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Italy's Institutional Renaissance

Managers Should Play a Fundamental Role in Transformation Processes

by *Stefano Tripi*

Italy is a country of small cities. History in central Europe has always been a tale of small cities, of kingdoms and states trying to win, rule, and develop cities in strategic locations.

At the beginning of the 19th century, Napoleon Bonaparte defined and applied the traditional "French model" for state organization: an "ideal" model based on a strong central state, departments (counties) and municipalities, all with different duties and responsibilities, and all governing the same territories, on different levels.

The French traditional model was adopted by other countries such as Italy, with minimal customizations, including provinces instead of departments. The Italian local government changed slightly after the two world wars, the fascist era, and the new national constitutional law. Italy created a new level, the region, between the central state and the provinces in 1948, in the new national constitution, but this new level was effectively activated only by 1970.

Party politics played an important role, even at the local level. City councilmembers, elected by citizens, chose the mayor of the city inside the city council. The only administrative head in local government was the secretary general, a jurist appointed by the national government to oversee the juridical legitimacy of local government policies.

TOWARDS THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

In the 1990s, important local government reforms by the national government pushed towards decentralization, professional management in local government, and intermunicipal associations, with the aim of simplifying and strengthening local government.

This took place in a country where fragmentation has always been a big problem because 70 percent of the 8,047 municipalities in Italy have less than 5,000 inhabitants. A major breakthrough happened when citizens directly elected the mayor.

Another major step occurred when bigger cities—those with at least 15,000 inhabitants—established the director general's role, with duties and responsibilities similar to a city manager. ("City manager" is used for the remainder of this article for international comparison.) This connected the political and administrative levels of the municipalities.

Unfortunately, global and local crises during the first decade of the 21st century brought the country to a new centralization, and expenditure cuts halted many of these reforms. These left unresolved problems in Italian local government management.

One law, for instance, forbid the appointment of city managers in cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants (some 50 of the 8,047 in Italy), deepening the governance problem at the local level. It is a problem that secretary generals with backgrounds and approaches far from a governance paradigm can't resolve.

This law leads to a second issue that is deeply rooted in Italian public administration, the strong juridical approach commonly called "management by decree." Is it right to enforce correct managerial practices by law?

To sum up, Italian local government is at the same time strong and weak. It is strong because it has always been extremely difficult to reform Italian local government, introducing more efficiency and efficacy due to strong



Photo: City Hall, Modena, Italy., Courtesy of the Modena Municipality Press Office.

self-defense mechanisms against innovation, even by lobbying the national government by opposing municipalities. Municipal aggregation, for instance, has always been difficult to implement.

It is weak because cities still lack juridical and managerial instruments for continuous innovation to align with social changes.

RADICAL CHANGES UNDER WAY

After the crises and some recovery measures, Italy recognized the need for growth at the local government level. A new national government, with the participation of former city mayors and staffed by former city managers, supported new economic and social policies along with new measures for government reorganization. The main strategies include innovation, transparency, anticorruption, financial, and planning reform.

Provinces, 110 of them, have been one of the most important parts of recent reforms. Their government system was quite similar to the municipalities, with a directly elected president and councilors. Provinces have key functions for wide territorial areas regarding public transportation, roads, environment, education, and so on.

Provinces, according to public opinion, have always been targeted as responsible for public money waste and inefficiency. This is why recent reforms approved a radical change.

New laws for local government reforms, as a result of spending reviews aiming towards efficiency, were approved through the indirect election of the province president and council; between mayors and councilors from the municipalities in the province (less elected officials); through new measures for compulsory associated public service provision (less waste through "tiny" municipalities); and in 10 selected big cities, through the creation of a metropolitan city (a new level for wide-area governance).

It is then possible to underline the changes that are now happening—and have been since fall 2014—in provinces and metropolitan cities.

For 10 selected cities—Bari, Bologna, Florence, Genua, Milan, Naples, Turin, Reggio Calabria, Rome, and Venice—the province has been replaced with a new institution called the metropolitan city. Composed of all the municipalities of the former province but without merging them, the metropolitan city has a metropolitan mayor, by law the mayor of the provincial capital, and dedicated grants from the central government that target new metropolitan functions.

The other 100 provinces will become new provinces, with indirect election of politicians and forced cooperation through associated public service management and delivery.

There are still many issues to be assessed at the national level. A lack of coordination between different laws and decrees on the topics of local government has led to more fragmentation, with the creation of many different government levels (municipality, intermunicipal associations, provinces/metropolitan cities, region), which means that more coordination is needed.

A territorial problem of the new metropolitan cities area, exactly the same as the old provinces (and often historically designed using chariots and horses many centuries ago), means that many metropolitan cities represent areas that are not metropolitan, while nearby provinces, presenting similar metropolitan features, are not included in the area.

A recent development regarding the provinces presents an uncertain destiny, since new drafts of reforms are trying to remove this level from the national constitution. So another change could be around the corner.

Summary of the Tiers of Italian City Government Before and After Reforms.

BEFORE RECENT REFORMS:	AFTER RECENT REFORMS:
State: Directly elected parliament, nominates government.	State: Directly elected parliament, nominates government.
Regions (20): Directly elected president and assembly.	Regions (20): Directly elected president and assembly, with wide spaces for merging of small regions.
Provinces (110): Directly elected president and council.	Provinces (100, number to shrink): Indirectly elected president and council, with wide spaces for merging of small provinces.
Intermunicipal Associations (309): Indirectly elected, not compulsory.	Metropolitan Cities (10): indirectly elected president and council (depending on Metropolitan City statute).
Municipalities (8,047): Directly elected mayor and council.	Intermunicipal Associations (309, number to grow): Indirectly elected, reforms and local governments are moving responsibilities and functions from municipalities to these associations.
	Municipalities (8,047, number to shrink): Directly elected mayor and council, with wide spaces for merging of small municipalities.

BEST PRACTICES FOR THE FUTURE

In this uncertain situation, putting aside the numerous unresolved issues is important to understand how city managers and other civil servants in local government could, and should, operate given this new institutional landscape composed by metropolitan areas and new provinces.

Managers should play a fundamental role in these transformation processes. Many are already working in this direction, anticipating central government decisions through such leading practices as these:

- **A new role for such major cities as the provincial capitals.** These municipalities have a correctly sized structure, and their city managers should create the basis for the new metropolitan cities and provinces through extended cooperation on local service delivery and the implementation of intermunicipal back-office structures for internal and external services.
- **A new role for minor cities.** Many smaller municipalities should stop delivering their own services and increase intermunicipal cooperation at a subprovincial level, through networked service delivery and control, but also through the merging of smaller municipalities.
- **An indirect lobbying on the national government** through elected officials and associations for the implementation of effective reforms.
- **Stronger and innovative planning and control systems.** Italy lacks a culture of constant evaluation, both inside and outside local government. Through management control systems and an increased participation of municipal employees, the new challenges for local government should be addressed in a planned but flexible way, increasing the use of digital solutions.
- **Network relations.** It is time for city managers to step up and increase network relations at the local level, creating horizontal and vertical links inside and outside municipalities and provinces.
- **A new link between elected officials and administrative officials through intermunicipal governance.** It is important to complete the shift from government to governance. That is why more managers and fewer lawyers are needed in local government, to support local politicians—mainly mayors—with increasing duties and responsibilities.

In these times of uncertainty for Italian local government, city managers can play a central role in the transition towards new provinces and metropolitan cities, leading the path towards effective and efficient network governance.



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