

River Contract: a voluntary tool for river protection

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The anthropic activities developed along fluvial corridors in many cases have led to a severe alteration of water quality, an increasing exposure to hydrogeological risks and a consistent landscape degradation. As for the first two, the EU legal framework (mainly Water and Flood Directives) provides strategies and methods to be implemented by Member States, but landscape qualities - that encompass human communities as key asset of the territorial values - still remain poorly addressed.

In order to face the complexity that underpin the functionality of a river system, appropriate governance processes should be pursued. In particular inclusive and collaborative agreements at catchment scale, based on the engagement of all relevant stakeholders, might play a crucial role in facilitating an effective community-based river management.

The River Contract (RC) is a voluntary-based inclusive tool for strategic and negotiated planning, whose main scope is the protection and better management of water resources, the enhancement of river landscape and the mitigation of flood risk, contributing to the local development (Italian Environment Code, 2006, mod. 2015).

Since the early 2000s, RCs has been implemented in Italy - following the former French experience of *Contrats de Rivière* which began in the 80s -, first in the Northern regions and then in most of the other Italian regions, with different approaches and outputs (Gusmaroli, 2013).

The RC can represent an effective approach to systematise issues treated separately so far. Implementing a RC at (sub)catchment scale means to operationalize the principle of community participation envisaged by the Water Framework Directive (WFD).

Through the literature review of some RC cases, it emerges that successful water management programs/projects related to improvement of landscape quality are closely linked to the Green and Blue Infrastructure (GBI) design.

As a matter of fact, GBI is deemed to address both water management and landscape enhancement at the regional level (i.e. the establishment of river parks) and at the local scale (i.e. the re-naturalization of river corridors and the implementation of Natural Based Solutions) (D'Ascanio, 2018).

In France - where the RC is a consolidated tool - a wide range of river management programs has been planned for the years to come through the implementation of RCs, focusing on ecological continuity restoration (incl. dam removal).