

## THE STRATEGIC PLAN OF VIBO VALENTIA: A SHARED EXPERIENCE

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### **Vibo Valentia: an overview of the territory**

Vibo Valentia (pop. 35,000 *ca.*) is one of the main towns of the Calabria Region, in Southern Italy, and capital of the province of Vibo Valentia. The municipal area (46,34 square kilometres) goes from the Tyrrhenian Sea to a mountainous hinterland and encompasses the hill town of Vibo Valentia, the coastal district of Vibo Marina and several smaller hamlets, scattered around the countryside. Like many towns in Italy, Vibo Valentia has very ancient origins, dating back to Greek colonization. The area has been inhabited for centuries and has a very important cultural heritage, although not well known and sufficiently valorized. The town is also an important service and industrial hub in its province and one of the main ports in Southern Italy.

When the strategic planning process started, Vibo Valentia showed great potential as a tourist destination. But to be really attractive to tourists and citizens it still had to solve several problems: the town suffered from poor tourism infrastructure, scarce urban quality, decay of historical buildings, tendency to urban sprawl, high hydro-geological instability and presence of degraded informal settlements, mostly along the coast. Moreover, the local community as a whole didn't seem to have a clear and shared idea of the future role the territory could play in the global competition. Nonetheless, citizens appeared to have a strong, almost "instinctive" sense of identity and belonging, that has been taken into deep consideration during the strategic planning process.

### **The participatory approach: territorial strategic planning as a bottom-up process**

Like most Italian local councils, Vibo Valentia recognized strategic planning as an important opportunity for territorial enhancement. In 2008 it initiated a strategic planning process and hence entered a new phase of its development, aimed to reach a competitive position in the new national and international scenarios. The strategic planning process represented a real change in the traditional governance practices: it required a shift from the local council from a bureaucratic and prescriptive approach to the development of policies through a bottom-up and intersectoral approach, aimed at enhancing both negotiation with local stakeholders and inter-institutional cooperation, in the framework of a shared vision of the future.

Vibo Valentia's strategic plan was given the name of "Vibo Futura 2015" - a name that stressed the town's willingness to design its future. The strategic plan provided the local council with development guidelines that could be implemented with the support of

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European Union (EU) structural funds 2007-2013. It paved the way for the last phase of the EU funds supporting cohesion and development policies to align Italian regions to EU standards. From a medium to long-term perspective, the strategic plan “Vibo Futura 2015” pursued coherence and compatibility with plans and programs which were already operating in the area, with the aim of coordinating different sectoral policies. Special attention was given to coordination with the Town Plan, with the guidelines of the Provincial Plan and with the existing programmes for public investments.

[iNExTstudio](#),<sup>1</sup> represented by the present authors, provided technical assistance to the local council for the creation of the strategic plan. We adopted a participatory methodology, aimed at including the entire community of Vibo Valentia in the construction of a shared development strategy. Having worked for several years in the strategic planning field, our approach is to interpret the strategic plan as the outcome of a cyclical process that involves a plurality of local actors.

The two main principles adopted in drafting Vibo Valentia’s strategic plan were accurate analysis and interpretation of territorial variables - which represent the basis for effective development strategies - and the use of a participatory methodology throughout the entire strategic planning process.

Vibo Valentia’s strategic planning experience shows how the active involvement of the local community and the commitment of citizens, stakeholders and local authorities are essential factors in guaranteeing the success of planning initiatives and in ensuring concrete development results. In fact, thanks to the commitment and the active collaboration of the local council and stakeholders, the process was able to effectively highlight the real strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges that might shape the town’s future, point out the local actors’ needs and expectations and bring to light the future image of Vibo Valentia (the “vision”) that the local community wanted to build and the actions required to achieve it. In our experience, the participatory approach used also enabled existing know-how to emerge and be enhanced, improved relationships among the local actors and strengthened the sense of collective identity and belonging. Moreover, it encouraged a sense of responsibility to citizens and stakeholders, raising awareness of the role they could (and should) play in the development process.

The local council encouraged participation by promoting several moments of dialogue, discussion and group sharing. The strategic planning office (created by the Municipality to coordinate and manage the whole process, with the support of iNExT professionals) worked very hard to promote participation through communication. For example, it promptly informed citizens about events and meetings; it invited all relevant stakeholders to take part in the process; it constantly underlined the importance for citizens to play a lead role in building a shared future for Vibo Valentia.

Given that citizens were not in the habit of participating in the definition of territorial policies, the methodology adopted was differentiated accordingly: from the beginning of the process, stakeholders were constantly kept informed so that they fully understood

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<sup>1</sup> iNExTstudio is currently working with UNDP’s ART GOLD2 Programme in Albania to support two strategic planning experiences in the counties of Shkodra and Vlora.

the objectives and the different steps of the strategic planning process. Each step of the process required a growing commitment from involved stakeholders: at the beginning, a presentation event was organised, merely aimed at informing the local community about strategic planning objectives and methodology; later, representatives of institutions, trade unions and the non-profit sector were interviewed to gather information and points of view about the territory; schools were involved, too, to encourage students to actively engage in the construction of their own city and future; working groups were formed and face-to-face meetings with the relevant stakeholders were arranged to focus on the definition of shared development strategies; finally, focus groups worked on the identification of development projects, consistent with the agreed strategy.



A moment in the participative process: Focus Group discussing about the Port development (July 2008)

Moreover, the creation of the website [www.vibofutura2015.org](http://www.vibofutura2015.org) at the very beginning of the process helped to convey information and to improve the opportunities for interaction among the actors, by reaching those parts of the population (youths, workers, etc.) who didn't participate in public meetings but had easy access to ICT. The main objective of the website was to keep the 'participatory spirit' and the cooperation between the staff and the citizens alive. It was created with the vital contribution of local graphics design students and it evolved significantly throughout the strategic planning process as new contents (information materials, documents, presentations, agendas, etc.) were periodically added. The site became tangible proof of the administration's willingness to (re)build a solid relationship with the local community, based on transparency, communication and mutual trust.

## Building the strategic plan together

In a first phase of analysis, the participatory process, together with desk research and surveys, highlighted the complexity and diversity of Vibo Valentia's territory. The town appeared to play a consolidated reference role for its province, but at the same time, still had not developed those characteristics of innovation, integration and quality that could make it really attractive to tourists, citizens and entrepreneurs. The territory appeared fragmented in every aspect: "colliding" productive activities (i.e. beach tourism activities next to industrial areas), a scattered urban structure, a poorly-integrated infrastructure network, etc. In this fragmentation, Vibo Valentia still couldn't set itself up as leader and engine for the province's development. Moreover, the 'protean' nature of the town seemed to involve the surrounding area as well: on one hand, the province was dependent on the main town, mainly for social services and industrial activities; on the other hand, it had initiated development processes that were "alternative" to those of the capital, focusing on the enhancement of endogenous resources. Thus, Vibo Valentia found itself amidst an extremely heterogeneous territory, where it was hard-pressed to find a specific identity of its own.

The analysis also showed that no municipality within the province had the potential to start up self-sufficient development processes: towns in Calabria are usually small towns that cannot face global competition alone. Therefore, the process highlighted the opportunity to build an integrated territorial system, a network among small municipalities, where Vibo could play a leading role because of its historical hegemony and its institutional functions. This leading role encompassed coordination among development policies, joint management and acting as interface with higher institutional levels.

These considerations led to the first step in outlining the development strategy: the definition of the shared vision of the strategic plan. The "vision" is a possible future image of a territory which orients the entire strategic planning process. It proposes, consistent with the outcomes of the participatory process, a possible role of a given territory in the context of global competition, towards which all development initiatives will be oriented. The vision proposed for Vibo Valentia – "Vibo Futura 2015: a Territory of Value" – wanted to express both the multiple aspects of the area and its common historical and cultural identity. We noticed that this common identity, built throughout the centuries, was neither properly internalized by the citizens, nor adequately communicated outwards. Vibo, therefore, still appeared to be in search of a unique identity and subject to "inner conflicts" – for example, between the hill town and the coastal settlement, or between industrial growth and tourism development.

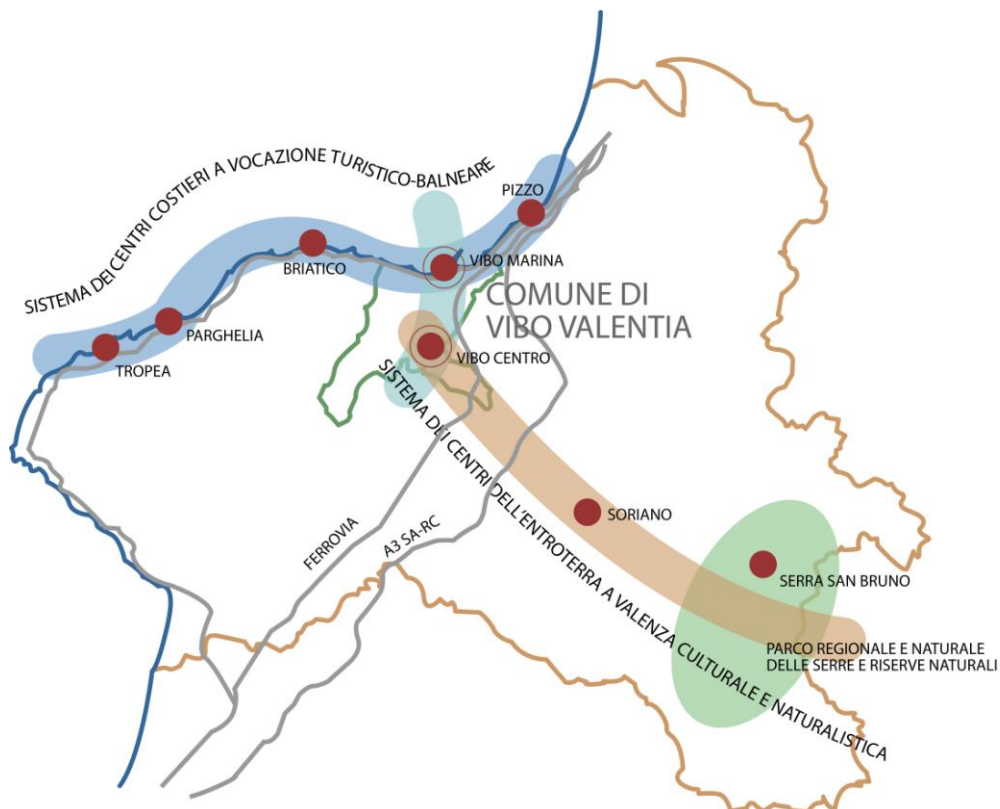
It was decided that the historical identity and the reference role played by the city within the province had to be recovered and strengthened by:

- reinforcing the role of Vibo as a "service hub" for the various existing productive activities and for the different parts of the urban area (the coastal districts, the old town, the hamlets). Vibo was to become the engine and the leader of the province's future development by supplying efficient services and infrastructure for the socio-economic and cultural re-launch of the area;
- "bringing to light again" (as in an archaeological excavation) the endogenous



territorial resources and giving them new value and appeal. The strategic plan had to strengthen the citizens' sense of identity, their knowledge of the available resources and their awareness of the territory's value so that they could consciously decide on its future development.

Thus, the Plan conveys a vision of Vibo as a “city of integration”. The idea was to promote a balanced development: a place where the different ‘souls’ of the territory (coast, hinterland, agro-food production, tourism, culture, metalwork industry, commerce, social care, education) could live together in harmony, reinforcing and enhancing each other in a coordinated and synergic way.



Graphic outline of the Vision of the Strategic Plan ‘Vibo Futura 2015’

The vision “Vibo Futura 2015: a Territory of Value” also contains several hidden meanings:

- the word *territory* expresses the broad perspective of the strategic plan, which not only concerns the municipality of Vibo Valentia, but also involves the nearby municipalities and extends to the whole province. The word also conveys the idea of the future role of Vibo as a service hub *for* the territory;
- the word *value* expresses the richness of the strategic planning area, in terms of cultural heritage, wine and food, natural environment, entrepreneurship. It conveys the idea that the territory of Vibo Valentia is valuable and is able to produce value, by offering qualified human resources and excellent typical products. These values should be rediscovered, optimized and enhanced in order to start up environmentally and socially sustainable development processes. Moreover, in Italian, “value” is a synonym of “courage”: for the members of a community, starting up a strategic planning process,

also means to be brave enough to make choices, to take up global challenges, put themselves to the test and work together to build their own future;

- the vision as a whole is a slogan that acts to awaken the local community's pride. In fact, one of the objectives of strategic planning is to guide local actors towards a rediscovery of their common roots and values and to use local identity and sense of belonging as starting points to define shared development goals.

The next step was the identification of cross-cutting objectives. These represent general needs and demands expressed by the local community throughout the participatory process and cut across the specific topics discussed during the meetings. Three cross-cutting objectives were identified:

1. *Protection and enhancement of endogenous resources*: local actors showed a remarkable awareness of Vibo Valentia's potentials: they were convinced that existing historical, cultural, environmental and entrepreneurial resources could (and should) represent an important point of departure for development.
2. *Integration*: local actors are aware that the fragmentation of Vibo's territory could be a possible constraint for development; therefore, they consider the integration of the different 'souls' of the town essential to taking forward a common development path and to overcoming sterile conflicts.
3. *Quality and innovation*: a strong demand for quality and innovation emerged from the process. Stakeholders consider these two elements fundamental to enhancing competitiveness and to making economic and urban development both environmentally and socially sustainable.

The cross-cutting objectives represented the inspiring principles for the shared development strategy, which was made up of four strategic guidelines:

1. the value of identity and culture – focused on the enhancement of cultural heritage;
2. the value of tourist hospitality – focused on the improvement of the infrastructure network and services addressed to tourists;
3. the value of agro-food and industrial production – focused on the qualification of local products and know how, and on the improvement of environmental sustainability in the productive processes;
4. the value of everyday life – focused on the improvement and coordination of social care services, with the direct involvement of non-profit sector.

Each guideline encompassed a number of specific actions. The participatory process was fundamental to agreeing on guidelines and actions, and to "materialize" them through projects. First, five working groups were formed and each of them focused on a specific issue, with the aim of better defining the strategy and of identifying priority projects to realize it, with the commitment of the whole community. It also led to more than 90 long-, medium- and short-term projects, proposed by local stakeholders to "trigger" development. The project proposals were put forward both orally, during the meetings, and in writing, by filling in more than 50 project forms. Later, the projects were organized, coordinated and prioritized and were grouped into "project packages" or *macro-projects*, to broaden their perspective. These macro-projects, each of which is internally consistent and well-integrated with the others, refer to the issues and places that the local actors considered especially relevant for socioeconomic growth:

- the Port City: the port and the surrounding coastal district, which represent a sort of second town, ‘alternative’ to the hill town;
- the Agro-food Hub which would act as a tool to coordinate and enhance the agricultural sector and to qualify typical local products;
- the Network of Cultural and environmental heritage sites: this heritage represents important resources for the development of cultural tourism and for the reinforcement of local identity;
- the Industrial areas, where the main productive activities are concentrated;
- the Network of Social care services, to be improved both quantitatively and qualitatively, and in terms of their overall coordination.

The macro-projects aim to strengthen the main sectors of the local economy (tourism, agro-food production, metalwork industry) in a framework of overall social sustainability. In this sense, they have the function of bringing together several development initiatives around a strong “political” idea: (re)defining the town’s role in the provincial and regional context. These macro-projects represented the main topics of the Focus Groups which were formed by relevant stakeholders and met twice to discuss and agree upon macro-projects and specific projects and to detail their characteristics – both functional and financial – and the partnerships needed to realize them.

The projects of the strategic plan “Vibo Futura 2015” are thus included in an overall territorial development framework and in an integrated set of synergic interventions. Thanks to this, they will have better chances to get financial assistance from the European Union (EU), through EU Structural Funds 2007-2013: the European Regional Development Funds (ERDF), aimed to promote economic and social cohesion within the European Union through the reduction of imbalances between regions or social groups; the European Social Fund (ESF), mainly focused on employment policies; the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (EAGGF), which contributes to the structural reform of the agriculture sector and to the development of rural areas. For the town, easier access to EU structural funds could mean quicker achievement of its territorial development objectives.

### **Results achieved by the participatory process**

Local actors expressed appreciation of the participatory process and acknowledged the local council’s efforts to build a new relationship with citizens and stakeholders, based on mutual trust and cooperation. There was a substantial agreement on the strategic planning documents and, in particular, on the project proposals that focused on the coordination of stakeholders and interventions (i.e. the Agro-food district, the Metalwork district, the Steering committee for the harbour management and development, the Coordination committee for non profit associations, etc.). Stakeholders also expressed a strong demand for the optimization of existing structures and services as a part of a more general demand for efficiency and overall territorial quality; they became aware that, in order to be attractive to tourists, entrepreneurs and citizens – and consequently to develop local economy and not to lose human and financial resources - Vibo Valentia should offer high standards of environmental quality (in terms of solid waste management, urban cleanliness, maintenance of green areas, etc.) and administrative efficiency. To achieve this goal, the quality management



systems, which were included in the strategic plan with an eye to the local enterprises, should be extended to public administration activities, also to strengthen the citizens' trust towards the local authority.

The participatory process related to the strategic plan had very positive effects on the local community. It was really successful in raising awareness among the local actors about the territory's present state and about the importance of personal commitment to solve problems and trigger development. It also allowed the identification of concrete, shared and feasible development projects. Moreover, the population experienced the process as an important opportunity and as a positive sign of the administration's willingness to put itself to the test, to really "listen" to the people who live and work in the territory.



Communicating the Strategic Plan: banners on Vibo Valentia Castle's walls to promote a strategic planning meeting

One of the main results of the process was the willingness of the local community to carry on participatory activities: people openly asked the administration to optimize and enhance the collective work done so far, and expressed their hopes that negotiation might become a permanent and established practice in the framework of administrative procedures. To respond to these explicit demands, a management structure, called "Urban Center Vibo Futura 2015", was proposed to help the administration promote participatory strategic planning as an ordinary method to manage local development processes. In particular, in the strategic plan's implementation, the Urban Center will be the place where all the issues related to the plan's activation (and to its capacity to



attract public and private investments) can be discussed, assessed, and be subject to proposals. The Urban Center will deal with the start up of projects included in the strategic plan and with the constant monitoring of their implementation. Moreover, it will work to:

1. continue to involve and coordinate local stakeholders, also by convening working groups on specific issues and/or on particular projects; encourage and stimulate constant participation; gather opinions and proposals which could be useful to correct, update or upgrade the strategic plan;
2. inform citizens about the strategic plan's contents and state-of-the-art, by constantly updating the website and by promoting communication campaigns, both periodically and during specific events;
3. continue to ensure coordination among the other plans and programs operating in the same territory, also by developing further synergies;
4. carry on constant negotiation with institutions at national and regional levels, in order to outline coherent development policies and to promote wide-range projects, linked to the strategic plan.

The Urban Center will be composed of institutions and private actors. Thus, it will set itself up as an effective institutional and technical coordination model, aimed at enhancing the participatory process the strategic plan has started up and to optimize the human, organisational and financial resources for the implementation and management of the strategic plan itself.

In conclusion, we can affirm that, within the Italian scene, Vibo Valentia's strategic plan represents a good practice in participatory planning and local development policies. In fact, it shows how the involvement of the local community and the cooperation among local authorities, stakeholders and technicians are fundamental to achieving concrete territorial development goals.

The Strategic Plan "Vibo Futura 2015" was formally approved by the Regional Government in 2009. The local council, despite a change in political leadership, decided to put the process forward: it succeeded in obtaining regional and EU funds for a total of approximately 21,000,000 Euros to finance the integrated urban development projects included in the strategic plan and has recently published a call for tenders for technical assistance.