

Public administration and COVID-19 management in a local context. A research on citizens' and administrators' point of view in Tuscany

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic, despite being global, has highlighted the importance of the local government in the management of the emergency. This study is focused on a small village in Tuscany and explores the local dimension through a series of in-depth interviews with local administrators and a survey with a representative sample of the local population to determine their evaluation of the actions and communication strategies of the local government. The findings show an articulated but meaningful relationship between the central and the local administration, a positive evaluation on the part of citizens, and, in general, good social cohesion, although not fully supported by the engagement of civic cultures heavily restricted by the emergency.

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Keywords: local administration, municipality, citizenship, pandemic management, COVID-19.

Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore how the municipality of Peccioli, a small village in Tuscany (Italy), faced the COVID-19 emergency. The current resident population of this town is about 4,000 people, distributed heterogeneously between the administrative centre and the hamlets. The landscape is hilly and composed of intensively cultivated agricultural fields. Peccioli is an avant-garde municipality, especially when compared to others of similar size in Italy. The village is known for the development of the first free TV channel in Italy, the first experiments with robots walking on public streets, and numerous contemporary art installations made in the open air and freely accessible to all. The relationship between the local government and citizens is characterised by an open and proactive attitude and, over the last 30 years, has been marked by many citizen participation initiatives and experiences of public consultations promoted by the municipality to involve the broader public in local planning decisions. These initiatives have made the village a sort of open-air laboratory (see Author, 2019) for testing various innovation practices, not only at the social level, but

also at the environmental, administrative, and technological levels. For example, it is worth remembering that in Peccioli there is a large municipal solid waste treatment and disposal plant, known internationally for its virtuous management, largely inspired by the PIMPY (“Please in My Back Yard”) approach. The plant is, in fact, managed by a joint stock company, called Belvedere, with mixed public–private capital, where approximately 64% of the shares are held by the municipality and the remaining 36% by approximately 900 small shareholders, most of whom reside in Peccioli (Belvedere, 2021). It constitutes one of the few landfills in the world, which is characterised by the absence of conflict at the social level (Caspretti, 2013) because, unlike other realities, in Peccioli the citizens decided to play a proactive role instead of passively accepting the choices made by the political class. In this way, city dwellers have become small shareholders, who, instead of clinging to the position of those who did not want the landfill near their home, have transformed a critical issue into a great opportunity to revamp their village. In addition to the numerous initiatives with popular participation, it must also be emphasised that the municipality is located in Tuscany, which is the first Italian region to have adopted a law on public debate and promotion of citizen participation (Florida, 2008).

Coming back to the aim of this study, we were interested in exploring the role of this local dimension in coping with the pandemic at various levels. In particular, we investigated the role played by the local administration in respect to the national government and the potentiality of civic cultures, citizens’ evaluation of the actions of the local administration, and, finally, how the new dimension acquired by the local administration has contributed to maintain social cohesion within the emergency context. Usually, if the national government has the task to outline the normative framework of reference and is the place where the core decisions of the pandemic management are made, the local has the task to specify, when necessary, the content of the norms, which generally maintain a certain degree of abstraction, and is the place where these norms and decrees established at the national level are implemented (Forgione, 2020). As we have seen in the past months, local governments have been at the forefront of the virus response, trying to respond to COVID-19-related pressures and manage social care services. In some respects, we can assume that the pandemic has emphasised the enduring importance of the local state. Thus, we aimed at studying how the municipality and citizens reacted to COVID-19 and how the public administration has reshaped its organisational structure and initiatives to cope with it. At the operational level, we investigated the attitudes and opinions of local political and administrative actors towards the pandemic, and we explored how citizens reacted to the actions of the local government to deal with the emergency and to the communication strategies implemented at a time when, due to the restrictions on public gatherings, large public events were forbidden. Citizens’ reactions are crucial for understanding if the administrative initiatives have been able to construct a shared consensus around them.

Public administration in local contexts and pandemic management

We have many reasons to believe that an important scenario from which to observe the behaviours and initiatives of public administration is the local one, especially considering that, according to Eurostat (2020), almost a third of the European population in 2018 lived in rural areas (compared to 39.3% who lived in cities and 31.6% who lived in towns and suburbs). Over the last few years, the local dimension has been returning to the centre of numerous reflections from different sociological perspectives because it represents the physical environment where social relations are structured in presence (De Certeau, 1988; Giddens, 1983) and are characterised by high physical attendance. These premises make the social relationships in small villages particularly intense, and more based on the knowledge of individual personalities, families, and historical relationships. According to Castells (1997), to fully understand the recent change in Western societies, it is necessary to start from the local context, since the profound sense of civic cultures emerges precisely in the dynamics of the community, as also stated a few years later by Bauman (2000) and Beck (2000). In more recent times, the localised experience has also been taken up by a part of the literature on social platforms, which attributes to this dimension the ability to mediate the redefinition of identity, belonging, and social organisation (Gordon & De Souza e Silva, 2011; Van Dijck, 2020). Today, proximity relationships have also revealed to be potential producers of civic cultures and new forms of social and political engagement (Dahlgren, 2006). Peccioli is a good example of this meaningful local dimension. At the same time, the

political relation between the national and the local remains quite unexplored, while many researchers (Balland *et al.* , 2015; Lagendijk & Lorentzen, 2007) document that proximity relationships constitute a potential space for innovation on the subject of institutional communication, as they are able to influence local decision-making processes and daily information practices.

However, studies (Martínez & Short, 2021; Rocklöv & Sjödin, 2020) have also pointed out that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was most acutely felt in the place where populations live in near proximity to each other and interact frequently in different social contexts (e.g., work, leisure activities, public transport). The COVID-19 pandemic, like any other emergency or crisis, called for urgent public action to make the uncertainty manageable and was characterised, as often happens in this type of event, by a certain tendency to centralise decision-making power (Konvitz, 2016). However, although centralisation is what normally occurs during an emergency, this tendency is not free from tensions, especially in multilevel governance systems, such as the Italian one (Malandrino & Demichelis, 2020:140), which has showed a strong role played by the central government, especially in the initial phase of the COVID-19 management (Mandato, 2020). This tension emerged possibly even stronger in the US, where the national and federal levels required multilevel arrangements by complicating the response to the pandemic. Here, the conflicting messages provided by federal and state officials risked producing fragmentation and disjointed action, which, in turn, probably cost time and lives (Huberfeld *et al.* , 2020).

In particular, in Italy the tensions between the different levels of government have been exacerbated, among other things, by the ambiguous formulation of the decree-law n. 6/2020, which attributed to unspecified "competent authorities" the power to take further measures to reduce the spread of the virus, and by the decree-law n. 19/2020, through which the central government limited the mayor's emergency management powers, establishing that they could not adopt measures conflicting with national prescriptions. These legislative measures contributed to increasing the uncertainty caused by the pandemic, both highlighting issues in allocation of power along the central–local continuum and pointing out differences in the practical outcomes of the initiatives carried out by public authorities (Malandrino & Demichelis, 2020). Conversely, they have also brought to light the pivotal role that closer cooperation between the central government and local government could play in the management of the emergency: greater involvement of the local authorities might in fact lower the level of uncertainty by virtue of their more direct knowledge of the specificities and needs of the areas under their jurisdiction (Deslatte *et al.* , 2020). Even with limited resources, local governments can do a lot, not only taking special measures to warn their citizens about COVID-19, facilitating safety measures at the workplace, assisting enforcement of physical distancing and confinement, and closing public venues, but also ensuring continuation of vital municipal services (which often include health, education, and social care, especially for vulnerable groups) and working with local businesses to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on citizens' jobs and income.

Starting from this discourse, our first research question is as follows: Did Peccioli's public administration simply replicate and implement what had been decided at the national level, or did it find its way to intervene at the public level? The second research question, although connected to the previous one, is as follows: Was Peccioli's public administration able, at the local level, to exploit the potential of civic cultures? We expected to find both a non-slavish implementation of what is recommended by the central government and great support from the world of volunteering and associations for the initiatives established by the municipality. The third research question concerns the other side of the coin, citizens: How was the pandemic management by the municipality perceived by citizens? We expected that citizens in this case were particularly in tune with the administration's behaviour thanks to all the advantages of proximity.

Continuing our analysis, two concurrent processes have reshaped the new dimension of all venues, the local included: 1) globalisation, which has created a short circuit between global and local, so today we are talking about "glocal" (Bauman, 2005), and 2) diffusion of new technologies, which has produced another short circuit between urban and rural, whereby some suggest talking about "urban rurality" (Perrotti, 2012) and others about "urbal" (Author, 2013). The creation of this new hybridisation of rural and urban is mainly due to mobile technologies, which are trans-geographic in that they embrace both the rural and the urban.

Consequently, the distances, not only communicative but also social, between city and countryside are shortening. Our fourth research question is as follows: Did this new dimension of urban somehow cooperate in maintaining a high level of social cohesion during the pandemic and in facilitating the work of the municipality? We expected a positive answer to this question.

Participants, measures, and methods

To answer our research questions, this study adopted the following tools: 1) semi-structured interviews with local administrators to investigate their point of view on the problems, obstacles, and difficulties related to the emergency management and 2) a survey carried out with a representative sample of Peccioli's population to investigate citizens' evaluation of both the emergency management by the municipality during the pandemic and the local government's communication with the population.

Interviews with administrators

Participants and measures

In the first, qualitative study we present here, we carried out 10 semi-structured interviews (Silverman, 2016) with local administrators regarding both the emergency management and the institutional communication strategies of the municipality during the pandemic. We selected about 20 significant participants, including some members of the municipal council, the Mayor, and a representative of the subsidiary of the municipality. Of course, several of the scheduled interviews were skipped at the last moment either because the interviewee was infected or because family members of the interviewees were infected, and thus our interviewees had to stay at home in quarantine to take care of them. Therefore, we had only 10 interviews, not adequately representing those previously planned, including representatives of the opposition. In these interviews, we explored the following issues: a) the impact of pandemic management on the organisational and communicative dimensions of the local administration; b) the management of institutional communication and the communication strategies implemented towards citizens; c) the involvement of expert knowledge in political decisions; d) the evaluation of citizenship participation in the development of proposals for emergency management; and e) the relational dynamics between the administration and the associative world.

Procedure and method

The interviews were conducted in person at the municipality headquarters in May 2021. Subsequently, given that the main objective of the study was to identify interviewees' subjective perceptions and points of view, the transcripts of the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis, a qualitative technique that emphasises identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns of meaning or themes within the textual data (Boyatzis, 1998; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). We opted to perform this manually. As is required in these cases, three independent judges (or coders) conducted the analysis separately. They then confronted the results and negotiated a shared decision on the elaboration of the categories of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Following the structure of the interview described above, the results that emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews will be presented using a narrative approach that makes use of extracts from the transcripts.

Citizens' survey

Participants

In the second study, we carried out a probabilistic stratified sampling by randomly extracting participants from the municipal registry through a proportional allocation based on three sociodemographic variables: age, gender, and place of residence. Given the low response rate in a previous survey and the low response rate that surveys generally receive, we decided to initially extract almost double the sample and then another 100 people. Eight hundred people were contacted via an invitation letter signed by the Mayor and hand-delivered by a municipal messenger. In the end, 268 people were interviewed, obtaining a response rate of 72.5% in relation to the original sample (N=356). Despite our efforts, the final sample, not unexpectedly, was affected by some representation bias regarding limited presence of adolescents and youth in respect to

the forecast and, as often happens in surveys, greater participation by women than men. However, despite these limitations, we were satisfied with the response rate, knowing that increased response rates would “only slightly decrease the presence of the response bias” (Hendra & Hill, 2018:6).

The sample was made up of 114 males (42.5%) and 154 females (57.5%). Regarding age, there were 11 (4.1%) adolescents (14–18 years), 10 (3.7%) young people (19–24 years), 54 (20.1%) young adults (25–44 years), 106 (39.6%) adults (45–64 years), and 87 (32.5%) elderly (older than 64 years). Regarding activity, 124 participants (46.3%) were employed, 85 (31.7%) were retired, 23 (8.6%) were unemployed, and both students and house-persons were 18 (6.7% each). More than half of the participants lived in the administrative centre (N=165, 61.6%) and the others (N=103, 38.4%) in the hamlets. Most of the sample (N=237, 88.4%) lived in an owned home, while 30 (11.2%) lived in a rented home and 1 (0.4%) participant in another condition. Among participants, 80, equal to 29.9%, declared that in their families there were self-sufficient elderly; 4, equal to 1.5%, declared the presence of non-self-sufficient elderly; 23, equal to 8.6%, declared the presence of disabled persons; and 63, equal to 22.5%, declared the presence of children under 14. Overall, 107 participants’ families (39.9%) included persons with special needs.

Procedure

Given that the lockdown was imposed to address the pandemic, we opted for a mobile survey (Boase & Humphreys, 2018). After extracting the sample, the Mayor sent a letter to all the selected citizens, asking them to call the researcher’s mobile number to schedule a date for the administration of the questionnaire. The collection of the questionnaires via mobile lasted from 7 July 2020 to 20 October 2020. However, in September, given that the number of persons with COVID-19 was quite low, we began to give citizens, following their request, the possibility to choose between a mobile or face-to-face interview. The integration of mobile and face-to-face surveys according to citizens’ preference led us to implement a mixed mode of the questionnaire administration. Face-to-face interviews took place in a public place made available to researchers by the municipality, in compliance with the official guidelines for COVID-19. We also went directly to the hamlets to facilitate the filling out of the questionnaires. The collection of the questionnaires was supported by three reminder letters, which were sent to the citizens who had not yet answered the Mayor’ s invitation.

Even if purists continue to stress the need to maintain the integrity of the mode of survey administration (Bowyer & Rogowski, 2017; Klausch & Schouten, 2016; Schwarz *et al.* , 1991), the constraints of the pandemic prompted us to adopt a mixed-mode survey design. We were aware that these survey designs could be effective at reaching certain sub-populations, such as the elderly, adolescents, and youth, and, consequently, at improving the overall response rate. Not by chance, mixed-mode survey designs are gaining popularity in the field, although more work is needed to examine the effectiveness of the synergy of their results.

Measures and methods

We asked citizens their evaluation regarding the initiatives and services carried out by the municipality in four areas: supply of protective devices, services to citizens, support for cultural and recreational activities, and allocation and management of funds to the neediest citizens.

In respect to the supply of protective devices, the question was as follows: The municipality and Belvedere have entered into an agreement with two local companies for the production of about 50,000 face masks, which were distributed free of charge to all families in the area. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative? Regarding the activation of citizenship services, we asked two questions:

- a) The municipality, in collaboration with the Misericordie of Peccioli and Fabbrica (two voluntary associations in charge to help those in need and suffering, such as by guaranteeing medical transport by ambulances), has activated a free service for the delivery of groceries and medicines at home. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative?
- b) The municipality has activated a telephone service with a psychologist ”Tell us about your days” for remote listening and psychological support during the quarantine. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative?

In respect to the allocation and fund management, we asked five questions:

- a) Belvedere has decided to anticipate the payment of the corporate dividend to all its small shareholders. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative?
- b) The municipality, in agreement with Belvedere and Banca Popolare of Lajatico, intends to allocate a fund of \euro 1,000,000 to support local businesses. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative?
- c) The municipality has dedicated economic resources to support financially unstable families by distributing shopping vouchers among them. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative?
- d) The municipality has prepared and increased a contribution for the training activities (sports, music courses, etc.) of the youngest citizens. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative?
- e) To activate all the initiatives, we have talked about so far, the municipality has modified its budget, allocating \euro 500,000 for the COVID-19 emergency. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this decision?

In respect to cultural and recreational initiatives, we asked three questions:

Due to the COVID-19 emergency, the "Pensavo Peccioli" ("I thought Peccioli") festival (a cultural event, where journalists popular at the national level publicly discuss current political and social affairs) has been redesigned in online mode and has been called "Cosa sarà" ("What Will Be"). From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative?

- b) Due to the COVID-19 emergency, the "11 Lune" ("11 Moons") festival (a famous festival with live performances, such as concerts, plays, and musicals, that in summer hosts prominent artists in the evocative setting of the Fonte Mazzola amphitheatre) has been resized by involving local artists and limiting the number of attendees, according to COVID restrictions. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative?
- c) At the end of April 2020, with the decrease in the number of infections and the relaxation of containment measures, the municipality issued an ordinance that allows citizens to walk in complete safety in the green space of "Le Serre", setting up an ad hoc function on the municipality app ("Peccioli System" app) for managing access bookings in four daily time slots. From 1 to 5, how do you rate this initiative?

In the end, we asked two questions on the overall evaluation by citizens towards the management of the emergency by the municipality:

- a) Overall, on a scale of 1 to 5, how do you rate the work of the municipality?
- b) Overall, on a scale of 1 to 5, how do you rate the institutional communication by the municipality during the quarantine?

In addition to these questions regarding citizens' assessment of the local administration, we asked questions aiming to trace a sketch of the population conditions after the quarantine period. We explored their financial situation by asking:

- a) Following the COVID-19 emergency, has your economic situation improved, worsened, or remained unchanged?
- b) What was the emotion you felt most often during the quarantine? We proposed as items for answers the six fundamental emotions — fear, joy, sadness, disgust, anger, and surprise (Ekman, 1972) — and the category "other" (specify).

Finally, we asked a question on the changes in everyday life regarding the sphere of online communication and information. The question was articulated in the following way: Compared to before, during the COVID-19 emergency, a) did you inform yourself?; b) did you communicate with relatives, friends, acquaintances?; c) did you use social platforms (Facebook, Instagram ...)?; d) did you watch TV programmes?; e) did you watch streaming content (movies, TV series, video courses, etc.)?; f) did you chat with friends or relatives (via phone call, video call and/or messaging services)?; g) did you go to shopping/online shopping and/or use delivery services? The following were proposed items for answers: more, less, in a different way, or without variations.

The gathered data related to the survey were analysed by means of descriptive statistics, χ^2 test and standardised residuals (res. stand), paired-sample t test, t test for independent samples, Kendall correlation coefficients, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and linear regression analysis. These analyses were performed with the software R, version 4.1.0. We present the results of both studies in the next section.

Results

Administrator interviews

In these interviews, we explored if this local public administration replicated and implemented what had been decided at the national level or if it was able to find its own strategies to cope with the pandemic. We will focus only on some points, however, as the Deputy Mayor declared “the Administration has faced the pandemic emergency from several points of view, certainly from the health, but also economic, social, cultural”. One relevant point is that, while the public administration at the national level decided to adopt the smart working mode, Peccioli’s municipality did not follow this indication, on the initiative of the Mayor, who asked the employees to continue working in person. This choice was also followed by the Belvedere’s staff. With this decision, these institutions aimed, on the one hand, to respond to the logistical and organisational needs necessary to implement the various, urgent initiatives that the municipality was planning to carry out, and, on the other, to provide a strong symbolic signal: “Here we are” (Mayor).

All the interviewees agreed that there was an increase in contact with citizens, even if, due to the measures for containing the spread of the virus, this has not translated into an increase in the physical presence of citizens in the municipal offices, but rather in an increase in contact via telephone, e-mail, and the “Peccioli System” app (especially by young people). The key to understand this deviation from the national directive is that in a small local context, the publishing institution is immersed in, serves, and depends on a network of proximity relationships, which exercise immediate control and require equally immediate feedback. Even understanding which initiatives were more urgent and more needed by those citizens was possible only by activating the radar of proximity. This also implied an exercise of filling the gaps left open by national government decrees. It must be added, however, that the decision not to adopt smart working was accompanied by a campaign of periodic swabs carried out by retired doctors and nurses. The regular swab testing of employees of the municipality and of Belvedere, who were asked to work in person, as well as the teachers in local schools was guaranteed, so as not to burden the staff currently working in hospitals and other health facilities. Administrators’ positive evaluation of the effectiveness of this initiative is attributed not only to the effects of the campaign in reducing the infection, but also for having favoured the creation of a climate of greater security and trust among the employees of the municipality and of Belvedere and pupils’ families.

The situation was monitored a lot, which also gave parents security, because in any case you knew you were sending a child to an environment that was controlled. (Communication Manager, Belvedere)

The second local initiative represents a further deviation from the national ritualised framework that every day (with the TV news at lunch and dinner) reported the number of people infected, dead, and admitted to hospitals or intensive care at the national level, often in comparison with other countries. The dimension of COVID-19 pandemic itself and the international dimension of the information we are used to have automatically introduced the dimension of the glocal in the case studied by us. This municipal administration has decided not to provide a local, daily case report, although the mayors of other villages in the same district did. This is another typical case in which a deviation is somehow necessary, if we consider that it is one thing to release reports at the national level with numbers that, given their size, are abstract, while it is another to release reports with small numbers that at a local level risk suggesting specific individuals, identifiable with names and surnames. This decision, however, made to avoid a witch hunt in the village, generated some discontent among the citizens, who expected to have this kind of report by the municipality.

Two initiatives instead went in the direction of complementing the action of the national government, which at its level had inevitable organisational delays due to the complexity of implementing a response to COVID-19 in the entire national territory, since at the local level it was possible to speed up the initiatives and make

them operational immediately. The initiatives are related to masks and economic aid. Regarding the former, when the health authority identified masks as a fundamental tool of protection from the virus, it was difficult for the government to supply them. In this context, the municipality of Peccioli made an agreement with two local textile factories to produce masks and took on the task of packaging and distributing them to citizens. This initiative was identified as one of the most effective by the administrators, not only for its possible positive effect in reducing the spread of the virus, but also because it represented a significant gesture of closeness and protection of the municipal administration towards citizens in a moment of profound fear and uncertainty, in which medical devices, especially masks, were hard to find.

I think that at the beginning the distribution of the masks was one of the most effective things, [...] we must realise that [...] there was absolutely nothing. So, in short, that was an important signal, in my opinion. (Public Works Office)

Regarding the second topic — economic aid — it is worth reporting that the municipality of Peccioli has activated and managed a complex set of initiatives to support citizens' income affected by the pandemic: modification of the municipality budget (to free up \euro 500,000 to implement initiatives to support citizens), shopping vouchers to the most financially unstable citizens, contribution to youth education, advance of dividend to the shareholders of Belvedere, and a local business fund for small and medium economic activities in the area.

Among the initiatives that half of the interviewed administrators considered most effective was the allocation of shopping vouchers to the most financially unstable citizens to be used in commercial establishments in the municipal area.

Citizens who did not have economic resources, lost their jobs, or were doing jobs that were no longer accessible could receive relevant financial resources. (Municipal Secretary)

This initiative not only provided direct assistance to those sectors of citizens who found themselves in economic difficulty because of the pandemic but also generated an indirect benefit, thanks to the obligation to use it within the municipal territory. A virtuous wealth redistribution mechanism was put in motion, which helped local businesses in a difficult time by producing an “economic injection into the revenues of the local shops” (to cite the words of the Deputy Mayor).

An initiative that replicated the action of the national government by strengthening it was referral to the advice of a hygienist. The Superior Health Council gave instructions on personal hygiene (recommending washing hands often and, in any case, systematically when returning home as well as sanitising public environments), but expert knowledge is often difficult for non-experts to implement. The challenge was to implement all these recommendations in the best way. The municipality of Peccioli used the advice of a hygienist from the University of Pisa, who provided instructions for the sanitation and safety of the Town Hall, Belvedere, schools, and public areas. In addition, this expert participated in sessions organised with the population to provide clarification and information on the sanitation of private homes and businesses, contributing to the spread of an atmosphere of greater serenity in the population.

Having a professor who shows you the right products and that makes you understand, “Look, it doesn't matter to go and look for them; who knows if a normal Amuchina or other things are enough?”, considering that there was no alcohol, nothing could be found, right? Well, I think this was very reassuring. (Public Works Office)

The pandemic has almost put in crisis the civic cultures and the forms of social and political engagement by complicating the relationship between municipality and citizens in terms of both citizens' participation in the management of the public good and volunteers' contributions, which traditionally have been very active. Regarding the first point, the increase in contacts between citizens and the municipal administration that were recorded in the initial and most acute phases of the emergency has not generated a dynamic of proactive participation by citizens. Citizens interfaced with the municipality above all to obtain information relating to socio-economic support initiatives for the sectors (tourism, catering business, etc.) most affected or relating

to cultural initiatives, online and in person. For example, distancing measures have not made it possible to organise periodic public assemblies, which, before the pandemic, were the main means of discussion and exchange between administrators and citizens.

Certainly, there has been a reduction in the number of meetings with citizens, since we could no longer hold assemblies. (Councillor)

Regarding the second point, during the lockdown, there have been intense relationships with the volunteer associations in the field of health and rescue (primarily Misericordie). Other types of associations (e.g., related to sports) have also assured their availability to be involved in assistance initiatives, whereby the municipality decided to accelerate and partially reconfigure the project called “Social Energies”, which aimed at involving local associations in co-planning and co-implementation of local welfare interventions. According to the Communication Manager (Belvedere), the problem was to understand how these associations could revitalise themselves or make themselves useful at a time like this and not lose sight of them.

So we talked a lot with them. We made experts available; they made focus groups; they put them together to also find a new declination, that is to understand how certain associations, for example, that of football rather than that of the Fratres group [an association of blood donors], which were used to doing certain activities, when they get together, maybe are able to give help to people who are in difficulty, or go shopping for the people who need it. That is, they can ... in some way create social energy.

The reduction of public debates has eroded citizens’ ability to be proactive subjects of the civic and political life, and the difficult reshaping of volunteers’ contribution has affected civic cultures.

A last point that deserves to be analysed in these interviews with the local administrators is the question of the urban, the short circuit between urban and rural, that we mentioned before. We aimed to verify to what extent this new hybridisation of rural and urban, mainly due to new technologies, has facilitated the intervention of the municipality and the communication with citizens, maintaining a high level of social cohesion during the pandemic. As we will see in the next section, Peccioli’s citizens are moderately digitised and rather rooted in the consumption of traditional media. On the other hand, during the emergency, according to the interviewed administrators, the municipality of Peccioli continued to make use of the previously used communication infrastructure: press office, institutional website, Peccioli System app, face-to-face communication (central in a small town), and a little bit of social platforms. Digital communication channels have been used more, both for institutional communication (press conferences and communications to citizens) and for the organisation of administrative work (meetings in videoconference).

However, the administration for informing and promoting the various initiatives has generally preferred more traditional channels (institutional website and press releases to local media) and the Peccioli System app.

I know that many citizens, in line with the general and growing habit to use social networks as a real means of information, would like a greater presence of the administration on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. I think we should work on this and structure ourselves better, always maintaining an institutional profile and tone of voice, but using and overseeing these channels, which have now become an integral part not only of our way of communicating but also of our way of behaving. (Deputy Mayor)

Citizen survey

The results we introduce in this section concern citizens and aim to depict broadly how COVID-19 impacted their situation. These findings better explain the framework in which the citizens, called to evaluate the emergency management by the municipality, found themselves. The first result involves their perception of the changes in their economic situation. Sixty-five percent of adult respondents (N=167) stated that their economic situation has remained unchanged, and 6.2% (N=16) said it even improved, while 28.8% (N=74) said their economic situation has worsened. This means that almost a third of the local population suddenly found themselves with a lower income level than before the pandemic. It is worth reporting that their initial economic condition was fragile, given that only 5.2% of the respondents were employed indefinitely, 29.9% employed for a fixed term, 11.2% professionals, 8.6% unemployed, 31.7% retired, 6.7% students, and another

6.7% homebound. These findings help explain the high appreciation that local citizens attributed to the financial support they received from the municipality.

Who has suffered the most from the worsening of their economic conditions? The third of the population that suffered a worsening economic condition comes from all the different social groups without differences, with some exceptions regarding age and activity condition of the participants. The first exception regards the age of participants. Young adults and adults found, significantly more than the other age groups, that their economic situation declined because of the pandemic ($\chi^2= 19.55$, $df=6$, $p<.01$, res.stand. 2.2 and 2.1, respectively), while the elderly stated that their economic situation remained unchanged. Thanks to their pensions ($\chi^2= 19.55$, $df=6$, $p<.01$, res.stand. 2.9), they became a major bulwark for themselves and their families. The second exception involves the activity of participants. While the unemployed stated significantly more than the others that their economic situation worsened ($\chi^2= 29.30$, $df=8$, $p<.001$, res.stand. 3.1), pensioners and students declared significantly more than the others that their economic situation remained unchanged ($\chi^2= 29.50$, $df=8$, $p<.001$, res.stand. 3.5 and 2.0, respectively). Crossing the economic situation with family composition, it emerged that participants who had self-sufficient elderly in their family declared that their economic situation has remained unchanged ($\chi^2= 6.27$, $df=2$, $p<.05$, res.stand. 2.4).

A second finding is that the emotional mood of the population has become dull. Negative sentiments such as fear, anger, impotency, insecurity, and uncertainty totalled 224 answers, while positive sentiments such as love, joy, surprise, and hope totalled only 44 answers. The emotional heart of the community has become unbalanced towards a pessimistic view of reality. Even this finding shows how relevant it was for the population to have public support to cope with the pandemic. The third finding highlights two aspects of the communication dimension. The first aspect regards the media diet of Peccioli’s citizens, according to whom the main device used during the pandemic to get information was the television (50.0%), followed by mobile phones (27.6%), computers (17.5%), newspapers (3.0%), radio (1.5%), no medium 0.4%. Traditional media are prevailing in this media diet. The second aspect regards the relevant increase of communicative activities on which the flow of energy, which had been blocked in terms of physical activities prevented by the lockdown, was spread (Table 1).

	Increased	Decreased	Unchanged	Never did this activity	Total
Activity					
Inform	190 (70.9%)	8 (3.0%)	70 (26.1%)	0 (0.0%)	268
Use of social platforms	97 (55.2%)	8 (3.0%)	72 (26.9%)	91 (34.0%)	268
Watched TV	148 (55.2%)	24 (9.0%)	95 (35.4%)	1 (0.4%)	268
Watched content in streaming	87 (32.5%)	3 (1.1%)	46 (17.2%)	132 (49.3%)	268
Talked to friends, relatives	213 (79.5%)	4 (1.5%)	49 (18.3%)	2 (0.7%)	268
Online shopping	59 (22.0%)	20 (7.5%)	72 (26.9%)	117 (43.7%)	268

Table 1. Communicative activities during the COVID-19 emergency

Table 1 shows us, first of all, the tremendous increase of mediated communication in this local community and, second, the resistance of this community to digital media. Author (2021) already reported and discussed

this, as well as why the means of communication mostly used by citizens was word of mouth (Here it is worth adding that one participant claimed he never watched the television and that two participants did not have experience of mediated interpersonal communication during the lockdown).

We asked this sample of citizens to evaluate a series of services proposed by the local administration as well as its overall activity and communication. Overall, the municipality's initiatives during COVID-19 were evaluated very positively by citizens, as Table 2 shows. In the first place, we find, not unexpectedly, the distribution of masks, which were indispensable to cope with the pandemic but at that time scarce on the market. The fact that the municipality provided masks to the population was the most appreciated. Another initiative that was very appreciated by citizens was the home delivery of groceries and medicines, organised by the municipality through volunteer associations. The elderly and people with mobility problems especially benefited from this service. Then, three initiatives appear in the list, all regarding financial aid to citizens, such as the budget modification by the municipality in order to allocate \euro 500,000 for the COVID-19 emergency, the simplification and increase of the contribution to youth education, and the creation of shopping vouchers to support families who needed them. These measures were appreciated by citizens because they clearly tried to contrast the economic waste that the pandemic had caused in several productive sectors of the country.

Two public initiatives received the same score: The first was the telephone listening service "Tell us about your days" to provide psychological support to citizens who suffered problems of loneliness or isolation or any case of general psychological malaise. The results from the exploration of the general mood of the population we reported above show how necessary this service was and why people appreciated it. The second initiative was the opening of the green space of "Le Serre". This initiative aimed to address the physical constraints caused by the lockdown, allowing citizens to walk in safety.

We then evaluated the "11 Lune" festival, which had to be remodelled by involving local artists according to the need to limit the number of attendees. This well-known cultural event suffered for the sudden adjustments. Moreover, there are two financial initiatives that are important for the overall community but not so much for individual citizens. One is the advance of the dividend to the shareholders of Belvedere (among whom the majority are citizens of Peccioli) and the allocation by the municipality, in agreement with Belvedere and the Banca Popolare di Lajatico, of a fund of \euro 1,000,000 to support local businesses. Finally, there is the moderate appreciation (although positive) of the festival "Pensavo Peccioli", which has been redesigned in online mode and called "Cosa sar ". The resistance that many citizens of Peccioli expressed against digital media explains their negativity towards the two festivals, traditionally very appreciated by the population when they were held in person, as they were remodelled within a local dimension and online, respectively.

The differences between citizens' average evaluations are small because they go from 3.76 to 4.82, but they are almost all significant (at least $p_s < .05$), as the paired-sample *t*tests reveal. Out of 55 couples, only 10 do not show a significant difference between them: 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 5-7, 5-8, 6-7, 6-8, 7-8, 8-9, 9-10. It is worth noticing that the scores that these initiatives received from citizens are very accurate and that the variability, measured by the coefficient of variation,¹¹The coefficient of variation is the ratio of the standard deviation to the mean multiplied by 100. It is used to compare the variability when the means are different from one another. is in general quite low, indicating that citizens share positive opinions about the initiatives of the municipality during the pandemic emergency.

Initiative	Mean	Standard deviation	Coefficient of variation*
1. Production and distribution of masks	4.82	0.450	9.34
2. Home delivery of groceries and medicines *	4.79	0.519	10.84
3. Budget modification *	4.65	0.517	11.12
4. Contribution to youth education	4.56	0.665	14.58
5. Shopping vouchers*	4.33	0.905	20.90
6. Telephone listening service "Tell us about your days"	4.31	0.782	18.14
7. "Le Serre" green space	4.31	0.980	22.74
8. "11 Lune" festival	4.21	0.962	22.85
9. Advance of dividend to the shareholders of Belvedere *	4.09	0.863	21.10
10. Local business fund *	4.00	0.842	21.05
11. "Pensavo Peccioli" Festival	3.76	1.052	27.98

* The items marked with an asterisk were not addressed by the adolescents and the number of respondents is 246.

Table 2. Means of the assessments by citizens of the specific initiatives of the municipality during the COVID-19 emergency on a scale of 1 to 5 ($N = 268$), standard deviations, and coefficients of variation

We explored further by means of a t test for independent samples and a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA with the Bonferroni post-hoc test) if the various social groups based on gender, age, and activity differed in their evaluations. The core of the differences concerns the evaluation of the two festivals, except that women appreciate also the local business fund ($t_{254}=-2.80$, $p<.01$) more than men, maybe because they value more that the small shops remained open despite the pandemic.

The appreciation towards the "11 Lune" festival is very high among all the age groups, while it decreases a little bit, but significantly, among the elderly ($F_{4,262}=5.72$, $p<.0001$). According to the Bonferroni test, their evaluation is significantly lower in respect to the evaluations of the other age groups, with the exception of that of adolescents. Also, the activity of participants is connected to different evaluations ($F_{4,263}=5.39$, $p<.001$), in the sense that pensioners expressed a significantly lower appreciation of this festival than students and the unemployed.

The evaluation of the other "Pensavo Peccioli" festival, dedicated to public discussions with eminent journalists, highlights several differences among the social groups. The t test for independent samples shows that women appreciate this initiative ($M=3.92$ vs $M=3.56$) ($t_{265}=-2.78$, $p<.01$) significantly more than men. Variance analysis instead shows that the younger groups do the same vs the older ones (M . adolescents= 4.27 , M . young= 4.00 , M . young adults= 4.13 vs M . adults= 3.92 and M . elderly= 3.26) ($F_{4,262}=9.25$, $p<.0001$). The Bonferroni test shows that elderly citizens' evaluation is lower than the evaluations of the other age groups, with the exception of young people. Participants' evaluations also differ regarding their activity ($F_{4,262}=9.25$, $p<.0001$), as pensioners' evaluation is lower than that of students and the homebound. Elderly citizens' limited appreciation of these festivals is not surprising because old people usually experience a certain inertia in their artistic tastes (e.g., music) and cultural interests, which remain similar to those when they were young.

Citizens having a disabled family member attribute a lower evaluation to initiatives such as the telephone listening service "Tell us about your days" ($t_{265}=1.98$, $p<.05$) and the advance of dividends to the shareholders of Belvedere ($t_{254}=2.32$, $p<.05$) because these initiatives probably are not able to resolve their material problems.

Two unexpected variables draw our attention: the place of residence (living in Peccioli or the hamlets) and the presence of self-sufficient elderly in the family. The first variable is associated not only to the two festivals, but to all the initiatives carried out by the municipality, except the masks. The participants living in the hamlets give a significantly lower evaluation than those living in Peccioli to the two festivals, "Pensavo Peccioli" ($t_{265}=2.37$, $p<.05$) and "11 Lune" ($t_{265}=2.72$, $p<.01$), but also regarding the opening of the green space of "Le Serre" ($t_{265}=2.65$, $p<.01$) and the financial support for youth education ($t_{265}=2.45$, $p<.05$). The geographical distance between the national and local levels is also represented in the microcosm of a small village and its hamlets. This finding invites reflection on the value of proximity in the management of political consent.

Having self-sufficient elderly in the family also causes participants to give a significantly lower evaluation of the "Pensavo Peccioli" ($t_{265}=4.68$, $p<.0001$) and "11 Lune" festivals ($t_{265}=3.05$, $p<.01$), the opening of the green space "Le Serre" ($t_{265}=2.18$, $p<.05$), the budget modification ($t_{254}=2.52$, $p<.05$), and shopping vouchers ($t_{254}=2.14$, $p<.05$). These results are in line with the minor enthusiasm of the elderly for the festivals and their minor sensitivity to the financial problems created by the pandemic, given that they receive their pension every month.

The overall evaluation of the management of the emergency by the municipality and its institutional communication during the lockdown is positive, with a moderate standard deviation (respectively $M=4.39$, $SD=.807$; $M=3.72$, $SD=.965$), which indicates moderate variability of the answers (Table 3). However, according to the paired-sample *t test*, the first score is significantly more positive than the second ($t_{266}=12.54$, $p<.0001$), which means that there is room for improvement in communication methods and strategies on the part of the municipality. Furthermore, there is a moderate and significant correlation between the two items ($r=.418$ according to the Kendall rank correlation coefficient $p<.001$) in the sense that as appreciation for the work of the municipality increases, so does the appreciation for institutional communication. Based on their standard deviations, we did not expect great diversification of these two assessments when crossed with other variables.

We ran two linear, multiple regressions analyses regarding the evaluation of the administrative and communication activity of the municipality, considering as independent variables gender, age exact, activity, place of residence, change of the economic situation during the emergency, and the average score of all the evaluations regarding the local government's initiatives. In respect to the first item investigated, (the evaluation of the administrative activity), an overall significant regression was found ($F_{9,247}=21.31$, $p<.0001$), with an adjusted $r^2 .4166$. It emerged that being occupied and the average score of all the evaluations are significant predictors of the assessment of the administrative activity. In particular, being occupied ($\beta=-0.3822$, $p<.05$) gives a lower score in respect to the other categories, while the average score of all the single evaluations has a positive relation with the assessment of the overall local government's activity ($\beta=0.9992$, $p<.0001$). In respect to the communication activity of the municipality, another significant regression was found ($F_{9,246}=11.68$, $p<.0001$), with an adjusted $r^2 .2737$. It emerged that the only significant predictors here are the changing of citizens' economic situation during the pandemic and the average score of all the evaluations of the administrative activity. In particular, we found that experiencing the improving of one's economic situation causes participants to express a higher judgment ($\beta=0.2175$, $p<.05$) and that the average assessment of the municipality's activity has a positive relation with the evaluation of local government's communication ($\beta=1.1136$, $p<.0001$). As we mentioned before, however, 65.0% of citizens said their economic situation has remained unchanged, and 6.2% even said their economic situation improved, while 28.8% of citizens said their economic situation has worsened.

Discussion

We will use our research questions as a guide to structure the discussion of the results. We will begin by providing an answer to our first research question: Did the public administration replicate and implement what had been decided at the national level or did it elaborate any specific strategy? The study documented that, given the large political, cultural, social, and organisational distance between the national level and the local level, it was inevitable that something was done in the established terms at the central level, while other measures were aimed often to fill the gaps or even to anticipate the decisions of the central government, and other measures deviated from the national trends in order to be more adherent to the needs of the local community.

Our second research question was as follows: Was Peccioli's municipality able, at the local level, to exploit the potential of civic cultures? What emerged from this study suggests a limitedly positive answer, since the quarantine cancelled the public space as the dimension where citizens could play a proactive role in the management of the public good, and it also hindered the activities of volunteer associations.

The third research question was as follows: How was the pandemic management by the municipality perceived by citizens? As we expected, citizens expressed a particular harmony with the administration's behaviours, thanks to the advantages of proximity. Although there is a margin of improvement in the communicative relationship between citizens and the public administration, the overall emergency management received a solid consensus by citizens, highlighting that the social body of the village is based on strong social cohesion. This is, of course, the merit of both citizens and administrators.

Our fourth research question was as follows: Did this new dimension of urban somehow cooperate in maintaining a high level of social cohesion during the pandemic and in facilitating the intervention of the municipality? We can say that the dimension of urban was able to cooperate very well in maintaining social cohesion during the pandemic. There are still many things to fully understand about citizens' daily practices during quarantine, like the meaning of the paramount increase of communication that has emerged. This must be counted among the social changes brought about by the pandemic and that must be analysed and discussed properly at the scientific level. On the contrary, the awareness of the need for more effective use of the various communication channels, including digital media, has been consolidated. However, due to the composition (in terms of age, for example) of the Peccioli community and its small size, face-to-face communication revealed to still be very important for both effective institutional communication and citizens' participation.

The strong point of this study is that the approach adopted made it possible to analyse the perspective of both citizens and local administrators, which allowed us to have a more complete vision of the management of the COVID-19 emergency. The main weak points of the study are as follows: a) all the measures presented and discussed here are self-reported measures and thus may be affected by interpretative biases related to the presentation of the self and to social desirability, a limit that characterises almost all surveys, and b) the limited number of interviews with administrators.

Future research directions hopefully could further reflect on the significance of the local political experience on the part of administrators during the pandemic, also in terms of the possible innovations triggered by the management of this emergency. Furthermore, it is necessary to introduce new methodological tools to further develop the empirical part by integrating it with new approaches (e.g., gamification applied to public participation, (S)OST, etc.).

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