

BOOK REVIEW

Il nuovo associazionismo intercomunale. Sfide e risposte delle culture politiche locali

Edited by Mattia Casula, Roma: Biblioteca di Testi e Studi. Carocci Editore, 2017. 217 pp. € 25,00.

Matteo Bocchino* 

Urban Studies and Regional Science, Gran Sasso Science Institute, L'Aquila, Italy

*Corresponding author. Email: matteo.bocchino@gssi.it

(Received 5 June 2019; accepted 5 June 2019; first published online 30 July 2019)

Mattia Casula, a postdoctoral research fellow in Political Science at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice, in his first book examines the nature of a commonly used instrument for dealing with problems of scale at the local level, namely Inter-Municipal Cooperation (hereafter IMC).

Generally, inter-municipal cooperative arrangements (hereafter IMAs) are considered a way of addressing the challenges of suboptimal size municipal bodies and can serve as functional substitutes for territorial amalgamation by supplying a tool for municipal upscaling (Hertzog, 2010) and for strengthening administrative efficiency at the local level. The focus of the analysis is on the case of the Municipal Unions (hereafter MUs) in Italy, more precisely on their implementation in two Italian regions, Emilia-Romagna and Veneto. A MU is a judicial entity constituted by two or more municipalities created for the joint management of functions and/or services and can be considered the most institutionalized form of IMAs available in the country (Fedele e Moini, 2006).

In this book, the author compares the spread of inter-municipal associationism and the more general process of territorial reorganization connected to it in Emilia-Romagna and Veneto, two Italian regions traditionally characterized by a different culture of regional government and a different degree of individualism of municipal administration. Combining the neo-institutionalist approach with the analysis of local political cultures and making use of a solid longitudinal empirical research, the author describes and interprets the main characteristics of inter-municipalism in the two-different regional contexts. He shows that there are still relevant historical legacies that are conditioning the form taken by new associationism in the various Italian local contexts and that this process needs to be understood and analysed using not only a long-term historical perspective but also a plurality of institutional, cultural, and geomorphological factors closely related to them.

This book explores how and why Italian municipalities have adopted reforms towards inter-municipalism, and it focuses on the governance processes that have taken place after the reforms. Then, particular attention has been given to the way in which democratic values have been influenced by governance at the inter-municipal level. In his analysis, Casula uses a multilevel approach. Rather than assuming that national policy changes play a uniform effect across the national territory, he analyses whether national policies produce the same impact in different regional and local contexts. To this end, the author elaborates a comparative research design, analysing how different national policies influence the way in which different municipalities create forms of cooperation.

To do so, in the first part of the book the author outlines the topic and its stream of literature, the paradigms of administrative reforms for local authorities, the national legislation concerning

the inter-municipalism in Italy, and the complexities faced by small municipalities in administrative terms. Then, in the second part, he focuses on the two regional cases providing an analysis of their legal features and their demographic and geomorphological aspects, namely the geographical conformation of the territory, the size characteristics of the municipalities, their rate of compliance with association programs, and the structures of the rural areas. The focus on each of these dimensions allows a better understanding of the regional and sub-regional contexts within which new intercommunal practices tend to be structured nowadays, as well as the characteristics of the demographic and geomorphological contexts within which the respective regional actors had to legislate and elaborate policy decisions.

An important section is dedicated to the study of the different ways in which the two regions have been able to initiate, since the 1990s, the process of administrative federalism and the devolution of powers and functions to lower levels of government. The analysis of this dimension intends to investigate the characteristics of the culture of regional government rooted in the two regions.

The analysis provided by the author confirms the role played by path-dependence in public administration. However, the empirical evidence provided suggests that the historical legacies of the identified political subcultures (such as the persistence of an administrative individualism between the municipalities in Veneto, or the leading and guiding role of the regional legislator in Emilia-Romagna) can only partially explain the associative choices of the municipalities in the two regions. Indeed, many of the current characteristics of the size of IMC should be understood not only by looking at the intercommunal tradition rooted in individual sub-regional contexts, but also at the propensity of municipalities to adapt their associative choices on the basis of the existing regional incentive structure. This finds confirmation, for example, by analysing the scopes of cooperation or the number of partners for each MU, which generally depend on the regional decision of how to incentive the MUs' creation and functioning.

The main strength of this work is that it fills the gap in the international literature on the Italian case which has never taken into account the possible role that intermediate levels of government, such as the regional authorities, may have in the direction and coordination of inter-municipal cooperation processes.

Hence, on the one hand, the author builds a common comparative framework for understanding the main dimensions of IMC in Italy and, on the other hand, he shows in empirical terms how a regional authority can be able to influence the characteristics of inter-municipal associations within its territory. The research provides also a series of data and information that enrich the Italian debate both on the issue of the MUs as local authorities within our legal system and on the more general implementation of the associative agreements in Italy.

However, what the analysis seems implicitly to suggest that it is still lacking, a broader and more comprehensive research comparing the other Italian regions, especially those which have received less academic attention than Emilia-Romagna and Veneto. Moreover, more attention should have been given to the horizontal political dimension of IMC in order to better understand if and how it is possible to overcome at the micro-level the scale-related issues and path-dependent dynamics. Furthermore, even though the author focuses on the scopes of cooperation at the local level, their financial dimensions should be taken more into consideration, especially because the concepts of efficiency and cost reduction have guided the last national legislative interventions. In this regard it is important to highlight that different joint functions/services differ in their nature; highly capital-intensive services can reduce their cost if the number of municipalities increases. On the other hand, labour-intensive services could show diseconomies of scale due to the increase in the size of the MU (Bocchino, 2018).

To sum up, this research shows how the understanding of the IMC cannot be separated from a preliminary analysis of the context in which it is rooted. This book undoubtedly represents an important contribution to the field, and shall deserve attention by both academics, and local administrators and policy-maker. Indeed, understanding the functioning mechanisms,

determinants, and intervening structural variables of such processes can be crucial elements not only for the academic debate, but also for practitioners and political actors (at the macro, meso, and micro level) directly involved in the implementation of IMC.

References

- Bocchino M** (2018) Inter-municipal Cooperation in Italy. Analysis and an opening research agenda for the Municipal Unions case. *AIJ Journal of Sociology* **12**, 51–72.
- Fedele M and Moini G** (2006) Cooperare conviene? Intercomunalità e politiche pubbliche. *Rivista italiana di politiche pubbliche* **7**, 71–98.
- Hertzog R** (2010) Inter-municipal cooperation: A viable alternative to territorial amalgamation. In Swianiewicz P (eds), *Territorial Consolidation Reforms in Europe*. Budapest: LGI - Open Society Institute, pp. 285–308.