

Foreword

The capacity of Public Administrations has always been a critical factor in the social and economic development of our Country. Now that we are beginning to understand this again, this Report on the administrative capacity of the 109 Capital Municipalities provides precise factual elements to give direction to a public action that is urgent. And to give in any case strength to the action of active citizenship.

It does so by showing three fundamental things: first, we have the information to assess that administrative capacity (and we know what information is missing and it is clear what we should do to get it); second, the variability of results between different Municipalities is very high and full of surprises; third, there is therefore plenty of room for a widespread leap in those capacities, learning intelligently from the best experiences, without reinventing the wheel.

These are valuable indications if we really want to bring about that much invoked change that should have a powerful level in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (*Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza*, hereafter PNRR). The Government should read and draw clear lessons from this Report. Among these: that without strong monitoring and powerful civic participation the Country will not change.

Suffice here to mention the decisive role of the capacity of Public Administrations. It is also from the failure to adapt this capacity that the end of the “Italian miracle” of the post-war period derives. As well as the difficulty of following up on the extraordinary and innovative social reforms of the 1970s. And, again, the inability to fully grasp the opportunities of the two-faced process of administrative decentralization and acceleration of European unification stems from this

failure. This structural flaw in the Country has been aggravated since the 1980s by neoliberal ideology: with its systematic mortification of the “public”, and the inhibition of the discretion of decisions in the name of alleged simplifications, automatisms and privatization of functions. In Italy, always extreme in its ideologies, this cultural hegemony translates into the lack of generational renewal of the PAs, the atrophy of recruitment, the failure of the public to open up to citizenship and its aggregations. Now that it is a question of reacting to a prolonged state of crises, to climatic and social challenges, to the aggravation of inequalities, we are once again understanding the need to invest in the capacity of the PAs, in the motivation and ability of those who are part of it to take responsibility and to adapt decisions to contexts. Thus, the powerful generational renewal that awaits them has finally been emphasised. However, as we have repeatedly observed as the Diversity Inequalities Forum (*Forum Diseguaglianze Diversità*) – see for instance “The Human Factor: A *vademecum* for hiring quickly and well in public administrations” jointly drawn up with the Forum of the PA and Movimenta – the Government is unable to move from statements to action. This Report provides clear indications for doing so with regard to Municipalities, the fundamental basis of the Country’s institutional structure.

This Report takes full advantage of the information that starting from March 2013 Municipalities must produce according to Legislative Decree 33 of the Monti Government – a detail that I would like to underline – regarding the “law of civic access and obligations of publicity, transparency and dissemination of information by the PAs”. Rights and obligations often ignored even by us citizens and, therefore, the Report has the merit of bringing them to light, of enhancing them. It does so in a way that is both compact and detailed. Compact, because it uses this information to build a Public Rating, which the European Commission considers a good reference practice. Detailed, because next to a summary ranking it provides detailed information and scores on six areas of action – budget, governance capacity, personnel management, services and relations with citizens, contracts and relations with suppliers and environmental impact – each internally further articulated. It is precisely this second aspect that represents, in the punctual comparison between good and

bad results, an extraordinary tool for a radical public action aimed at the renewal of the PAs.

The main summary results are easy to explain. The majority (62) of the 109 Municipalities turn out to be altogether insufficient – below the score of 50 out of 100 – and only 3 Municipalities (Prato, Bologna and Reggio Emilia) are above 70. Two Regions – Emilia Romagna and Veneto – have only one Capital Municipality that is insufficient. Among the 20 best Municipalities, only one is in the South, and among the 30 worst ones only one is in the North (Imperia), but when going into more detail the South features some qualities. The aggregated result does not appear to be correlated neither with the size (population), nor with the per capita income. Nevertheless, I want to focus on the “details”, recalling some examples taken from the large amount of information well systematised by the Report. These are details that talk loudly to decisive aspects for the quality of public action.

First of all, open data and digitisation. 47 Municipalities do not publish datasets on either a dedicated or regional portal. With regard to digitisation, expenditure and appointment of the digital transition managers (missing in 27 cases), only in 17 cases an appointed office has been set up and embedded in the organisational structure. These are important indications for the commitment to digital transition, which constitutes one of the strengths, and best elaborations, of the PNRR. Obviously, if we want to avoid the risk of thinking that “digitisation” is in itself the goal, this commitment will have to be addressed in relation to the objectives of improving the quality of services and the participation of citizens in the definition and monitoring of these objectives. And here the Report still comes to our aid.

First and foremost, in respect of the decisive issue of the efficiency of services (number of services provided, timing, delays, etc.). In this regard, the Report shows the incomprehensible weakening suffered by DL 33 when, in May 2016, the mandatory publication of the data necessary to assess that efficiency was abolished (Legislative Decree 97 of the Renzi Government). Despite this serious step backwards, many Municipalities (36) have voluntarily continued to publish the necessary data – which in itself is a very important signal – and some of them show data that actually allow a precise

evaluation: Alessandria, Bologna, Trieste, Oristano and Prato are mentioned in the Report. A question that springs to mind is what initiatives is the current Government taking to correct the damage done in 2016, enhance the data that are of most interest to citizens, and perhaps reward and learn from those who work best? As for civic participation, the overall picture is negative, with as many as a third of cases where information is not detectable or is minimal. But, again, there are countertrend cases, such as that of Modena. The European Commission, in approving the PNRR, made a few recommendations to Italy, but among these it noted the weakness of the participatory processes, starting with the way the PNRR was constructed, and called on the Government to act. Again, this is an information base to start from if one really wants to take action on it.

Another important aspect of the relationship between the PAs and society concerns companies. Here, too, the information is rich and the variability high and with surprises. In terms of payment times, as many as 44 Municipalities make payments in advance of the due date, but late payers are sometimes months late. Do we want to identify the causes from the centre, assist, reward and penalise, without lumping everything together with measures that are blind to the contexts? The same can be said for dubious procurement methods. The recurrence of the same subject in direct awards (over €5.000) is one of these signs. For 16 Municipalities, the share of recurrences is below 25%: Bergamo is in the lead (only 13%), and of these Municipalities are in the South. However, 13 Municipalities (7 in the North) are above 40%.

Strategic aspects are also under scrutiny. As for the clarity and the transparency of objectives, those that, in accordance with the law, PAs should indicate in detail by sector of activity at the beginning of the year, and then accompany them with the results actually achieved, verifiability varies extraordinarily depending on the case. They range from the detailed information of some Municipalities, first among all Trieste, to the absence of any kind of reporting document (Andria, Agrigento, Caltanissetta, Caserta, Catania, Vercelli and Vibo Valentia). Once again: why not use this information at national level to stimulate, promote and demand improvement? And then there is the important issue of the use of investee companies. Leaving aside

any neo-liberal ideology that, unlike the principles of the European Union, sees the public nature of companies as a disadvantage, it is a question of assessing the merits and the data at hand to see whether the use by Municipalities of publicly-owned companies responds to obvious advantages and produces benefits or whether it is merely a tool for nepotism and for hoarding and consolidating economic and political power. The available data do not allow this discrimination. But they do serve to erode prejudices. For instance, that a high number of investee companies is an indication of malfeasance. The examination of financial statements (only possible in 74% of cases, which is already a sign) shows, for example, that Venice has 16 companies, 15 of which are profitable, while Cosenza has only 6, but one is bankrupt, 3 are in liquidation and one 1 inactive. An invitation to not generalise and to evaluate the results.

There are many other “details” in the Report. This information would be precious in the hands of a Government willing and able to initiate change and invest in a modern role for the central State as a promoter of principles and guidelines in all the autonomous folds of the institutional order; it would constitute the starting point for an action of comparison, spurring and assistance. In the hands of us organised citizens, who cannot wait or just protest, it becomes a powerful tool, Municipality by Municipality, to select our representatives and to compare, spur and assist the Public Administrations in a new public-private-social relationship. Let's get to work then!

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