Since 2011 in the Veneto Region (Northeastern Italy) a network of Landscape Observatories at local scale has been established, in order to strengthen the implementation of the European Landscape Convention. The experimental project realised in Canale di Brenta (a Pre-alpine valley) represents the first example and a “best practice”. It started thanks to an agreement among the Regional Administration, Padova and Venice Universities and the local Mountain Community (8 municipalities, about 10,000 inhabitants).

It originates from the idea that landscape can be considered as a “tool”, which may contribute to the expression, outline and mediation of different perceptions, values and viewpoints, both of expert knowledge and lay people, concerning different reasons for interest in the landscape. In this perspective landscape may stimulate the emerging of territorial questions and an open discussion on them. The Landscape Observatory should operate as a “round table” for dialogue and for identifying common objectives inside the local community.

During the development of this project, population has been invited to participate in many different activities (see below) based on three key words, considered as the most important for people’s involvement as claimed by the ELC: knowledge, in the sense of deeper and wider knowledge of the local landscape, including surveys, training and dissemination activities; awareness, in order to make local people more conscious of the values and critical aspects of their landscape and more willing to take care of it; sharing of values and meanings, questions and proposals, through focus groups and public events.

Lessons learned

The critical evaluation of each activity and the results of the project as a whole allow identifying some general “lessons learned” and some guidelines for the implementation of local observatories, and discussing the appropriateness and the effectiveness of these tools for the implementation of the ELC.

- The articulation of actions and the involvement of different stakeholders permitted a very inclusive approach, starting from the idea that landscape is a matter for everybody
- A strong external inputs was needed at the beginning, but then we faced a growing local involvement; anyway a problem of mobilising adequate local resources (financial as well as human ones) still exists
- The activities focused on the local questions but they have been always proposed in strong relation to wider scales; in this way a marginal valley assumed visibility and importance outside its borders
- Considering landscape as a “tool” on the one hand encouraged proposals of actions and sustainable economic activities; on the other hand it allowed the fostering of active citizenship, over the risk of neglecting people’s expectations

Survey about the perception of landscape: Nearly 1.000 people answered a questionnaire, with questions on the attachment and the evaluation of the local landscape, on the places with affective value, representative places and degraded places, on the transformation processes in the landscape (abandonment of agricultural practices on the slopes; quarries; mobility and infrastructures; tourism).

Education and sensitisation in schools: Activities involved 1300 school children, from kindergarten to secondary school. The Observatory proposed training for teachers, focusing on a methodology for “landscape reading” considering elements, meanings and values, processes and landscape changes form the past to the future. Teachers then implemented activities with children during school time, according to each curriculum.

Focus groups and participation activities: Participation activities involved more than 50 people in 4 focus groups on the main questions of the valley: environment, living, mobility, jobs. Landscape was proposed as an input and helped in making different points of view emerging: “The Observatory looks at, discusses, recommends”. The main proposals emerging from the discussion concern sustainable tourism in order to safeguarding and promoting the valley and overcoming the division inside the valley itself, considering and proposing it as a “unit”.

Landscape Festival (25-26 May, 2012): At the end of the first year of activity, all the children were involved in a large “embrace at the valley” and all the population were invited to visit the exposition and to participate at the event, during which the Mayors signed their commitment in the Landscape Observatory.