Managing Urban Parks for Sustainable development and Social Sustainability in Rome, Italy

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Abstract

Roma Natura is the public institution that manages all the natural parks inside the city of Rome, more than 16.000 ha of natural and historical environment. In the last months the Communication and Education Office tried a new and different management, based on people involvement. A new project, called VITA (that can be translated in English as LIFE) started with six different goals. The main purpose is to give back natural resources and spaces to citizens, involving them in management and decision making. This paper wants to present the first results of this project and the future programs to make people understand the importance on natural parks in urban context.

Keywords: Urban parks, social development, sustainable development, parks management.

Introduction

Roma Natura is the public regional office that manages all the natural protected areas inside the city of Rome. Established in 1997 by a Regional Law (number 29), RomaNatura supervises 16.000 hectares, which is more or less the area covered by the entire city of Bologna, and about four times the city of Hammamet.

Archaeological finds, historical monuments, villas and castles are only a small part of the treasures offered by this great heritage: the real treasure is made of a number of ecological islands providing a natural habitat for over 1.000 different species of plants, 5.000 species of insects, and 150 species among mammals, birds, amphibians, and reptiles[1].

Many of these areas are still used for farming, and the Municipality of Rome is still the largest agricultural town in Italy.

Roma Natura Education and Communication Office started, from the beginning, a policy addressed to environmental education. In particular in 15 years, more than 15.000 pupils were involved in our events and projects in the entire city of Rome. Many associations contributed to divulge the mission of RomaNatura, based on protection and safeguard of natural protected areas in urban context[2]. In 2008 a 1 billion Euros project started to provide events, conferences, public debates with the purpose to involve citizens and make them live roman parks, but the results were satisfying only in education projects with schools[3].

In 2010, at the end of this first big project, with the simultaneous economic crisis that involved many European countries, Roma Natura decided not to change its mission, but the means by which to achieve a bigger people's involvement.

For this reason, in 2013, while I was doing a PhD in Communication Sciences, I spent six months in San Francisco studying the city parks system. The main goal was to understand the mistakes we did in Rome in the last years and what San Francisco Parks Department's winning strategies could be adapted in the different social and economic context of Rome.

The end of the research gave us the main idea we wanted to export from US, based on volunteer programmes. This idea came from a comparison with volunteer projects in San Francisco, where people were involved from the beginning to the end of the process. In Italy volunteers are well organized, but the common idea is that some way they have to be rewarded for what they do.

If someone is paid for its activity, is not 100% volunteer and if someone decided to spend time helping in some project, is not often involved from the beginning but only for single events or one day programme, without understanding the mission or the main goals of the entire project.

Our new project, called VITA, wants to try to change this wrong mentality[4] to create a bigger involvement in population who use and live the park around its own house. VITA is the Italian word for LIFE and it is the acronym of Volontariato Insieme per il Territorio e l'Ambiente (translated as Volunteers Together for Territory and Environment).

We chose a small area in one of RomaNatura parks and we decided to start the project as a master plan; in case of success, the model should be applied to other areas inside Rome, to create a network of volunteers in the entire city.

Methodology

Fundamental values: The mission of reaching a full sustainability is the main RomaNatura value, but sustainability is not only about environment. Especially in urban context, it is about society and people[5].

There are several approaches to social sustainability: in 2014 Daniel Raphael[6] divided the topic of sustainability in material (air, water, food, arable land, etc.) and social (individual/family, government, politics, economy).

This idea of linkage between environment, economy[7] and society is summarized in figure-1: these three aspects need to be combined to reach sustainability. The connections between society and environment, society and economy and economy and environment have to be respectively bearable, equitable and viable.

The entire project is also based on the six different dimensions of social sustainability[8] given by the economist Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize in 1998, which have to be applied to reach a better general management of urban parks in Rome: i. Equity: a community provides the same opportunities for all its members, particularly for the poorest and vulnerable. ii. Diversity: a community encourages diversity and its promotion (about gender, race, religion and so on). iii. Interconnection and social cohesions: a community promotes connections within and outside itself, especially with formal and informal institutions, iv. Quality of life: a community guarantees the basic needs for all its members, particularly about houses, education, health, safety, employment and open spaces' availability. v. Democracy and governance: the community provides democratic and open-access processes. vi. Maturity: individuals accept the improvement of the community changing their mentality, life style and behaviour.
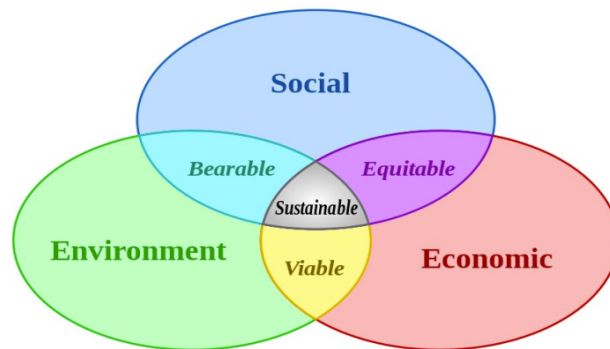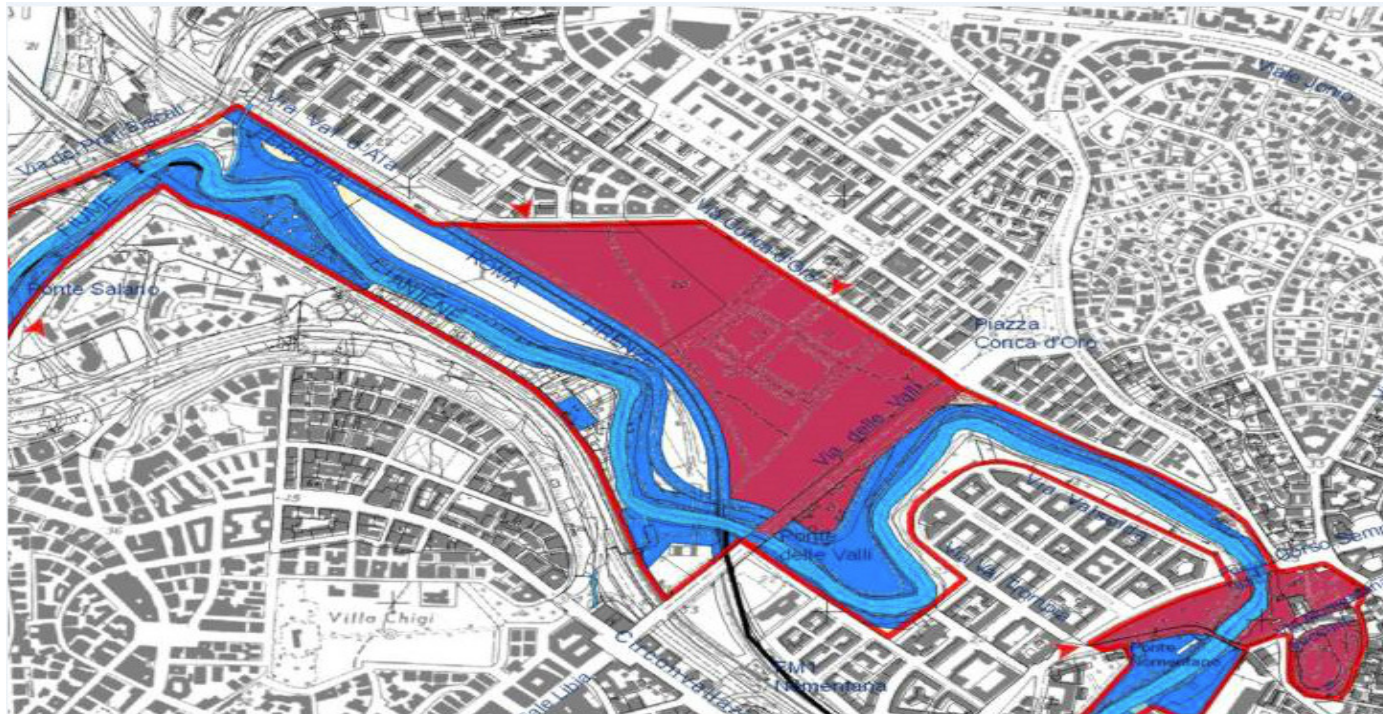

(Source: Calmos at fr.wikipedia)

Figure-1
Three aspects of sustainability
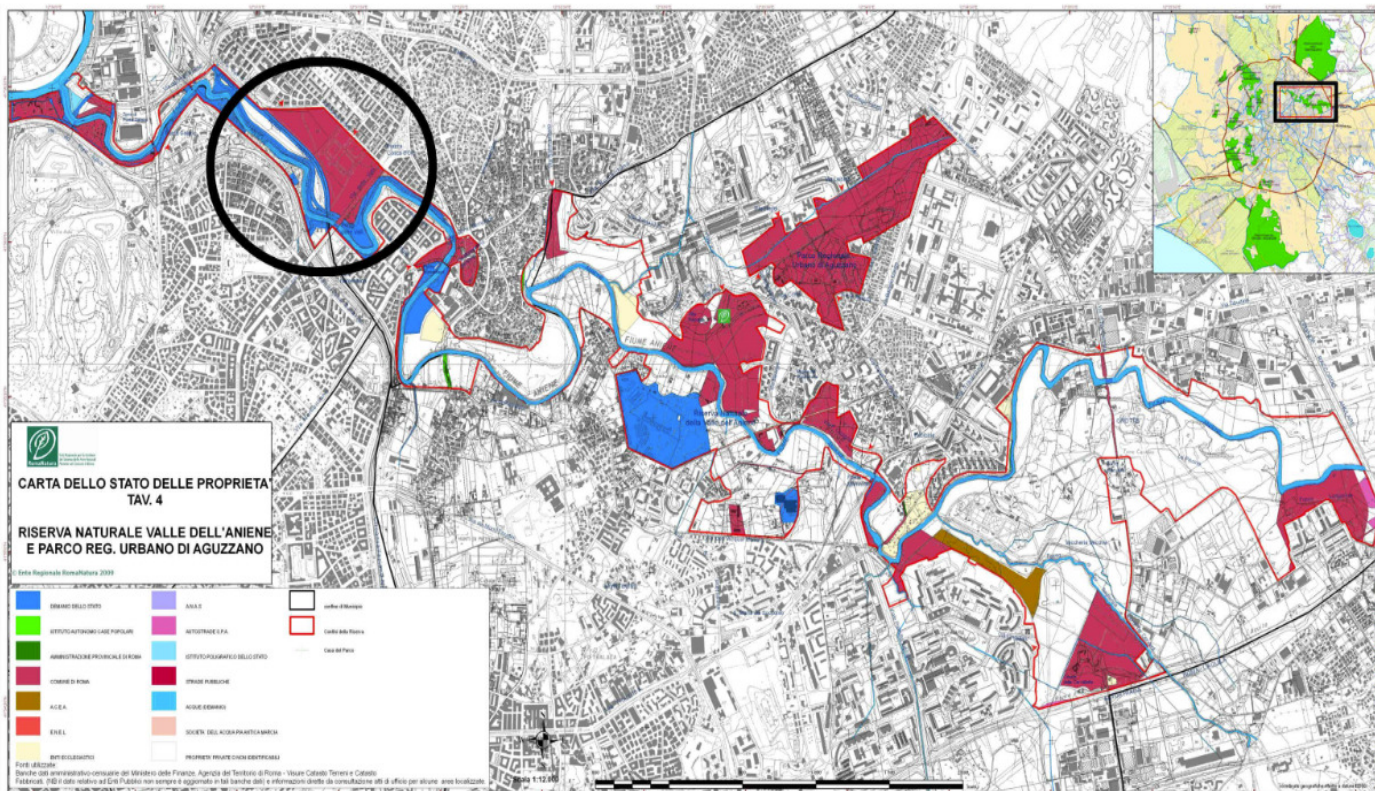
(Source: www.romanatura.roma.it)

Figure-2
Valle dell'Aniene Natural Reserve. In the black rectangle on the top right, the Reserve location within the city of Rome. In the black circle on the top left, the area of study

(Source: www.romanatura.roma.it)

Figure-3
In red, the Pratone delle Valli area

The area of study: One of the main problems of natural parks in Rome is that most of them are private property (around 80%). That is why management seems to be very difficult, first of all because most of the parks are not accessible[9].

Therefore, there were few options and the area chosen is a small part of Valle dell'Aniene Natural Reserve, in figure-2, called Pratone delle Valli, figure-3, a 31 ha area with the river Aniene on the west and south borders and high density buildings on the north and east borders.

The reasons for this choice were: i. it is a high density area. ii. it is used by different kind of people (seniors, kids and families). iii. it could be used with different purposes (sport, nature, relax). iv. it is provided with some facilities (a dog area, a jogging track, paths, a multifunctional building). v. a good transportation system around the area (a new metro station was opened 600 metres from the main entrance). vi. many associations already have projects in this park.

The first step of the research was to find some statistics about the area, which were provided by 2013 population census of Rome[10].

More than 19.500 people live near the chosen area; about half of them are families with children (46.5% are married) and 53.5% of population are composed by singles or divorced.

Seniors are a consistent part of the population (23.6%), they are well organized and the main seniors' association manages part of the multifunctional building inside the park. People under 14 years are 12.5%, as reported in table-1.

Table-1
Population per class ages living around the area of study
(Comune di Roma, 2012)

Ages	Populations per age groups (%)
1-4	4.3
5-14	8.2
15-29	13.2
30-49	30.5
50-64	20.2
65 and more	23.6

The area is characterized by a bigger percentage of seniors in comparison with Rome (the average percentage of senior of the entire city is 21.7%). Besides, many students live near the area thanks to the good transportation to the main Universities of Rome.

The idea of foreign citizen involvement seems to be hard to realize because in the area there is a small percentage of foreigners (8.2%), compared with the higher percentage of Rome (13.1%).

After a social analysis of the population we started our project based on six different activities: i. connection between the different institutions around the area, ii. volunteer projects for citizens, iii. volunteer projects for groups of citizens and associations, iv. long term projects (civil service), v. short term projects (university students), vi. sponsorship, donations, and fundraising.

Results and Discussion

Public institutions: Despite Rome has the biggest green area surface per citizen in Europe (more than 131 square metres), in the European Green City Index[11], that measures the environmental performance of 30 European cities, taking into account 30 different indicators, Rome is only 14th in the overall ranking and 23rd in Environmental Governance's ranking.

The main reason for such a low ranking is because in Rome there are four different levels of management that often hinder between themselves[12].

Italy has 4 different administration levels: the State, Regions (20), Provinces (110) and Municipalities (8057). In big cities like Rome there are also smaller Districts (15 in Rome), that are responsible for local activities and development. The population of Rome's Districts goes from 52.000 to 244.000 people; it means that the most peopled District in Rome has the same citizen of Venice, the 12th biggest city in Italy. Furthermore, in the same city there are National parks, managed by the State and the Environment Ministry, Regional parks, managed by Roma Natura, Provincial parks, managed by the entire Province of Rome, and historical villas and gardens, managed by the City of Rome and by smallest districts (Pratone delle Valli is inside District III).

In the chosen area there are different responsibilities: i. Roma Natura is the general manager, ii. the City owns the multifunctional building that is inside the park, and assigned it to the District, iii. cleaning is managed by the City, iv. there are at least three private associations that manage facilities and services in the park.

It is easy to understand that the first step is to make all these subjects communicate each other. It is important to establish from the beginning everybody's responsibilities and tasks, especially about the multifunctional building that is the headquarters we would like to use for our project.

The second step is to understand the level of involvement of any administrations and private associations, in order to better plan all the future activities in the area.

At the moment the City of Rome, the District and RomaNatura are discussing about the building entrusting and, thereby, how to use it.

Projects for citizens: The second activity is to create specific volunteer projects for citizens. Many people do not want to be involved with private associations, because it is not always easy to trust in them or to be accepted as a member.

The goal is to give all these people the occasion to do something for the community they live in, especially for a park that they use every day and that need to be protected and revitalized.

The difference between the existing projects and VITA project is to involve people from the beginning of the decision making, and not only in single events about which people do not understand the mission.

To involve people from the beginning and through the entire project means to make them feel part of something bigger and give them a different and new motivation.

Considering the social composition of the area and all the resources inside and around it, one of the main purposes is to train seniors about the history of the park, from the first environmental groups and associations, through its creation in 1997 and the actual management. The second idea is to train people about urban history of the District, which can be observed from inside the park, because of the strong urban pressure around the area. Understanding how the District grew up can make people understand why and how much is important to preserve such a big green area for all the population.

Training will be done in the multifunctional building by some volunteers (territory's experts) and by RomaNatura employees. The training will be around 4/6 weeks and at the end all the volunteers will be able to conduct a guided tour about different aspects of the park.

We want to create something like the "San Francisco City Guide"; they offer free guided tours in the city and people can give a contribution directly to the guide to lend support to the project. The guides will not receive any salary but all the money will be used to create new training opportunities and to improve services in the park. Donations are also tax-deductible, and RomaNatura will give a receipt for all the funds received; all the donations will be available on the official website in a quarterly report.

Projects for groups and associations: The third activity is about projects for groups of citizens or associations. There are three different associations already operating on the park.

Insieme per l'Aniene is one of the most active environmental associations in Rome; it is expert in environmental education for schools and recreational activities, and it can give a good contribution to the general project thanks to its employees' great experience and professionalism.

Mercatino Conca d'Oro is a small antique and craft market located inside the area. They can arrange meetings and provide with indoor areas in case of bad meteorological conditions. The last one is a seniors association that, at the moment, manages part of the multifunctional building.

Despite it is not easy to create a network between different associations and groups, which have different goals, the attempt is to make them understand the importance of mutual help. All the activities and events need to be communicated using a common way, as a single website or newsletter, which can be managed by RomaNatura.

The same people who spend their free time in the market need to be informed that, in the same days, they can also do a guided tour and they can play a cards tournament with seniors association.

The second part of this activity is to involve all the other associations that are interested in doing activities inside the park. The goal is to create a group of people that can coordinate all the activities having common goals and helping one each other.

Long term projects: Long and short term projects concern especially students and youth involvement. Long term projects could be planned only having new and long term staff. Because of the general economic crisis, at the moment RomaNatura cannot hire new staff but can afford to train people.

One of the easiest solutions is to ask for civil service accreditation. In Italy the Civil Service gave the opportunity to young people to be involved in a project for one year (working 30 hours per week), being paid by the State. The institution or association that asks for civil servants has to guarantee a specific training about the project people are involved in. This is not an easy process because of the high number of institutions or associations that make request every year, but RomaNatura, as a public office, could have the precedence.

To have a small group of people for one entire year means, first of all, to give free access to the multifunctional building every day, and to guarantee all the planned activities and events.
Civil service workers, after training, could be promoted senior manager being responsible for single activities like. i. guided tours, ii. volunteer programmes, iii. specific environmental education projects with school, iv. communication.

The second solution is to raise money from sponsors to hire people with specific expertise, but this process seems to be more difficult as well as expensive.

Short term projects: Short term projects could be planned with university students, to give them the opportunity to work in a public office to improve their skills and résumé.

The present selection system, called *Jobsoul*, allows every registered office to offer stages and internship to all the students from every university in Rome.

It is possible to choose position, duration, the specific Department and area of interest to have students from. Usually a stage or internship is totally free (if the student lives inside the city) and it is specific for a single programme rather than for a general project.

Students can be selected from different university Departments and fields: i. economics and marketing, for sponsorship and fundraising events. ii. communication, to create and manage a website and social networks communication (Facebook and Twitter profiles, YouTube channel and Instagram). iii. pedagogy, to help civil service workers in environmental education projects. iv. natural sciences and biology, to support the guides' training.

Sponsorship, donations and fundraising: Last, but for sure the most important activity, is to manage sponsors, donations and fundraising activities.

After detecting all the commercial activities near the park, and some big company in Rome, the main idea is to have three different actions: i. donations from singles to guarantee the daily activities. Donation can be done both with money and objects that can be used by volunteers and by staff (i.e. t-shirts for all the guides). ii. donations from small commercial activities around the park (i.e. greenhouses and plant nurseries can donate plants and seeds for gardening). iii. donations from big private companies interested in linking their name to environmental projects. iv. Donations are tax-deductible and the main idea is to recognize with gratitude what people could do for the park, giving them visibility in communication campaigns and through social networks.

Conclusion

VITA project, started in April 2014, gave both our Office, both people involved a new motivation. In the first 45 days we already involved five associations and we started several meetings with other institutions. RomaNatura is registered in Jobsoul, the university website for stages and internships, and we started the process to have civil service accreditation, starting from the beginning of 2015.

To give back to the citizens a green and well organized area is the main goal of this programme, considering that green areas in urban context improve the general quality of life, in different fields, as reported by Garvin[13]: i. natural environment conservation (air and water quality improvement and pollution reduction). ii. individual health, thanks to the activities and physical exercise that can be done inside a park[14]. iii. public health, reducing cardiovascular problems and all the linked diseases, and therefore public health expenses. iv. social

interaction, as a park is the perfect place for people to socialize[15]. v. urban sustainability conservation.

The best strategy to reach these goals is to make people understand the importance of green areas inside a city with huge urban pressure. People are more predisposed to understand it if they are directly involved in parks management. We want to give people back their territory, and allow them to live it and love it always more.

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