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## Demographic sensitivity inside the local authorities

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# DEMOGRAPHIC POLICIES OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Enrico Todisco<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Introduction

Italian public administration is a pyramid-shaped structure. Boroughs (Comuni) are the smallest administrative units and form the very base of the structure. More boroughs form together a Province and more provinces constitute a Region. According to Italian administrative law, a borough is a territorial, independent and basic unit which is made up by territory, population and legal system. Provinces and Regions share the same basic elements even though they have different powers and administrative laws. They are entrusted with power over those matters which the Constitution, integrated by legislation in force, has envisaged to promote the territorial delegation of power from central to local authorities.

From the postwar years to the present days, local authorities have acquired more and more importance in social and political analysis. In particular, the Commune has assumed a relevant position in the sphere of local authorities and has developed a growing complexity, both in connection with its activity as a local institution with greater administrative power and the social life in general.

The municipalities' self-government which is taking new shape is defined by unprecedented features. It is in fact not only characterized by independent management of the local affairs of the community, but also by political awareness and responsibility on central, regional, provincial and municipal level.

In Italy, one of the most complicated matters to be solved is the inconsistency of the administrative and financial situation of local autonomies. Central administration and local authorities are faced with clashing powers. Local institutions find it very difficult to distinguish between the powers which belong to them from those which are simply delegated by central offices. This is the reason why very often they act as deputed more than independent bodies. Italian local authorities have to find their own independence from government financial support, in order to acquire a decisional autonomy that allows them to

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compete with an open and free market ( Filippi, 1991). In such a situation of financial dependence, it is almost a contradiction to speak about the "authonomy" of the local authorities.

This being the structure of administrative power, population constitutes one of the major independent variables. However, the importance of demographic problems is not only due to the size of population. It is the "quality" of population which bears more influence on demographic policies.

Local institutions tend to approach demographic problems in a very superficial way. This is mainly due to the fact that local operators lack proper statistical information. Above all they do not have an adequate knowledge of theoretical frames of reference and methodological instruments in order to tackle the possible consequences of the low level of fertility, the ageing of population and the contradictory migration flows. Lack of familiarity in the treatment of the structural data and of the distribution of the administered population according to sex and age denies local authorities a fundamental support for a valid organization of a proper political and managerial action.

Communal authonomy in the field of social policy lacks normative and institutional grounds but it meets with citizens' expectations. Mayors and local administrators find it very hard to define their role in mastering social policies. On the other hand they are under the pressure of public opinion which urges them to take a stand. This is the reason why so many expectations are not complied with.

Social policies are indeed the focal point of the new, both national and European, restructuring of local authorities (Ferrari Occhionero, 1990). In this context great attention must be paid to demographic policies because they are of fundamental importance for social policies.

This being the right approach, it is impossible not to mention the fact that town demography is at present too often neglected, with the exception of very few enlightning examples. Even the topic of immigration is growing more and more important on a local level. Too often, for want of central government's adequate policies, local authorities are bound to manage immigration problems, either by following central orders, or, and this is more often the case,

by setting up specific provisions which have a greater significance in the local environment and the larger context of relationships between citizens and local authorities.

## **2. Field Research**

In order to evaluate the Mayors and municipal administrators' awareness of demographic problems, a field research has been conducted with the support of the Ministry of University, the Scientific and Technological Research (MUR) and the National Council of Researches (CNR).

In 1991 a preliminary investigation was made in the Communes of Abruzzo (Iares, 1992). The study can be considered as a pilot research for a deeper survey which was conducted five years later in the Communes of Tuscany, Molise, Lazio, Campania, Puglia and Calabria. The six Regions considered include on the whole more than 2000 Communes which represent a quarter of all the Communes existing in Italy.

The research has been conducted by five university groups: the University of Pisa, the University "La Sapienza" of Rome, the University "Federico II" of Naples, the University of Bari and the University of Calabria in Cosenza.

The methodology of the research has been diversified according to the territory in connection with economic and human resources available. In certain cases a mail inquiry has been made, in others an inquiry with direct interviews; sometimes we resorted to telephone calls to urge the answers, to integrate the questionnaires partially filled in order to complete the missing interviews. In many cases a collective research was made while a sample survey was directed to a reduced number of Communes. Different methodological approaches have been experimented even in order to extend the investigation to other territorial realities.

In any case a studied and tested questionnaire was specifically designed, which substantially followed the questionnaire submitted for the pilot research in Abruzzo.

The questionnaire is made up of 35 generally closed questions.

Questions concerning migration can be summarized as follows:

question n° 2: it focuses on the existence of several social structures such as nurseries, primary, secondary and other school levels, cultural and sport centres, institutions for the elderly, receiving centres for immigrants, for handicapped persons, family counselling...;

question n° 6, 7 and 8: focus on public opinion about immigration dimension at national level;

question n° 14 and 15: focus on measures taken to support local people emigration and their return;

question n° 20: focuses on the Municipal Council discussions (many time, few time, never) about the following issues: immigration, emigration, young people employment, elderly people, children problems, fertility and family, migrants' integration, population territorial distribution, illiteracy, compulsory school attendance, under age crimes, young people disadaptation, drug addict people; question n° 21: focuses on the opinion about measures taken by local authorities in connection with immigration;

question n° 23 and 24: focus on the opinion about local authorities attitudes towards immigration and emigration problems, young people unemployment, elderly people, childhood, migrants' integration, men-women equal rights, young people disadaptation and crime;

question n° 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33: are designed to determine the knowledge of population quantitative aspects such as number of inhabitants, size of elderly and young people population, number of registered and resident immigrants, local economy peculiarities.

### 3. Some results

General and final results will be published in the near future. In this phase of the elaboration process, it is possible to use data concerning some Regions.

For example, as far as immigration issue is concerned, the following are the results of the Molise region.

The 111 Mayors of Molise who answered the questionnaire can be divided in two main typologies: those who consider immigration not a worrying phenomenon in Italy (about 27%), and those who consider immigration a real problem of too vast dimension (52,7%).

**Table 1** - Mayors' opinion in Molise about immigrants who live in Italy

Few	1.9%
Too many	52.7%
Not too many not few	25.0%
I don't know	18.5%
Other	1.9%

More than half of the interviewed consider immigrants' integration in our Country a difficult process (Tab.2).

**Table 2-** Mayors' opinion in Molise about immigrants' integration in Italy

Easy	7.2%
Difficult	55.3%
Possible	32.2%
I don't know	5.3%
Other	-

The analysis of these attitudes cannot ignore the influence which immigration bears at local level. Infact, the more negative attitude comes from the Mayors of those Commune where the presence of immigrants is more consistent even though the answers refer to national dimension of the phenomenon.

Notwithstanding, it does not imply a narrow minded attitude, rather a realistic awareness of the support which is required also at local level by the Communal Administration.

**Table 3** - Mayors' opinion in Molise about a possible Communal Administration support to immigrants

Type of support	Very agreed	Quite agreed	Not very agreed	Not agreed	Indifferent	No answer
A	16.0	40.2	25.0	8.0	8.9	1.9
B	27.9	36.9	14.5	7.2	13.5	-
C	50.1	33.0	9.9	3.5	3.5	-
D	21.6	35.2	16.2	16.2	10.8	-

A= encouraging integration of immigrants coming from poor Countries

B= limiting the presence of immigrants coming from poor Countries

C= encouraging the development of poor Countries with suitable economic support

D= giving the voting right to immigrants after some years of residence

56.2% of the interviewed are in favour of integration in the Commune of immigrants coming from poor Countries, even though two out of three persons are favourable to reducing the number of immigrants. A good percentage (83.1 %) is favourable to give economic support to poor Countries in order to facilitate their development. Those favourable to political rights (56.8%) have to face a good percentage of not in favour (32.4%).

It seems that a consistent Mayors' attitude towards immigration is quite difficult, because of social and economical restrictions, humanitarian awareness towards poorer Countries and the possibility of increasing the electoral base.

Analysis of attitudes towards immigration has to take into consideration the attention which Communal Administration has paid to the problem. In fact, 45.6% of town Councils have never discussed the immigration issue, while one out of four has discussed it some times (Tab.4). Anyway, one administrator out of five did not answer.

**Table 4** - Frequency of town Councils' discussion about immigration issue in the last two years

Never	45.6%
Few times	26.5%
Several times	8.8%
Other	0.7%
No answer	18.4%

Another interesting aspect which stands out from the study is the logical sequence which leads to the awareness that future initiatives and provisions are much needed as it results

from the analysis of answers given by town Councils on immigration issue and the perception of its urgency. (Lecchini, Barsotti, Bottai, 1998).

In fact, the structure of the questionnaire allows to check the coherence-incoherence of local administrators' answers by means of several linked questions. The considered questions are:

- question 20: in the last two years both town councils and Juntas have discussed issues related to ....
- question 23: Town Administration's prevailing opinion is that the situation about the following problems is satisfactory or not
- question 24a: Town Administration prevailing opinion is that it is, or it isn't necessary to intervene in the following problems
- question 24c: Does Town Administration make provision for initiatives relating to the following problems in the future?

The questions' logical sequence leads to the awareness that future provisions and initiatives are much needed according to answers given by local councils and the perception of the problem urgency.

The question is to examine to what extent town councils' discussions are an indicator of the awareness of the phenomenon, the need to intervene and the extent to which effective action is taken. Two are the patterns to which discussion, perception, need and will to intervene have been reduced (0 and 1). Adopted dichotomy allows to separate positive and negative aspects, the rare and frequent occurrences, the "yes" and "no" answers. Graphic 1 has been realised on the basis of studied data.

The majority of Mayors in Molise (47+2=49) is perfectly coherent (continuous lines in the higher and lower part). The 47 Mayors who never discussed the immigrants' problem in their own territory are coherent. They never felt the need to work about this issue and they never showed the will to do it. The 2 Mayors who often discussed about immigration problems are coherent too. They perceived the unsatisfactory situation, the need and the will to work and to improve it.

On the contrary, the 2 Mayors who often discussed about immigration problems during the town council are completely incoherent (dashed lines). In fact they perceived the



insatisfactory situation and the need to work for improving it, but they did not work and act concretely.

The coherence lines are 50 (48+2) if the link between the first level (discussion) and the second level (perception) is excluded. More than half of the interviewed Mayors have a coherent behaviour in the perception, need and will to work in order to manage the immigration problem.

Tables 5 and 6 show the couple of links which define the logic process.

**Tab.5** - Logic process between intervention and future initiative envisaged

Future initiative	Need to work		Total
	NO	YES	
NO	52	39	91
YES	1	4	5
Total	53	44	96

**Tab.6** - Logic process between perception and need to work

Need to work	Problem perception		Total
	NO	YES	
NO	44	9	53
YES	32	11	43
Total	36	60	96

On the basis of these data it is possible to calculate a synthetic index of coherence. The index considers the majority of coherent attitudes over the incoherent ones and their sum. This indicator has a variation +1,

- 1. In the case of complete coherence its values is +1, on the contrary is - 1.

In tables 5 and 6 coherent values are in bold. In both tables the indexes of coherence are positives. In the case of need to work and future initiative is +0.17. In the case of problem perception and need to work is +0.68.

In other words the immigration issue produces enough coherent attitudes even where the problem does not exist (small Communes where immigration is absent), on the contrary, others topics (such as elderly people and children problems) present negative indexes.

A similar analisys, applied to the Tuscany Region, has also positive values. However, the index values show that mayors of the two Regions compared have different attitudes.

**Tab. 7** - Coherence indexes in Molise and in Tuscany in connection with immigrants' problems

	Molise	Tuscany
problem perception and need to work	+ 0,68	+ 0,34
need to work and future initiatives	+ 0,17	+ 0,14

The mayors of Molise, in fact, seem to be little convinced especially in the first phase of the process, being the coherence index exactly double in comparison with the value scored by the mayors of Tuscany.

The same approach has been applied to other demographic issues thus obtaining interesting theoretical values. For instance, the plight of the elderly has been perceived by the mayors of Campania as it appears in figure n. 2. This time the coherence index is positive during the first phase of the process (+0,60), but is negative in the second phase (-0,39). Comparison with Tuscany shows that indexes are quite the opposite. Campania in fact is positive in the first phase against a slightly negative value of Tuscany.

**Tab. 8** - Coherence indexes in Campania and Tuscany in connection with elderly people's problems.

	Campania	Tuscany
problem perceptio and need to work	+ 0,60	- 0,07
need to work and future initiatives	- 0,39	+ 0,25

On the contrary, in the second phase Tuscany is positive while Campania is negative. The completele coherent processes among Campania's mayors are little less than one out of three. In Tuscany they are one out of eight. Leaving the first phase of the processes aside (discussion-perception), 57% of Campnia's mayors are coherent against the 25% of Tuscany. On the immigration issue administrators who intend to intervene are again prevailing, as much as the coherent processes are prevailing over the incoherent ones.

These results are quite difficult to interpret since they are very much connected with the quality on information gathered. As the authors who have set up this method have pointed out, a fundamental role is played by the persons interviewed. In case of Campania, councillors more than often answered instead of mayors. Moreover, the answer rate differs considerably for each demographic problem and each region examined. "We are dealing here with a method which can be improved not only on a technical level but also in the field of concepts' definition and their application as coherent and effective indicators upon which empirical research is to be based" (Lecchini, Barsotti, Bottai, 1997).

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## Summary

Local administrators (mayors, coucillors, public servants) do not appreciate the study of the population they govern. More attention is dedicated to political issues while awareness of population size is very scant. This paper presents the main results of a research conducted in a number of municipalities in some Italian regions (Tuscany, Latium, Molise, Campania, Puglie and Calabria) during 1996. Different topics were submitted to local administrators and they were asked to quantify various demographic and social phenomena in their own institution. Questions referred to the relevance they attached to different matters, how many times they had discussed them in the Council, the general importance of each aspect at national level.

Only recently a few majors changes took place. Regions have experienced important demographic changes deeply affecting local populations and consequently local authorities. This is the case of fertility fast decreasing, or the case of several regions turning into immigration from emigration areas. Unemployment, elderly people's survival, family planning, education, youth problems, immigrant population, were but few of questions posed to people interviewed.

Quite frequently a major gap between perception of the problem and further action needed was outstanding.