

RISKS AND SOCIAL COSTS OF THE NIMBY SYNDROME AND INNOVATIVE FACTORS FOR COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to assess the relationship between the so called NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) syndrome and the risk it poses to the community in terms of its impacts and social cost. These issues are discussed with regard to the differing views of a development proposer and public citizen when a new plan for development is proposed. These roles may become conflictual, as the relationship often incurs significant impacts, risks and social cost.

The interposing role of social representation is between administration and citizens and amount to symbolize citizens mental and ideological representation of project to be realized. The way in which the development is symbolically represented in social media, is also considered. Social media becomes a catalyst in the conflictual process, as it seeks to represent the objectives of the administration of the project as well as the emotions and experiences of private citizens. This new form of communication becomes a platform for the contrasting views, but also one that can become used as an opportunity for dialogue and prevention of risks and social costs.

Key words:

Community, Social representation, Psychological perception, Social costs, Social media.

1. Introduction

The NIMBY phenomenon has now become an increasingly important factor in the creation of public or private developments which may have an impact on social areas and territorial complexes. The main course of action to prevent this syndrome is the direct involvement of citizens in the planning process. Participatory planning and shared decision-making are a tool used to create a shared vision around the target to be achieved [1]. Although participatory planning is implicitly considered as part of the



The technique of "Planning for real" for decision making and community planning. Source: the author

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), this step is often overlooked or not properly managed

by the project developer. This lack of attention to the active role of citizens thus becomes the cause of the NIMBY syndrome. This social phenomenon has social actors with both direct and indirect roles. [2]. There are the actors who initiate the process and those who suffer it. In these cases, the syndrome manifests itself throughout the social context, creating impacts, risks and issues spread, with indefinite time limit and boundaries which are theoretically unlimited.

1.1. Risk perception and social representation

The concept of risk is often related to the concepts of danger and “insurance”. Over time, risk has assumed a negative connotation and driven the individual to approach it in two separate ways: the first related to analysis (slow and complex), the second to experience (fast and immediate). Experience is influenced by external factors and by elements linked to the individual history or the social context in which they live [3]. As we have progressively lost touch with the analytic function composed of data and quantitative elaborations, the prevailing function has become qualitative and emotional, which is much more complicated and difficult to interpret.

In the case of the realization of a public development, the two different approaches can generally be attributed to the two main stakeholders involved: the analytical to the proposers (administration and evaluation experts), the experiential to the citizens. These two different entities will experience the decision-making process and all of the stages of assessment and realization differently. Elements such as probability of risk, sustainability, benefits and uncontrollability are perceived in contrasting ways by these two main stakeholders. This phenomenon is studied as a “psychometric paradigm”, a methodology that allows us to understand the different perceptions of danger creating a cognitive map of the risks [4]. This is accompanied by the “cultural approach” to the risk, where the focus of the phenomenon is the community and its aggregation, cultural and social characteristics.

Adding to the complexity of risk perceptions are “social representations” [5]: the complex symbolic result of the combination of the aggregation of values, experiences, opinions and theories that refer to a particular object. These contribute to creating a shared vision of the discussion object,

facilitating relations between the actors of the community and stakeholders involved in the communication. A wrong or misguided social representation of the objective pursued by the project, will be the basis for the creation of NIMBY syndrome.

1.2. The risk of impacts to the environment and citizens

Once the process that accelerates the NIMBY phenomenon is triggered, factors are produced that can upset the political balance and social and territorial dynamics of the area. This process will often have a dual function, linked to the two main stakeholders (applicant and citizens) and the effects that it could produce. The positive/negative relationship will be the basis of the phenomenon, making it difficult to understand objectively how the different stages of the process may affect the psychological perception of the work and influence the development. In fact, in the first place, the development will be held up, and there will be a growing and strengthening sense of territorial community. With the start of the NIMBY phenomenon, the first negative factor triggered is related to the completion of the development and how its stated objectives gradually lose interest and value. A project that may be strategic and important for the community, is perceived in terms of its: functional utility, environmental impacts and risks to the population. The social representation of the development is accomplished and consolidated at this stage, with the initiation of a hostile symbolic vision of the project. The NIMBY phenomenon now assumes a negative aspect because it physically limits or blocks the realization of the project. Consequently, it drives the population to reflect on territory values and public health; in this case, intangible and underestimated elements become key points and factors for discussion. Among these are: the landscape, public health, protection and structure of the territory. NIMBY on one hand drives people to re-think (over) their role in the ecosystem and urban settlements, but also causes short sightedness in terms of assessment of development and skepticism about its administration. The proposer loses the role of representative of the public will. Through losing this role, the proposer’s assessment, objectives and prospects, are resized losing effectiveness

and trust. The results presented during the environmental or strategic assessment are not accepted by the population as “neutral factors”, but the result of manipulation. The evaluation process is no longer a real measurement of future impacts, but a tool to achieve the result. In this context, indeed, the population will opt for non-implementation, while the administration will focus on preliminary assessments and indicators. The trigger of the NIMBY phenomenon has meanwhile added to the development timescale, increasing the economic costs and often making the preliminary valuations obsolete. In this atmosphere of uncertainty and slowness, risk can become a real danger. It can create a situation where the development has no initial impact and an unsustainable economic cost. In case of failure to complete the development process, NIMBY causes a block to the local dynamics and creates strong contrasts within the social sphere.

2. The social cost

The exacerbation of the phenomenon may also culminate in violent acts. Demonstrations and protests, if not properly managed by government, can create direct clashes between the demonstrators and the police. They can also create factions inside the population, capable of creating physical fights or instigate psychological contrasts able to fragment the community. Social agreement could even legitimize violent or illegal acts that have the favor and support of the group to which they belong. The social cost is then directed to the population and derived from risk that demonstrations and other protest activities are an occasion to attract violent actions, campaigns of intimidation or even guerrilla acts and acts of sabotage [6].



Protest degenerate into violence: No TAV manifestation, Val di Susa, Italy.

Source: ladige.it

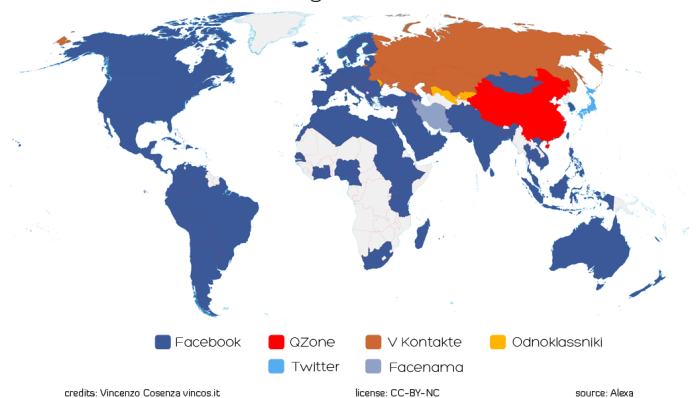
The risk for safety therefore extends to protagonists of the protest and the administration, and also the neutral stakeholders not directly involved, economic assets and territorial contexts. An indirect cost is instead related to policy. A community so strongly opposed to the choices in place and mistrustful towards politics can trigger another behavior in administrators. This refers to the administration's unwillingness to propose new projects. A gradual immobility in terms of territorial planning develops; a community too linked to immutability, will not encourage change or innovation and restrict social and economic development.

2.1. The role of social media for the risks and social costs

Communication plays a key role in the activation of NIMBY phenomena. Looking at the transition from traditional media to the Internet and Web 2.0, the latter appears as a mean, but also as a tool [1]. Social media are considered as “amplifiers of social relationships”, triggering the phenomena of sharing, empathy and plural information, but also misinformation or ideological extremism. The psychological relationship of the actors involved, exceeds space barriers and, through internet, creates a new “shared opinion” also open to distant citizens and those not directly affected.

WORLD MAP OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

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The most popular social networking sites by country. Source: Alexa, credits: Vincenzo Cosenza vincos.it

Social media, for citizens affected by NIMBY, become the means by which the social representation of the development and the community consensus is generated. They are also a tool with which to spread the discontent,

negative comments, criticisms and platforms that allow the aggregation and involvement aimed at direct protest. For the administrators, social media act as the means to spread communication, assessment and feedback on the development, but may also act as a tool to communicate directly with the opponents.

The various methods of communication such as Facebook and Twitter should, however, push the proposers to multi-platform comparison on dedicated sites and social media. A proper communication plan, should use all possible methods to facilitate constructive dialogue in all phases of the project. Direct connection with the individual user, which should be timely and cost-effective, allows for the correction of an improper message, provides accurate information and responds to technical and emotional doubt. Social media and the web, if properly used, can become a very useful tool for the administration in the creation of an alternative social representation of the development and for direct communication with the individual citizen which aims at cohesion, inclusion and dialogue. In conclusion, the most effective technique to reduce or prevent the birth of NIMBY phenomena remains the direct involvement of the population in the preliminary phase with actions of participatory planning and inclusion

in decision-making. The use of social media, both in the preliminary stage, and during realization, however, can facilitate widespread communication with the citizens and turn a possible social cost and risk into an opportunity for constructive dialogue, the aggregation of the community and facilitate direct governance.

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