

After Putnam: Reassessing Italy's local policy communities with network analysis

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The spatial (or territorial) dimension of welfare policy has long stayed in the background – not least due to historicism, methodological nationalism, and some normative aversion to regionalism and localism. In recent years, however, as welfare scholars become increasingly aware of the spatial implications of socio-economic change in the post-industrial society, the spatial dimension of welfare policy has come to light. The present paper taps into this emerging research agenda, asking how, in contemporary Italy, policy communities organise themselves to design and delivery local welfare policies.

To dig out the spatial dimension of welfare policy in and across Italy, scholars have mainly conducted in-depth case studies. In my view, this empirical literature is tarnished by two limitations. First, it departs from mainstream welfare research in that it uses a more granular unit of analysis than the nation-state along the spatial axis of comparison, namely regions or municipalities. Thus, although it promises to explore the spatial dimension of welfare policy, what it actually explores is the local dimension. In contemporary sociology, space is understood as “a relational arrangement of social goods and people (living beings) at places” (Löw, 2016: 188). Thus far, the empirical literature has failed to acknowledge the defining feature of space, that is, that space is a relational construct.

Second, each case study captures only a small fraction of the existing variance in policy design and delivery – across space, time, and policy sector. To increase external validity, the authors tend to engage in generalisation, namely to think about whether and to what degree the evidence found in one or few settings can be transposed to other settings. Yet generalisation becomes problematic as long as we follow the emerging approach to policy intervention for spatial development: the place-based approach. According to this approach, as captured, for example, in the Barca Report of 2009, policy should tap into the local knowledge and values that are embedded in each place. Thus, generalising policy practices makes little sense from a place-based perspective. Rather, we must engage in replication, that is, we must reproduce the same research design in different places.

In response to these limitations, I build a model of how policy communities organise themselves to design and deliver local welfare policy that is both relational and replicable. I follow a sequential (two-stage) research design based on mixed methods. In the first stage, I use network analysis to model the policy communities of about 70 Italian mid-size municipalities. For this purpose, I draw from the OpenCoesione database, which has recorded detailed information about ~2 million projects delivered in the framework of cohesion policy in and across Italy, from 2007 to present. I construct network measures to capture how efficiently and inclusively each policy community operates. In the second stage, to fill the empirical gaps left open by network analysis, I conduct fieldwork for a smaller sample of municipalities.

I find that three ideal-types of policy community exist in Italy, whose incidence across the country follows a geographical pattern – yet a different one from the North-South divide. First, light networks, typical of the North-West of Italy, deliver many projects with few actors. Typically, local government delegates projects to an oligopoly of organisations, and national government performs limited and targeted interventions. Second, heavy networks, typical of the East, delivery many projects with many actors. Local government relies on the broader community, and national government occupies significant but peripheral network positions. Third, siloed networks, typical of the South-West, deliver few projects with few actors. The policy community is clustered into several silos, which barely interact with one another, and national government occupies core network positions within each silo.

To explain the observed pattern of variation, I advance the hypothesis that the organisation of the policy community reflects the underlying distribution of trust across the broader local community. Thus, light networks would emerge where trust is high and concentrated in the hands of a few actors; heavy networks where trust is high and diffused across the community at large; siloed networks where trust is low, thereby requiring exogenous intervention to make policy work. I test this hypothesis through a combination of network simulations and fieldwork.

Overall, the paper showcases the key role of policy communities in designing and delivering local welfare policy. Besides, it illustrates that Italy's policy communities organise themselves in remarkably different ways, with key implications for policy efficiency and participation. This way, it intercepts broader debates about globalization and (glocal) democracy in the post-industrial society.