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## Migration Governance and the Role of the Third Sector in Small-sized Towns in Italy

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The paper makes an innovative contribution to studies on the local governance of migration by considering the role played by Third Sector actors in three small municipalities in northern Italy: a mountain village, a rural village, and a town located at the edge of the great Milanese conurbation. The cases shed light on the implications that a small size can have for understanding the policy outputs and challenges of migration governance at the local level. Building on comparative qualitative data, the paper describes common features that can be observed in the local policy arena of small municipalities, such as the reduced number and limited heterogeneity of Third Sector actors, ease of access to local decision-makers, and blurred boundaries between politics and administration. It shows that such features can be associated with specific inclusionary and/or exclusionary policies that can be explained by local associational ecologies and local governments' political orientation, despite the (often) limited human and economic resources available, but also by the activation of policy entrepreneurs and supra-local networks.

Keywords: migration governance, small-sized town, Third Sector, policy entrepreneurs

### Introduction

In the past two decades, migratory flows in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand have been increasingly directed towards new destinations, including new metropolitan gateway cities (Cisneros et al., 2009), small and medium-sized cities (Bonizzoni & Marzorati, 2015; Sánchez-Flores, 2018), and mountain and rural areas (Fonseca, 2008; Galera et al., 2019; Hedberg & Haandrikman, 2014). The phenomenon has been studied mainly in the US (Marrow, 2011; Massey, 2008; Smith & Furueth, 2006), while the issue has only recently received attention from scholars in Europe (on Germany: Kreichauf, 2015; on Spain: Morén-Alegret, 2008; on Sweden: Scarpa, 2015; on the UK: Hackett, 2020; on France: Frigoli, 2010; on Italy: Barberis & Pavolini, 2015). Few studies have tried to understand if structural factors, including population size and the municipality's level of urbanisation, could have an impact on local immigration governance (Schammann et al., 2021) and, more specifically, if factors ascribable to the city scale and dimension might impact the role played by Third Sector actors in the local governance of migration.

Our paper intends to contribute to this debate by analysing the local governance of migration in three small municipalities in northern Italy which are characterised by different migrant settlement patterns: Breno, a mountain village; Sermide, a rural village; and Mortara, a town at the edge of the great Milanese conurbation. We aim to look at the role played by Third Sector actors, as defined by Salamon and Sokolowski (2016)—that is to say, a large heterogeneous set of organisations, including non-profit institutions, cooperatives, social

enterprises, voluntary, community and civil society organisations. While the role of these actors is increasingly recognised as crucial to providing services and exercising advocacy towards the migrant population, how (and why) their actions might reveal specific opportunities and challenges in small municipalities is still to be fully understood.

After discussing our analytical framework in light of the main theoretical debates on the topic, the research design is shown. The empirical part will follow, with an overview of the context in which the three case studies are set and a description of the type of Third Sector actor at play, the different approaches they adopt, the services they provide, and the forms of collaboration they have developed with the public sector. We will shed light on what we argue are some recurring variables in explaining the configuration of the local governance of migration in small-sized municipalities and the resulting policy outputs, namely the reduced number and limited heterogeneity of the local associational ecologies; local governments' political orientation; the activation of policy entrepreneurs; and the building and/or strengthening of supra-local networks.

As we explain in Marzorati et al. (2017), when we talk about small-sized municipalities we refer not only to the (maximum) number of inhabitants (in the statistical administrative definition adopted by the Italian National Institute for Statistics, the threshold is 5,000), but to other factors that are also relevant, including the extent to which the municipality is more or less peripheral and connected to larger cities (see Balbo, 2015). This is crucial as it allows us to put small-sized municipalities into context concerning migration flows and to take into consideration their scalar position in patterns and dynamics of territorial interdependence (Brenner, 1998; Glick-Schiller & Çağlar, 2011). The literature has often described similar municipalities as disempowered and fragile (Glick-Schiller & Çağlar, 2011; Osti, 2016; Servillo et al., 2017), but as we will show, they are not.

## **Local Policymaking and the Role of the Third Sector in Migration Governance**

Studies have highlighted the role of local key actors, including Third Sector actors, in local migration governance (Schammann et al., 2021), and their relevance is underlined in all phases of the policymaking process (Campomori, 2008; De Graauw, 2015; París & Müller, 2016). The needs of refugees and migrants, including those without residence rights (Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015), are often addressed by non-governmental and non-profit organisations (Dimitriadis et al., 2021), as these deliver various forms of support to migrants (including language courses, healthcare, clothing, food, shelter/reception and legal advice). Advocacy is also listed as a major contribution of civil society actors in the immigration and refugee field (Cordero-Guzmán et al., 2008; Cullen, 2009; Garkisch et al., 2017; Minkenbergh, 2008): as immigration turns into an increasingly controversial issue, Third Sector actors can strengthen their position in the public debate, contrasting (local) policies of exclusion (Itçaina & Burchianti, 2013).

The role of Third Sector actors in service provision and the different kinds of relationships they can establish with relevant public actors (Balbo, 2015; Marzorati et al., 2017; Mayblin & James, 2018; Milbourne, 2013) should be understood in light of the political orientation of (local) governmental agencies (Balbo, 2015). According to some, regardless of different political orientations, pragmatic forms of convergence towards interventions aimed at including migrants can be observed at the local level (see Schiller, 2015). However, municipalities (or other local governmental agencies) can respond to the hostile attitudes of local populations by deciding not to take charge of immigration-related issues. While some local authorities have opened welfare and reception services to migrants (Ambrosini, 2018; Davis et al., 2016), others have instead designed exclusionary—when not explicitly discriminatory—interventions (Ambrosini, 2012; Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Caneva, 2014; Chand & Schreckhise,

2015; Gargiulo, 2017; Gilbert, 2009). In this respect, the key role of non-governmental actors and organisations was especially evident at the time of the so-called humanitarian crisis, when several local governments struggled—or refused—to handle the challenges associated with asylum seekers’ reception issues (also exemplified by the high number of municipalities that, in the Italian case, did not adhere to the voluntary national programme of refugee reception).

While the role of Third Sector actors standing in for states’ organized non-responsibility (Pries, 2019) might be crucial in providing resources additional to those channelled by the public welfare system, which might be especially critical for non-entitled (e.g. unregistered, undocumented) migrants (Ataç et al., 2020) and in less resourceful territories (such as in several small or peripheral local contexts), outsourcing by the public sector to Third Sector actors is also a widely reported phenomenon (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020; Caponio, 2005; Sempredon 2021). Governance processes and regulatory powers deriving from public-private partnerships and funding make the boundaries between Third Sector actors and the State increasingly blurred in this respect (Andrews & Edwards, 2004).

Third Sector actors exhibit considerable variation in their structure, identities and goals (Ambrosini, 2018; Caponio, 2005; Castañeda, 2007; Fauser, 2016). Migration scholars have traditionally associated them with trade unions (Ambrosini et al., 2017), but churches and faith-based organisations (including Caritas;<sup>1</sup> see Itçaina & Burchianti, 2013) also represent crucial partners for local authorities in several countries (Bassi, 2014; Itçaina & Burchianti, 2013), together with migrants’ associations (Ramakrishnan & Lewis, 2005) and politicised militant groups (Rygiel, 2011). Third Sector actors can show different degrees of professionalisation, from large non-profit social enterprises to small informal volunteer-run organisations, and can orient themselves primarily or exclusively towards service provision and/or political advocacy and support. While some Third Sector actors are capable of openly denouncing and combatting exclusionary policies, and are eager to do so, others deliberately choose to avoid overt attacks on policymakers (Ambrosini & Van der Leun, 2015). How advocacy is exercised depends on the position that Third Sector actors establish with governmental actors in the provision of services to refugees, and on their ideological and cultural background (Fehsenfeld & Levinsen, 2019). Many fear, in this respect, that by engaging in public welfare delivery, Third Sector actors could become increasingly reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them (Bloodgood & Tremblay-Boire, 2017; Carmel & Harlock, 2008; Hodgson, 2004; Onyx et al., 2010).

Several studies have shown how Third Sector actors can also be limited in their capacity to influence local policymaking by a scarcity of human and economic resources (Caponio, 2005; Garkisch et al., 2017; Penninx, 2004; Phillimore & McCabe, 2010). At the same time, when Third Sector organisations collaborate with the public sector, reciprocal opportunities for institutional learning can arise (Boris et al., 2010).

Apart from collective actors, individuals are also found to play a relevant role (Schammann et al., 2021) in the local government of migration. In this respect, decisions made by administrative officials are influenced not only by a variety of non-institutional actors and advocacy groups, but also by factors internal to institutions themselves. This includes the discretionary powers of administrative officials (De Graauw, 2015; Van der Leun, 2006) and the role played by policy entrepreneurs (Mintrom & Norman, 2009<sup>2</sup>). Mintrom and Norman

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<sup>1</sup> Caritas is a well-known religious institution that has delivered charity since 1971. Its work at the local level is implemented in Italy through 220 local organisations (*Caritas Diocesane*), which are engaged in diverse social and charitable tasks such as drop-in centres, observatories on poverty, parochial services, shelters, etc.

<sup>2</sup> According to Mintrom and Norman, policy entrepreneurs operate as ‘advocates of policy change’ contributing to develop convincing arguments on how to define a problem, building advocacy coalitions and developing pilot projects exemplifying how policy change can take place through their connection within policy networks and their understanding of the local policy context.

(2009) describe as policy entrepreneurs those individuals operating as advocates of policy change by putting forward convincing arguments on how to define a problem and drive policy change; by developing policy networks; and by building advocacy coalitions and promoting pilot projects. While Mintrom and Norman refer mostly to mayor entrepreneurs, following Garcés-Mascareñas and Gebhardt (2020), we argue that policy entrepreneurs can also be found among Third Sector actors and that their presence is relevant in explaining the processes of local migration policymaking in small-sized municipalities, adding to municipalities' political orientation and to small associational ecologies.

### **Small-Sized Towns: Contextualising the Role of the Third Sector**

In the wider context of small-sized towns, little investigation has been made into the nature and functioning of the Third Sector, with some exceptions that point out several issues that might be relevant to consider to understand specific outcomes in terms of local forms of immigration governance.

Baglioni et al. (2007) and Kriesi and Baglioni (2003) suggest that small-sized towns tend to be characterised by the presence of a smaller number of actors and a more limited associational heterogeneity. This means that in small cities we do not usually observe the same variability and heterogeneity in terms of identities, values and socio-political backgrounds, degrees of professionalisation, or resources that the local Third Sector manifests in a large city. Size might also affect the resources available to local public and private actors, including not only financial resources, but also information and expertise (Schammann et al., 2021), such as that deriving from a more or less established history of migration and integration policies (Williamson, 2018). Weaknesses in the local integration infrastructure (Glorius et al., 2021) might encourage collaboration with the Third Sector to allow local administrations to implement measures that would otherwise be unsustainable.

The limited number of actors with denser networks, evident in small cities, may facilitate the communication among key local actors including especially the communication between the civil society and the public administration (i.e. in order to have an appointment with a mayor, a civil society member in small cities is less likely to go through a long bureaucratic procedure and may be in a position to take direct contact) (Balbo, 2015). Small is not synonymous with more inclusive, either (Coenders & Scheepers, 2008). Research highlights, in fact, that the increased social density of relationships in rural places resulting from the need for neighbourly solidarity in the absence or weakness of State institutions might be combined with a high amount of social control (Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Glorius et al., 2021) that could lead to exclusionary outcomes. As far as Italy is concerned, anti-immigrant protests have frequently been associated with small-sized municipalities (Marzorati & Semprebon, 2018), just as the exclusionary and discriminatory local policies implemented by municipalities often concern small ones (Ambrosini, 2012).

We argue that more exploration is needed to understand the features characterising associational ecologies in small-sized municipalities and how these features influence the local governance of migration and, in particular, the forms of collaboration that Third Sector actors can develop with the public sector. To this end, we propose the following analytical framework for the analysis of our case studies.

We will investigate three municipalities by looking at their local migration policy arenas—that is, the constellation of actors operating in migration policymaking (Caponio, 2010). As Hinger et al. (2016) suggest, local governance can comprise initiatives beyond specific administrative units; hence we will open up our analysis to see whether relevant actors can be found at the supra-local level, or in other words, beyond the administrative municipal borders. In our opinion, Third Sector actors may be prone to reach out to actors at the supra-

local level, as in small-sized contexts associational ecologies are limited and resources are likely to be scarce.

In this sense, our framework may provide a critical contribution to the literature on the local governance of migration, focusing not only on the forms of collaboration within the policy arena but also on the forms of contention (see Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). Such a focus can help understand the policy arena better, particularly in small-sized municipalities where the boundaries between public and Third Sector actors can be more blurred, considering that some actors may have multiple overlapping roles across both sectors because of small ecologies and smaller municipal government coalitions. Additionally, it is relevant to question whether this configuration can result in more direct and easier access to policymakers (Balbo, 2015) and in the increasing need to find resource, where institutional infrastructures to meet migrants' needs are reduced (Balbo, 2015; Winders, 2014).

## **Methods**

This article is based on qualitative data collected as part of the research project 'Small-size cities and social cohesion: Policies and practices for the social and spatial inclusion of international migrants', funded by the Italian Ministry of Education and Research in the period 2013–2016.<sup>3</sup> The case studies presented in what follows focus on three small municipalities in Lombardy, a region that exhibits a particularly complex scenario in terms of settlement patterns of the foreign population. As we shall see, the cases selected well reflect the variety of small-scale contexts of immigrant settlement and forced migrant reception, which, for different reasons and in different ways, have attracted a growing number of immigrants in recent decades. Such contexts include rural municipalities, peripheral metropolitan areas and mountainous territories.

The research was conducted through a combination of on-site observations within the reception project in Breno, at monthly intervals between May 2013 and September 2014, and a total of 94 in-depth interviews carried out between February 2013 and September 2014.<sup>4</sup> Interviews were conducted with various actors, including local administrators; municipal employees; technicians, managers and volunteers of local associations, trade unions and social cooperatives; teachers; foreign residents indicated as potential referents of their respective ethnic-national communities; journalists; and other key informants, all chosen according to the main criteria of homogeneity across the three contexts. Through the interviews, we reconstructed the trends and characteristics of the migrant population in the respective localities, interviewees' perceptions of the main critical issues associated with them, and the forms of governance implemented to manage the phenomenon, including the resources/services made available to migrants by the public and the Third Sector.

## **The Case Studies: Demographic and Socio-Economic Background**

Mortara is a town of 15,362 inhabitants located in Lomellina, a predominantly agricultural area in the province of Pavia, characterised by a large number of small municipalities. First the mechanisation of agriculture and then the crisis in the (predominantly textile) manufacturing sector have drastically reduced local employment opportunities,

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<sup>3</sup> The leading partner was the SSIIM UNESCO Chair based at the University Iuav of Venice. Five other Italian universities were involved. For more details, see <http://www.unescochair-iuav.it/en/research/prin-small-size-cities/>

<sup>4</sup> Interviews were recorded but no quotations are reported here because of word limits. More recent data are not available: hence it must be considered that variations in local configurations also apply in consideration of the ongoing pandemic and the frequent changes in the migration policy domain.

determining, over the years, an increased concentration of the population around better connected centres in the area. These include, among others, Mortara, which offers housing at affordable prices and a railway hub that guarantees the mobility of a large number of commuters to nearby towns (Vigevano, Pavia and Milan). The high incidence of foreigners depends mainly on the low cost of real estate and on a boom in the construction industry in the 1990s which attracted a considerable labour force, especially from Albania, North Africa and Romania. Despite the poor employment prospects in the area, in ten years (2003–2014) the number of foreign residents in Mortara quadrupled, their incidence in the total population reaching 14.6 per cent in January 2014, a value well above the regional and provincial averages (11.3% and 10.4%, respectively).

Sermide is a town of 7,338 inhabitants located in the province of Mantova in the south-eastern part of the region, on the border with the Venetian province of Rovigo and Ferrara in the Emilia-Romagna region. It is part of a socio-health district<sup>5</sup> that includes 17 small municipalities. In recent decades, this area has witnessed a progressive demographic decline and a high growth rate of its elderly population. Sermide is located in an area dedicated to the cultivation of fruit and vegetables, particularly melons, which requires considerable seasonal manpower for both harvesting and processing. This explains the growth of the foreign population, which more than doubled in the decade 2004–2014 to constitute 11.8 per cent of the total resident population. It is growth that can be largely associated with the arrival of single males first, and families thereafter, from the rural Moroccan province of Béni Mellal. This figure, however, does not include a significant fluctuating group of seasonal workers, estimated by local trade unions at around 1,000 to 1,500 people, employed on small/medium-sized farms, with permanent and temporary employment contracts and short or long-term residence permits. The presence of these workers, initially tied to the harvesting season only, has become more and more permanent, as evidenced, for example, by the increasing number of foreign children and young people in schools.<sup>6</sup>

Breno is a small town of 4,821 inhabitants in the Brescia Province. It is located in Valle Camonica, a valley that partly extends over the Adamello National Park and comprises 42 small municipalities. This area, like other mountainous territories, has recently witnessed a slight population decline. For years, Breno played a crucial role as a public service centre (decentralised from the provincial capital city to the valley), but this function came to an end with the closure of several offices. From an economic point of view, Valle Camonica has long benefited from burgeoning building and textile sectors, which have been drastically downsized in recent years. Migration has characterised the valley for more than two decades, with a constant increase in the foreign population that, in January 2017, corresponded to 8.8 per cent of the total population; 40 per cent of the foreign population is comprised of residents from Romania, who have been gradually settling with their families in the valley due to employment opportunities in the building sector. Since 2011, migration has been increasingly associated with asylum seeker reception.

### **Governing Migration in Small-Size Towns: The Migration Policy Arena Configuration in Mortara, Sermide and Breno**

Our case studies are characterised by specific and different migration policy arenas. In Mortara, there are few Third Sector actors engaged in activities targeting migrants, and they

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<sup>5</sup> The national health system in Italy is organised into socio-health districts, or territorial areas generally organised at the sub-provincial level responsible for the management and provision of socio-health care services.

<sup>6</sup> The head of the local primary school reported that at the beginning of 2014 foreign children represented about one-third of school pupils.

mainly provide food and clothes to vulnerable impoverished groups. There are no migrant associations. Public services are mainly mainstream. The municipality of Mortara has been led by the right-wing Lega (party) coalition, whose political orientation has been known to be exclusionary towards newcomers. In Sermide, there are more organisations involved in migration issues: the local branch of the Catholic organisation Caritas, that has promoted the rights of migrant workers; an informal group of volunteers delivering Italian language courses; and the Moroccan association Friends for Peace. The local administration has traditionally been governed by a centre-left coalition, favourable to migrant inclusion. Finally, in Breno, two main Third Sector actors have engaged in migration policy: a local branch of Caritas, based in the nearby town of Darfo Boario Terme (the biggest in the valley in which Breno is located), has run a helpdesk—another is run by a trade union; and the social cooperative K-Pax has implemented asylum seeker reception projects, outsourced by the municipality, that has been governed by a centre-left pro-migrant coalition.

### **The Role of Municipal Political Orientation**

The style of government of the municipality of Mortara exemplifies an exclusionary and security-oriented attitude towards migrants, as reflected in a series of administrative measures aimed at preventing individuals with a migrant background from obtaining the status of registered residents and from accessing social assistance.<sup>7</sup> This hostile attitude has also repeatedly been manifested in a refusal to support local initiatives promoting migrant communities' visibility—for example, denying spaces that could permit migrant groups to gather, play and socialise.<sup>8</sup>

A desk providing advice on legal and bureaucratic issues is available to migrants. The desk operates within the municipal building and is operated by a local volunteer supported by a professional cultural-linguistic mediator. The desk is located in a room shared with other administrative officials: the immigration desk therefore operates under close surveillance by the municipal administration. While the presence of a desk might reveal attention to the needs of the migrant population, it confirms the reluctance of the municipality to engage directly and fund dedicated services. In fact, the salary of the cultural-linguistic mediator is covered by funds obtained by means of a successful national bid by an association based in the neighbouring town of Vigevano. As we shall discuss, the mixed (public-private) nature of the desk, coupled with the limited advocacy-oriented attitude and skills of the volunteers, has limited the chance of successfully contrasting and denouncing exclusionary measures.

Sermide is characterised by a favourable system of political opportunities. The existence and the ongoing activities of a Moroccan migrant association are an example. While it could have met resistance from the mayors in nearby towns, the association was welcomed by the local administration, which was also open to considering the proposal to create a Muslim cultural centre and eventually granted authorisation: this was favoured by the constructive dialogue between the municipal councillors and the association members after they agreed to nominate a representative as the main interlocutor of the Mayor.

Moroccan residents and other foreign residents are facilitated in accessing municipal welfare services thanks to a dedicated Immigration Office, providing cultural-mediation support and aimed at orienting residents with respect to local services. The office was set up with public funds, and so were Italian language courses, previously activated by volunteers.

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<sup>7</sup> Some of these practices, also adopted in other municipalities, have repeatedly been deemed discriminatory in the courts.

<sup>8</sup> The request of a group of Ukrainian women for a locale in which to meet was ignored by the local administration and delegated to local Catholic organisations, while use of the local football field was denied to a group of asylum seekers hosted in Mortara.



Both the office and the courses have been implemented as part of the Piano di Zona, a three-year local social welfare plan involving municipalities in the relevant social-health districts. The Piano di Zona is available to all municipalities in Italy and it offers an important coordination tool for actors engaged at different territorial levels. It has also been crucial in promoting specific initiatives, though rarely in the field of migration. Sermide is therefore an exception in this sense. Within the Piano, a coordinating board on migration was instituted to promote forms of collaboration between municipalities, the provincial authority, schools, the Provincial Intercultural Centre, the Public Health Agency, trade unions, and local Third Sector organisations, such as Caritas. Meetings are convened regularly (two to three times a year) and have been crucial in developing a dense supra-local network beyond the borders of the Sermide municipal administrative unit, an approach that is particularly crucial for a small-seized town with limited resources. As we will see, reaching out to supra-local actors has similarly characterised the approach of Third Sector actors in the other towns we analysed.

Breno is located in Valle Camonica, an area considered to be a land of the Lega (party), as several of its most notorious exponents are based here (Marzorati et al., 2017). This party is known for its anti-migrant stance, which partially explains why the contentious character of migration policy has been especially strong in this valley. Many protests have been organised by far-right movements against the burden of reception, resisting the arrival of asylum seekers. In spite of this scenario, the local authority in Breno has shown a proactive approach towards migrants, taking responsibility for reception. It formally signed local reception projects implemented by K-Pax, a lay local social cooperative. The signature of a public entity is the main prerequisite to activate an ordinary SPRAR<sup>9</sup> initiative: hence it is essential, although it has mainly involved the formal engagement of the administration alone. The welcoming attitude of this municipal context is also evident in terms of cooperation between religious organisations and the public and Third Sectors. Similar calls for cooperation have frequently been reported in Italy in regard to demands for meeting/praying spaces. They are often left unanswered, but in this case, they were taken seriously as the parish church has traditionally engaged in the needs of more marginal groups, as have the Third Sector and the public sector. Multiple overlapping roles—i.e. municipal officers engaged as volunteers and/or active church members—contributed, for example, to promoting these demands by finding adequate spaces for migrants.

### **The Role of Associational Ecologies**

As anticipated, in small municipalities, local associational ecologies generally comprise a limited number of actors and are not very heterogeneous (see Baglioni et al., 2007; Kriesi & Baglioni, 2003). Yet, as we will show, the Third Sector, depending on their characteristics and skills, can make a difference in favouring migrants' inclusion in face of more or less welcoming policy arenas.

The immigration desk in Mortara was established under pressure from the Pianzoline nuns, a local Catholic institute, towards the Mayor. This confirms the facilitatory role of dense networks between Third Sector and local public sector actors that make accessibility to decision-making in small-sized towns easier. The desk is focused on supporting migrants in terms of bureaucratic-legal procedures regarding immigration status and access to local services: in this respect, it might have played a relevant role in identifying, denouncing and challenging the discriminatory and exclusionary measures enacted at the municipal level. However, the relatively low level of professionalisation of the personnel employed and their

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<sup>9</sup> SPRAR stands for System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees. Following normative changes, it has been renamed SAI (System of Reception and Integration).

limited predisposition to advocacy have seriously limited this opportunity. On the one hand, they lack advanced anti-discriminatory legal skills and a supportive network of pro-bono lawyers to file lawsuits; on the other, engaging in an open conflict with the local administration could compromise the relationship with the municipality. Volunteers were, in fact, reluctant to criticise and contrast the exclusionary measures because of the fear that the municipality would no longer provide a space for the helpdesk. This had actually happened in the neighbouring town of Vigevano, where the association that had obtained the national funds was left without an operating space by the municipality after denouncing to the media some municipal discriminatory practices exerted towards migrant children.<sup>10</sup>

It is also important to notice that, without the engagement of the association based in Vigevano an immigration desk would not have been established: this shows that where insufficient resources were available in Mortara, supra-local collaborations were mobilised by Third Sector actors to compensate for the lack of resources available locally. A similar process was observed in the establishment of Italian language classes, an initiative started by an informal group of volunteers operating as the local branch of the Caritas group based in Vigevano. In Sermide, Italian language courses were first organised in the mid-1990s by volunteers. Their establishment was made possible by the availability of a large number of people—that is to say, a dense local social capital. This points to the fact that human resources are not necessarily limited in small localities where, as in the case of Sermide, a tradition of social activism has been built. Over time, volunteers sought the collaboration of the local administration to ensure that the initiative was economically sustainable. The proposal was eventually discussed and the local administration confirmed its support in the form of dedicated funding and teaching facilities. The supra-local mechanism of the Piano di Zona ensured coverage of the expenses and provided continuity for the course, despite the scarce financial resources available in the municipality.

On its side, Caritas has also had a crucial role. It has adopted an advocacy approach aimed at producing social change. The role of a Caritas member, in an overlapping double role as volunteer and local councillor, was fundamental in encouraging municipal officers to address agricultural labour workers' conditions, thus moving beyond the policy remit of providing basic services. As will be explained later, in this context, she, together with Caritas, took on the function of policy entrepreneur.

Contrary to Mortara and Sermide, the municipality of Breno does not have an immigration office. Two desks have been operated in Darfo Boario, by the CGIL (Italian General Confederation of Labour) trade union and Caritas, the main mission being to assist resident and non-resident migrants in accessing welfare services, thus filling a municipal service gap. A third desk is managed by K-Pax. The cooperative first opened in the late 1990s to deal with drug addiction and social issues more generally. It was only later that it started engaging in asylum seeker reception, and it has since developed an expertise. This further demonstrates that small-sized towns are not necessarily characterised by Third Sector actors with limited human resources, nor with limited skills. These resources, together with dense networks, favoured the collaboration of K-Pax with the local administration, as it could count on consolidated collaborative relationships with municipal councillors that could, in turn, count on the capacity of K-Pax to manage reception projects. The engagement of the cooperative has developed further to embrace an advocacy stance. In face of the above-mentioned protests enacted against reception in the valley, K-Pax organised awareness-raising events at supra-local

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<sup>10</sup> Some children of migrant origin were left without lunch at school because their families were not able to complete the increasingly burdensome documentation required by the municipal social workers to access means-tested benefits.

level to promote solidarity towards asylum seekers throughout the valley and encourage the mayors of the nearby municipalities to activate reception projects.

### **The Role of Policy Entrepreneurs**

As we have shown, in limited associational ecologies such as the ones we are discussing here, the differences in terms of what can be done to cater for migrant needs often lie in the political orientation of the municipal administration and in the approach adopted by Third Sector organisations, drawing from the available resources but, most importantly, building on the benefits of dense networks and facilitated communication. We now argue that another relevant variable is connected to the engagement of individuals in the Third Sector that become policy entrepreneurs (an exception is the case of Mortara). They knit relations and produce social change thanks to multiple and overlapping roles, blurring the borders between the private and public sphere, and to expertise built over time and the willingness to adopt an advocacy stance.

The local administration in Sermide has been actively collaborating with the Third Sector, primarily due to the involvement of key actors. A Caritas member woman must be mentioned, who grew aware of the needs of non-resident migrant workers that the municipality had failed to address. Thanks to her double role as Caritas volunteer and elected councillor, she brought up the issue and acted as a policy entrepreneur. Furthermore, she contributed to the opening of a dedicated drop-in centre at the local Caritas premises in 2006.<sup>11</sup> Migrant agricultural workers soon emerged as an especially vulnerable group, particularly because of their precarious legal status that prevented access to social assistance. Volunteers operating the office provided information on accessible local services and on workers' rights. The contact with workers encouraged Caritas to take its advocacy stance further for the improvement of workers' conditions (for details, see Marzorati et al., 2017). Advocacy has not been the typical role carried out by this organisation; yet things have been changing since 2019, as explained in the 2019 Caritas Annual Report on Poverty. In the case of Sermide, advocacy efforts were further facilitated by the fact that the parochial branches of Caritas, such as this one, are more autonomous from their institutional hierarchy than those operated by the diocese (see Bode, 2003; Marzorati et al., 2017). Through the knowledge acquired with the drop-in centre, Caritas proposed convincing arguments on the need not only to provide basic welfare services to migrants but also to address their rights as residents and workers, bringing together two (apparently) different policy fields. This was done by pressing for the setting up of an advisory table at supra-local level focusing on workers' rights and involving various actors, such as trade unions and the Questura.<sup>12</sup> The first outcome was increased pressure on local firms to recruit workers with regular contracts only and to grant them decent housing conditions.

Another example of civil society policy entrepreneurship is provided by the engagement of a local group of volunteers who activated Italian language courses in the late 1990s. The group comprised some women who were (or had been) teachers and were particularly sensitive to the needs of young migrant mothers. Their initiative immediately assumed an innovative character. It targeted migrant women and provided a babysitting service and the support of a cultural-linguistic mediator who facilitated their participation by addressing their needs. As the

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<sup>11</sup> Drop-in centres (Centri di Ascolto) are the main means by which the territorial organisations of Caritas in Italy (Caritas Diocesane) have been supporting poor people of both immigrant and Italian origin. The centres mostly provide help to satisfy primary needs and give orientation to local services. In 2017, there were 3,366 Centri di Ascolto in Italy. The data available from 59 per cent of them state that the persons assisted in that year amounted to 197,332 (42.2% with Italian citizenship, 57.8% foreign). Information collected on people assisted by Centri di Ascolto is an important database through which Caritas contributes to knowledge about poverty and strategies to combat poverty in Italy.

<sup>12</sup> The Provincial Headquarters Office of the Ministry of Interior.

courses continued, the volunteers further engaged to ensure the municipality would provide financial support, thus granting their continuation, as explained above.

Moving to the context of Breno, it is undeniable that K-Pax has acted as a policy entrepreneur by providing resources for territorial welfare (see Bassi, 2014; Itçaina & Burchianti, 2013). It has contributed to finding spaces for religious communities and addressing the needs of migrants who have settled permanently in the valley. For example, the cooperative offered an opportunity for migrants to attend Italian language courses organised for asylum seekers, with dedicated funding. This represents an exception in Italy, where initiatives for asylum seekers and refugees are normally funded through separate parallel channels. K-Pax de facto compensated for scant educational opportunities by removing an obstacle to access produced by the normative framework. The role of K-Pax as policy entrepreneur was particularly strong with reference to asylum seeker reception. Together with the local parish, it has engaged in the promotion across the community of a welcoming attitude towards asylum seekers, organising cultural events aimed at raising awareness, as well as open days at the Hotel Giardino, a hotel that K-Pax opened to provide asylum seekers and refugees, and young native people, with job opportunities. The entrepreneurial approach extended beyond local service provision and beyond municipal borders to embrace advocacy actions at a higher supra-local level. Building on its expertise and the experience gained at national level in the construction of the ordinary asylum seeker reception system, K-Pax made considerable efforts to gain the trust of local administrators in neighbouring towns and to engage them in strengthening the valley's reception capacity. In this direction, the cooperative promoted two territorial agreements with municipalities and public entities<sup>13</sup> in 2015 and 2016.

## **Final Remarks**

Scholars have often described small-sized municipalities as disempowered and fragile. The evidence from our case studies shows that while public and private actors in these contexts may have limited resources and expertise (as in the case of Mortara) (see also Schammann et al., 2021), they may also display or develop expertise (as in the case of Breno and Sermide) and manage to gather resources through supra-local forms of collaboration that make resources available beyond the administrative unit of the town (as in the case of Mortara) or by expanding the territorial reach of advocacy work or service provision (as in the cases of Breno and Sermide). This process should be interpreted in light of the limited associational ecology (number and typology of actors) characterising small-size towns (Baglioni et al., 2007; Kriesi & Baglioni, 2003). However, it requires time and networking capacity, as well as professional skills that may be available (in the case of Breno) or not (in the case of Mortara).

We observed another feature in the small-sized municipalities that we studied: a relative ease of access to public actors. Associations and volunteer groups can easily talk and interact with public officers with reduced bureaucratic procedures (as in the case of Sermide). Sometimes, overlapping roles of Third Sector actors who hold a municipal role can make communication even more fluid. This does not always lead to greater recognition of these actors; nor does it necessarily mean their suggestions will be taken on board; but it can ensure that proposals are put on the table. In some contexts, overlapping roles can also contribute to favouring collaborative dynamics (such as Sermide) and inclusionary initiatives (as in Breno).

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<sup>13</sup> One (including 46 municipalities) was signed by the provincial authority of Brescia, the Association of the Municipalities of the Province of Brescia—the *Comunità Montana di Valle Camonica*—the main territorial entity of the Adamello National Park; another was signed by the *Comunità Montana* and the Brescia Prefecture (Provincial Headquarters of the Ministry of the Interior).

Building on the observations drawn from the three municipalities and their associational ecologies, some more reflections can be made on the specific features of the local governance of migration in small-sized towns. Some recurring variables help explain the approaches adopted by Third Sector actors and the resulting policy outputs, including not only the reduced number and limited heterogeneity of the local associational ecologies but also local governments' political orientation and the activation of policy entrepreneurs.

In the face of diverging political orientations, Third Sector actors, depending on their skills and capacity have adapted their approaches, taking full benefit of denser networks, overlapping roles and easier and more straightforward communication lines as a result.

The case of Mortara shows well the difficulties that Third Sector actors can encounter if they aim to reconcile a service-oriented with an advocacy role, where collaborations with local governments characterised by an exclusionary political orientation. In this respect, the limited associational ecology (in terms of the number and typology of actors) typically characterising small towns might represent a challenge when it comes to effectively tackling and contrasting exclusionary and discriminatory (municipal) acts.

An excluding anti-migrant orientation is evident in Valle Camonica, the valley in which Breno is located. However, the municipality of Breno has been open to newcomers—for example, by becoming the main signatory of local reception projects. K-Pax, a local cooperative, has played a central role in addressing and countering the anti-migrant stance that spread in the valley and in encouraging the Breno municipality to work actively towards migrants' inclusion. This was made possible by a consolidated collaborative relationship, facilitated by mutual trust.

The context of Sermide is instead characterised by a favourable system of political opportunities. The municipality has demonstrated a welcoming attitude towards migrants, authorising the opening of a Muslim cultural centre, activating a dedicated Immigration Office and providing financial support for Italian language courses. Certainly, the dense social capital available locally, deriving from a tradition of social activation, was crucial in bringing migration issues to the table and calling for the activation of the municipality to support Italian language courses financially.

Our cases show the relevance of a further variable. The engagement of individuals in the Third Sector, in the form of policy entrepreneurs, can be highlighted as crucial in favouring the inclusion of migrants. In Sermide, volunteers started an innovative Italian language course which promoted the involvement of women by pulling together voluntary resources. Later they managed to ensure the financial support of the municipality. Caritas was also entrepreneurial in its approach thanks to its increasing advocacy role and the relative autonomy of its local branches: it managed to raise awareness of the conditions and rights of migrant workers. Building on its expertise, K-Pax, in Breno, has provided resources for territorial welfare: it has challenged the functioning of funding streams and has promoted the activation of asylum seeker reception projects and collaborations not only in the town but also in the wider valley. In Mortara, the enthusiasm of a few individuals eager to engage voluntarily in migration-related issues was crucial to provide a local link to the initiatives promoted by the more resourceful and structured organisations rooted in the larger neighbouring cities, contributing to create local services that otherwise would not have been provided by the municipality.

This paper provides evidence on the role of the Third Sector in small-sized municipalities in terms of intra-national comparison. This evidence offers insights in view of further research that, in our opinion, should continue looking into policy entrepreneurs and the relevance of relational resources, easier communication lines and overlapping roles. We believe another promising avenue of research is the relevance of the models of migrant settlement in small-sized municipalities.



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