DIVISION DU DÉVELOPPEMENT RURAL
RURAL DEVELOPMENT DIVISION
DIRECCIÓN DE DESARROLLO RURAL

Italian lessons on the relations between civil society and public administration in the context of decentralization

DÉCENTRALISATION ET DÉVELOPPEMENT RURAL
DECENTRALIZATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
DESCENTRALIZACIÓN Y DESARROLLO RURAL

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1. The global challenge of decentralization

1.1 Decentralization of public institutions as a common challenge to the North and the South

Today both developing countries and industrialized countries are facing the same challenge of decentralization of public institutions. In order to adequately face this challenge it is not enough to confront the complex conceptual universe and wide range of questions pertaining to decentralization, but it is also necessary to pursue adequate knowledge of the contemporary global scenario, including public administrative reforms and civil society participation.

1.2 Some tendencies in decentralization

Keeping this global scenario in mind, it is necessary to take into account the following elements and trends:

- the adoption of federal models of organization and local government within the context of globalization, both at the political and institutional level as well as at the economic and financial level;

- the trend toward a reorganization of political and economic relationships at the "regional" level (or rather continental level: e.g. ASEAN, NAFTA, EU);

- in the field of public policy formulation, the change of paradigm from a an approach of transfer and verification to one based on negotiation and circulation;

- with regard to the effective implementation of public policies, the problem of low delivery by public institutions and the proposal to use decentralization as a means for increasing this delivery;

- outside Europe, especially in Latin America, the growing importance of the role of Major in town or city administration in a world that is rapidly urbanizing;

- the increasing role of civil society organizations in all contexts that ever more often compete for governance through their own direct interventions;

- a move towards concertation also implies a change in the social actors at local level who no longer correspond to a few great and traditional political actors (such as political parties and trade unions), but also include many other forms of civil society self-organization;

- the trend towards higher quality public services, as expected by the public;

- reform of the welfare state and adoption of new principles for public intervention, such as subsidiarity;

- the need to guarantee equal access and safeguarding people's rights in a society that is becoming increasingly fragmented and multi-cultural.

2. Interest and pertinence of the Italian case

2.1 The municipal dimension and its importance

Although Italy does not appear among the pilot countries in the field of political and administrative decentralization, its citizens, however, identify strongly with the municipal dimension. In the field of policy and administration, the strong local dimension makes the municipality an ideal environment for the studying the relationship between civil society and public administration within the framework of decentralization.

2.2 Italy and decentralization

The following elements of decentralization in Italy might be of interest:

- a capacity for institutional innovation which often manifests itself autonomously at local and municipal level;

- a wide variety of relationships between development and public policies (ranging from regions where there has been strong development - also economic – without significant interventions on the part of public policies and local administrations, to other regions where unprecedented efforts have been deployed to make public investments without the public administration playing its corresponding role).

2.3 The relevance of the Italian case for developing countries

From a methodological point of view the fact that Italy has become a modern and largely urban country should not be considered as an obstacle to our reflection.

According to some, this experience might not be relevant to developing countries, but in reality the relationship between the urban and rural dimension is continuously being questioned by the processes of transformation both in the North and the South. Therefore, thanks to the "global" character of this transformation, a reflection on the Italian case might prove significant also in other situations.

3. Decentralization and reform of public administration

3.1 Need to "incorporate" decentralization into the reform of public administration

❖ The current reforms of public administration at global level seem to be characterized, in most countries, by four main trends:

- a) from government to governance;
- b) from centralization to decentralization;
- c) from reform through rules to capacity building;
- d) from the management of the existing to strategic orientation.

❖ The enterprise is a concept that is being increasingly applied in administrative management and is characterized by a project management approach. It represents the main step in the move from "administration of procedures" to "administration of results".

3.2 Need for decentralization policies

❖ There are several reasons for the promotion of decentralization policies in public administration and the strengthening of those already in place. The following are among the most important factors:

- the increasing complexity of the problems related to the management of the territory and the need to bring the public actors closer to the problems;

- the increasing number of social and political actors at all levels;

- the greater efficiency of public action when there is contiguity between policies and actors;

- the increasing importance of peripheral areas in certain national contexts;

- the present crisis of administrative and other systems based on centralized decision making (and the diffusion of regionalization processes that are linked to a request for greater autonomy);

- the increasing difficulties of survival of traditional models of public administration that have proven too expensive (inefficient), unable to guarantee public services of good quality (ineffective) and to meet the demand adequately (unequal and non pertinent).

3.3 Opportunities for and potential of decentralization

❖ Current reforms (see Law 14.3.97 no. 59) are characterized by a tendency to ease the functions of the State (whose role is to regulate, promote and coordinate) and give power, duties and resources both to local and regional authorities as well as to civil society and private individuals.

❖ In synthesis, decentralization should not be seen as the creation of new offices at the local level where certain competencies can be transferred, but as a strategy to change the way in which public administration faces the problems at the appropriate level and acts accordingly.

❖ Decentralization can contribute to changing the following aspects of the general functioning of public administration:

- a move from administration "by procedures" to administration "by results" (see above);

- setting up of mechanisms for evaluating the results obtained by decentralized offices, including the degree to which the public is satisfied;

- the application of incentive schemes for staff and managers;

- renewed relationships between the end user of a service and the public administration;

- the low cost and strategic role of communication (special organizational efforts have to be made to collect and disseminate knowledge, and to find the right channels of communication).

❖ The formulation and implementation of decentralization policies needs to take into account the national institutional set-up and related reform prospects, in order to simplify administrative procedures (and disentangle the current paralyzing bundle of norms and procedures), affirm the regulatory nature of overall national policies, ensure the protection of the citizens' rights and of environmental and cultural assets.

❖ Decentralization should entail a clear distinction between the roles and competencies of central and peripheral organs (guidance and coordination functions at national level; programming functions at regional level; area management functions at local level).

3.4 Decentralization: Risks and obstacles

❖ Organizations at central level might resist and hinder decentralization (a phenomenon of centralization), go underground and become active although legal and administrative measures have been taken to avoid the problem. They might go as far as blocking the peripheric initiatives of local level authorities.

❖ A difficult aspect which needs to be taken into account is represented by the decentralized staff. There is a risk that at the central level decentralization is strongly promoted by a certain elite, while at the local level the political and administrative class might not be up to the task. Unless the aspects related to local political actors and public officers are adequately dealt with, decentralization can have counterproductive effects, as has happened, among other things, in several cases of public intervention in the "Mezzogiorno" (Southern Italy).

❖ There are risks in implementing decentralization as an isolated project, such as the emergence of new types of client-based systems and new corporative bureaucracies.

❖ There is a risk that at local (municipal) level the network of decentralized offices - although they are placed very near the grassroots level - becomes too entangled in bureaucratic procedures and therefore ineffective.

❖ The effectiveness of decentralized offices might be hindered by a too sophisticated language and conceptual base which are not understood by the public.

❖ Unless decentralization is implemented within the framework of a general policy of administrative restructuring, local authorities might turn into mere "information desks" whose only task is to disseminate decisions which have been taken elsewhere.

❖ In implementing decentralization a general framework needs to be elaborated which makes a clear distinction between the responsibilities and competencies at national, regional and local levels, otherwise it will not be possible to allocate and distinguish between the different tasks of each service (in Italy, for example, general programming and planning is the responsibility of the Regions).

4. Civic traditions, social capital and civicness

4.1 Civic culture and public administration

In order to prepare and implement decentralization policies it is necessary to establish new relationships between civil society and public administration and at the same time renew public administration. It is also necessary to study in depth the situation at both national and local levels, taking into account in particular the following two variables, which are usually of local character:

- the historical background in terms of civic traditions; and

- the present situation of the social capital which has does or does not emerge from these traditions and the degree and intensity of general civic behaviour (so-called civicness).

These variables have been introduced in connection with studies of the relationship between the effectiveness of public institutions and the social capital available in a certain area as well as with the civic traditions of its population.

Without entering into the debate arising from these studies, the following main aspects should be highlighted:

a) Certain socio-cultural characteristics are central to contemporary democracies: for example, if there is a widespread civic sense among the population the public sphere is more vital and capable of contrasting and containing the closed and self-contained character of political institutions and mechanisms.

b) A civil society composed of active citizens, who pay attention to the "public thing" positively contributes to the democratic decision-making process, to making the political elite more responsible, to improving the quality of political life and the efficiency of institutions.

c) A key indicator of this type of civil society orientation is represented by the solidity of its various types of associations. The associations do in fact play an important role both in promoting social integration as well as democratic participation. From this point of view the associations present in the civil society are important in spreading a culture based on the civic commitment of its citizens.

4.2 Civic traditions, social capital and civicness in Italy

Studies on the subject have shown that in Italy the efficiency of its public institutions at local and regional levels is at present much higher where there are well established civic traditions and a wealth of social capital. At the same time, other studies have demonstrated that – as a follow-up to a process of socio-economic modernization, linked with development in the urban and educational sectors – in recent years the public culture has changed and participation in various associations has increased. As a result self-organization of civil society in all regions of the country has increased.

The following are some elements extracted from the Italian experience, which could be taken into consideration in the field of decentralization policies and the renewal of public administration.

a) Increased well-being and education, with the consequent orientation by new generations towards a so-called post-materialistic values, which, however, does not necessarily entail decreased attention towards the vast social and political dimensions.

b) The relationship between social capital and civic culture and the economic and politico-institutional dimensions of the environment are very complex. In fact, although the effects of the territorial variable on the behaviour and values of the population in a given socio-institutional context can be easily demonstrated, these effects should not be considered as a straitjacket forged over a long historical period and capable of compromising the future.

c) Although one pre-condition for the good functioning of democracy is the presence of civic behaviour and values, institutions and *policies* as well have an equally crucial role to play in promoting or dispersing the potential for civicness in society.

d) In this respect, a positive contribution towards popular participation and the "responsible" behaviour of the elite is certainly provided by adequate forms of politico-administrative decentralization. At the same time, the growing number of associations, movements and voluntary organizations can constitute a useful reserve of resources for any attempts of renewal.

e) Although civic culture constitutes an important resource for the functioning of democratic and economic institutions, there are many factors that can encourage or hinder the development of social capital and civic traditions. Adequate policies often contribute to removing obstacles to social cooperation, especially in difficult situations where there is no reciprocal trust among the various actors.

## 5.	Decentralization, civil society and civic participation

### 5.1	Citizens as co-actors in decentralization and implementation of public development policies

❖	It is necessary to categorize the social actors present in the area under consideration as well as their roles (associations, non-profit organizations, political parties, trade unions, movements, community based organizations, enterprises, etc.), without forgetting the fact that single citizens who do not belong to any particular organization, are capable of actively participation in civic initiatives.

❖	In order to obtain positive results, it is necessary to involve local actors in decision-making, the implementation of development activities and decentralization.

❖	In order to encourage the participation of different population groups it is necessary to base the relationship between the various institutional subjects on the principles of cooperation.

❖	At present the trend is towards efficient of management of the major public services at local level. In order to improve the quality of these services, it is necessary to encourage the participation of the citizens in their management.

❖	The collaboration, although autonomous, of civil society organizations is of great help in safeguarding single citizens as well as general public interests. This type of collaboration can be in the form of proposals and contributions that can be translated into concrete projects, thus considerably expanding and articulating the "public" sphere.

❖	People's participation through their organizations can be promoted without conflict. In cases of conflict, this participation needs to be transparent and its composition ensured through adequate mechanisms.

❖	The presence of organizations that safeguard people's rights within the public administrative structure should not be considered as a symptom of inadequacy on the part of the State in the management of its own services. On the contrary, the activities of this type of organizations within a decentralized structure contributes to the efficiency of the services offered.

❖	It should be recalled, however, that there is a risk of creating "illegitimate alliances", which in the past have led to a symbiosis between civil society and political society. Not always has this symbiosis been positive because the problems of one of the partners have been imposed on the other.

❖	There are three pre-conditions to concerted action: the authority of public administration, the capacity to anticipate the general objectives that are being proposed, and the financial resources.

❖	It is necessary to establish to which extent public administration needs to take into account the opinions expressed by the population.

❖	Due to the productivity of civic participation and people's participation, civic partnership needs to be promoted by public bearing in mind the constant risk of statism.

❖	Taking into consideration the inter-connection between the various policies (for example, how to coordinate, implement and interpret economic, fiscal and employment policies in the light of environmental considerations), it is necessary to define the fora and modalities for the participation of civil society organizations in the formulation and orientation of large-scale national policies of general interest.

5.2 Governance and civic participation

❖ Civil society organizations should be considered as equal partners with public administration and no privileged relationships should be created, because these associations should be seen as "controllers" of public administration.

❖ The level of partial management responsibilities to be given to civil society organizations needs to be clearly defined, instead of delegating to them certain responsibilities (in the sense that the public administration will no longer deal with the matter). In this context, a case in point is represented by the role played by the "Comune di Pisa" in providing home-assistance to AIDS patients, where the municipality acted as mediator, fund raiser and funding agent.

❖ The modalities through which civil society actors and the population should be made "responsible" need to be determined.

❖ It is necessary to find ways in which to express the productivity of participation, taking into consideration that participation is not an obligation but a resource (for example, think about people's participation in conflict resolution or the differentiated collection of waste).

❖ Through voluntary work and participation new relationships of reciprocity and responsibility are created, which tend to extend progressively to new interested circles.

❖ Modalities need to be studied for the involvement of voluntary associations in innovative forms of cooperation (for example, the exchange of services among citizens as a form of participation and strengthening of social relationships).

❖ All forms of collaboration or joint activities between citizens and public administration need to be studied and an evaluation carried out of the most successful ones.

❖ The limitations of the social actors need to be identified on a case by case basis (e.g., sometimes they are unable of proposing general projects).

❖ The following types of problems may arise in the relationship with the public:

- the unspecified role of the population in the decision-making phase of public, decentralized bodies;

- not having taken sufficiently into account the problems raised by the population;

- the lack of a permanent system of monitoring and attention to the problems expressed by the end-users;

- eventually too frequent popular consultations that place the citizen under stress.

❖ If the normative, financial and personnel structures are incomplete or paralyzed, people's participation and concurrence in governance may become frustrated, even if the same people's representatives were called to play a representative role at the level of government or in a key position within a decentralized public office.

❖ New social actors emerge every day. These actors may not be immediately visible (and much less "represented" at social, cultural and political levels), although they could be called upon to play a meaningful role, for example in the economy. In agriculture, the agricultural base has changed a lot: in addition to the fact that the number of farmers has decreased significantly, today the sector has a component of new actors, who have not yet appeared on the scene but who are present and very

active, such as graduates and diploma holders who are engaged in agricultural activities or who run their own agricultural enterprises, farmers who have become operators in the field of agri-tourism, farmers engaged in biological agriculture, returnees, former workers or employees who have changed their profession, young farmers who have chosen farming as their profession instead of having inherited the farm, etc.

5.3 Population, information and participation

❖ The citizen's role as perceived by public administration needs to be redefined: instead of being considered as a passive end-user or exclusively as a source of requests and "protests", the citizen should be considered as the "source in communication flow". Information needs to be disseminated in both directions and not only in one sense. Administration should also ask the citizens for information.

❖ Information exchange is an important step towards constructing and consolidating people's participation in public management. In fact, an informed citizen is more conscious of the active role he/she is playing within the community and can influence decision-making.

❖ The relationship between public administration and civil society is usually marked by a great distance due to the fact that sometimes the administrative language, which is based on legal terminology and an often obsolete vocabulary is not fully understood by the citizens who thus are kept at a distance from the practices and functioning of administration.

❖ Adequate modalities need to be put in place in order to translate the opinions of consumers and users into concrete the activities by public administration.

6.   Training

6.1 Reform of public administration, decentralization and training

❖   Training is an integral part of public administration reform and decentralization.

❖   In the decentralization of public administrative structures the most important aspect is represented by the human resources. In fact, decentralization *per se* is not a guarantee: it is not sufficient to undertake a reform only by changing the rules, but "cultural growth" is required, implying a complete change in the approach to administrative management. Only by investing in human resources is it possible to undertake a real decentralization process.

❖   In the development process, the crucial human resource factor cannot be fully satisfied by only academic institutions of higher education, but it is necessary to create alternative types of training, specifically geared toward local level development and the renewal and modernization of public administration. At national level, the training institutes should be closely connected to any programmes of reorganizing public administration taking into account on the new roles and responsibilities at local level. A training institute should be established at central level with the task of planning training programmes and acting as a catalyser vis-à-vis other training institutes that should work in a competitive market framework.

6.2 Training and capacity building

❖   The conception of training as capacity building is a radical change that gives public administrations the opportunity to face their challenges.

❖   An assessment of local level training needs should be carried out. In defining the training programmes it is necessary to take into consideration, in addition to the capacity of every single administration, the characteristics of the area of intervention. A change in administration should have the reality as its reference point and not its own structure. It is therefore not enough to renew public administration through bills and laws, but culture should be considered as one of the most important tools for change.

❖   Capacity building strategies have an important role to play in the development of the skills of individuals or groups in pursuance of specific outputs or defined objectives. This type of training is geared to stimulate in its subjects an orientation towards an administrative project approach and therefore an attitude towards efficient management.

6.3 Training and adult education

❖   In the light of the capacity building approach, the training received by the civil servants at local level should not be considered as technical, but based on the principles of adult education. Adults learn efficiently only if the subject(s) being taught to them has a meaningful relationship to their work experience thus facilitating a continuous training process. The purpose is therefore not to transmit a great number of notions on a subject matter which is far from the trainees' working life, but instead to teach them how to do better what they are already doing.

❖   The criteria for the selection of civil servants should be based on their origin and duty station, because there is a tendency for people to work better in an area known to them.

❖   The needs for focused training should be carefully assessed. For example, the role of "public communicator" should be promoted; in fact, during the phase of internal institutional renewal the

motivation of the staff involved in the restructuring of a public office should be supported by the creation of completely new professional roles.

7.   Information

7.1 Decentralization policies and information

❖ As already mentioned, information has a fundamental role to play in the implementation of decentralization policies. However, local authorities still do not have at their disposal the necessary wealth of ideas nor sufficient experience in the field of structured communication ("institutional communication"). The subject matter therefore requires a new approach.

❖ This new approach to information is closely connected to the redefinition of the role of the citizen that has changed from passive user to "collaborator" who, in turn, generates information.

❖ In order to promote a global vision of administration, its functions and areas of intervention, it is necessary to open new channels of information flow, both between civil servants and the public as well as within the administration proper.

❖ At the same time, it is important to connect to the same network the various actors and institutions, both public and private, that operate in a given area.

7.2 Information management within the public administration

❖ It is necessary to install an internal communications network among the public officials that would lead to a more efficient functioning of the structure and hence to savings in time and resources.

❖ Access to services should be enhanced through the establishment of specific offices, while at the same time taking advantage of the experience of the public to improve the performance of public administration.

❖ Due to the fact that the relationship between public administration and civil society if characterized by great a distance, partly due to the use of an almost incomprehensible administrative jargon, there is a need to manage the information regarding administrative activities in a clear, transparent and generally comprehensible way.

❖ Knowledge of texts, laws and procedures relating to the functioning of the administrative machinery in general and decentralization in particular needs to be promoted.

❖ Particular attention should be paid to the way in which the various bodies of public administration inform the public of the services and programmes they offer, as well as to the way in which the public's/users' opinion regarding a particular service could be useful to improve the activities of the administration.

8. Formulation and implementation of public development policies and decentralization programmes

8.1 Policy formulation and decision-making

❖ In formulating public policies, there are some general difficulties which are typical of our contemporary complex society and should be kept in mind.

❖ In this context, the following elements should be taken into consideration:

- the need for popular consensus in order to effectively implement public policies;

- the need for coordination at all levels (international, continental, national, regional, local);

- the need to study adequate forms of programming by local authorities taking into account the many levels of policy formulation, types of connections, coordination and integration;

- the need to acquire adequate knowledge about the area of operation through relevant economic and social analyses;

- the need to adopt adequate mechanisms for evaluating policy implementation and innovation, including the degree of popular satisfaction;

- the need for collaborative strategies among the various actors, i.e. public, private and non-profit.

❖ It is therefore important to give priority to normative tools for guidance and general orientation and to strategic programming and planning at national level.

❖ This type of programming should be based on the principles of subsidiarity between administrative levels and "loyal collaboration" among the various actors (public, private and non-profit). This is made possible, among other things, by simplifying the procedures for the adoption, approval and monitoring of the various procedures in order to reduce the bureaucracy in development policy formulation and implementation.

❖ The planning and implementation of public policies should take into consideration the methodologies of implementation promoted by transnational actors with whom the local authority enters into contact (e.g. the partnership method requested by the European Union).

❖ Tools and mechanisms for the identification and formulation of public policies should be elaborated and utilized in a constant manner by public administration, including decentralized authorities. These tools should have a permanent character and should be able to bring together the public, private and civil society actors of a given area, in order to establish close link between the identification and formulation of policies and the programming of the various activities of public decentralized bodies. This is a way of promoting public/private partnerships and civil society participation.

❖ In general, public action should be characterized by greater selectivity in the allocation of funds and services, by a more transparent information flow and by the implementation of policies at the local level in a decentralized manner.

❖ With regard to local-level development, priority should be given to small-scale interventions in limited areas and the participation of civil society (individuals, associations, enterprises and various types of representative organizations) and local-level public authorities in the programming and management of processes of change.

8.2 The case of the "Mezzogiorno"

❖ The most significant Italian experience in public policy programming and implementation after World War II is represented by the extraordinary interventions in favour of the "Mezzogiorno" (Southern Italy), where mainly economic, but also local-level development has been promoted.

❖ These extraordinary interventions in the "Mezzogiorno" provide, in fact, several elements for reflection on the inter-dependence between socio-economic development policies and instruments on the one hand and levels of decentralization and participation on the other. This type of inter-dependence should be taken into consideration in the programming and implementation of decentralization policies.

❖ This historical Italian experience shows that notwithstanding the level of functional decentralization (high or low) and participation requested by the subjects at local level, the following principles need to be respected:

- clear delegation of responsibilities at all levels and the elaboration of adequate mechanisms to evaluate results, including the possibility of substitution if the responsibilities assigned to a person are not fulfilled;

- transparency in the selection criteria used for initiatives at various levels of decision-making;

- in order to be able to pass a judgement on those who administer and use the resources of the community, quantifiable objectives that can be evaluated need to be set;

- support for the weakest public and private subjects, through training, protection and technical assistance;

- the high costs of development policies should be shared by the population and enterprises through financial formulae that link funding to results.

8.3 Information regarding the formulation and implementation of development policies

❖ Two aspects need to be highlighted:

- better information flow also allows for a better national/local interface;

- an important working axis is the optimum exchange of information, experiences and cooperation among countries, that has led to promising results in the decentralization process.

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