

IN FOCUS

The New Towns of L'Aquila: A successful post-quake rehousing project or a wrong long-term reconstruction policy?

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On 6 April 2009 at 3.32 a.m. an earthquake of magnitude 5.8 struck the city of L'Aquila, located 7 km away from the epicentre, as well as 124 surrounding towns. The death toll was 309 people (Il Secolo XIX, 2013), while 1500 people were injured and about 50000 left homeless in the immediate aftermath of the quake (Repubblica, 2009; Il Corriere, 2009). Most of the people affected came from the city centre. The management of the crisis underscores interesting aspects of reconstruction and rehousing measures.

Interestingly, the government decided to defer the reconstruction of the historical centre of the city and gave instead priority to the C.A.S.E¹ project which was comprised of a total of 185 buildings designed to host approximately C.A.S.E, project that was comprised 15,000 people². The project aimed at relocating the displaced population living in the tent camps into newly built anti-seismic apartment blocks before the winter: the so-called New Towns. Four years after the quake, the city is still in ruin, the situation raises a wide range of criticism with regard to the effectiveness of the measures implemented in the aftermath of the quake, their durability, cost and impact on the quality of life of the people relocated.

Firstly, the flats were not meant to be provisional accommodations, but were instead conceived as high-quality flats that would generate a profit on the market in the long term for all the actors involved in their construction. On the other hand, the anti-seismic platforms upon which the buildings were erected turned out to be very expensive devices. These facts coupled with the short time

allowed for public tenders and requests for proposals to be carried out considerably raised the whole cost of the project (40% higher than the average market price of the square meter in the country), which amounted to a total of 809 million³.

Secondly, the amount of money poured into the project and the wide publicity made for and around it in the media contrasted sharply with the ruins of the city centre. This fact actively contributed to fuel the feeling that C.A.S.E was mainly a strategy to divert attention to the fundamental issue of a durable reconstruction of the city centre (whose cost was estimated to be of EUR 10 billion) and raise electoral consensus desperately needed by the ruling government at the time and its Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Furthermore, the local authorities were completely marginalized and excluded from the decision-making phase, which led to a feeling of disempowerment of the inhabitants and the victims of the quake.

Finally, it emerges from media and interviews carried out by the author⁴ that the quality of life of the people resettled is actually very poor. The 19 areas of the project are far from the city centre while poor transportation has been set up. No services or social structures have been included in the project, and the New Towns resemble dormitories rather than the lively neighbourhoods they were meant to be.

In light of these elements, we may ask ourselves whether the New Towns are just the incongruous outcome of an ineffective long-term reconstruction policy or yet an incredibly rapid and effective project aimed at rehousing in few months thousands of displaced families while permanently rendering urban areas vulnerable to earthquakes more secure. While the debate still rages in the country and among the public opinion on the final assessment of C.A.S.E project. The most important question has not yet found an answer: will the displaced be able to return?

1. The acronym forms the word "houses" in Italian.

2. Protezione Civile, Numeri del Progetto Case: http://www.protezionecivile.gov.it/cms/view.php?dir_pk=395&cms_pk=15963 ; Accessed on April 26th, 2013

3. Court of Audit of the EU, The response of the SFEU to the 2009 Abruzzo earthquake: pertinence and costs of the operations (in Italian), Special Report n. 24, 2012

4. Phone interview with Carla Tatone, Professor at L'Aquila University and New Town resident, conducted in Paris on April 28, 2013; Phone interview with Giovanna di Carlo, former resident of the city center, conducted in Paris on April 7, 2013. See also Sabina Guzzanti, *Draquila: l'Italia che tremava*, 2010 (documentary)