

Population Challenges at a Regional Level. The Social and Health Districts of Italy.

Giuseppe Gesano, Frank Heins
Irpps-Cnr, Rome, Italy

In 2000 the foundations for a new system to provide social and health assistance in Italy were laid. The goal is the formation of social and health districts (about 700) through the cooperation of the national/regional health system and the social services of the municipalities. Whereas the introduction of these districts in the health system is so far unproblematic, social expenditures and services are today not yet organised at the district level (only 7% of social expenditures in 2003 are tallied at the district level). Municipalities have to create in cooperation new structures and institutions to actuate the districts. Municipalities and the social and health districts are and will be the institutions that have to deal with the regional aspects of population challenges.

Italy is characterised by significant regional differences in population distribution, population structure (ageing), demographic trends (population growth/decline) and immigration, and the population challenges vary considerably over its territory. A typology of population challenges, based on the formulation of appropriate critical thresholds, will be attempted. The following dimensions of regional population challenges are considered:

- The settlement density (population per built-up area, population per indoor surface area)
- The population change over the last decennia with important population decline as well as population growth considered a challenge,
- The ageing of the population measured by the share of the population 65 years and older in the total population
- The presence of an immigrant population and its structure.

The individual population challenges and the summarizing typology are presented for all social and health districts and sample districts serve to illustrate the existing disparities in detail.

The articulation and examination of the regional or local population challenges focus on the presently observed situation and ignores, for the time being, future population dynamics. This choice or modus operandi is based on the assumption that Italian local and regional administrations have already difficulties to acknowledge present challenges.

The research concludes with an analysis of the perception of the population challenges through local and regional authorities and their, still infrequent, attempts to formulate a response to these challenges (legislation, plans and policy documents governing the workings of the districts).

In fact, in Italy the policies of all levels of government continue to rely very often on the family as a provider of social and health assistance. In the meantime the Italian family emerges increasingly as an employer of foreign labour to be able to continue to provide assistance to family members.