization of processes and institutional space [49], confronting the dimensions and asymmetries of

power, including in the practices of territorial governance. "In its beginning sociology aspired to be such an angel of history, searching for order in the broken fragments of modernity, seeking to salvage the promise of progress" [22] (p. 5). Participation, on the other hand, should also be understood as an "ambivalent" [50] cultural and political process, that is, complex and troubled, even one of open conflict at times, in the context of a continuous oscillation between mutual distrust–trust between citizens and institutions toward new imaginaries about democracy [37] and more democratic governance of urban dynamics with a focus on fostering closer community connections, increasing social capital, promoting social integration, and reducing reliance on unsustainable development models [51]. At the same time, participation plays a crucial role in urban planning by involving community members, stakeholders, and residents in decision-making processes that shape their cities and neighborhoods. Through participation, individuals have the opportunity to voice their concerns, share local knowledge, and contribute to the design and implementation of plans and policies that directly impact their lives. This collaborative approach fosters a sense of ownership and accountability in the planning process, leading to more inclusive and equitable living environments. With this study, we sought to highlight, through a particular case study, some innovative aspects of the intersection between sociology and planning processes. First of all, we dealt with forms and practices of participation that anticipated the relevant regional legislation, grafting themselves into a cumbersome context of traditional and now standardized schemes, and that were conducted not as mere formalities or "apparent" policy tools related to participatory democracy but as attempts to ground deliberative democracy policies.

Certainly, this study has some limitations, such as the narrowness of the experience studied and the use of public sociology categories within limited time frames. However, we believe that an intervention on a Local Plan cannot be considered as a short-term solution. The Local Plan interprets the long-term development of a territory and requires broad reflections. It also highlights the function and role of sociologists involved in the process. Planning activities at the spatial scale involve critical and opportunistic investments for a possible and desirable community future. They question social, political, and economic scenarios with the goal of sustainability and resilience in the face of contemporary uncertainty, including demographic and multi-hazard perspectives. This study represents the potential of this multi-actorial and multi-scalar process "before finally turning to what makes sociology so special, not just as a science but as a moral and political force" [22] (p. 6).

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