



Local Authorities and Pandemic Responses in Perspective. Reflections from the Case of Milan

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Abstract. While in general the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic have been analysed in academic literature from many points of view, such as the medical, occupational, social, economic and psychological ones, much less attention has been paid to the systems of norms which, in an emergency situation, have been elaborated and applied, and to their relationship with space.

In order to explore this gap, the paper will propose to open a discussion on the role and effects of systems of pandemic regulation at local level, proposing a research framework and some very first applications to a specific case, the City of Milan in Northern Italy, an area badly hit by the pandemic.

The paper thus moves from three research questions, related to questions of framing, governance, and timescale of the effects, as the main interpretive perspectives to understand and conceptualise the relationship between norms, actors, and decision-making processes, with a specific focus on the spatial realm. While the case in point chosen is the City of Milan, the research questions open to a wider debate, and to possible cross-context comparisons with other urban areas.

Keywords: Covid-19 restrictions · Pandemic regulation · Local authorities preparedness

1 Pandemic Restrictions and Local Scale

The pandemic has caused effects that can be read at different scales, but with a significant concentration at the local scale, the scale of people's daily lives. While the pandemic diffusion is indeed global and has reminded all of us of the inherent interconnectedness of contemporary life, based on flows and mobility, the actual effects of the main restriction strategies chosen by most governments across the world have been very much linked to the actual spaces inhabited, used and negotiated in daily life.

While, in general, action to curb, or at least to slow down the pace of the pandemic has been largely based on medical and pharmaceutical intervention, such as hospitalization, hospitalization in ICUs for the most serious cases, and pharmaceutical treatment at home (Giordano et al. 2020), we can highlight, in parallel, how non-pharmaceutical intervention has been consistently gaining ground, even if in different ways and with different pace in different countries regions of the world (Bo et al. 2020; Bendavid

et al. 2021). In this field, we can list and discuss restrictions to individual behaviour and restrictions to activities, both of which we will examine more in depth in the next sections.

The effects of the many restrictions imposed have been analysed from multiple points of view, at the personal, occupational, social, economic, psychological levels. On the contrary, the systems of norms which, in an emergency situation, have been elaborated and applied has been much less investigated (Di Mascio et al. 2020). There are indeed useful repositories of different types of norms (e.g. the *Covid-19 Government Response Tracker*, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford¹), but in general literature on the specific role of norms, and their relationships with the use of space (Pasqui 2022), is quite scant.

This paper thus aims to open a discussion on the role and effects of systems of pandemic regulation at local level, proposing a research framework and some very first applications to a specific case. Even norms which regulate behaviors visible at the local scale, on the other hand, are located at different scales, and are therefore linked to different institutional levels, to their interactions, to the models of government (and governance) experienced in a situation of strong emergency.

In order to investigate such regulatory aspects, the paper proposes a path towards a critical reconstruction of the debate, the decisions taken, and the system of rules applied by the Municipality of Milan, an area heavily affected by the pandemic, especially in the first phase during the spring of 2020. In order to read such responses in a dynamic and evolutionary way, the analysis will concern the period between February 2020 and September 2021. While the former date represents the very start of the pandemic diffusion in Italy, the latter one enables to reflect on the emerging elements with some time distancing.

With respect to this background, the paper moves from three research questions, related to as many interpretive perspectives on the relationship between norms, actors, and decision-making processes, with a specific focus on the spatial realm. While the case in point chosen is the City of Milan, in Northern Italy, the research questions open to a wider debate, and to possible cross-context comparisons with other urban areas.

2 Framing, Governance, Effects: Building a Conceptual Map

2.1 Local Government Responses to Covid-19: Research Questions

The first question is related to *framing* (Schön, Rein 1994) and it investigates how framing has been contributing to the definition of the problem to tackle, and therefore to shaping the regulatory and policy responses. The paper aims at better understanding how the Municipality of Milan, in its political and technical/bureaucratic components, did understand and conceptualise the pandemic; in order to do so, it is important to explore which interpretative, normative and operational frameworks were the basis of City of Milan's intervention in the different phases, and what was the role played by emergency in it, and by the ways to address it. Moreover, we might further investigate if emergency itself has been used more or less instrumentally.

¹ <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker>.

Along these same lines, it will be important to investigate the way in which radical uncertainty has been conceptualised in the discourses and interventions brought about by this Local Administration, both in general (which means, in relation to different sets of unexpected or disruptive occurrences), and in the specific case of the Covid-19 pandemic. What conceptual and normative frameworks have they drawn on to address it? Was the specific type of pandemic emergency present in policy documents, discourses, administrative culture? Was there some form of preparedness towards these emergencies, and how was it defined in organizational terms?

In relation to the conceptualization of uncertainty, it is useful to further examine the issue of emergency, the conceptualization of the pandemic as a state of emergency, and thus the justification/legitimation of norms proposed and designed as responses to unprecedented and exceptional situations.

The second question concerns the *models of government and governance* that have been tested in practice to manage the pandemic situation (Capano 2020). In what way was the production of ad hoc norms the combined effect of vertical (EU-Government-Region Lombardia-Municipality of Milan) and horizontal (with other local agencies, and other public and private stakeholders) forms of comparison and interaction? How much, therefore, are the ordinances and other regulations produced the result of exogenous processes of interaction, decision-making and evaluation and how much endogenous? What forms and modes of regulation were chosen and why?

The third question has to do with the *short- and medium-term effects of the norms* applied. We want to discuss whether, and in what way, the Milanese municipal administration has evaluated the specific effects of the regulations produced both on a national and local scale, in the short and in the medium term. The type of regulation issued, the different texts, ordinances, strategic documents, etc., have had very different effects on both citizen behaviour and spatial transformation, and the ongoing research aims at critically assessing them, in their dynamic effects (Fig. 1).

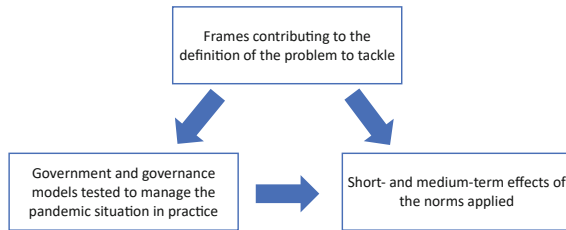


Fig. 1. Conceptual map of research questions

2.2 Main Research Steps

To discuss these aspects, the research, still underway, is based on the analysis of a mix of secondary and primary sources.

Operationally, it is organized in three steps. The first one is a *punctual collection of data on the progress of the pandemic* in Italy and in Milan between February 2020 and

September 202, concerning the development and spread of the pandemic, as well as its spatial distribution, mortality, hospitalization and ICUs, etc.

The second one is the *collection and critical interpretation of the norms produced*. They include both the Italian national decrees and the local ordinances, sectoral policies and strategic documents issued by the Municipality of Milan, looking at how many and which ones have been issued; how often they have been issued; whether local ordinances simply implemented the national decrees or if they integrate, specify, and make the national norms more restrictive or locally targeted.

Finally, the third step will include *in-depth interviews* with politicians and technical bureaucrats of the Milan municipal administration, as well as, depending on the evidence that emerges, with other local players (experts in the health domain, representatives of other agencies, decentralized state administrations, private interests, etc.).

The first research steps concern the collection and analysis of the documents produced by the Municipality of Milan in response to the pandemic, since February 2020. As we have seen, the Municipality has responded to the pandemic emergency and its aftermath through different type of documents, such as Mayoral ordinances, strategic documents, and sectoral policies.

Mayoral ordinances, which are immediately applicable, concern a wide range of issues, from constraints on individual behaviour to constraints to activities. In the first phases, such ordinances concern also procedural streamlining and simplification, as well as the suspension of sets ‘ordinary’ rules and practices, such as vehicle traffic limitations. Finally, some of them contain first support measures to individuals and economic activities. While in 2020 the Mayor issued 34 ordinances, in 2021 he issued 8. As far as the local regulatory texts are concerned, the ordinances issued by the Municipality include measures introducing restrictions to personal behaviour and activities; bureaucratic simplification and reduction of red tape; temporary suspension of ordinary measures, rules and uses; support and welfare measures, aimed both at citizens in fragile situations and at economic activities in distress.

A second type of document issued has less coercive power compared to ordinances, because it mainly holds a strategic value, which means that it acts as a guideline for future policy design or rule-making. A Strategic Document on pandemic adaptation has first been issued by the Municipality of Milan in April 2020 (Comune di Milano 2020) and it has been opened up to extended public debate through a public participation process aimed at collecting different points of view and possible suggestions from citizens and their organisations.

Finally, the Municipal offices have issued a number of sectoral documents, with more or less cogent power, concerning different domains of their action, such as school, public space, mobility, etc. Among them we can mention the *Patto Milano per la Scuola*, jointly promoted by the Prefect of Milan (the local representative of the National Government) and the Mayor; (Prefettura di Milano 2020; 2021) the Guidelines for the Occupation of public land; different policy measures concerning mobility, and a number of policies in the area of social assistance.

These strategic or sectoral documents propose a wide range of more or less coercive regulatory tools, such as policy recommendations and different type of procedural reorganization, or short- and medium-term incentives. Moreover, looking towards the

pandemic aftermath, they propose recovery and adaptation strategies, through the development of possible future scenarios, as well as piloting policy innovations. These last ones, in particular, suggest that the Municipality may have used the emergency situation to propose and test (more or less) disruptive policy measures, such as the ones linked to forms of slow mobility or the so called ‘city of proximity’. These measures, related to the pandemic adaptation, but wider in scope, may have been implemented in any case, while the emergency situation can be seen as an occasion to modify the political opportunity structure (Tilly, Tarrow 2007), by exploiting the state of emergency and speeding up decisions that would have otherwise required extensive confrontation with the municipal structure, and outside.

3 Local Rules and Urban Effects. Emerging Research Directions

3.1 First Reflections on New Regulation Introduced During the Pandemic

In the wake of the framework outlined, it is possible to propose some first considerations, even if our research is still underway.

One first issue concerns the conceptualisation of emergency by the City of Milan: here, following considerations on the national response to the pandemic, it is possible to highlight that emergency situations tend to unveil the ordinary mismatches and disfunctions of institutional action (Capano 2020). More than the specific response or preparedness to the exceptional situation, therefore, the type of institutional response and reveals the ordinary capacity and robustness of institutions, local ones in this case.

Secondly, the analysis of local regulatory responses critically highlights the complexity of the relationship with national and regional systems of norms and their evolution, with the risk of loss of clarity, ambiguity and possible duplications. Moreover, it is possible to highlight how the measures included in local ordinances (restrictions, simplification, suspensions, support) have a totally different degree of cogency and imply different levels and intensity of control, even if they tend to be mixed in the same texts and therefore may generate confusion and ambiguity.

Lastly, as we have seen, emergency regulation can be seen as an opportunity to bring forth policy innovations which are already in the political agenda, but maybe difficult to promote in ‘ordinary’ times. In this sense, the changing structures of political opportunities pushed by the emergency situation enables the piloting and testing of forms of policy innovations. Some interventions on public space and on the road network, aimed at fostering and facilitating slow mobility (walking and cycling) have been publicly legitimized and justified as linked to the pandemic emergency, even if they would have probably been proposed regardless, maybe with a different timing.

3.2 Further Research Directions

Finally, we can highlight that many of these aspects need further exploration, since they are interesting suggestions, that have to be further probed through deeper conceptual and empirical investigation. Such investigation may lead to unpack the dimension of institutional learning. In order to understand whether the Municipality of Milan has

learned from the pandemic experience, specifically in the area of emergency and recovery regulation, it will be necessary to examine through what processes this learning has taken place (interaction with external actors, internal review and evaluation processes, etc.), how has this learning been institutionalised and, finally, how it may become a guide for the production of regulations in other emergency situations.

Looking at different sectoral domains, it will be important to unpack the temporal dimensions, and distinguish short terms effects related to pandemic mitigation from longer terms institutional learning effects. This distinction will be relevant to interpret more precisely the developments in domains such as the reorganization of school spaces, and of their interface with their surroundings (Prefettura di Milano 2021), or the city of proximity and the new relevance of the neighbourhood level (Comune di Milano 2020).

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