



## Failures of political decentralization in promoting network governance in the forest sector: Observations from Italy



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### ABSTRACT

Decentralization has been the most remarkable reform process that has occurred in the institutional arrangements and framework in Italy, a country of contrasts and contradictions with neglected – but increasing – forest resources and a limited range of actors' networks able to make the sector more modern and dynamic. On the basis of a qualitative-based document analysis and observations collected in three case-study Regions (Veneto, Molise and Sicily), our paper aims to provide interpretations of the failures in network forest governance in Italy connected with the decentralization policy process. Our findings show that Italy is experiencing several of the recurrent problems highlighted for decentralization in other countries, including difficulties in creating the conditions for more network-based governance initiatives with the involvement of local community and civil society. Problems have been exacerbated by the financial and political crisis and the consequent spending review. However, some encouraging signals also exist.

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### Introduction

Italy is a country of contrasts and contradictions, also in the forest sector: the country has experienced a radical change in forest cover that doubled in 50 years, in the social demands for forest products and services and in the structure of the wood-working industry, but its institutional organizations, mode of forest governance and the political-legal frameworks have only changed slightly. The objectives and contents of Italian forest policy have slowly evolved over time (Pettenella and Romano, 2010: 11), but most of the Italian formal institutions connected with the forest sector, at all levels, have been unable to reform and adapt themselves to the new challenges posed by the changing environmental, social, economic and political scenarios. The most remarkable step towards introducing changes in Italian institutional arrangements and forest governance has been the decentralization process, which is “a crucial issue in sustainable forest management” worldwide as “its quality may ultimately determine the fate of forest resources in all their aspects – economic, social and ecological” (Blaser et al., 2005:1).

Decentralization varies a lot from country to country in terms of mechanisms, degree of powers transfer, level of social responsibil-

ity, etc., therefore having impacts that differ (Colfer and Capistrano, 2005; Rojas-Briales, 2005). Concerning the forest sector, the vast majority of the literature is focused on developing countries (e.g. Agrawal and Ribot, 1999; Colfer and Capistrano, 2005; Ribot et al., 2006; Ribot and Oyono, 2012; Tram Nam and Burgers, 2012; Persha and Andersson, 2014) or countries in transition, and only a few studies have been conducted on decentralization processes and their effectiveness in European countries, exceptions being for example Switzerland (Küchli and Blaser, 2005), Scotland (Ritchie and Haggith, 2005) and France (Sève, 1999). In a comparison study focused on Mediterranean countries, decentralization tendencies are reported as being “evident in all the countries despite significant differences in their scope” (Rojas-Briales, 2005: 384). Starting in 1977, political-administrative decentralization<sup>1</sup> in Italy has now been lasting for more than 40 years, but a stable and balanced organization of public institutions to deal with the challenges of the

<sup>1</sup> Political decentralization occurs when “groups at different levels of government – central, sub-national (meso) and local – are empowered to make decisions related to what affects them”. Administrative decentralization occurs when “different levels of government administer resources and matters that have been delegated to them, generally through a Constitution”. In particular, in Italy, we can talk about devolution, which transfers specific decision-making powers from one level of government (State) to another (Regions). “Regional governments become semi-autonomous and administer forest resources according to their own priorities and within clearly defined geographic jurisdictions” (Blaser et al., 2005: 8).

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forest sector is far from being reached: the central State administration should in theory have no role in policy-making, all forest tasks having been transferred to the 21 Regional administrations and Autonomous Provinces. However, some of these administrations are so limited in their policy and political action, in the relevance of their forest sector and/or the political role played by the sectoral interests, that no comprehensive and consistent regional forest policies are implemented and many responsibilities have been transferred back to the Central administration under formal bi-lateral agreements.

Such a complex, unclear and fragmented legal-policy situation, originating from a defective decentralization process, also occurred in a similar way in many other sectors (e.g. agriculture and rural development, health care)<sup>2</sup> is one of the reasons for Italian public administration inefficiency, which has contributed to exacerbating the problem of financial viability of a proactive forest management oriented at preserving forest multi-functionality (Pettenuella, 1994; Cesaro et al., 2013) and ecosystem services provisions.

As a result of this situation, Italy does not in practice have one single updated National Forest Programme (NFP)<sup>3</sup> nor a comprehensive sectoral policy supported by coordinated budget allocations. It instead has various different local forest policy programmes or sets of laws that are formulated and implemented by the Regions and/or Autonomous Provinces. According to Cullotta and Maetzke (2008), only 8 out of 21 Regions in Italy have completed their Regional Forestry Programmes (RFPs) while “presumably the others have by now been provided with planning documents or plans of one kind or another for the forestry sector” (Carbone and Savelli, 2009: 511). Horizontal coordination among these local fragmented policies is very limited, and if we add the typical complexity of the legal framework – with often tens of national and local laws and rules regulating single types of activities like wood harvesting or mushroom picking (Vidale et al., 2012) – the policy and related governance framework of the whole sector appears particularly confused, without a clear and common oversight. The decentralization process in itself, which should have better connected policy-makers to other sectoral stakeholders and local institutional capacity to global goals, has been demonstrated to be an inadequate governing model, “very dispersed and ineffective due to high transaction costs” (Rojas-Briales, 2005: 375). Many of the failures reported with decentralization reforms (at least those that occurred in the ‘90s) in several countries worldwide (Colfer and Capistrano, 2005; Berkes, 2010) are also valid for Italy, as “effective devolution takes time, requiring a shift from a static con-

cept of management to a dynamic concept of governance shaped by interactions, feedback learning and adaptation over time” (Berkes, 2010: 489), not always having the expected (positive) impacts on forest management in the country. However, decentralization has been reported as one of the most important principles of good governance identified in international policy processes (Rojas-Briales, 2005).

Our paper, on the basis of the analysis of three case-study Regions (Veneto, Molise and Sicily), provides observations on the failures in forest governance in Italy connected with the policy process of decentralization. In particular, we present and discuss the reasons for Italian forest sector decentralization being unable to support the shift from conventional government towards innovative governance arrangements, where stakeholders are supposed to be more involved in the decision-making process, profit and non-profit organizations are expected to increase their participation in defining forest economy strategies, and command and control regulations are progressively integrated by voluntary and market-based tools.

## 2. Methodology

The paper adopts a narrative policy analysis approach combined with a case-study method and is based on a qualitative-based analysis conducted in 2014–2015, which included: a) documents analysis, i.e. reading and analysing texts of policies and laws at national and regional level, with a focus on three regions selected as case-studies; b) primary sources collection and analysis. While document analysis has been used mainly for compiling Sections 3 and 5.1, the analysis of original data has been used mainly for Sections 4 and 5.2. The selection criteria and description of case studies, methods for data collection and analysis, and the narrative structure are reported in the following.

### 2.1. Case-studies identification and description

Our three case-study regions were selected on the basis of the following criteria: i) to guarantee a balanced geographical distribution among the three main Italian macro-areas (North, Centre and South/Islands), thus including one case-study region per macro-area (respectively Veneto, Molise and Sicily); ii) to incorporate different timespans of the decentralization process, thus including one autonomous Region (Sicily) the first Region to have the competences in the forest sector transferred in the middle of last century and two Regions (Veneto and Molise) where decentralization implementation started in the late ‘70s; iii) to cover different models of forest economy: one with a relatively high level of timber production linked to a dynamic wood working sector (Veneto); one with poorly stocked forest almost exclusively used for fuel-wood production and environmental protection (Molise); and one regional forest economy almost exclusively connected to environmental services provision and social functions (30,000 publicly employed forest workers) (Sicily). In each Region, one sub-regional area<sup>4</sup> has been identified and explored, thus focusing the analysis at landscape level. Key data are summarized in Table 1.

Forest area dynamics that can be observed for the three case-studies follow the national trend, with a continuous expansion of the forest cover during 2005–2015 (Table 2). However, while Veneto shows an increase that is below the one observed at national scale (+4.7% vs. +6.2%), Molise (+16.6%) and Sicily (+13.2%) present the highest increase rates among all Italian regions, being the only ones doubling the national value (CFS,

<sup>2</sup> Decentralization has been implemented in several other sectors, with similar consequences of institutional fragmentation. Italy has, for example, 21 different Rural Development Programmes (one for each of the 21 Regions and Autonomous Provinces), with different and not coordinated strategies, measures and actions (Cesaro et al., 2013). This also determines inefficiencies in the interaction with the EU authorities during rural development policy negotiation (Corrado and Merlo, 1999). However, decentralization in agriculture and rural development differs slightly from that in the forest sector. In fact, while almost 40% of forest is owned by public entities (namely, State and municipalities) under direct or indirect control of the State Forest Service, agricultural land is almost totally privately owned, so the State does not play any relevant role, with either active (incentives) or passive (command-and-control) policies. In the environmental sector the situation is slightly different: competences have been defined as a matter of concerted action between State and Regions. This determined a long-lasting conflict and several delays in environmental protection policies implementation. The proposed reform of the Italian Constitution, which will be the subject of a referendum at the end of 2016 and will take this problematic issue into consideration, is likely to bring a re-centralization of the environmental protection competences. As for the industrial sector, including its forest-related components (e.g. sawmills, pulp and paper producers, furniture, etc.), it is dominated by private actors and several public services (e.g. railways, airlines, ...) have been privatized, so that nowadays the State does not have any special role.

<sup>3</sup> The possible use of the term “Plan” instead of “Programme” has been discussed by Carbone and Savelli (2009).

<sup>4</sup> Respectively Asiago plateau in Veneto, Alto Molise area in Molise and Etna regional park in Sicily.

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