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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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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).

trends both in terms of territorial extension as well as in terms of population. According to data provided by ISTAT, these LMAs have increased their territorial extension marking an increase of 14.9% in the intercensal period due to the expansion in the number of municipalities involved. This expansion has been more than proportional (+27.5%), due to the smaller geographical size of these municipalities. In demographic terms, the urban LMAs have also displayed an expansionary trend (+11.2%) far higher than the other LMAs (+0.8%). Consider that in the above-mentioned intercensal period the growth of the Italian population have totaled just over 2.4 million inhabitants, of which approximately 2.1 million are concentrated in the LMAs examined, approximately equal to 88% of the net balance recorded (ISTAT 2015). This increase is probably due to the dynamics of migration flows. As regards internal migration, there has been a substantial shift of masses of individuals – especially young people – from marginal areas to the major cities with serious social, economic and cultural consequences on the former, increasingly characterized by aging populations and economic crunch. Similar trends have been noted for international migration inflows that have concentrated in the largest urban areas.

In the same period, there has been an increase in employment for the inhabitants of the same LMAs of 21.7%, compared to 8.5% in the remaining LMAs. This difference in growth rates is less significant than population dynamics, but it is certainly equally interesting, because it clearly shows the power of attraction that the major urban areas are able to exert.

The new spatial configuration of the 21 LMAs analyzed in this study shows a very diverse context within which there is a strong contrast between the north-western area, particularly the macro-region Lombardy-Piedmont, and the rest of the country. This contrast overshadows the most frequent forms of North-South divide which also constitute a distinctive feature of the national economy. More in detail, the evolutionary trends of the 21 urban LMAs can be grouped into five distinct types:

- LMAs with a significant reduction in the number of municipalities of over 15%. Only two LMAs belong to this group: Palermo and Verona, with a variation respectively of -21.6% and -20.7%;
- LMAs with a more moderate decrease in the number of municipalities, below 10%. Genoa, Reggio Calabria and Florence belong to this second group of LMAs, with variations of -8.8%, -7.7% and -5.3%.
- LMAs without changes in the number of municipalities within their borders. Bari, Messina and Trieste are in this group of LMAs;
- LMAs with a 10% increase in the number of municipalities. In this group there are the LMAs of Venice, Taranto and Padua, with a growth in the number of their municipalities of +5.6%, +5.9% and +6.1% respectively;
- LMAs with a consistent increase in municipalities. Because of the wide variability of the data in this case it is possible to operate a further subdivision between the LMAs with a high increase in the number of municipalities - Catania (+15.8%), Cagliari (+20%), Bologna (+21.2%), Milan (+25.2%) and Naples (+28.9%) - and the ones that showed an exceptional growth in the municipalities attracted - Rome (+41.3%), Como (+45.6%), Bergamo (+53.8%), Turin (+60%) and Busto Arsizio (+103.8%).

If we compare this figure with the one relating to changes in the demographic dimension of LMAs, even in the presence of a clear correlation (Fig.1) between the two phenomena ($R^2 = 0,7082$), it highlights the specific characteristics that should be analyzed in more detail.

In fact, in the 8 LMAs with a negative or insignificant variation in the number of municipalities within the intercensal period (2001-2011), a negative change in the population is shown at the same time while in the remaining 13 LMAs, population size grows almost always at a slower rate than the growth in the number of municipalities. The only exceptions are represented by the LMAs of Catania, Como, Bergamo and Padua, whose population grows more than proportionally compared to the number of municipalities. This factor is very often dependent on the acquisition of municipalities with a considerable population size that were found to be the economic and social cores of the same LMAs in the 2001 survey. On the contrary, a special case is represented by the LMA of Florence where a population growth of 2.4% is recognized against the loss of a single municipal unit (almost certainly unimportant from the demographic point of view).

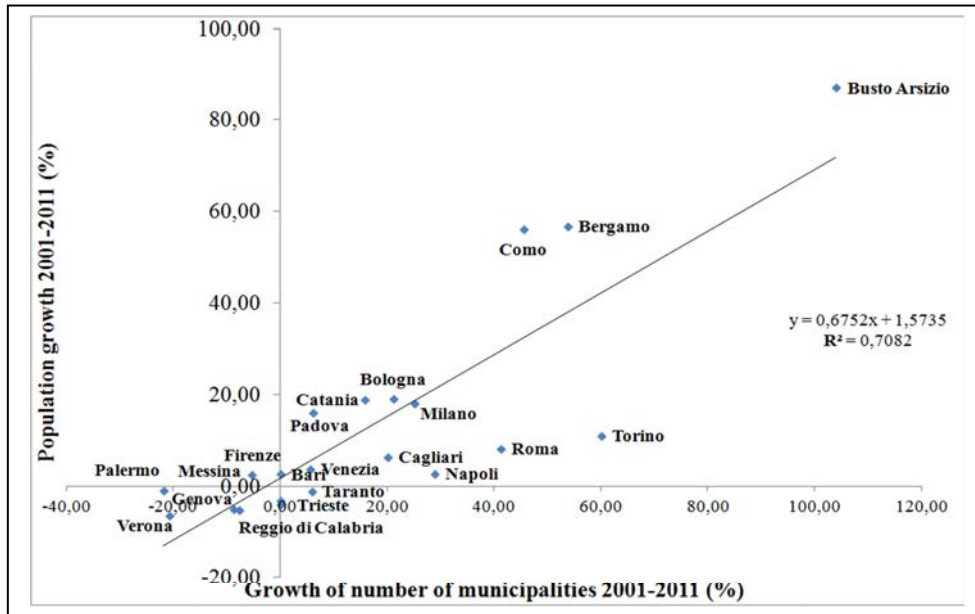


Fig. 1. Correlation between Growth of number of municipalities 2001-2011 and Population growth 2001-2011 – Source: our elaboration on data Indicatori di qualità dei SLL 2011 e nuovi SLL 2001 (ISTAT)

Based on the situation just described, we tried to detect if the spatial reconfiguration of the LMAs could somehow be attributed to their employment evolution. The growth in size of a LMA derives from the ability of the centroid and of its possible satellite poles to increase their attractiveness in terms of employment, not only by growing the number of employed residents, but also by attracting workers from their external geographical neighborhood. This ability can create the basis for an expansion in size of the LMAs with the annexation of contiguous municipalities.

The process just outlined leads us not only to consider the LMA as a variable-geometry entity, but also to consider the Italian economic geography in constant evolution also in terms of its spatial configuration. In the period 2001-2011 for all LMAs analyzed, a positive and sustained growth in the number of total employment is reported, with percentage increases over 97%, as in the case of the Busto Arsizio LMA, although in this as well in other cases the increase is largely dependent on the increase in the spatial and demographic dimension of the LMAs.

The worst result is recorded instead by the Verona LMA which shows an increase of only 0.3%, however, accompanied by a significant decrease in the number of its municipalities (-20.7%) and inhabitants (-6.4 %), as already mentioned.

Considering, however, the incidence of the employed population in 2011, all the 21 LMAs show a figure (34.9%) which is not very different from what is found in the remaining LMAs (30.6%), with a range of values between 25.9% (Reggio Calabria) and 42.8% (Milan).

From an evolutionary perspective, in almost all urban LMAs indicators improve with an increase of employment in the intercensal period. The only exceptions are, in fact, the LMAs of Turin, Como and Bergamo, where the trend is the opposite with a reduction in the level. It should however be noted that these LMAs are among those that have registered the most significant increase in geographic and demographic terms, which leads to the belief that the cause of the decline in the number employed, largely comes from the incorporation of marginal municipalities characterized by a less developed and dynamic economy.

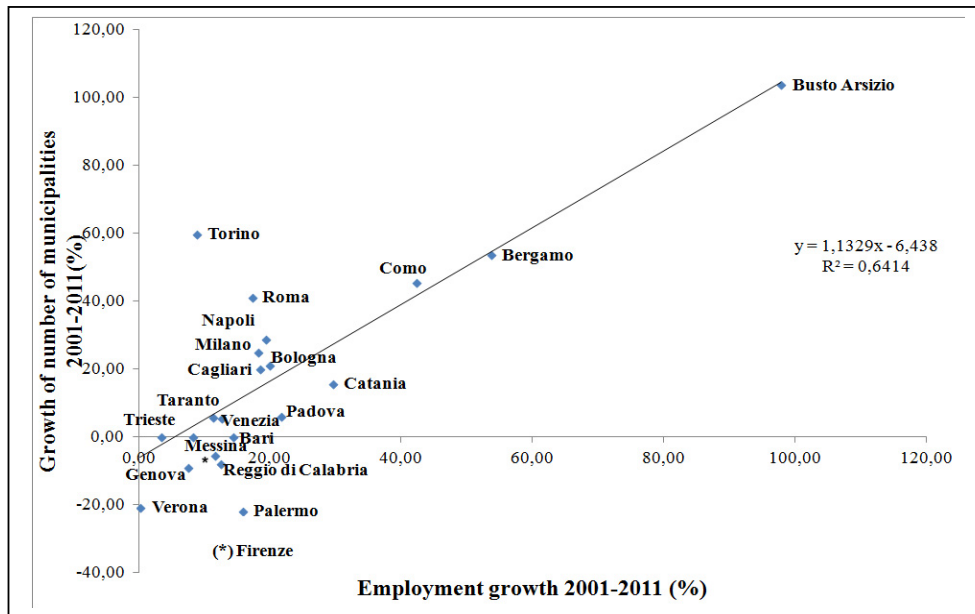


Fig. 2. Correlation between Employment growth 2001-2011 and Growth of number of municipalities 2001-2011 – Source: our elaboration on data Indicatori di qualità dei SLL 2011 e nuovi SLL 2001 (ISTAT)

Overall, the model shows that the 64% growth in the number of municipalities can be explained by the increase in the number employed (Fig.2), so showing a good adaptability to empirical data.

Discussion

Our analysis, beyond the obvious correlations given above, shows that there is a kind of virtuous circle in which the movement of migration flows for work reasons from a centroid or, more generally, from one LMA to another, implies a change in the number of municipalities that constitute a single urban LMA. Some of them increase, in some cases even considerably, the number of municipalities, while others lose municipalities in favor of other LMAs.

Usually a lower growth of the population corresponds to the increase in the number of municipalities. This is due to the fact that most of the municipalities that belong to an urban LMA, have a demographic dimension far smaller than their centroid (Calafati 2014). Nevertheless, the growth in population involves a growth in demand for goods and services in the LMAs - particularly in the centroid and the satellite poles - which causes a corresponding increase in supply. This increase in supply in turn leads to the creation of new jobs and, in this way, the attractiveness of the LMA for its geographic neighborhood. This implies, in turn, the attraction of workers from other towns with subsequent re-orientation both of migration flows and, especially, of commuting flows.

It would be interesting to analyze in more detail the territorial factors which determine these changes in the geography of the LMAs and, in particular, to detect whether the increased attractiveness and the aggregating force of the urban LMA is a consequence of economies these contexts are able to develop or whether, on the other hand, it is a consequence of the weak economic structure of the closer LMAs that, weakened by the crisis, cannot sustain competition with the major centers and lose their territorial «autonomy».

This could be the only further research aim, but we consider it appropriate to propose, for collective reflection, the initial results of this process of analysis on the geography of LMAs and on the need to consider these economic and territorial configurations as essential reference points for local development policies.

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