

2nd International Symposium "NEW METROPOLITAN PERSPECTIVES" - Strategic planning, spatial planning, economic programs and decision support tools, through the implementation of Horizon/Europe2020. ISTH2020, Reggio Calabria (Italy), 18-20 May 2016

The evolutionary dynamic of the main urban Labour Market Areas

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Abstract

If the Labour Market Areas consist of «territorial units identified by a set of adjacent municipalities approximated with travel-to-work daily commuting flows», the change in the number of municipalities that make them up, can be considered an indicator of the changes in the levels of socio-economic interaction within the LMAs. In particular, in the hierarchical-functional LMAs, where the daily commute to work moves from the periphery of the system toward its center, the variation in the number of municipalities that are part of it can be interpreted as the result of a change in the attractiveness of the economic and employment level of the center for its immediate geographical surroundings. Following any changes in the spatial configuration of the 21 local labour systems of the major Italian urban areas and crossing data with that relating to demographic and economic level, an interpretive framework can be built of the evolutionary dynamics of these metropolitan areas and the role they occupy within the national urban system.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of ISTH2020

Keywords: Local Market Areas; Metropolitan Areas; Competitiveness

1. Economic and political-institutional regionalisation

Italy features a deep and widespread mismatch between the political-administrative organization and the socio-economic structure of its territory. The explanations may be varied and they draw a complex and causal matrix. As already highlighted by the administrative reorganization plan proposed by the Italian Geographical Society (Castelnovi, 2013), the Italian regional organization had been built on the basis of ISTAT statistic units, rather than

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criteria of geographical homogeneity and/or functional integration. Not only did this choice fail to consider all or part of the historical articulation of the Italian territory, but it also disregarded the current and potential regionalization processes because of the presence of specific local conditions.

We add to this, on the one hand, the late application of the constitutional provisions on the establishment of Regions and, on the other, the lack of a governance policy aimed at supporting the regionalization processes, so that the new political-administrative entities (Regions) could build their economic and social space. It is therefore easy to understand why on the political level Regions not only have not been able to reverse the trend in the “territorial” development policies, but have even failed to integrate their territories economically and socially and to take on an identity dimension.

We must however consider that a resistance to change affects the local political institutions and we can count this among the factors of “territorial impedance”. This resistance is manifested in the difficulty of changing the geographical configuration, as effectively witnessed in recent years by the problematic implementation of Law N° 142/1990, first, and later by changes of Title V of the Constitution.

This inability of the political institutions to promote, support and orient the integration processes at different territorial levels, has greatly reduced them - if not totally inhibited - with serious damage to the economic and social development of the related territorial contexts, so creating an obvious gap between the political-institutional and the socio-economic dimensions. Other scholars (Calafati 2009; Calafati, Veneri, 2013) have, not surprisingly, interpreted this gap as the implementation, over time, of the “territorial coalescence”[†] process not combined with an equal process of “institutional coalescence”. In fact, the intense processes of spatial polarization and territorial integration, that have taken place since 1950, have not been combined with similar adjustments at the institutional level. The spatial organization of the political-administrative systems has not been changed, nor have forms of governance for emerging functional areas been introduced. Thus, for decades, processes of building policies at the local level have been shaped by a set of rules which did not reflect the spatiality of social and economic structures. These rules have hindered, rather than supported, the economic development.

The Local Market Area can be regarded as the economic and territorial configurations that provide the geographical reference for the implementation of a “territorial governance” that will lead to solving the mismatching problem between the institutional and the territorial organizations in Italy. According to the definition provided by ISTAT, they constitute the «territorial units identified by a set of adjacent municipalities approximated with travel-to-work daily commuting flows» and, therefore, they identify a territorial context in which the levels of economic and social interaction become very intense and emblematic, highlighting the systemic and integrated nature of the area.

With reference to the LMAs, we also realize that what distinguishes the territorial moment from the political moment is the fixity of each one. The territory, as evidenced by the evolution progress made in the geographical projection of the LMAs, has variable-geometry features both economically and socially; and the political governance, if it really wants to have a territorial and territorializing dimension, cannot ignore this, by trying to assume a dynamic configuration from a geographic perspective. This approach is even more necessary when the LMAs have a metropolitan dimension and it is necessary to adopt an integrated and coordinated policy on a territorial basis. Hence what is at the heart of this article and is the subject of the following pages is our focus on the evolutionary dynamics of the major urban LMAs in Italy and their underlying factors.

2. The development trends of the primary urban LMAs in the last decade

Between 2001 and 2011 the LMAs of 21 Italian primary cities[‡] (ISTAT 2015) have displayed rather similar

[†] “Territorial coalescence” refers to the process by contiguous municipalities which are integrated to form a single socio-territorial unit (Calafati 2002; Calafati, Compagnucci 2005; Calafati, Mazzoni 2005).

[‡] The main urban areas have been selected starting with the provincial capitals of the 10 “metropolitan cities” set up by the national law (Law N° 56, 7 April 2014) and by the regulations of the Special Statute Regions. We added to them other municipalities that analytically (LMA demographic dimension larger than 500,000 inhabitants and/or LMA provincial capitals with more than 200,000 inhabitants) have been deemed worthy of relief (ISTAT 2015).

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