

Evolution of EU Regional Policies in Italy
The Italian experience in dealing with 2000-2006 programming period of Structural Funds

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Abstract

The presentation highlights the evolution of Italian regional development by providing a rapid outline of both the administrative system and the development policies. At this extent, methods of programming and matching national with regional development policies will be quickly reviewed.

The focus goes on the profound difference characterising Italy in terms of regional disparities and development unbalances. As a matter of fact, the core of Italian development policies is concentrated on the efforts of the Southern Italy, the so called "Mezzogiorno", to catch-up with the rest of the Country. Most of the resources deriving from European Structural Funds are in fact devoted to the former "Objective 1" and presently "Convergent" Italian regions.

The lesson learned from the Italian regional policy can be hardly modelled and in any case not taken as a reference for a Country like Turkey. Despite the similarities that connect Italian and Turkish challenges in socio-economic cohesion, Italy has a too different administrative system to make comparison with Turkey possible and somehow meaningful.

Yet, the profound experience that Italy gained in enacting regional development and multi-level governance shows three important elements as key factors that are useful in absolute terms and worth to be transferred, such as: advanced methods in negotiated programming, adoption of management procedures (introducing evaluation of public investments) and the elaboration of articulated partnership schemes at all governance levels.

The Italian administrative system is configured through a very articulated and multilevel mechanism of territorial governance. This configuration may well lead to the understanding that -although Italy is not a federation- it is indeed a union of regions.

The structure of the Italian administrative system is laid out in Title V of the Constitution, describing how the Republic is composed of the Municipalities, the Provinces, the Regions and the State. In accordance with the principles laid down in the Constitution, these entities are relatively autonomous, having their own statutes, powers and distinctive functions.

In its historical past and before the institution of a Republican form of government, Italy has long been a rather centralised state. The decentralisation process started in 1948 with the introduction of Regional Governments in the Republican Constitution. As a matter of fact, in the attempt of introducing a certain form of devolution, direct elected Regional Governments were given a catalysing role in the composition of the High Chamber of National Parliament (the Senate of the Republic).

However, important steps towards genuine decentralisation were made during the nineties, including fiscal reforms aimed at conferring financial autonomy to regional governments through participation in national tax revenues, the possibility to impose an additional rate on top of the national rate, and the imposition of their own taxes.

The decentralisation process set in motion during the nineties culminated in the 2001 constitutional reform that considerably increased the powers attributed to the Regional Governments, rendering the structure of the Italian Republic more similar to that of a federal state.

Most importantly, the powers of the central state are now expressly indicated by the Constitution; therefore those powers not specifically reserved for the Central Government are normally attributed to Regional Governments.

So, given such rather peculiar institutional and administrative background, it is indeed the case to provide a clear definition of what is to be intended as regional policies in a Country as Italy.

In Italy the term “regional policy” refers to a development policy aimed at strengthening cohesion, socio-economic balance and the competitive strength of specific territories.

As a matter of fact, Italy is characterised by a profound socio-economic imbalance between the more dynamic regions of Centre and North and the lagging behind ones in the South, the so called *Mezzogiorno d'Italia*.

In compliance with the indications of the Treaty of the European Union and the Italian Constitution, the emphasis is therefore placed on the intentional and additional nature of the policy focused on specific territories. More specifically, regional policy in Italy indicates a development policy supplementing ordinary actions carried out by either Central or Regional Governments. In this sense, the goal of regional policy takes into full consideration differences in regional development. It is geared, therefore, to ensuring that the objectives of competitive capacity are achieved by all the territories, including those that present socio-economic disparities, delays or situations of crisis tied to the loss of comparative advantages.

In Italy, “regional policy”, as defined above, is funded with resources allocated both by the European Union budget (the Structural Funds) and the National budget (the Fund for Under-Utilised Areas).

The dilemma shared by all ones involved in the programming and in the implementation of these resources lays in how to measure regional policies’ effectiveness for the sake of a major socio-economic cohesion. In a very few words, how can Mezzogiorno catch-up with the rest of Europe and how can Italy as a whole have at one time a competitive economy and balanced society.

Challenges in cohesion

The actual gap of Southern Italy with the rest of the Country and Europe is dated back in the centuries and it is due to many varied factors (culture, history, nature, etc.) So, the undeveloped situation of the Mezzogiorno has been somehow the very core of all Italian politics since the late fifties.

As for regional policies are concerned, it is possible to identify three main causes for Mezzogiorno to still have to catch-up with the rest of the Country. These are:

- ➔ combined effects of wrong policies;
- ➔ little trust between individuals and the State;
- ➔ the presence of organised crime.

Wrong economic policies in the sixties, seventies and eighties, which were mostly based on pointless infrastructures, subsidies and grants that were often scarcely planned, fragmented in the aims and dispersed in the space (the so called “cathedral in the deserts” and “rainfall aids”), reduced dramatically the level of competition and while any reform of the inadequate banking system has proven to be hardly possible no measure was taken to consistently boost genuine private initiatives and consistent investments.

Conditions have worsened also as a result of little trust in human endeavours that heavily discouraged the establishment of a competitive climate. But most of all, trust is vital for the State to carry out its functions.

As a consequence of this lack of trust, a demand for organisations that are the antithesis of the State arose: i.e.: organised crime found the nourishment to grow up strong and well-adjusted in such a situation. Organised crime contributed to erode further competition, to discourage growth of capital markets and to weaken and even infiltrate the State.

The combination of these enduring factors enacted a vicious circle of un-development that Mezzogiorno seems still unable to escape.

Persistence and incidence of organised crime in four regions of Southern Italy (Mezzogiorno)

| Regions | Municipalities affected | | Population | Surface |
|--------------|-------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | N° | % | % | % |
| CAMPANIA | 203 | 36.8 | 81.3 | 33.7 |
| APULIA | 97 | 37.6 | 72.5 | 59.9 |
| CALABRIA | 115 | 28.1 | 62.5 | 33.4 |
| SICILY | 195 | 50.0 | 82.0 | 63.2 |
| Total | 610 | 37.9 | 77.2 | 50.8 |

Source: CENSIS – 41° yearly report on the social state of the nation

Thanks to a lucky number of combined reasons, these three lethal factors (wrong policies, lack of trust and organised crime) had a serious setback in the early nineties.

The misguided economic policy was drastically interrupted in 1992 with the closing of the Agency for Southern Italy, the successor of the Development Fund (*Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*), and the privatisation of state-owned firms.

The overall reform of the banking system triggered a process that increased the transparency of the lending system and put adequate attention to creditworthiness of borrowers.

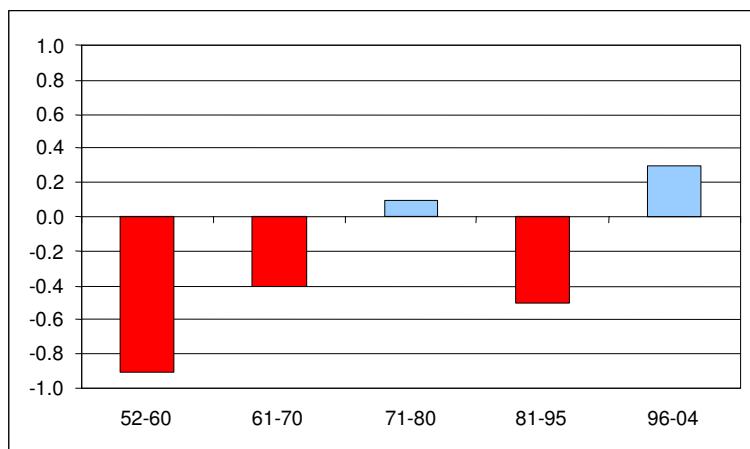
Stronger measures were introduced to fight against organised crime and a new political and social climate caused it to retreat, although at a certain extent.

The new economic policy for Southern Italy, adopted in 1998, contributed to firm up these trends giving rise to better government and collective actions.

Last but definitely not least, as a major part of such new policy, a more effective and efficient use of EU resources (Structural Funds) was required and set-up to give Mezzogiorno economy adequate stimuli.

As a matter of fact, between 1996 and 2004 South Italy growth was approximately three-tenths a year higher than in the rest of Italy. Such positive gap is unprecedented in Italian history after the establishment of the Republic.

Growth differential between Southern Italy and the rest of the Country
(average yearly percentage change of GDP at constant prices)



Source: compiled on the basis of ISTAT data, regional flow-of-fund accounts 1980-2003 and Svimez 1952-1980.

It is important to notice that Mezzogiorno growth rate was in no way aided by public capital expenditure (which grew as much as in Central and Northern Italy), by current public expenditure (as reflected by government agencies' spending) or by household consumption (which rose less than in the other regions of Italy).

Thus, growth was not boosted by public expenditure – via infrastructure spending, civil servant salaries or transfers to households – as was the case in previous decades.

Mezzogiorno faster growth was mainly determined by the starting of a virtuous growth cycle, driven by the local firms' greater competitiveness and propensity to risk.

Overall, Southern Italy does show that its growth since the mid-nineties has been faster than that in the rest of Italy, and that such growth has been characterised by greater competitiveness and productivity.

Yet, in general terms such growth rate has not been enough for Mezzogiorno to catch-up with the rest of Europe, also because of the profound economic difficulties experienced by the entire Country nowadays.

Paradoxically, after decades of regional (structural and cohesion) policies and massive investments, it can be said that Mezzogiorno situation which improved in relative terms is still unable to cope with the wider stagnation, loss of competitiveness and general decline characterising the Italian economy as a whole.

This is confirmed by the fact that, despite all pre-established objectives, the pace of growth of Southern Italy continues to lag behind the European average.

One of the fundamental causes of the crisis in Southern Italy and the rest of Italy appears to be the unsuitable production of collective goods. Such condition leads to the under utilisation of the productive potential (and the stagnation of productivity) in the whole territory.

The inability to produce collective goods is mostly given by a cultural weakness, such as the inadequacy of human behaviour in the face of its quantitative dimension: although people might share a common interest, they are too numerous, the society is too fragmented and the social transactions are so articulated to discourage anyone in doing what is necessary to fulfil that common interest.

The State is called upon to favour and make possible such a collective decision.

Italian regional development policy

These were the basic concepts underlying the decision to implement a multi-level governance policy in Italy, a policy characterised by putting strong emphasis on territories and human capital, pursuing effective partnership and stronger public decision-making process.

Given the peculiar Italian situation, the authority capable of performing such action is identified at the local level of government and the new territorial development policy is designed keeping in mind this local level of territorial governance.

The problem confronting this new policy is the paramount role that knowledge plays in the intermediation and collective decision-making process, especially at the local level.

The local Governments and the private entities acting on their behalf (Regional Development Agencies) can better trigger the provision of collective goods because they possess both:

- the appropriate knowledge about the collective needs to be satisfied first
- and the highly specialised knowledge about how these needs might be satisfied.

The implementation of this economic policy concept in Southern Italy has a fundamental role.

Moreover, there is no doubt that the introduction of such economic policy was favoured by the discipline that the European Union reasonably demands from Italy in improving efficiency in implementing the massive resources allocated to Mezzogiorno.

Hence, national policy for Mezzogiorno has been based upon the following key elements:

- focus on the provision of integrated collective services, with incentives (instead of subsidies) playing a complementary but increasingly role;
- multiple-level governance, with the central authorities providing guidance and control, Regional Governments setting out development priorities and local authorities generating coherent and consistent actions;

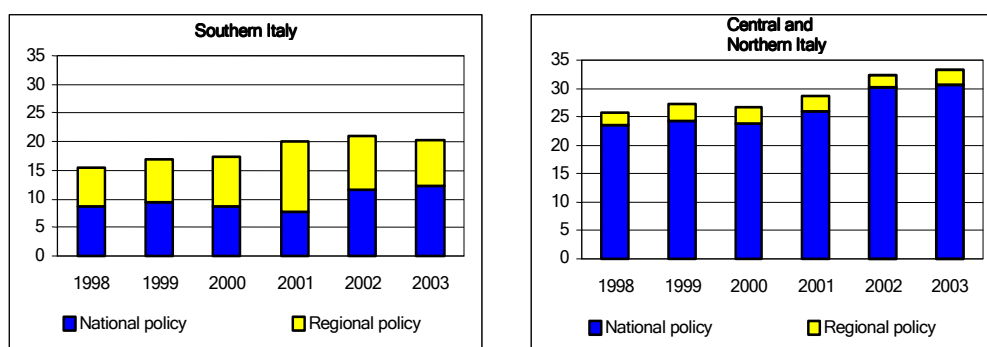
- set-up of an economic and social partnership both centrally and locally;
- strong capacity building commitments;
- dissemination of an evaluation culture for assessing the impact of public investments.

As for the period 2000-2006, the financial dimension of national policy for Mezzogiorno can now be weighted, especially through a system of territorial public accounts designed in close cooperation with the Regional Governments.

The total capital expenditure in the two macro-areas of the Country (approximately 20 billion euros in Southern Italy and 33 billion euros in Central and Northern Italy) is broken down between the component financed and managed according to regional policy – by the central State or by the Regional Governments – and the traditional sector-oriented component.

The financial dimension of the new regional policy

(billions of euros)



Source: DPS Unified Financial Framework and Territorial Public Accounts – 2004 DPS Report

In the figure above, capital expenditure (public investments for infrastructures and incentives) are broken down into ordinary expenditure (dark coloured in the chart) and into additional EU and National expenditure for regional policy (light coloured in the chart).

The national policy was harmonised with the EU cohesion policy also thanks to the establishment of the Fund for the Under-utilised Areas, which is now managed in accordance with rules similar to those of the EU regional policy.

Thus, the improvements in efficiency and effectiveness that were originally the mark of EU funded actions were now extended to the national regional policy too.

In the 2000-2006 period, the ability of government agencies, especially regional agencies, to schedule resources, to select, manage and complete projects as well as to spend funds has improved markedly. Evidence to this is that, contrary to other European Countries, Italy did not experience any cut in the allocation of funds by the European Union.

Substantial progress has been made in upgrading regional administration and in improving their efficiency through an extensive and innovative use of reward-punishment methods whereby the transfer of several billions of euros managed by the Regions was conditional on the improvement of administrative capabilities.

On the basis of a substantial injection of additional funds as determined in the Community Support Framework 2000-2006, as well as thanks to this strong combination between regional and national policies, the potential productivity jump was measured, bringing Southern Italy's growth rate to have the positive outcomes described so far.

Italy and the Structural Funds

The main use of Structural Funds in Italy is aimed at supporting the less developed area (namely Objective 1 regions) of the Mezzogiorno.

While the Structural Funds non addressed to these regions (Objectives 2 and 3) were negotiated with the European Commission and managed by each Regional Government separately, via single programming documents, the whole set of Structural Funds for the Objective 1 Regions was included into a Community Support Framework (CSF) negotiated and agreed by the Central Government and the European Commission. The CSF identified a number of priorities and each Operational Programmes had to be conceived in line with those.

The amount negotiated with the European Commission was approximately 24 billion euro, while approximately 22 billion euro from national public (both Central and Regional Governments) and private resources co-financed the CSF for a total of approximately 46 billions euro.

Italian CSF 2000-2006 - Financial breakdown

| PRIORITIES | TOTAL | Total Public Funds | PUBLIC FUNDS | | PRIVATE FUNDS |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| | | | EC contributions | National contributions | |
| | | | Total | Total | |
| <i>I - NATURAL RESOURCES</i> | 7,795,292,226 € | 7,794,645,088 € | 3,967,770,712 € | 3,826,874,376 € | 647,138 € |
| <i>II - CULTURAL RESOURCES</i> | 2,625,069,383 € | 2,624,163,969 € | 1,280,791,074 € | 1,343,372,895 € | 905,414 € |
| <i>III - HUMAN RESOURCES</i> | 8,565,027,250 € | 8,194,105,855 € | 5,238,649,966 € | 2,955,455,889 € | 370,921,395 € |
| <i>IV - LOCAL SYSTEMS</i> | 15,077,408,392 € | 14,855,432,043 € | 7,765,985,439 € | 7,089,446,604 € | 221,976,349 € |
| <i>V - URBAN AREAS</i> | 2,109,725,071 € | 2,109,725,071 € | 1,040,863,288 € | 1,068,861,783 € | 0 € |
| <i>VI - NETWORKS AND HUBS</i> | 9,281,308,767 € | 9,276,756,270 € | 4,281,388,229 € | 4,995,368,041 € | 4,552,497 € |
| <i>TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE</i> | 621,912,058 € | 621,912,058 € | 383,551,292 € | 238,360,766 € | 0 € |
| TOTAL | 46,075,743,147 € | 45,476,740,354 € | 23,959,000,000 € | 21,517,740,354 € | 599,002,793 € |

Source: Community Support Framework for Italian Objective 1 Regions 2000-2006 Mid term review updated

In Italy the 2000-2006 CSF for the Objective 1 Regions has been articulated into 14 Operational Programmes (OPs):

- ➡ 7 Regional OPs (territorial-conceived);
- ➡ 7 National OPs (sector-conceived).

The Regional Governments contractors of the Obj.1 OPs were: Basilicata, Calabria, Campania, Apulia, Sardinia and Sicily. Managing Authority of each OP was the relevant Regional Government. All the Regional OPs followed the same standardised structure and were articulated into six chapters, such as: analysis of the starting situation, development strategy, main priorities of assistance, measures, financial plan, conditions for implementation.

National (Sector) OPs for the Obj. 1 were 7 and concerned the following subjects: scientific research, school, security, local enterprise development, transport, fisheries, technical assistance and system action. Managing Authorities were the relevant Ministries.

The Central Government has been directly responsible only for the National OPs encompassing almost the 30% of the overall allocation, while the 70% was managed directly by the Regional Governments. The Ministry of Economy and Finance acted as Managing Authority of the CSF; in such position it was the co-ordinating authority setting general rules and guidelines for monitoring and evaluation.

First versions of the OPs were approved in year 2000. Afterwards, the CSF and the OPs were reviewed and adjusted in the middle of the programming period (2004) in accordance both with the mid-term evaluation and the allocation of the performance reserve for promoting efficiency, effectiveness, management and financial implementation.

Such performance reserve consists of appropriate incentive devices set-up to encourage Regions to implement administrative reforms and to pursue high quality projects, both in terms of concentration and integration. The 4% performance reserve foreseen by EU Regulations was considered as an opportunity to hasten the upgrading of Managing Authorities and reach higher quality standards. The Commission proposal was therefore strengthened (with the addition of a 6% national reserve) and turned into an effective reward system.

An evaluation of regional policy for the period 2000-2006 requires distinguishing between financial terms (in relation to the efficient absorption of the funds allocated) and the real impact (in relation to the quality and effectiveness of the initiatives carried out).

As for the financial absorption, overall the Italian performance was definitely satisfactory not only in absolute terms but also compared to the previous period which was characterised by very poor performance and automatic de-commitment.

EU Structural Funds for Italy 2000-2006

Comparison between results and values at 2005 (mid term review)

| Objectives | Value (a) | Result (b) | Rate of absorption (%) (c) = 100 x (b)/(a) |
|---------------------------|------------------|------------------|---|
| Objective 1 | 12.056,60 | 12.623,80 | 104,70 |
| Objective 2 | 1.366,60 | 1.453,80 | 106,40 |
| Objective 3 | 2.248,60 | 2.473,20 | 110,00 |
| Others, such as: | 673,90 | 713,70 | 105,90 |
| <i>IC Urban</i> | <i>56,00</i> | <i>64,50</i> | <i>115,10</i> |
| <i>IC Interreg</i> | <i>242,50</i> | <i>258,70</i> | <i>106,70</i> |
| <i>IC Equal</i> | <i>193,40</i> | <i>201,10</i> | <i>104,00</i> |
| <i>IC Leader Plus</i> | <i>124,40</i> | <i>131,30</i> | <i>105,60</i> |
| <i>FIFG outside Obj.1</i> | <i>57,60</i> | <i>58,10</i> | <i>100,80</i> |
| TOTAL | 16.345,70 | 17.264,50 | 105,60 |

Millions of euro and %

However, the primary role played by the Structural Funds in being additional to national resources was also (indirectly?) beneficial for activating a virtuous circle based on principles and practices of efficient and accountable governance, such as the one implicitly required by the EU. This implied the design of an accurate system of attribution and distribution of powers and tasks among the different levels of administration.

As a matter of fact, the improvement of the synergies between Central and Regional Governments, together with the building of capabilities and expertise, constituted an intermediate objective of EU policy in all the Regions of the Country, playing a priority role in Southern Italy.

Seen in this light, the results generally appear to be quite close to the objectives:

- financial efficiency has markedly increased, both for EU funds, where the loss of resources has been stopped, and for National regional funds;
- management capacity has grown in all the administrative bodies;
- cooperation between the Central and Regional Governments has been noteworthy improved thanks to innovative contractual methods and with the support of incentive mechanisms;
- a new economic and social partnership has arisen, including the regional and local levels.

In more general terms, and with specific reference to Mezzogiorno, in almost all regions the implementation of the new regional policy has created a system of incentives that has tended to radically alter the operating characteristics of the regional governments, in areas such as the management of public investments.

The achievement of noteworthy final results in terms of the quality of services can definitely reinforce this process, cutting away the old practices under which resources were previously managed.

Especially looking at Southern Italy, the final results tend to meet the objectives. This is true of both the growth rate (as seen earlier) and the quality of services.

The weakness experienced in the implementation of the new regional policy in the Mezzogiorno can be summarised in three main issues, such as:

- a low quality (even the inadequacy) of the initiatives funded, this is measured by the insufficient concentration of priorities established at the start of the Operational Programmes, the difficulties in funding the most innovative projects and in promoting coalitions of protagonists; the failure to draw inter-regional plans and cooperation;
- an inadequate banks-to-business relationship, together with intermittent incentive performance: these two factors have contributed to depriving businesses of certain financial resources that could have been used to take advantage of the development opportunities created by the new policy;
- an underestimation of the time needed to achieve the objectives; in particular, the initial underestimation of the level of backwardness and inefficiency of the Public Administration involved in the policy for Mezzogiorno made it appear that the intermediate objectives could be achieved earlier than occurred, and, even more crucially, that this would rapidly have an effect on the capacity for selecting projects and, therefore, on their effectiveness.

The elements outlined above also represent the lesson learnt from the 2000-2006 programming period and undoubtedly they have been translated into ideas for changes as for 2007-2013.

The new programming period bases its main features both in term of continuity with the positive trends which marked the 2000-2006 period and discontinuity with its limits.

Three main positive features characterising the previous period paved the way and will lead the criteria for the new programming, such as:

- throughout the Country, regional policy, at both the EU and national levels, has to be aimed at objectives of productivity, competitive strength and innovation, accompanied by a marked focus on social inclusion and on the quality of life and the environment;
- the most effective approach to pursuing these objectives, therefore, is to produce and promote everywhere collective services which, by raising the quality of life, work and business activities, attract individuals and capital while integrating these initiatives with focused incentives;
- Mezzogiorno still presents a high level of under-utilised development potential and has so many critical problems that it would be best not only to confirm the greater allocation as the previous cycle of planning, but also to establish an appropriate form of strategic unity.

At the same time, it is precisely the experience of 2000-2006 that points to the need for the introduction into regional political action of a number of significant points of methodological innovation, in order to remove the obstacles encountered to date.

The most relevant and general examples characterising the new programming period can then be summarised as follows:

- the unification of the two funding components of regional policy (EU Structural Funds and the National Fund for Under-utilised Areas) is going to be fully implemented in both the general plan and in the central and regional operational action plans, as well as in the unification of responsibilities for implementation at all levels of government;

- the integration by the central and regional administrative bodies of the regional policy within ordinary policy must be pursued, as a guarantee of the additional nature, in terms of financing of regional policy, as well as of its effectiveness; this is also a precondition for ensuring that regional policy is no longer perceived as a subsidiary system for areas in difficulty, but rather an instrument that can really help to renew and transform sector policies that are often antiquated or ineffective, on account of its territorial scope, the clarity of the objectives, the rigor of the method and the participatory nature of the design and implementation processes;
- the priorities are identified with greater courage than in the past, multi-regional projects of significant impact will take on a major role, especially in Southern Italy. However, the selection of priorities will be possible and may be safeguarded during the process of implementation, only if it is supported both through a bolder distribution of the decision-making process and thanks to a stronger culture of evaluation;
- the quality of services becomes the goal of regional policy in a way to favour a broadly-supported and consensual rebalancing from incentives to public investments;
- the banking system must be strategically and operationally involved in regional policy, above and beyond the new role it is invited to play in reforming incentives.

In line with the new EC Regulations on Structural Funds, the CSF has been replaced by a lighter form of funds governance, such as a National Reference Framework to which all OPs shall respond in terms of coherence and consistency.

In the case of Italy, 66 OPs are going to be financed and the ratio of management distribution adopted for the previous programming period will be maintained, confirming a share of the 70% under the management responsibility of the Regional Governments and the remaining 30% in the hands of the National Ministries.

These OPs will be financed by only one Structural Fund each according to this breakdown:

- 42 OPs are financed by the ERDF;
- 24 OPs are financed by the ESF.

In line with the lesson learnt, to the usual differentiation between National and Regional OPs a third typology of OP is added such as: the Interregional OPs, which will deal with all those aspects where a coordinated action from multiple Regional and National actors is required.

All OPs are referred to the three Objective of the EC Cohesion Policy for 2007-2013, such as:

- 33 OPs encompassing the central and northern regions plus the Mezzogiorno phasing in regions will refer to the Objective of Regional Competitiveness and Employment;
- 19 OPs encompassing Mezzogiorno regions will refer to the Objective of Convergence;
- 7 OPs will be referred to the European Territorial Cooperation.

As a conclusion of this quick overview, the main lesson to be derived from the Italian experience can be summarised in the following few statements.

Regional policy should be based on strong national consensus.

This consensus shall be pursued and expressed in all the form of policy implementation, starting from the strategic planning to the implementation of the single actions. Consensus means that all rules of the game have to be followed and respected by all players, the role of the Central Government is therefore the one to lay down these rules and enact a system of evaluation and assessment which could in both reward efficiency and ensure impact effectiveness.

In this line of thinking, the new programming period should be carried out on the basis of a strong consensus rooted in shared cultural and political beliefs.

In broader terms, this is a substantial principle that should be applied to any regional policy.

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