

The role of local government in the reconstruction after the 1976 Friuli earthquake

D. CARPENEDO

Former member of the Italian Senate and of the Friuli Venezia Giulia Council

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ABSTRACT The guidelines for reconstructing the villages after the 1976 Friuli earthquake are summarized. Special attention is given to the number of decrees issued by the Regional administration.

Key words: reconstruction, Regional decrees, 1976 Friuli earthquake, NE Italy.

1. Introduction

The reconstruction following the devastating earthquake that hit Friuli (north-eastern Italy; Fig. 1) in 1976 (Slejko, 2018), is considered a paragon, not only for the timing and operating mode (to mention only the housing, it took only 10 years to rebuild 17,000 and repair 75,000 homes), but also because it overturned the traditional thinking towards intervention usually applied in Italy in the case of natural disasters (Riuscetti, 2018; Slejko *et al.*, 2018).

Such thinking envisaged abandoning the older now destroyed settlements in favour of newer ones. Gibellina (a village in south-western Sicily destroyed by the 1968 Belice earthquake; Fig. 1) can be considered the symbol of this strategy to face the aftermath of an earthquake. Gemona, on the other hand, represents perfectly the different solution adopted in Friuli, where it was decided to secure the pre-existing urban settlement instead of abandoning it despite all the damage caused by the earthquake.

This change of approach to managing such situations was possible because the central government delegated the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region with the reconstruction. This unusual decision, made by the government the day after the earthquake and subsequently confirmed by parliament, proved crucial for the success of the reconstruction (Zamberletti, 2018). Indeed, such a decision had never been taken before the 1976 disaster and would never be repeated with such scope: the procedure would have remained in the hands of central ministries, resulting in the intervention modes adopted in Belice (a M_w 6.4 earthquake that caused between 231 and 370 deaths in south-western Sicily in 1968; Fig. 1) and Vajont (a tsunami in an artificial lake triggered by a landslide, resulting in 1917 victims in several villages of north-eastern Italy in 1963; Fig. 1).

Even from these brief comments on the basic principles of the Friuli reconstruction, it can easily be perceived how and why the local authority planned and managed the reconstruction, largely through its administrative and legislative activities. It is equally apparent that the legislative activity must have been very broad in scope.

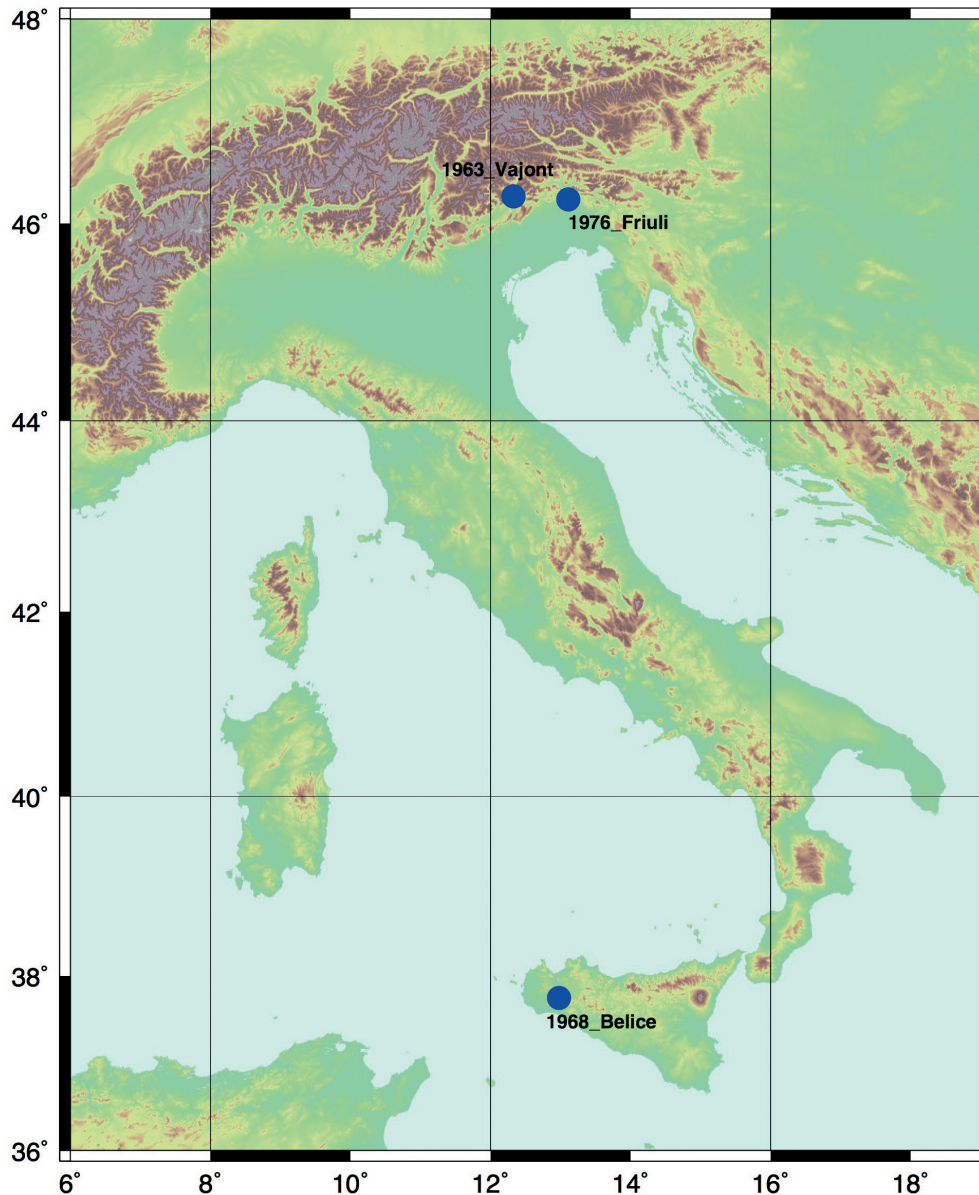


Fig. 1 - Places of the catastrophes cited in the text [earthquake epicentres from Rovida *et al.* (2016)].

2. The basic laws

In the 20 years following the earthquake, the Council of the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region passed 69 local bills that covered almost every aspect of the reconstruction: from assistance to earthquake victims to house building, from public works to the restoration of business activities, etc. It should be noted the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region benefits, together with other four Italian Regions, from a special status giving it a wider autonomy from central government. The extent of the problems to tackle may help explain the reasons for this choice: overall, the earthquake caused about 1,000 deaths and more than 3,000 injured. About 600,000 people living in 137

municipalities were involved. There was damage and destruction to houses but also public buildings such as schools, hospitals, city halls and churches (Tertulliani, 2018). Among the infrastructures, the electricity and road networks suffered limited damage. Unfortunately, the water mains, phone and train networks saw a worse fate. The manufacturing base was severely damaged: Manifattura di Gemona (textile factory and main industrial company in Gemona) was razed as well as many other factories in the epicentral area, such as Pittini (manufacturer of steel for building and industrial applications), Fantoni and Snaidero (both furniture factories), were out of action. Many commercial and agricultural activities, as well as craft workshops, were heavily damaged or destroyed. As a result, 18,000 jobs were lost.

Among the 69 regional bills, laws no. 30/1977 and no. 63/1977 played a significant role in the reconstruction phase and are still recalled in the hearts and minds of earthquake survivors. The former ruled on the restoration of buildings that were “not irredeemably damaged”, the latter on reconstructing the destroyed ones. Alongside the prevailing private intervention, both laws envisaged the possibility to apply for public intervention.

In order to appraise the work carried out by the regional administration, it should be remembered that more than 300 implementation decrees were issued together with the regional bills. Particular merit goes to those decrees that approved the 14 technical documents (*DT documenti tecnici*) concerning the planning and management of reconstruction in detail. These documents, processed by a team of professionals (appointed by the regional government and called Group A), were unanimously approved by experts. The most important was DT2, regarding the so called “seismic repairs”, which are the keystone to understand how and why the “Friuli Model” was so successful. It was issued after the second earthquake (September 1976), when the fragility of the traditionally-made repairs became evident.

3. The Friuli model

As mentioned, the prevalent model at the time, the one implemented in Belice and Vajont and elaborated in the most important Italian city-planning schools, was based on the principle of abandoning old town centres, seen as archaic, with unacceptable health conditions and without security measures in case of earthquakes. The reconstruction was then undertaken in new sites, even several kilometres away from the original ones, as in Gibellina (Sicily) and Erto (a village close to the Vajont dam in Friuli). Following this scheme, city planning inevitably had a crucial role. Plan after plan, all the while reconstruction had to wait patiently to begin. What’s more, the central government was in charge of directly managing the whole process.

In Belice, the territorial coordination plan, the district plans, including the municipal and more detailed local land planning, were still being prepared. Reconstruction was still blocked when an earthquake occurred again in Friuli, eight years later. Nonetheless, the same model was again proposed. The Friuli Venezia Giulia Region had just approved the regional development plan. The discussion preceding the plan was focused on developing and stabilizing the four major urban settlements (Udine, Trieste, Gorizia, and Pordenone). The Belice and Vajont model seemed to take hold in Friuli, supported by those who believed that nature had “helped out” this theory and that the reconstruction should bear this in mind. Some suggested expanding Udine (the closest major town to the epicentral area) instead of rebuilding the destroyed villages, especially the

smallest and most isolated ones. Obviously, the people affected, the earthquake victims, strongly disagreed and passionately voiced their opinion in the heated meetings held in the tents. So as not to disappoint or mislead them, it was necessary to solve an academic problem: the safety of the buildings that needed repairing. This was achieved by applying new methods, not yet included in the current legislation, that were able to ensure that the repaired buildings had the same safety standards with respect to the seismic actions of the newly-built ones. A brilliant idea that kicked off a major operation of recovering the pre-existing urban layout. The slogan used to sum up the adopted strategy was “as it was, where it was”, i.e., anti-seismic repairs and reconstruction of how and where things were before the earthquake. It helped reassure the earthquake survivors and did not have a drastic application. It also helped launching, throughout the whole of Italy, the idea of recovering the existing heritage rather than erecting new houses.

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Corresponding author: Diego Carpenedo
E-mail: dica35@katamail.com