

The development of Voluntary Service Centres in Italy

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The Italian non-profit sector

According to Barbetta (1993, 1) "the Italian non-profit sector is a vast and vague universe that falls in the shaded area created by the overlapping of the nominally separate realms of private and public institutions. This grey area is the result of two parallel conflicts that take place in the second half of 19th century, when the process of unification of the country comes to an end. On the one hand, the new Italian elite tries to limit the power and influence of the Catholic Church, while on the other, it struggles to integrate the growing socialist movement into the political structure of a capitalist economy". "The Italian welfare system expands greatly after World War II. The role of non-profit organizations decreases, while that of the state increases largely through public provision of health and education services" (Barbetta, 1993, 5). "The government provides social security, health and education. Primarily Catholic organisations administer most other social services. Begin 1990s the fiscal crisis of the welfare system reverses this trend and motivates the state to contract services to private non-profit organisations, primarily in the field of social welfare, but also, to a limit extent, in health. Many of these contractors derive from a Catholic tradition. Others however, are of a recent vintage and reflect a new secular social awareness of altruism, the importance of caring for other people" (Barbetta, 1993, 6).

Law 266/1991 supports volunteering

"Law 266/1991 defines *organizzazioni di volontariato*² as those that pursue participation, pluralism and 'solidarity' purposes – what in other countries might be called charitable aims" (Barbetta, 1993, 10). "The aim of this legislation is to promote the development of the volunteer movement, safeguarding its autonomy and favouring an increase in social, civil and individual participation" (Palma and Paganin, 2002, 64). This law regulates the vast array of unincorporated associations acting in health and social fields that rely heavily on volunteers. This law addresses voluntary organisations, instead of the individual voluntary activity (Paganin, 2001) and is focused on agreements between these associations and regional and local authorities. "To take advantage of the benefits (fig.1) provided by this law a voluntary organisation must be enrolled in the Regional Register of Voluntary Organisations" (Palma and Paganin, 2002, 64). According this law such groups shall not seek profits and volunteers shall play a 'prominent and conclusive' role in management and service provision. Sources of income include government grants and (tax deductible) contributions and bequests from both member and non-members. "Furthermore, this legislation is important for the creation of a National Observatory of Volunteerism and the allocation of Special Funds at the regional level to build Voluntary Service Centres (VSCs)" (Palma and Paganin, 2002, 64). "The establishment of VSCs is an important innovation in the Italian Legislation, not only for the voluntary organisations, but also in general for the creation and support of new forms of active citizenship. With the establishment of VSCs the Italian Legislation for the first time supports democratic organisations of citizens and its activities" (Paganin, 2001, 3)

¹ The description of the development of volunteer centres in Italy is not the result of own research but merely based on literature study. Although the number of English-language publications available is modest, the five referred articles have been sufficient to sketch roughly the development and organizational structure of the Voluntary Service Centres (*centri di servizio per il Volontariato*) in Italy. No Italian researcher could be found to comment on this description and to participate in the invitational conference that compared the development of volunteer centres in different countries.

² voluntary organisations

Figure 1: Benefits of registration in the Regional Register of Voluntary Organisations

"Opportunities to co-operate; receive public funding; make agreements with public authorities to provide services; serve on advisory bodies; participate in the planning of policies and services of public authorities; receive tax relief and other benefits" (Palma and Paganin, 2002, 73)

Special Funds

In the 1990s most public banks in Italy are a hybrid of for-profit and non-profit activities. Law 280/1990 allows banks to change their legal status. "Foundations (and associations) are allowed to create joint stock companies for the actual bank operations, whereas the foundations keep control of the majority of the new bank shares. Dividends paid by the bank therefore represent the income of the philanthropic foundation. This new Savings Bank Foundations or 'Special Funds' may be active in scientific research, education, preservation of cultural heritage, or health" (Barbetta, 1993, 12). One-fifteenth of the capital of these Special Funds is earmarked to the VSCs (Palma and Paganin, 2002). The total annual sum available for the VSCs is increased from 9 million Euro in 1991 to 59 million Euro in 2000, which is not distributed proportionally among Italy (Paganin, 2001). The number of banks varies significantly per region and since each VSC is funded locally there are inequalities in the amount of money available. Northern Italy has many more Banks able to fund VSCs through Special Funds. Furthermore bureaucracy, complex financial procedures, delay or lack of continuity in the delivery of funds, make it for VSCs hard to plan budgets and carry out activities on schedule (Spes, 2005,).

Distinguishing features of the Italian VSCs are not only their funding by Special Funds, but also the fact that some of the VSCs are managed by local voluntary organisations, in order to promote a culture of solidarity and to improve the quality of service offered by volunteerism. At first some Regions and Autonomous Provinces appeal against Art. 15 of Law 266/1991 (fig. 2), because they feel this Law impairs their powers to some extent. The Constitutional Court however judges the State, and not the Regions, have to safeguard the fundamental rights of citizens – including active citizenship (Spes, 2005, 281).

Figure 2.: Art. 15 of Law 266/1991 (Paganin, 2001, 3)

"According to article 15 of the Framework Law on Voluntary VSCs have to:
- elaborate tools and initiatives with the objective to increase the culture of solidarity, to promote new volunteering initiatives and to reinforce existing organisations
- offer qualified assistance and advice as well as tools for the planning, the starting and the performing of special activities
- organize training and qualifying initiatives for the members of voluntary organisations
- offer information, news, documentation and data useful for the organisations and for all interested in better volunteer movement"

The implementation and organization of Voluntary Service Centres

Italy is composed of 21 regions, each with its own provinces. In 2001, ten years after the legislation is enacted, due to bureaucracy only 51 VSCs are working in 16 out of 21 regions (Palma and Paganin, 2002). This number increases to 77 (71 of which are member of the national coordination) in 2005 in all Italian regions, except in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano and Campania. In that Province VSCs start at the end of 2005. Because of divergent interpretations of Law 266/1991 in the regions, three different models of VSCs are developed: some regions have one regional VSC with provincial branches; other regions have a VSC in each province or inter-provincial VSCs (Paganin, 2001). Figure 3 mentions the main fields of the VSCs' activities. Of all Italian VSCs 10 have a regional and the remainder a provincial dimension. At the national level they all are represented by CSV.net³ that assists the VSCs in their relations with national political and institutional authorities, organizes meetings to exchanges ideas and experiences and fos-

³ Coordinamento Nazionale dei Centri di Servizio per il Volontariato www.CSVnet.it

ters the co-ordination of activities and professional development. In 2005 the 77 VSCs manage in two ways 346 local structures: branches (85%) and committees (15%). A 'branch' is a point that provides services in the VSCs' area of competence; a 'committee' does the same, but is governed in cooperation with local voluntary organisations (Spes, 2005; Rapizza, 2006).

Figure 3.: Main fields of Voluntary Service Centres' activities (www.csvnet.it consulted 15/06/08)

- *"promotion of voluntary work and of the culture of solidarity, e.g. promotion initiatives on youth voluntary work and on the relation between school and voluntary work;*
- *help desk: to listen, provide information, guidance, counselling and accompanying on legal, tax, administrative, regulatory, management issues and for the relations with institutions and local organizations;*
- *training: training courses and initiatives for voluntary workers and operators. Counselling for the organization and management of training processes;*
- *support to planning and access of voluntary work to calls for tenders and funds;*
- *logistics, through the provision of spaces and equipment for the organizations' activities;*
- *help to improve communication in all the operating fields;*
- *economic support to the projects of the organizations"*

Funding

"Most of the VSCs are managed by second level voluntary organisations: by an association of associations of the various cultural and target areas of volunteering within a specific territory" (Paganin, 2001, 4). Actually where the VSC coincides with its holding body, it has better possibilities and facilities. On the other hand they meet difficulties in the relation with voluntary organisations in that specific area, that aren't represented in the managing association (Paganin, 2001).

Services

VSCs provide a variety of services, depending on the local needs of voluntary organisations. With respect to the fields of intervention and the growth in number of services provided, a substantial unity becomes visible (fig. 4). Especially in between the first VSCs differences in capacity and in the ability of directors to nurture their development are visible. Delay in the delivery of funds makes it for early VSCs hard to hire paid staff or organize activities in advance. For the performance of activities they are forced then to rely only on volunteers. Through sharing these experiences newer VSCs can avoid such mistakes, and plan and manage their activities easier. Once established in their region, VSCs appear valuable resources for the promotion and development of volunteerism in Italy (Palma and Paganin, 2002). Thanks the continuing growth of funds, VSCs are able to finance voluntary projects (Paganin, 2001). Compared with VCs in other countries the Italian VSCs stand out with this service. In 2005 in about 60% of the VSCs the accessibility to services and the transparency of activities carried out are codified. As next step the National Federation promotes utilisation of social accounting systems to identify and clarify objectives and elaborate strategies, improve work processes etcetera. "The ultimate aim is the acquisition of quality certification, and of clear criteria to assess the impact of VSCs' activities on the growth of volunteering in Italy" (Spes, 2005, 285).

Figure 4.: Services provided by VSCs (Palma and Paganin, 2001, 68)

- *"Information (98% of the VSCs): e-newsletters, Internet site, periodicals*
- *Training (90%): seminars and courses for volunteers*
- *Advice and counselling (90%): capacity building, legal-juridical, fiscal, HRM, social security*
- *Promotion (84%): opportunities, campaigns, publications, activities with schools*
- *Logistic services (80%): office space, computers, equipment, communication services*
- *Help with project planning (74%): supply of funds, co-funding of projects"*

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