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## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COVID-19 MANAGEMENT IN A LOCAL CONTEXT: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON THE VIEWS OF CITIZENS, TOWN COUNCILLORS, AND OFFICIALS IN TUSCANY**

### ABSTRACT

*This study is focused on a small village in Tuscany and explores how citizens evaluate the actions and communication strategies applied by the local government during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study adopted a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods: semi-structured interviews with local administrators, and a survey with a representative sample of the local population. The findings show a limitedly articulated yet meaningful relationship between the central administration and the local one, a positive evaluation by citizens of the local government's management of the emergency and, generally, good social cohesion, albeit not fully supported by the engagement of civic cultures that were heavily restricted by the socially restrictive measures imposed during the pandemic.*

**KEY WORDS:** *local administration, municipality, citizenship, pandemic management, COVID-19*

# Lokalna uprava in upravljanje pandemije covid-19 v lokalnem okolju. Empirična raziskava o stališčih državljanov ter mestnih svetnikov in uradnikov v Toskani

## IZVLEČEK

*V študiji se osredotočamo na majhno vas v Toskani; raziskujemo, kako državljani ocenjujejo ukrepe in komunikacijske strategije, ki jih je med pandemijo covid-19 izvajala lokalna vlada. V raziskavi smo uporabili kombinacijo kvalitativnih in kvantitativnih metod: polstrukturirane intervjuje z lokalnimi upravitelji in anketo z reprezentativnim vzorcem lokalnega prebivalstva. Ugotovitve kažejo na omejeno artikuliran, a pomemben odnos med osrednjo in lokalno upravo, pozitivno oceno prebivalcev o upravljanju izrednih razmer s strani lokalne uprave in na splošno dobro družbeno kohezijo, čeprav ta ni bila v celoti podprta z aktivnostmi državljskih kultur, ki so jih med pandemijo močno omejevali ukrepi družbenih omejitev.*

*KLJUČNE BESEDE: lokalna uprava, občina, državljanstvo, upravljanje pandemije, covid-19*

## 1 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.<sup>1</sup> The current resident population of this town is about 4,000 people, distributed heterogeneously between the administrative centre and the hamlets. 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 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 citizenship in local planning decisions. These initiatives have made the village a sort of open-air laboratory (see Farinosi et

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1. This research has been carried out within an agreement framework between the Municipality of Peccioli and the University of Udine.

al.2019) for testing various innovation practices, not only at the social level, but also at the environmental, administrative, and technological levels. For example, there is a large municipal solid waste treatment and disposal plant in Peccioli, known internationally for its effective management, largely inspired by the PIMPY ("Please in My Back Yard") approach.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the numerous initiatives with citizens' participation, it must also be emphasised that the municipality is located in Tuscany, which is the first Italian region to adopt a law promoting public debate and citizen participation within the urban planning process (Florida 2008).

Coming back to the aim of this study, we were interested in exploring the role of the local government of a small village in coping with the pandemic at various levels. In particular, we were interested to investigate on the one hand the role played by this type of local government, juxtaposing it to the national government, and on the other, citizens' evaluation of the local government's management, as well as, civic associations' response to the pandemic and, finally, if the initiatives undertaken by the local government have contributed to maintain a sense of community (McMillan 1996) and social cohesion within the emergency context. Usually, while the national government has the task of promulgating laws and decrees by outlining the legal framework of reference and is the place where the core pandemic management decisions are made, the local government has the task of implementing them by, when necessary, adapting the content of these norms to the local context (Forgione 2020). As we have seen in this pandemic from 2020 to 2021, local governments have been at the forefront of the virus response, trying to respond to pressures related to COVID-19 and manage social care services. In some respects, we can assume that the pandemic has emphasised the enduring importance of the local government as the bearing structure of the state at local level. Thus, we aimed at investigating how the local government and citizens reacted to COVID-19 and how the local government reshaped its organisational structure and initiatives to cope with it. At the operational level, we investigated the attitudes towards the pandemic and opinions of town councillors

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2. 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.

and officials, and we explored how citizens assessed both the actions of the local government to deal with the emergency and the communication strategies implemented at a time when, due to the restrictions on public gatherings, large public events were forbidden. Citizens' reactions are usually considered crucial for understanding if local government's initiatives have been able to construct a shared consensus around them.

## 2 Local Government and Pandemic Management

We have many reasons to believe that an important perspective from which to observe the behaviours and initiatives of political and administrative policy 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 per cent who lived in cities and 31.6 per cent who lived in towns and suburbs). Over the last few years, the local dimension has been returning to the centre of numerous sociological reflections because it represents the physical environment where social relations are structured in-presence (De Certeau 1988; Giddens 1983) and characterised by the inhabitants' high physical participation in social life. These premises make the social relationships in small villages intense, particularly based on personal knowledge of individuals, families, and historical relationships. For example, Castells (1997) argued that to fully understand the recent change in Western societies it is necessary to start from the local context, since the profound sense of civic culture which is those beliefs and values that are shared by a group and that help it to pursue socially valuable activities (Guiso et al. 2011) emerges precisely in the dynamics of small communities, as stated a few years later by Bauman (2000a) and Beck (2000). In more recent times, the local 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 and De Souza e Silva 2011; van Dijck 2020). Today, proximity relationships are revealed to be potential producers not only of civic cultures but also of new forms of social and political engagement (Dahlgren 2006). Peccioli is a good example of this local dimension, where the presence of a high number of associations goes hand in hand with innovative and strong forms of political engagement. At the same time, the political relationship between the national and the local needs to be explored further, while many researchers (Balland et al. 2015; Lagendijk and 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, some studies (Martínez and Short 2021; Rocklöv and Sjödin 2020) have also pointed out that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was most acutely felt in places where populations live in close 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, was characterised by a certain tendency to centralise decision-making power, as often happens in this type of event (Konvitz 2016). 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 and Demichelis 2020: 140), which showed the central government to play a strong role, especially in the initial phase of COVID-19 management (Mandato 2020). This tension was possibly even more marked in the US, where the national and federal levels required multilevel arrangements, 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).

Coming back to the Italian case, the tensions between the different levels of government have been exacerbated, among other things, by the ambiguous formulation of Decree-Law 6/2020, which attributed to unspecified “competent authorities” the power to take further measures to reduce the spread of the virus, and by Decree-Law 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 the 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 and Demichelis 2020). Conversely, the legislative measures have 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 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 in the workplace, assisting the enforcement of physical distancing and confinement, and closing public venues, but also ensuring the 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 was as follows: Did Peccioli’s local government simply replicate and implement what had been decided at the national level, or did it find a way to manage initiatives towards citizens? The second research question, connected to the previous one, was as follows: Was Peccioli’s local government able to exploit the potential of civic engagement through associations and volunteering? We expected to find both the implementation of what was recommended by the central government adapted to the local context and great support from the world of volunteering and associations for the initiatives established by the municipality. The third research question concerned 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 local government’s management thanks to all the advantages of proximity.

### 3 Methodology

To answer our research questions, this study adopted two tools. Firstly, we collected ten semi-structured interviews with town councillors and officials (Table 1) to investigate the management and the institutional communication strategies of the local government during the pandemic; secondly, we administered a survey carried out with a representative sample of Peccioli’s population (n= 268) to explore citizens’ evaluation of both the management by the local government during the pandemic and the communication with the population by town councillors and officials.

**Table 1: Positions of the interviewed town councillors and officials.**

1. Mayor
2. Deputy Mayor
3. Councillor for Public Works
4. Councillor for Social Policies
5. Municipal Deputy Secretary and Head of the CUC (Single Central Purchasing Office)
6. Head of the Single Office for Public Works and Maintenance
7. Head of the Staff Services Office
8. Head of the Single Financial Service and Human Resources Office
9. Town Clerk
10. Belvedere Marketing Communication Manager

The interviews were conducted in person at the municipality headquarters in May 2021 and their transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis (Boyatzis 1998; Ryan and 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 compared the results of their analyses and negotiated a shared decision on the elaboration of categories of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2019). 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.

From 7 July to 20 October 2020, we carried out a survey with 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 (Farinosi et al. 2020) and the low response rate that surveys generally receive (Rindfuss et al. 2015), we decided initially to almost double the sample. Among the 712 people invited, we succeeded in interviewing 268 people, obtaining a response rate of 72.5 per cent in relation to the original sample (N=356). Despite our efforts, the final sample, not unexpectedly, was affected by some representation bias regarding the limited presence of adolescents and youths in respect to the forecast and, as often happens in surveys, greater participation by women than men (e.g. Smith 2008). 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 and Hill 2018: 6).

In practice, the survey investigated citizens' evaluation of 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. The sample is described in Table 2.

We add here some information about the employment characteristics of the sample in order to place it firmly within the regional and national context. If we compare the percentages of employed and unemployed in this sample with those of Tuscany and Italy as a whole, it emerges that the percentage of employed is lower than at the regional and national levels, while the percentage of unemployed is higher than at both the regional and national levels. Specifically, the percentage of employed people in 2020 in the present sample was 46.6 per cent, consistently lower than in Tuscany (66.1%) and Italy (58.0%), while the percentage of unemployed was 8.6 per cent, higher than in Tuscany (3.5%) and Italy (4.2%) (Regione Toscana 2020).

**Table 2: The sociodemographic profile of the sample.**

Variable	N	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	153	57.5%
Male	113	42.5%
<b>Age category (years)</b>		
Adolescent (14-18)	11	4.1%
Young people (19-24)	10	3.8%
Young adults (25-44)	54	20.3%
Adults (45-64)	106	39.8%
Older adults (>65)	85	32.0%
<b>Education</b>		
Primary or less	54	20.3%
Lower secondary	63	23.7%
Upper secondary	106	38.0%
University degree or higher	43	16.2%
<b>Activity</b>		
Employed	124	46.6%
Unemployed	23	8.6%
Housewife or househusband	18	6.8%
Pensioner	83	31.2%
Student	18	6.8%
<b>Place of residence</b>		
Administrative centre	164	61.7%
Hamlet	102	38.3%

Given that the lockdown was imposed to address the pandemic, at the beginning we opted for a mobile survey (Boase and Humphreys 2018); when the number of persons with COVID-19 was quite low, we gave citizens, following their request, the option to choose between a mobile or face-to-face interview. The integration of mobile and face-to-face surveys led us to implement a mixed mode of questionnaire administration. Even if purists continue to stress the need to maintain the integrity of the mode of survey administration (Bowyer and Rogowski 2017; Klausch and 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 in reaching certain sub-populations, such as older adults, adolescents, and youths, and, consequently, in 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. The gathered data related to the survey were



analysed by means of descriptive statistics,  $\chi^2$  test and standardised residuals (Std. Residual), 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.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Town Councillors and Officials' Interviews

In these interviews, we explored if Peccioli's local government 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. One relevant point is that, while the government at the national level decided to adopt the smart working mode<sup>3</sup>, obliging public employees to work at home during the lockdowns where possible, Peccioli's municipality did not follow this indication, on the initiative of the Mayor, who asked the employees to continue working in person but safeguarded the health of employees (and citizens) by subjecting them to very frequent swabs. This choice was also followed by the staff of Belvedere, the joint stock company with mixed public–private capital, that manages the landfill in Peccioli's territory (see note 1). With this decision, these institutions aimed to respond to the logistical and organisational needs necessary to implement the various, urgent initiatives that the municipality was planning to carry out, and 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 translated rather into 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 public institution is immersed in, serves, and depends on a network of proximity relationships that exercise immediate control and require equally immediate feedback. Even

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3. The Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies defines smart working (or agile work) as a method of executing the subordinate employment relationship characterised by the absence of time or space constraints and an organisation by phases, cycles and objectives, established by agreement between the employee and the employer. Available from: <https://www.forumpa.it/riforma-pa/smart-working/smart-working-cose-come-funziona-la-normativa-e-i-vantaggi-per-le-pa/> (Accessed 21. 1. 2023). Following the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, in February 2020 a series of measures were issued to simplify access to smart working and spread its use to the maximum in the Public Administration (PA).

understanding which initiatives were more urgent and more needed by citizens was possible only by activating the resources typical of proximity, such as easy personal contact. This also implied an exercise in filling the gaps left by national government decrees which, being general, lack the implementation guidelines necessary to apply them in the specific local contexts. 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, and of the teachers in local schools, was guaranteed so as not to burden the staff currently working in hospitals and other health facilities. Town councillors' and officials' positive evaluation of the effectiveness of this initiative is attributed not only to the effects of the campaign in terms of reducing infection, but also to 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 (Belvedere Marketing Communication Manager).*

The second local initiative represents a further deviation from the national ritualised framework that reported every day on the TV news at lunch and dinner the number of people infected, dead, and admitted to hospitals or intensive care at the national level, often in comparison with other countries. Peccioli's municipality decided not to provide a local, daily case report, although the mayors of other villages in the same district did. Peccioli's Mayor decided to avoid disclosing reports with small numbers that at a local level risked suggesting specific individuals, identifiable with names and surnames. This decision, made to "avoid a witch hunt" in the village (using the Mayor's words), did, however, generate some discontent among the citizens, who expected to have this kind of report by the municipality. However, it is one thing to give an account of large numbers which in themselves remain abstract and another thing to give small numbers which in a local situation can make citizens believe they personally know those who have become infected and therefore infringe the right to privacy of the infected.

Two initiatives instead sought to complement the action of the national government: at the local level they could be made operational immediately and their implementation concrete, while at the national level they were delayed due to the complexity of implementing a response to COVID-19 in the entire national territory. The initiatives were related to masks and economic aid. 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 textiles 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 town councillors and officials, not only for its possible positive effect in what was believed capable of 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 surgical masks were very hard, if not impossible, 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 (Head of the Single Office for Public Works and Maintenance).*

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 € 500,000 to implement initiatives to support citizens), shopping vouchers to the most financially unstable citizens, contribution to youth education, dividend advance to the shareholders of Belvedere (the majority of whom are ordinary citizens), and a local business fund for small and medium-sized economic activities in the area.

Among the initiatives that half of the interviewed town councillors and officials 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 (Town Clerk).*

This initiative not only provided direct assistance to those 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" (in the words of the Deputy Mayor).

An initiative that replicated the action of the national government and strengthened 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 among the population.

The pandemic almost put in crisis forms of social and political engagement by complicating the relationship between the 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 did not generate a dynamic of proactive participation among citizens. Citizens interfaced with the municipality above all to obtain information relating to socio-economic support initiatives for the sectors most affected (tourism, catering businesses, etc.) or relating to cultural initiatives, online and in person. For example, distancing measures made it impossible to organise periodic public assemblies, which were the main means of discussion and exchange between town councillors and officials and citizens before the pandemic.

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

Regarding the second point, there were intense relationships during the lockdown with volunteer associations in the field of health and rescue (primarily Misericordie). Other types of association (e.g. related to sports) also assured their availability to be involved in assistance initiatives, and the municipality decided to accelerate and partially reconfigure the project called "Social Energies", which aimed at involving local associations in the co-planning and co-implementation of local welfare interventions. According to the Belvedere Marketing Communication Manager, the problem was to understand how these associations could revitalise themselves or make themselves useful at a time like this.

*So we talked a lot with the associations. We also put them together to find 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 in public debates has eroded citizens' ability to be proactive subjects in the civic and political life, and the difficult reshaping of volunteers' contribution has affected civic engagement.

## 4.2 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 per cent of adult respondents ( $n=167$ ) stated that their economic situation remained unchanged, and 6.2 per cent ( $n=16$ ) said it even improved, while 28.8 per cent ( $n=74$ ) said their economic situation 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 participants' initial economic condition was fragile, given that only 5.2 per cent of the respondents were employed indefinitely; 29.9 per cent were employed for a fixed term; 11.2 per cent were autonomous, craftspersons and self-employed professionals, such as architects, engineers, or doctors; 8.6 per cent were unemployed; 31.7 per cent were retired; 6.7 per cent were students; and another 6.7 per cent were housewives. These findings help explain the high appreciation that local citizens have of the financial support received from the municipality.

Who has suffered most from the worsening of their economic condition? The third of the population that suffered a worsening economic condition comes from all the different social groups, but especially from two groups. The first exception regards the age of participants. Young adults and adults, significantly more than the other age groups, found that their economic situation declined because of the pandemic ( $\chi^2= 19.55$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.01$ , Std. Residual 2.2 and 2.1, respectively), while older adults stated that their economic situation remained unchanged. Thanks to their pensions ( $\chi^2= 19.55$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.01$ , Std. Residual 2.9), they became an even more important economic entry for their families. The second exception involves the activity of participants. While the unemployed stated significantly more than others that their economic situation worsened ( $\chi^2= 29.30$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p<.001$ , Std. Residual 3.1), pensioners and students declared significantly more than others that their economic situation remained unchanged ( $\chi^2= 29.50$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p<.001$ , Std. Residual 3.5 and 2.0, respectively). Looking at the economic situation in conjunction with family composition, it emerged that participants who had self-sufficient older adults in their family declared that their economic situation remained unchanged ( $\chi^2= 6.27$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.05$ , Std. Residual 2.4).

A second finding is that the emotional mood of the population has worsened. Negative sentiments such as fear, anger, impotency, insecurity, and uncertainty emerged in 224 answers, while positive sentiments such as love, joy, surprise, and hope emerged in only 44. The emotional heart of the community, as proposed by Tarde (1895) to define the affective temperature of a 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 overall media consumption of Peccioli's citizens - what is generally called "the media diet" - according to which 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%), or no medium (0.4%). Traditional media prevail in this media diet. The second aspect regards the relevant increase in communicative activities, perhaps also due to the decrease in physical activity caused by lockdowns (Table 3).

**Table 3: Communicative activities during the COVID-19 emergency.**

Activity	Increased	Decreased	Unchanged	Never did this activity	Total
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 3 shows us, first of all, the relevant increase in mediated communication in this local community and, secondly, 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 (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 government, as well as its overall activity and communication. Overall, the local government's initiatives during COVID-19 were evaluated very positively by citizens, as Table 4 shows. In the first place, we find, not unexpectedly, the distribution of masks: the fact that the municipality provided masks to the population was the most appreciated, as reported in Table 4. Another initiative that was very appreciated by citizens was the home delivery of groceries and medicines, organised by the local government through volunteer associations (see Table 4).

Older adults and people with mobility problems especially benefited from this service. Then, three initiatives appear in the list, all regarding financial aid to citizens: the budget modification by the local government in order to allocate € 500,000 to the COVID-19 emergency; the simplification of an increase in 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 counter the economic waste that the pandemic had caused in several of the country's productive sectors.

Two public initiatives received the same score. The first was the telephone listening service "Tell us about your days", which provided psychological support to citizens suffering problems of loneliness or isolation or any case of general psychological malaise. The results from the exploration of the general mood of the population show how necessary this service was and why people appreciated it. The second initiative was the opening of "Le Serre", an estate of 900 hectares of greenery that offers walkers and cyclists a nature trail equipped with five picnic areas. This initiative aimed to address the physical constraints caused by the lockdown, allowing citizens to walk in safety. Citizens were required to book access through the municipality's app - "APPeccioli" - to avoid gatherings. We then asked for evaluation of the "11 Lune" festival, which in the past had attracted famous, international artists to Peccioli but had to be remodelled by involving local artists and limiting the number of attendees. This well-known cultural event suffered a little for the sudden adjustments. Moreover, there were two financial initiatives that were important for the overall community but were not perceived as important by individual citizens: the advance of the dividend to Belvedere shareholders and the allocation by the municipality, in agreement with Belvedere and the Banca Popolare di Lajatico, of a fund of € 1,000,000 to support local businesses. Finally, there was the moderate (but positive) appreciation of the "Pensavo Peccioli" festival, which has been redesigned in online mode and renamed "Cosa sarà". The resistance that many citizens of Peccioli expressed against digital media explains their negativity towards this festival, which was transferred completely online.

The differences between citizens' average evaluations are small, ranging 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 the 55 paired comparisons of the average evaluations of the initiatives carried out by the local government, only ten do not show a significant difference: 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,<sup>4</sup> is in general quite low, indicating that citizens share positive opinions about the local government’s initiatives during the pandemic emergency.

**Table 4: Means of citizens’ evaluations of the specific initiatives of the municipality during the COVID-19 emergency on a five-point scale (from 1 “very dissatisfied” to 5 “very satisfied”), standard deviations, and coefficients of variation.**

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, Festival "Pensavo Peccioli"	3.76	1.052	27.98
<b>Overall evaluation</b>			
Management of the emergency	4.39	0.807	18.38
Institutional communication	3.72	0.965	25.94

\* Items marked with an asterisk were not addressed by adolescents: thus, the number of respondents was 246.

We further explored by means of a t test for independent samples and a series of analyses of variance (ANOVA with 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 also appreciate the local business fund ( $t_{254}=-2.80, p<.01$ ) more than men, maybe because they value more that the small shops remain open despite the pandemic.

Appreciation of the “11 Lune” festival was very high among all the age groups, while it decreased a little bit, but significantly, among older adults ( $F_{4,262}=5.72, p<.0001$ ). According to the Bonferroni test, their evaluation is significantly lower compared to the evaluations of other age groups, with the exception of ado-

4. The 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.



lescents. 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 "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 appreciated this initiative ( $t_{265}=-2.78$ ,  $p<.01$ ) significantly more than men ( $M=3.92$  vs  $M=3.56$ ). Variance analysis shows that the younger groups did not give a different assessment from the older one (adolescents:  $M=4.27$ , young people:  $M=4.00$ , young adults:  $M=4.13$  vs adults:  $M=3.92$ , older adults:  $M=3.26$ ) ( $F_{4,262}=9.25$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). The Bonferroni test shows that older citizens' evaluation is lower than those of the other age groups, with the exception of young people. Participants' evaluations also differ according to activity ( $F_{4,262}=9.25$ ,  $p<.0001$ ), as pensioners' evaluation is lower than that of students and housewives. Older 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 when they were young.

Citizens with 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 were not able to resolve their material problems.

Two unexpected variables draw our attention: place of residence (living in Peccioli or the hamlets) and the presence of self-sufficient older adults in the family. The first variable is related not only to the two festivals, but to all the initiatives carried out by the local government, except the masks. 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" ( $t_{265}=2.72$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and of 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 older adults 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 muted enthusiasm of older adults for the festivals and their minor sensitivity to the

financial problems created by the pandemic, maybe because they receive their pension every month.

Overall evaluation of the management of the emergency by the local government 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 4). However, according to the paired-sample t test, the first score is significantly higher than the second one ( $t_{266}=12.54$ ,  $p<.0001$ ), 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 local government's administrative and communication activity, considering as independent variables gender, age, activity, place of residence, change in economic situation during the emergency, and the average score of all the evaluations regarding the local government's initiatives. In respect of the first item investigated (evaluation of the local government's management), an overall significant regression was found ( $F_{9,247} = 21.31$ ,  $p<.0001$ ), with an adjusted  $r^2$  of .4166. It emerged that being occupied and the average score of all the evaluations are significant predictors of the assessment of the local government's management. In particular, being occupied ( $\beta = -0.3822$ ,  $p<.05$ ) yields a lower score compared to the other categories, while the average score of all the single evaluations is positively related to the overall assessment of the local government's activity ( $\beta = 0.9992$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). With regard to the communication activity of the local government, another significant regression was found ( $F_{9,246} = 11.68$ ,  $p<.0001$ ), with an adjusted  $r^2$  of .2737. It emerged that the only significant predictors here are a change in citizens' economic situation during the pandemic and the average score of all their evaluations of local government's management. In particular, we found that experiencing improvement in one's economic situation causes participants to give a higher judgement ( $\beta = 0.2175$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and that the average assessment of the local government's activity is positively related to the evaluation of local government's communication ( $\beta = 1.1136$ ,  $p<.0001$ ). We remind the reader, though, that for 65.0 per cent of citizens the economic situation was unchanged, for 6.2 per cent it was improved, and for 28.8 per cent it worsened.

## 5 Discussion

We will use our research questions as a guide to structure the discussion of the results. We begin by providing an answer to our first research question: Did the local government 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 would be achieved within the terms set by the central level, while other measures often aimed to fill gaps or even to anticipate the decisions of the central government, and others 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 hindered the activities of volunteer associations.

The third research question was as follows: How was the municipality's pandemic management perceived by citizens? As we expected, citizens expressed a firm consensus towards the local government's behaviours, thanks to the advantages of proximity. Although there was a margin for improvement in the communicative relationship between citizens and the local government, the overall emergency management received solid approval from citizens, highlighting that the social body of the village is based on strong sense of community and social cohesion. This is, of course, thanks to both citizens and local government.

A final comment on how qualitative and quantitative data have intertwined in this study: they were complementary, since they were able to document both the perspective of those who had to manage, politically and organizationally, an unprecedented situation like the pandemic and that of citizens, who were invited to evaluate how effective the local government had been in its management.

## 6 Strengths and Limitations of the Present Study

The strong point of this study is that the approach adopted made it possible to analyse the perspective of both citizens and town councillors and officials, 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 town councillors and officials.

Future research could further reflect on the significance of the local political experience on the part of town councillors and officials 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 develop the empirical part further by integrating it with new approaches ((e.g. gamification applied to public participation, Open Space Technology (OST), etc.)).

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