

Positive thinking: an innovative strategy of Local Development in the “Inner Areas”

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a methodological reflection on the use of the "positive thinking approaches" for the promotion of capacity building of the projects in the local and inner areas. Recently, international policies have focused on the need to identify local development strategies to promote the capacity building in the local administrations, for the development of human and social capital.

In the inner areas, it is necessary to experiment innovative approaches that are "place based" and "tailor made" for the projects to achieve the objectives of the National Strategy of the Inner Areas"

The paper presents the "positive thinking approaches" as an innovative strategy of local development in the inner areas. The

positive thinking approaches start from the analysis of "what has worked well", with a focus on the co-construction of the "successes", because “you learn more from successes than failures”.

In particular, the article presents three positive thinking approaches (EI, evaluation of innovation; DE - developmental evaluation, and MSC - Most Significant Change). The aim is to explore what these approaches share in the Inner Areas. The advantage of positive thinking approaches is their ability to capitalize on unexpected positive effects. EI, DE and MSC recognise that the good practice that has been detected needs to be adapted to other situations by thoughtful agents. In both cases, a detected success will need responsible actors to produce further success.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, theoretical reflection on the wellness policies (Sen, 1993), at national and international level, has focused on the need to identify new local development strategies to promote capacity building in the local administration. Given their responsibilities in providing an infrastructure and basic services, local administrations are playing an increasingly important role in the development of human and social capital. This is especially valuable in rural and marginal areas of countries, where poor access to resources and basic services and the distance from the central delivery of basic services centres (health, education, social), together with the inadequacy of an integrated system transport, represent a strong limit to the welfare of the inhabitants and to the development of their ability to live actively and to innovate within their territory.

Italy is a country, which for its geographical, historical and territorial characteristics is fit for this type of argument. The abandonment and the depopulation of farming areas will negatively affect the quality of the system of relations and, in general, the lifestyle of those who choose to remain in this territory. It seems, therefore, increasingly necessary to make a critical review of the prevailing model of development, noting that the agroforestry systems are a fundamental part of the "capital" on which the possibility of economic development and environmental conservation depends.

The "Italian answer" to these requirements came with the "National Strategy of the Inner Areas" (Barca *et al.*, 2014) pointing to the resumption of economic and social development of Italy from the exploitation of the potential this development in inland areas. While marginal, as they are significantly distant from the main centers providing essential services, these areas have a cultural,

social, artistic and especially environmental biodiversity to be promoted and enhanced. There is an increasing interest of some policy makers to take decisive action on the most marginal and peripheral areas of the country, away from the large agglomeration and from the service centres. The goal is to liberate the energies and boost the value of good practices to enhance environmental and human resources in these territories. This ambitious goal is in line with the expected impact of the strategy, which aims to reverse the demographic trend of the decline of the inland areas and make them centres of attraction and excellence throughout the national territory, decreasing the gap between the central and metropolitan areas and marginal-inland areas.

The achievement of the objectives of the local development policies, defined as "place based" (Barca, 2009) or as "tailor-made" for the specificities of the territories, requires testing of the methodology for design and construction of strategic interventions on the various territories. The "place-based" approach is a development model addressed to the areas. The development policy is to promote integrated projects for change in the different areas.

A “place-based” policy provides the integration promotion in the territories and the mobilization of local actors. In a place-based public policy the interventions are based on local knowledge and they are verifiable and subject to supervision. Also the connections between the places are taken into account.

In this model, the construction of strategic interventions on the various areas is a result of the consultation and co-planning of all stakeholders involved in the local development. These stakeholders are local administrations (regions, municipalities etc.), ministries, citizens, young people, the elderly, the trade associations, cooperatives and all the social partners operating in these territories.

In this general framework, there is a reflection proposed by this essay which suggests that the approaches related to the "positive thinking" logic can be particularly suitable to amplify the capacity of local actors to promote innovative interventions of development based on the local resources and starting from the "good practices" that already exist in the territories, with additional support from technical experts and central government representatives.

The positive thinking approaches that build on the emergence and enhancement of positive experiences and on the finding of the shared "successes" in the communities, can represent an innovative response to the need of the poorest areas of our country to find expressive and practical ways of their own development based on the potential and existing practices in the territories and promoting the socio-cultural identity of citizens and strengthening capacity building (Casavola & Tagle, 2004).

The positive thinking approach and the “placed based” policy work well together, because they target the enhancement of positive interventions experienced in the various areas. Positive thinking and “placed-based” model can stimulate the *capabilities* (Nussbaum, 2011) of the inhabitants of these territories. This is even more valid in internal and marginal areas of our country, where sometimes we find small positive experiences that can become models of excellence also transferable to other territories.

POSITIVE THINKING AND LOCAL DEVELOPMENT: “WHAT WE DO BETTER”

The positive thinking approaches (Patton, 2011; Stame, 2010, 2014; Stame & Lo Presti, 2015) have the main feature to overthrow the methodological process usually used in the analysis of mainstream policies that starts from the "problem solving", for example from the identification of issues related to the poor success

of an intervention and the consequent identification of potential solutions and improvements for the future. In general, the "problem solving" is the usual method in the analysis of policies and interventions and can be viewed in the context of the approach to linear and preordained policies (Stame *et al.*, 2009) pursuing a logic type "goals-tools-actions-results" and finds its highest expression in the so-called types of blueprint approach (Fantini, 2014) based on the use of the "logical framework tool."

The positive thinking approaches completely overturn this perspective starting from the identification and analysis of "what has been done well", "what has worked well". The positive thinking approaches give an important role to the shared definition and co-construction of the "successes" and consequently leaving considerable space to the evaluation as a tool for improving the effectiveness of the interventions. It is argued, therefore, that a useful way to promote positive and innovative responses through the design of local development interventions is to start from the "analysis of what has been done well", rather than "the one that got hurt" - so-called failures - because "you learn more from successes than failures" and the successes are incentive factors that motivate action.

The logic of "positive thinking" takes up the suggestion of a known analyst and scholar of development policies, Judith Tandler (1982) who in the 80s was a pioneer of a *modus operandi* very similar to the "positive" and had experienced it in the contexts of development cooperation, when she suggested to be "surprised before the success" and to stop and think about the mechanisms intervening in the definition of a specific intervention which had functioned in a specific place.

Tandler (1982) stressed the importance of focusing on its elements of success in development programs. She suggested to overcome the methodological error that we tend to focus solely on pre-

established objectives and why something does not work. Tandler says that failure or unsatisfactory achievement of these objectives may obscure the value of those unexpected achievements.

Judith Tandler (1993) had the merit of highlighting the importance of dwelling on the elements of success in the context of interventions and development programs, suggesting to overcome the methodological error that we tend to focus solely on pre-established objectives and to linger about why something does not work, concluding that, in the first place, "the strengths that give rise to successes in one area may be impediments in others, so that the failure can be a logical result of the success, or vice versa" (Tandler, 1982, p. 143), and secondly, the failure or unsatisfactory achievement of predetermined targets, could overshadow the value of the unexpected results, i.e. of those achievements unplanned and not provided.

It is a way of thinking in line with the logic of adaptive approach¹ (Stame *et al.*, 2009) in the design and implementation of development projects, as opposed to the blueprint approach (centred on the logical framework). The adaptive approach is addressing the need to redesign ongoing actions necessary to achieve the objectives, including innovation, experimentation and, consequently, social learning that occurs in development projects designed and implemented in the territories. The dominant approach to local development planning became known as the ‘blueprint’ approach to reflect its emphasis on the project preparation process as the key to successful intervention. As the focus of national development strategies shifted in the 1970s to

¹ It is an approach based on the process and on the stages of the project. The adaptive approach is careful to unexpected results and what happens in the course of the program, rather than matching objectives and expected results.

redistribution and rural poverty alleviation, this blueprint approach was identified as an impediment to effective rural development, and contrasted with an alternative ‘process’ approach that was found to be characteristic of more effective interventions.

According to Korten (1980) the blueprint approach is characterized by the conceptual and actual separation of planning from implementation.

Positive thinking is a possibility of synthesizing blueprint and process approaches. In this context, positive thinking is an ideal perspective and a methodological response to test the assumptions made explicit in the planning of an intervention. Positive thinking is very important for identifying the factors not foreseen in advance, proposing innovative strategies to investigate the specific context of those cases where the problem does not occur or is resolved.

This approach can have an added value, compared to traditional methods of intervention, because it can mobilize resources, which are not explicit but useful to produce the desired change.

Under the hat of "positive thinking" can be identified, however, micro-different approaches, all united by the idea according (Stame & Lo Presti, 2015) to which “we learn more from successes than failure”, since success shows that difficulties can be overcome and is a spur to action. As claimed by Sabel (2004) in his reflections on the subject of policy analysis, enhancing the positive allows you to make known and extend the positive results to those left behind. Moreover, the success adds information about why you want something to happen, while failure merely reproduces the lack of initial knowledge, highlighting the barriers to change. Add to this that success is proactive and motivates people to take action, while failure demoralizes. The hypothesis sustained in this discussion is that this idea could find an application in the design and evaluation of local development strategies of marginal areas.

So this perspective shows "what we do better" at specific territories, putting aside for a moment the interventions that have not worked, the stakeholders who were unable to work, the negative results of the investments etc. in order to dwell instead on the elements that have promoted the success of specific interventions on the territory.

Another factor that leads you to believe that the use of "positive thinking" can foster capacity building and designing innovative interventions on the most marginal areas of the country refers to the lack of attention often attributed to the assessment of the interventions of local development. Frequently, the problem in the theoretical literature and in the research is - if you actively participate in local development projects "place based" (Barca, 2009), based on the actual needs of the territories - related to the fact that very rarely there arises the question of evaluation (ex-ante, in-itinere, ex-post) of the effectiveness of the interventions. Therefore, little is said about the mechanisms that have intervened in the process of planning and implementation of actions implemented for the achievement of expected results. Where there are traces of analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of the interventions, the most widely used logic is analysis of the linear process goals-means-results expected within the "traditional" logical framework.

It is possible to ask, therefore, if this preordained and linear approach is not really the best way to design effective and efficient operations of all the territories, having in mind the fact that there is a wide variety of local characteristics that require specific design and innovative ideas that respond to the specificity of the different areas of the country.

In this perspective, the positive thinking approaches that move the focus of attention on the resolution of problems and elements of contrast which enhance positive experiences and "success"

achieved by each of the parties involved, can be an incentive to the cooperation between the various stakeholders for the design of successful programs, in a logic that shifts the role of evaluation by the "tail" to the "centre" of a process no longer understood in a linear but circular and functional learning and empowerment.

DE, EI AND MSC FOR CAPACITY BUILDING IN THE INNER AREAS

The common feature of all the approaches that we can understand under the "positive thinking" labelled umbrella is that special ability to enhance the successes in various and specific situations, often developing new methodologies and research techniques.

The Positive thinking approach to evaluation has been proposed by Stame (2014), Stame and Lo Presti (2015), Stame (2016) following a suggestion by Patton (2011).

The approaches differ, however, regarding methodologies for discovering successful cases, eliciting people's motivations, mobilizing latent energies, and innovating on the basis of past success.

In particular, Appreciative Inquiry, Success Case Methods and Positive Deviance are best suited to organizational contexts or to evaluation of successful cases. For example, Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider *et al.*, 2000) is used within organizations. The mobilization of people's energies—at the core of the approach—can only be obtained if one keeps the negativity syndrome at bay, in both programs and methodologies. AI is not trying to “solve problems,” but to generate collective agreement about what people want to do together. Program perspectives should not be based on mistakes or failures to be corrected, but on dreams to be designed and projected into the future.

The Success Case Method (SCM) is an approach that can also be used to evaluate the performance of organizations (Brinkerhoff, 2003). Once the best cases have been identified, they should be circulated throughout the organization to provide models and examples to motivate and guide others.

Positive Deviance (PD) has been used in development programs, especially those concerned with health and nutrition (Sternin & Choo, 2000). It is based on the idea that, whatever the problem, there will be people in any community who have found better solutions to that problem than their peers (they eat healthily, they follow hygiene rules, etc.), and this means that good behaviour is already practiced and need not be introduced from outside.

In this paper, three of the approaches that can be included under the umbrella term of positive thinking will be reviewed. They are considered the most suitable for the field specific local development, namely: "EI, evaluation of innovation; DE - developmental evaluation, and MSC - Most Significant Change. The idea is that these three approaches can be applied in the design and evaluation of interventions in the local area, with good results with respect to the promotion of capacity building among stakeholders involved (including beneficiaries), in order to promote and encourage innovation of interventions with a view to type placed based policy (Barca, 2009).

MSC - The Most Significant Change

"Most Significant Change" is particularly suited to local development contexts that have been treated so far, as it is set directly in the evaluation of development programs.

The idea of a general approach, introduced by Dart and Davies (2003, p. 140), is to be able to facilitate the improvement of the programs "orienting the work towards that which has an explicit

value and away from what is considered less valuable (...), providing information on the performance and unexpected consequences through the best success stories." For Dart and Davies (2003), the MSC is based on a continuous search of the most significant results of the programs through intensive dialogue on the values of stakeholders and beneficiaries, since it is believed that discovering those values helps to ensure that programs meet the needs.

The method is that of the "story-telling", so you ask the actors to tell stories about something that has been a significant change (which is valuable) for them. If you think that these people are often isolated in marginal areas of the country and do not have easy chance to confront others about what they do, you can understand the potential of this approach for the promotion of capacity building in the local area. On the other hand, people often like to tell stories and we know that people are more spontaneous and tend to deepen in the telling detail rather than responding to formal questionnaires on what you intend to do and have already done. The stories encourage both experienced actors and those not experienced to participate, creating opportunities for dialogue on practical effects rather than on abstract indicators (Stame, 2016).

This approach is of great interest also in terms of the methodological experimentation, because it may provide mixed methods: the stories are complemented by descriptive and interpretive information and you can arrange Delphi Group involving industry experts from various fields (education, health, transport, etc.). The entire process is geared to learning, as it happens through the personal involvement of the group members, who are asked to make public their emotions and to share with others the values that have favoured the emergence of a positive change from the routine practice.

It is a very interesting approach, as it allows the construction of real archives of the most significant stories, for starting a shared reflection on the founding values of the organization land even after the evaluation was completed. It can stimulate the strengthening of collective memory and organizational culture.

EI - Evaluation of Innovation

The second approach that is believed to be particularly useful in the field of local development interventions design is the one proposed by Burt Perrin (2002) for the programs that have the specific purpose of introducing the innovations and that, therefore, would be declared failures if they were assessed with the traditional methods.

Although, this approach is very interesting, because it highlights the innovation characteristics of the interventions. This is not as widespread in the local area where you tend to repeat what has already been done traditionally rather than experiment with innovative solutions and alternative response to the problems. The definition of "innovation" by Perrin as "new ways of doing things better or differently, often by means of significant leaps towards incremental gains" (2002, p. 13) is interesting. Contrary to the normal programs that assume the re-establishment of the status quo, in programs that seek innovative alternatives meaningful goals cannot be identified in advance. Innovations are risky and unpredictable; actors often work differently from what you expect. Perrin proposed that the Innovation Scoreboard follows the logic of venture capitalism: take a calculated risk, expect a small part to be successful, but also a few successes can make a program worthy of being implemented. In the case of the innovative program, we note with greater emphasis the limited use of a linear logic and pre ordered cause-effect type. As an innovative project tends to interact

with many other factors, in order to access exceptions (positive), including unintended consequences, it must be flexible enough to open up to "serendipity", to surprise and to discover (as evidenced already by the pioneer of this thinking Judith Tandler).

The methodology proposed by Perrin to bring out the innovative project is once again a mixed type and therefore, provides the use of a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques combined in a different way than it usually happens.

DE - Developmental Evaluation

The third approach that this paper wants to bring to attention is that of the "Evaluation that promotes the development" (Developmental Evaluation, Utilization Focused Evaluation), drafted by Michael Patton, who was inspired by the best-known theme of "Utilization Focused Evaluation" (Patton, 1986).

It is a proposal for the promotion of capacity building and evaluation capacity in local development, so even more complex than the two approaches proposed above. The utilization-focused evaluation is based on the principle that an assessment should be judged by the utility for users who are scheduled (*“intended use for intended users”*).

Developmental Evaluation appears therefore as a positive approach that can work well in programs or projects in which potential users, innovative programs and niche are involved.

This approach seems very useful to support the development of innovative projects that arise in a logic of dynamic adaptation to realities and emerging territories often complex for socio-demographic and cultural characteristics, as marginal and peripheral areas. In this type of area, the innovative social interventions are not discounted and are marked by uncertainty in the choice of functional steps to problem solving and respect at

times switched between key stakeholders, who may have different opinions on how to proceed. For this reason, you cannot immediately conceptualize what will be a success and the design and evaluation should proceed simultaneously to recognize the positive changes.

It is a "bricolage" approach that combines several elements such as: reflexivity of practices, action research, and systemic change (Patton, 2011, p. 264) and that does not require a specific method, but it may provide for the collection of quantitative data, qualitative, mixed within different research designs (from the naturalistic, to experimental, from the perspective of a real mixed approach (Lo Presti, 2012).

The three approaches EI, DE and MSC are particularly in line with the objectives of the National Strategy of the Inner Areas.

In fact, the Strategy has the main objective to repopulate and revitalize the inner areas through the enhancement of local development experiences already tested positively in the territories. The methodology of the Strategy is based on the design of interventions of valorisation and promotion of the territory, through the implication and active participation of those people who, in recent years, have already made initiatives able to generate positive changes.

EI, MSC and DE are the approaches which allow you to bring out these successes because (see Tab. 1):

- they are based on a mutual learning process that involves all stakeholders,
- "put the legs" to emergent and innovative projects, identifying unexpected changes.

The Strategy's methodology can be used within the three approaches to promote a bottom-up and tailor-made change for the specific characteristics of the areas.

POSITIVE THINKING APPROACHES TO THE PROMOTION OF LOCAL DEVELOPMENT INTERVENTIONS: A SUMMARY

The three approaches that we have reviewed are just some methodological proposals to be tested empirically in the design and evaluation of local development interventions, focusing on their own specific methodology (often mixed) to identify successes within a local context and a participatory methodology that can facilitate the empowerment of individuals and motivate them for future actions. The element of the strengthening of the reasons is a strong point of these approaches, which can find fertile application in particular in marginal and peripheral areas of the countries, where there are often few "best practices" that are struggling to emerge in the disadvantaged contexts.

The following table summarizes the characteristics of each of the three approaches outlined above, highlighting the specificity with respect to: the basic assumptions, objectives, criteria to identify success, empirical evidence, investigations and link with the learning methods.

As the table 1 shows, positive thinking approaches differ on many points. First, they are based on different assumptions: for the MSC the evolution is a learning process, while, for the DE, the projects are built and the design of actions promotes the development of the territories. They may be used in different situations and for any objectives: for example, in the inner areas, EI can help to identify "new ways of doing things better" employing different methodologies: qualitative methods of research (life stories, focus groups, direct observation, etc.), quantitative methods (surveys, statistical methods for detecting the outliers, etc.), and various mixes of both.

The use of mixed methods in the DE favours the change of values, practices, actions and results promoting the development of the energies of an area to favour its growth.

Table 1 – A comparative table of PT Approaches

	MSC	EI	DE
Assumptions	Evolution is a learning process	The statistical average rewards mediocrity and does not facilitate innovation	The projects are built and the design of actions promotes the development of the territories
Objectives	Identify unexpected changes	Identify "new ways of doing things better"	Identify, in the dialogue with all stakeholders (especially users-beneficiaries of interventions), what it means to develop an idea in a specific context
Evidence of the “Success”	The "stories" are collected and then validated by direct observation and dialogue with stakeholders	Actions "new" to respond in an improved logic to "old" problems	The change of values, practices, actions and results that promote the development of the energies of an area to favour its growth
Methods	Participatory methods	Direct observation, qualitative interviews, Delphi groups	Mixed methods and mixed approaches

The table is a reworking of the scheme proposed by Stame and Lo Presti (2015)

As it can be imagined, the positive thinking approaches are not without their critics. The main critiques refer to the credibility of the evidence of success and their relation to learning. “Is it credible?” As this criticism goes: “how can you trust those who put forward a success of their own?” meaning that a “subjective” judgement must be combined with an “objective” assessment.

We have seen how the positive approaches have addressed this criticism. Some have developed quality assurance systems for assessing the credibility of “positive” findings. For example, the MSC has introduced a filter for the selection of stories in order to verify what has been narrated: trying to avoid the risk of fabrication, authenticity is verified by giving the names of the story-tellers and of the locales, and possibility of verification.

So, some critics contest the prevalence of success over failure in promoting learning. The idea is that you learn from experience, from both success and failure. Some of the positive thinking approaches would not be at odds with this statement, but they would qualify the way in which failures can be utilized for learning. We have seen, for example, that EI is oriented toward detecting innovations, proposes not to blame failures and to look at them as “work in progress”.

CONCLUSIONS

Beyond these critical issues, the advantage of positive thinking approaches is their ability to capitalize on unexpected positive effects. In traditional approaches, the attention is on expected (positive) results: if they are obtained, there is success, if they are missing, there is failure. When an innovation has occurred, this may be an unexpected positive result, able to change the current framework of idea.

In positive thinking approaches, and in the inner areas, the attention is on both expected and unexpected positive results.

MSC, EI and DE recognise that the good practice that has been detected needs to be adapted to other situations by thoughtful agents. In both cases, a detected success will need responsible actors to produce further success.

The field experimentation of these three approaches, which can be used with local development projects and programs with the help of mixed methods of investigation and of qualitative and quantitative research techniques, can provide an opportunity to bring out the good existing practices in territories, while respecting the specificity and making it the basis for new developments.

In this article I have discussed how three approaches that share the positive thinking persuasion may suit the capacity building of the stakeholders and the evaluation of programs in the inner areas, with different orientations toward the aid that can be offered specific actors.

While it is generally accepted that similar approaches fit innovative situations that may exist among programs or organizations, this review has shown the great versatility of such approaches in the inner areas. If wisely chosen in a way appropriate to the projects and the specific socio-cultural context, they can cover a variety of situations and offer ways out of the predicaments of traditional approaches in accounting for unexpected positive consequences, emerging outcomes, and all that is generated by people's empowerment.

To include these approaches in the general Strategy's methodology means increasing the ability to plan together a collective strategy (rather than a summation of individual projects), embodied by competent persons.

The goal is to increase the chances of the Strategy to bring change and innovation in the inner areas.

The use of Positive thinking approaches can promote the participatory construction of a Strategy, combining in an integrated plan different but interlinked interventions: education, mobility, tourism, the sense of belonging to the territory and territorial relations.

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