

Article

The Impact of COVID-19 on Public/Third-Sector Collaboration in the Italian Context

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Abstract: The extent of the effects produced by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on the collaboration between public administrations and the third sector is currently unclear. Undoubtedly, as in any other organizations, social enterprises and non-profit organizations have been severely affected by the spread of COVID-19, especially regarding their relationship with the public sector. Based on an analysis of 563 Italian third sector entities (ETs) that responded to an online survey launched in March 2020, this study aims to explore the current state and extent of the potential change in the collaboration between organizations belonging to the third sector and the Italian public administration system in response to the COVID-19 emergency. The results have shown that only approximately one-third of the organizations have been asked to jointly contribute with the public sector to contain the negative effects of the pandemic. In other cases, spontaneous support initiatives have been undertaken to manage the crisis. The findings have also revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the internal operating and functioning mechanisms of the organizations operating in the third sector. The study concludes with a forecast of the potential exacerbation of the difficulties currently faced by the third sector and with the provision of future strategic paths to contain the health, social and economic effects of the pandemic.

Keywords: third sector; pandemic; COVID-19; public sector; public administration

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1. Introduction

In the history of humanity, crises and epidemics have not only resulted in violent impacts, grief and heavy economic and social repercussions, they have often been considered as a harbinger of essential changes [1]. Similar to both the black Plague in the XIV century and the global financial crisis at the beginning of the third millennium, the 2020 COVID-19, also called coronavirus, pandemic is leading all the countries ravaged by the virus to rapidly carry out compelling strategies to contain the negative consequences of the crisis in terms of global health and economic growth [2]. COVID-19 has demonstrated its strength by showing how fast it has been able to change the world, bringing about deep implications for society [3].

Since the 2007/2008 international crisis, the socio-economic situation both at national and global levels has not been particularly prosperous [4]. In addition, Italy has been one of the first countries severely struck by the coronavirus to have generated a socio-economic tsunami [4–7] and general discontent and negativity. In fact, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics, 75,891 people died from COVID-19 in the period between February and 31 December 2020 [8]. At the time of writing this article, 15 April 2021, the number of deaths due to COVID-19, unfortunately, has reached a peak of 115,088 in Italy and 2,960,777 globally [8], confirming the death toll of a natural disaster

as it has caused “acute collectively experienced events with sudden onset” [9] (p. 8) and a disastrous reduction of resources [10,11]. This negative scenario has confirmed the extreme relevance of a timely provision of public services, in particular health care treatments and social care services, which are no longer a privilege of the public sector [12]. In fact, the delivery of many public services has progressively devolved to third sector organizations collaborating with national governments [12–14].

Based on the negative serious consequences generated by the spread of the coronavirus, this study aims to explore the current state and extent of the potential change in the collaboration between organizations belonging to the third-sector or *Enti del Terzo Settore (ETS)* (Pursuant to the Italian law (Legislative Decree No. 117 of 3 July 2017), ETS are not-for-profit private organizations or entities that pursue civic, solidarity and social benefits for the purpose of carrying out, exclusively or principally, activities of general interest in an accountable and transparent way.) and the Italian public administration system in response to the COVID-19 emergency.

However, it is doubtless that the COVID-19 emergency is causing effects that, often in total discontinuity compared to just a few months ago, will significantly determine new health, relational, social and economic frameworks [1]. Among the many macro issues that may impact the relationship between the state and citizens and relations among people, the focus of this article is mainly on the relationship of the state with the area of the third sector and, therefore, of active, organized and supportive civil society. According to the literature, there are diverse advantages that can strengthen the collaboration between governmental and nonprofit organizations [12]: (1) the mutual exchange of soft and/or hard resources; (2) the improvement of the status quo due to collective effort and wisdom; (3) the increase in the legitimacy of the decision-making process for the public bodies [15]; and (4) a reputational advantage for the non-profit organizations [16]. In this regard, a valid contribution is offered by Sancino and colleagues (2018) [17] who explored how the diverse forms of cross-sectoral collaboration can co-create public value.

However, the extent of the effects produced by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on the collaboration between public administrations and the third sector is currently unclear, and this article, framed within this branch of studies, endeavors to contribute to further developing this under-investigated stream of research. More specifically, based upon the analysis of 563 social enterprises, non-profit organizations and entities operating in the Italian territory that responded to an online survey launched during the COVID-19 outbreak (March 2020), this study aims to deepen the magnitude of the potential change in the collaboration between organizations belonging to the third sector and the Italian public administration system in response to the national emergency triggered by the spread of COVID-19.

The article is organized as follows. The next section endeavors to highlight the theoretical roots of the collaboration between third sector and public administration systems and how it has been developed throughout the years with a specific focus on the Italian context. Then, after giving an account of the research methods implemented to conduct this study, the results of the analysis are shown. The last section is dedicated to the discussion, concluding remarks, future research paths and limitations of the study.

2. Research Background

Prior to analyzing the negative effects of the national disaster of COVID-19 [3] on the relationship between organizations belonging to the third sector and the public administration system, a brief description of the third sector seems to be necessary. In this regard, Iannello’s question *What does third sector mean?* (2020) seems to be challenging to answer unambiguously. Sociologically, the third sector could be defined as a reality with economic, social, political and cultural objectives that have nothing to do with the aims of the market and profit, nor with the typical objectives of the public administration [1]. Undoubtedly, the term “third sector” has now entered the common vernacular,

together with other related terms such as fourth sector [18], private social, non-profit, social economy, third dimension and social enterprise. It is a neologism coined by sociological and economic investigation fueled by the influence of two distinct cultural and ideological matrices: the North American line of thought of the third sector because of the State's or market's failure and the European line of intermediate communities [19]. "Third sector" is therefore intended to indicate entities that are not the State, public institutions or a for-profit company operating in a private market.

The origin of the third sector was originally investigated by Weisbrod (1972) [20], who attempted to theorize the reasons for the birth of non-profit organizations in a capitalist economy. Years later, Salomon and Anheier (1998) [21] conceptualized six main theories to explain the development of the sector in relation to specific socio-economic dynamics. More specifically:

1. Heterogeneity theory: an unsatisfied demand for public or quasi-public goods in situations of heterogeneity in demand leads to the emergence of non-profit organizations.
2. Supply theory: non-profit organizations, created by entrepreneurs who aim to maximize non-monetary returns, constitute a reflection of the heterogeneity of demand.
3. Theory of trust: in conditions of information asymmetries, usually making monitoring more expensive and suspecting of undeserved profits, the constraint on non-distribution of profit makes non-profit organizations more trustworthy.
4. Welfare state theory: the industrialization process leads to the modern welfare system that displaces private organizations to non-profits.
5. Theory of interdependence: due to lower transaction costs (at an early stage), non-profit organizations anticipate the government in supplying public utility goods; however, due to the "failures" of volunteering, synergistic relationships with the sector are established over time.
6. Theory of social origins: the size and structure of the non-profit sector reflect the characteristics of the complex system of relationships, classes and social regimes in which it is involved.

These theories represent the entire spectrum of interpretative possibilities of the evolution of the Italian non-profit sector [22]. In particular, the theory of the welfare state appears particularly significant, as it allows us to verify the hypothesis put forward by Weisbrod about the birth and development of these organizations (presence of areas of dissatisfaction not covered by the offer of public goods and services). In Italy, following the crisis that occurred in 2007–2008 and the consequent decrease in investments and public spending on social services, there has been a growth in the non-profit sector [23].

Henry Mintzberg (2015) [24] participates in the current debate on third sector by introducing the concept of the plural sector, which is defined as that set of organizations that, as they are not owned or controlled by either the state or private investors, can act for the rebalancing of the society. Extending this theory, it could be affirmed that the social mission of these organizations is supported by the achievement of positive social and environmental impacts. These effects have the power of creating conditions to rebalance inequality and therefore return to what Weisbrod introduced; more specifically, to aid unserved areas of dissatisfaction arising due to the inability of the public sector and the for-profit sector to meet all social needs.

In general, as observed in recent research conducted by Salomon and Sokolowski (2016) [25], while in Anglo-Saxon countries the concept of the non-profit sector is linked to the evolution of charities, the involvement of volunteers and the constraint of non-distribution of profits, in continental European countries and some countries located in Southern Europe, including Italy, the non-profit sector terminology is often accompanied by the third sector and the social economy, which represents a broader con-

cept, as it includes also social cooperatives and mutual and other organizations that offer goods and services to the market [25].

Overall, the relationship between third sector organizations and national governments can be analyzed under three points of view [26]. The first point of view considers the relationship under a financial perspective, more specifically, in terms of funding [27,28]. The second point of view focuses on interaction styles [29] while the third point of view focuses on the relationship between the public and third sectors as service providers that are able to develop effective synergies [18,30,31]. Regarding the first perspective, there is a tight dependency of third sector organizations on fund-raising, volunteerism and public subsidies, allowing them to exercise the allocative and integrative function, also defined as the twin-function [26]. Regarding the type of interaction between the public and third sectors, the unique political and administrative culture rooted in each country shapes different national patterns of public–third sector interactions. Regarding the third perspective, organizations belonging to the third sector have been actively involved in the provision of public services to meet the increasing demand of needy individuals dealing with conditions of emergency. In fact, third sector involvement has changed the delivery of public services, and this, in turn, has changed the third sector itself [32].

COVID-19 has clearly demonstrated that unpredictable events are able to deeply defy societies and, above all, test the public sector to its extreme limits [33]. In fact, the spread of the virus has rapidly led to a public health crisis at a global level with strong negative implications for national governments and for third sector organizations which had already faced severe income shortfalls because of the 2007/2008 financial crisis and the consequent economic recession [34]. Consequently, in response to the economic and the following global fiscal crisis, many European Union (EU) governments had to implement austerity measures to enhance public expenditure performance [2], and organizations financed by public subsidies working in social welfare were hardly struck [35].

Many scholars have emphasized the power of the third sector in response to COVID-19, which shows all the peculiarities of a wicked problem, more specifically, complexity, open-endedness and intractability [36,37]. For instance, Wakui [38] claims that the third sector, as it neither belongs to the public sector nor the free market system, can uniquely contribute to the fight against the pandemic. On the other hand, Naidoo [39] highlights the fact that organizations belonging to the third sector are currently facing a great challenge to survive due to the shrinking of the financial resources at their disposal. In fact, the majority of third sector organizations only rely on philanthropic resources and fundraising resources collected through events and face-to-face donations, which have been shut down due to the restrictions imposed by national governments (lockdown) to contain the further spread of the virus.

The social, political and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have severely compromised the ability of third sector organizations to provide services at a time when they would be most needed [40,41]. However, despite the limited resources available, the third sector has demonstrated the ability to provide prompt responses to the physical, psychological and spiritual needs felt by indigent people during the pandemic [42].

The impact of COVID-19 on third sector organizations, especially regarding their ability to tackle the pandemic with the public sector, highly depends on local circumstances and different national plans [34]. However, the extent of this relationship represents a clear gap in the literature with only just-emerging research shedding light on national experiences. This research is willing to contribute by investigating the extent to which, within the Italian context, the cooperation between organizations belonging to the third sector and the public administration system has been changing in response to the emergency induced by the spread of COVID-19.

3. Research Methods

For any researcher of social science, the first major step is to select a paradigm and method to conduct their research [43]. In this study, we overcame this barrier by firmly deciding to engage in a qualitative approach. However, even though precise definitions for qualitative research are rarely found in the literature [44], a steady point in this type of research is represented by the close engagement of the researcher with the research context where data are collected and analyzed [45] which means “getting closer to the phenomenon studied” [46].

In their Handbook of Qualitative Methods, Denzin and Lincoln [47] argue that “while this increasing centrality [of qualitative research] might lead one to believe that consensual standards have developed, this belief would be misleading” (1995: 417). In fact, there is restless academic debate questioning the full validity of qualitative research since “developing validity standards in qualitative research is challenging because of the necessity to incorporate rigor and subjectivity as well as creativity into the scientific process” (2001: 522) [48]. According to Aspens and Corte [46], qualitative research is an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new, significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied (2019: 139) [46]. This process can be implemented, as qualitative researchers’ primary goal is to “make the facts understandable,” and often places less emphasis on deriving inferences or predictions from cross-case patterns [49]. In addition, the qualitative method, in comparison with quantitative counterparts, allows the researcher to be more creative both in terms of data collection and analysis [43].

Among the qualitative research methods available, this study employs the basic or fundamental qualitative description method, which has the goal of qualitatively describing specific events experienced by individuals or groups of individuals (2012: 255) [50]. The basic or fundamental qualitative description method allows researchers to interpret without compromising the neutral depiction of reality [51], which differentiates it from other forms of qualitative research approaches, such as grounded theory [52], phenomenology [53,54] and ethnography [55], which basically aims to describe events. On the other hand, through the implementation of the qualitative description method, social researchers endeavor to provide a rich explanation of the occurrences described in simply understood language [56] or, according to Caelli and Mill (2003), to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved [57].

The reasons behind the specific choice of selecting the qualitative description method are twofold. Firstly, qualitative descriptive studies are “the least theoretical of all the qualitative approaches to research. In addition, qualitative descriptive studies are the least encumbered studies, compared to other qualitative approaches, by a pre-existing theoretical or philosophical commitment” [50]. As the aim of this research is that of exploring the impact of one of the most unprecedented world-wide catastrophic events, the COVID-19 pandemic, on the collaboration between public and third sector organizations operating in the Italian territory, an approach that did not require a conceptual or highly abstract rendering of the data was needed. This explains our choice of the qualitative description research method, as it is specifically adequate for this type of first-time event, according to Lambert (2012) [50]. Secondly, this research is the first attempt to descriptively analyze the consequences of COVID-19 on the public–third sector relationship. Therefore, as any other qualitative approach would have required engagement with previous studies, which, at this stage, do not seem to be existing, qualitative descriptive research is the least “theoretical” of all of the qualitative approaches to research as it is, in fact, purely data-driven. Finally, the basic or fundamental qualitative description research model does not require researchers to follow strict procedural steps. In fact, how the data are organized depends upon the researcher and how the data were rendered (2012: 256) [50]. This gives an enormous opportunity to scientists to investigate

a research field under unprecedented circumstances such as those induced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, social scientists can implement numerous strategies to collect reliable data. One of the most utilized strategies involves surveys through structured questionnaires that allow researchers to collect data from a large number of respondents. To apply the basic or fundamental qualitative description model, a web-based questionnaire was sent to third-sector organizations across Italy in March 2020 and remained open until March 2021. We specifically chose Italy as the research context since all the authors are based in Italy and have gained multi-year experience within both the public and third sector research fields, which allowed us to construct our dataset.

The impact of COVID-19 on public/third-sector collaboration was evaluated by means of an ad hoc questionnaire (included at the end of the article) that was configured through a mixed process, following the introductory fundamentals, research objectives and experts' judgments [58]. In addition, in order to test the robustness and reliability of the questionnaire employed and, in particular, the internal consistency reliability of the items included in the questionnaire, the Cronbach alpha (α) value was calculated (Table 1) giving a final value of 0.94, which is higher than the threshold of acceptance (set at 0.70) [59]. Therefore, the items included in the submitted questionnaire are highly reliable.

Table 1. The Cronbach alpha test.

No. of Respondents	No. of Items (K)	Sum of Items Variance (X)	Variance of the Total Value per Respondent (Y)
563	8	12.94	73.21
Cronbach's alpha = 0.94			
$(K/K - 1) \times (1 - (X/Y))$			

The questionnaire was composed of four main sections and a total of 38 questions spread among multiple-choice, five-point Likert scale and, when a deeper investigation was required, open-ended questions were submitted. In the first section, basic descriptive information on the 563 third sector organizations and entities (ETs) interviewed, such as personnel structure (volunteers or non-volunteers), geographical area of intervention (municipal, regional, national or international), legal form adopted and main sector served such as health, education, religion, philanthropy and others, was collected. The second section of the survey covered the crux of the analysis by questioning the 563 third sector organizations and entities regarding the effect of COVID-19 on their relationship with the public administration system (PA). Furthermore, ETs were asked if they collaborated with the PA at a local, regional or national level during the pandemic and, if so, on what type of emergency related to COVID-19. They were also asked if there was previous collaboration with the PA and if it was changed by the COVID-19 emergency. The third section of the survey was related to the activities carried by each ET to tackle the emergency. More specifically, they were asked the type of support they provided, such as intensive care, prevention, diagnosis, family support, provision of necessities, etc. This section also involved whether the ET included new volunteers in their personnel, how many and how unpaid workers were recruited by the ET. The last section of the survey dealt with the consequences that COVID-19 has had on the functioning mechanisms of ETs. They were asked whether the pandemic has forced them to change their methods of provision of services, such as digitalization, and to what extent the services regularly provided have changed, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, due to the emergency. In addition, ETs were asked whether and, above all, to what extent the public sector has retrenched public funding.

According to the latest report published by the Italian National Institute of Statistics in 2021 [60], there is a total bunch of 362,634 third sector organizations and entities (ETs) operating in the Italian territory, of which 3566 were included in the initial dataset used in this descriptive analysis. The Italian legal system provides for third sector entities (ETs) to sign up to specific registers in order to carry out activities of public interest and access certain benefits. The obligations imposed are based upon the legal form chosen and the activities carried out by the third sector entities. The final list of 3566 ETs included in the dataset was generated through the consultation of regional ET lists and national third sector networks such as Legacoop, CNCA and Welfare Forum. We first launched the survey in March 2020, and it remained open for 12 months, until March 2021. We specifically chose to keep the survey open to allow ETs to freely answer during the difficult times caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, all the organizations involved were kept informed about the data collection and analysis during the process. More specifically, in June 2021, all respondents were sent a report with the key findings of the research in Italian; an open access data visualization in powerBI (powerBI data visualization was sent to the organizations involved in the study); and a report explaining the next research steps that were going to be made.

The next section shows the results of the qualitative description method implemented on the final dataset.

4. Results

This section explains the main findings stemming from the analysis of the four sections of the questionnaire (see Appendix A). A total of 563 completed questionnaires (563 third sector organizations and entities) were collected out of the 3566 originally sent, generating a response rate of approximately 16%, distributed per legal form, type of activity carried out and area of intervention (Table 2).

Concerning the significance of the sample, the confidence level is 95% and the confidence interval is 4.13 considering a standard deviation of 50%.

Table 2. The respondents to the survey.

Type of Activities	No. of Organizations	%
Civil protection/social care	162	28.8%
Unspecified	80	14.2%
Culture/sport/recreational activities	80	14.2%
International solidarity/cooperation	24	4.3%
Economic development/social cohesion	23	4.1%
Education/research	21	3.7%
Rights protection/political activities	20	3.6%
Environmental activities	19	3.4%
Philanthropic/voluntary activities	17	3.0%
Labor relations	1	0.2%
Religion	1	0.2%
TOTAL	563	100%
Legal Form	No. of Organizations	%
Volunteering organization	156	27.6%
Social cooperative	139	25.3%
Social promotion association	138	24.6%
Registered association	54	9.6%
Unregistered association	51	4.8%
Foundation	15	2.8%
Social enterprise (non-social cooperative)	5	1.2%
Other forms	5	1.1%

TOTAL	563	100%
Area of Intervention	No. of Organizations	%
Intermunicipal	165	29%
Municipal	136	24%
Regional	117	21%
National	86	15%
International	28	5%
Interregional	23	4%
TOTAL	563	100%

As shown in Table 2, 12 types of different activities are carried out by the 563 organizations included in the dataset. Almost half ($n = 277$, 49.2%) of the 563 organizations analyzed carry out activities pertaining to either the health or social/civil care sector, while cultural, sport and recreational activities are only carried out by 14% of the entire list of organizations. In addition, 9 out of the total 12 categories of activities are conducted by less than 5% each of the organizations included in the dataset, in line with the national landscape.

Regarding the legal form adopted, three-quarters ($n = 433$, 77.5%) of the organizations included in the dataset adopted either a legal form of volunteering organization, social cooperative or social promotion association, while other forms, such as foundations and non-social cooperative enterprises, seem not to be favored as a legal form by the representatives of the third sector. Regarding the area of intervention, organizations predominantly operate at local level, more specifically, at municipal, intermunicipal and regional levels, while interregional operations are only chosen by 4% of the 563 organizations included in this study. However, if we consider the top two categories of activities, civil protection/social care and health, the area of intervention of the organizations carrying out those activities seems to be slightly more equitably distributed, especially at the national level, where almost 50% of the total number of organizations implements civil protection/social care and health activities. Moreover, out of the 115 organizations carrying out health activities, approximately half of them (47%) adopted the legal form of volunteering organization, while the 162 organizations committed to conducting civil protection and social care largely chose the social cooperative legal form. To fully understand the temporal evolution of the Italian third-sector throughout the years, Figure 1 shows the number of organizations founded per year and included in the dataset.

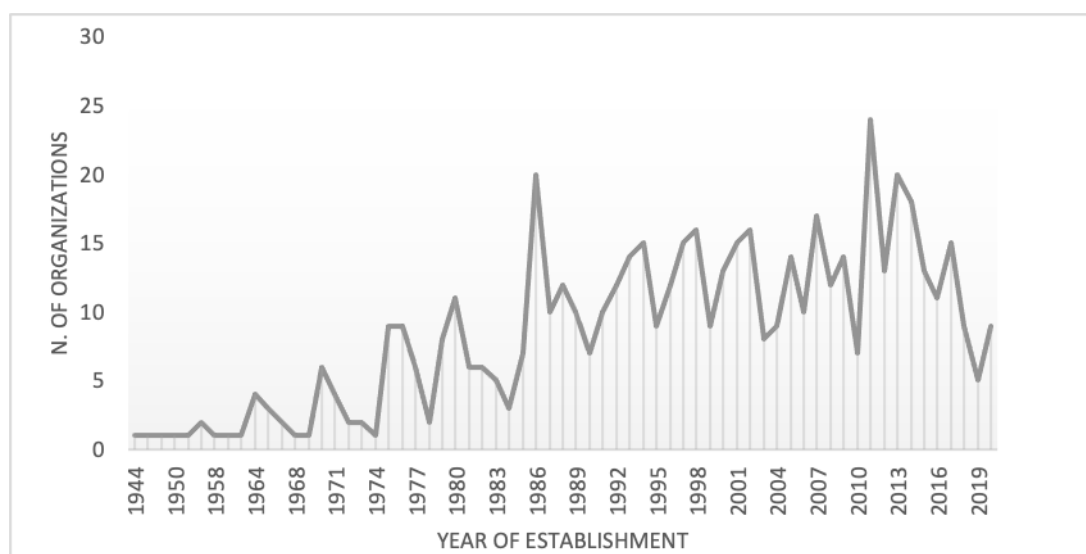


Figure 1. The number of organizations established per year.

As shown in Figure 1, most organizations were established in the last 20 years. In terms of the number of organizations funded per year, the peak was reached with 20 organizations established in 1986 and, more than 30 years later, in 2013. Overall, the growth of non-profit organizations and entities operating in the Italian territory has been fluctuating over the past thirty years, but progressively increasing if compared with the period going from 1944 to 1984.

The results of the analysis conducted mainly focus on the organizations that were asked to provide support to the Italian public administration system to fight against the pandemic caused by the spread of the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2). Interestingly, only 211 organizations (38%) were contacted by the public administration system in response to the pandemic, and only 51 (9%) are carrying out health services. Compared to the large extent of the negative effect exercised on the entire nation in terms of the number of deaths, the COVID-19 outbreak seems to be a weak reason to ask for support from the third sector by the Italian public administration system. In addition, 133 out of 211 organizations were contacted by local administrations (at municipal and intermunicipal levels) while only 5% (11 organizations) were contacted by public administrations at the national level.

From the analysis of the 211 organizations contacted by the Italian public administration to contain the negative effects of the pandemic, 95% had previously collaborated with public administrations at a local level while only 30% had done so at the national level. Therefore, the fight against the pandemic has not broadened the partnership between the national public administration system and the third sector; it has merely confirmed the solidity and continuity of precious voluntary collaborations at a local level.

As confirmation of the constant help provided by the third sector to manage emergencies such as the current pandemic, only 7% ($n = 39$) of the 563 organizations included in the dataset have not spontaneously undertaken activities to support the management of the emergency. However, those organizations have been facing constant budget cuts, which have substantially limited their ability to provide support. In fact, within the dataset analyzed, only 5% of the organizations have been either publicly funded or helped through donations to provide support for the COVID-19 emergency. Therefore, even emergencies with the magnitude of a global disaster like the COVID-19 pandemic seem not to be satisfactory to reduce the constant financial cuts operated by the Italian national public administration system. These budget reductions have led third sector organizations to ponder changing their methods to provide services. Among these methods, the digitalization of the organization, production and usage of services provided by the 563 organizations included in the dataset has been one of the effects induced by the emergency.

However, the extent of the change towards the digitalization of services has been, in fact, less adopted than it was expected. More specifically, on a five-point Likert scale with 1 as “none of the services has been converted in a digital modality” and 5 as “all the services are digitally provided now”, the 563 organizations included in the data have averagely selected 2.65, confirming only a partial change and not a radical variation in the way services are provided during the pandemic.

In addition, organizations have been asked to rate the experienced reduction in terms of the services provided during the COVID-19 crisis. Unsurprisingly, organizations had to consistently reduce the number of services regularly provided to comply with reduced budgets (averagely rated nearly 4 in the 5-point Likert scale). Overall, the emergency seems to have negatively affected the capacity of the third sector to respond to the crisis, primarily in terms of reduced financial resources; however, it has demonstrated its high resilience by continuing to provide constant support to the public sector in fighting the pandemic.

Lastly, organizations have been asked to forecast post-crisis solutions and impacts. Regarding the former, co-design and co-planning represent the solutions highly recommended by the third sector. Both co-designing and co-planning are tools provided by the new Italian Legislation of third sectors organizations (article ex. 55) that should in-

crease the level of collaboration between ETSs and public administrations. Those solutions are therefore concrete ways in which public bodies and the third sector can work together to pursue a shared purpose in sectors of general interest. This ought to be done by maintaining full transparency of relations and the need to treat the subjects who develop relations with the public administration in a uniform manner, to be identified through public tenders and based on criteria consistent with the objective to be pursued. Co-planning is aimed at identifying the needs to be met, the interventions necessary for this purpose, the methods of realization of the same and the resources available; it is therefore the moment in which the third sector can fully participate in drafting public policies by bringing its own point of view and perspective. Co-design is instrumental in the co-planning process, as it aims to define and possibly carry out specific service or intervention projects aimed at satisfying defined needs based on co-planning.

Regarding the impacts that COVID-19 will potentially have on the public administration systems in terms of investment in the third sector, the 563 organizations included in the dataset have shown a serious concern about it by assigning an average value of 3 out of 5, with 1 being “no negative impact will be generated from the pandemic” and 5 being “a serious negative impact will be generated from the pandemic”.

5. Discussions and Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a health, social and economic shock that has few similar precedents in recent history [1,2]. The whole world has been substantially blocked in its mobility, sociability and lifestyle [61], and the risk to which billions of people have exposed themselves has put the social capital of territories under tremendous pressure, starting with the health system [7,8,10].

The effects of the crisis immediately became economic and social, and this required an unprecedented intervention by governments, with a necessary rethinking of who are to be considered public actors and their roles [2,3,6]. For decades, in fact, the debate on public governance and on the need for a constellation of entities generating public value has tended to consider articulated ecosystems, in which collaboration between public and private entities plays a crucial role in determining lasting positive impacts at the territorial level [12,14,17,62].

This research, therefore, aimed to verify whether, in a moment of acute crisis, a “collaborative instinct” has emerged on the part of public administrations [13,17]. If it is true that the word crisis can also be interpreted as an opportunity to give rise to those transformative changes that would not be able to be achieved under “normal” conditions, the collaborative possibility offered by the pandemic is unrepeatable: on the one hand, due to the exceptional nature of the challenge to be faced, and on the other hand, due to the extraordinariness of responses to be put in place through joint resources and experimental synergies [3,4,6].

Three main points emerged from the analysis of 563 third sector organizations operating in the Italian territory during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Firstly, there has not been an increase in collaboration between the third and public sectors in response to the crisis. In fact, only one-third of the organizations were asked to collaborate with the public sector to contain the negative effects of the pandemic. The data showing the distribution of requests for collaboration with respect to the territorial level are of particular interest: most (80%) were contacted by local administrations, followed by regional administrations and lastly by national administrations. This demonstrates how collaborative phenomena find a natural habitat in the levels of government that are closest to social needs, highlighting the centrality of local administrations in creating accessible governance opportunities for organizations operating in the area [12]. The interesting aspect to be debated is how many of these collaborations are to be considered effectively “new collaborations” and how many result as an extension of collaborations already active with the same PA. From the joint analysis of the data referring to

the territorial level of collaboration before and during the pandemic crisis, a rather significant picture emerges:

- Compared to collaborations with the local PA pre-pandemic among the ETS interviewed, 200 out of 211 declare that they have had collaborations. During the pandemic crisis, of those 200, 170 were invited to extend collaboration to the responses put in place to counter the current crisis.
- With respect to the collaboration with the regional PA, 149 ETS interviewees declare that they have collaborated pre-pandemic with the regional PA and, of these, 66 have been hired to collaborate to counter the current crisis.
- With respect to the collaboration with the national PA, 146 ETS respondents declare that they have collaborated pre-pandemic and only 24 have been hired to collaborate with respect to the current crisis.

The overall result returns a substantial narrowing of the spaces for collaboration between PA and ETS during the pandemic crisis at all levels of government.

Secondly, although there has not been a quantitative increase in collaborative relations between PAs and ETSs, where these were already present pre-pandemic, an interesting qualitative evolution has been recorded. By qualitative evolution, we mean an increasingly active involvement of the ETS that is not limited exclusively to the service delivery phase, but is aimed at the entire cycle of programming, design, management and delivery of the service [3,4,12,14]. In other words, it was investigated whether the PAs have valued the knowledge of the ETSs deriving from their recognized proximity to local needs.

This evolution, certainly influenced by the nature of extreme urgency, has resulted in the streamlining of administrative procedures and has brought out a perception of greater effectiveness of emergency responses. Starting from these considerations, the prospect of adopting more and more participatory devices (such as co-planning and co-design) is seen as an excellent opportunity for the ETSs to manage the post-emergency phase.

Thirdly, third sector organizations have demonstrated high resilience, especially in conditions of crisis. There has been a reformulation of activities regarding personal services and a sudden change in the financial situation. At the same time, organizations have been subjected to an unexpected and extensive experimentation with digital ways of working. From a pandemic response capacity point of view, the ETSs, despite these adaptation needs, have also been proactive in trying to organize their own initiatives beyond the provision of their services (when it has been possible to maintain or adapt them). In the sample analyzed, 33% of organizations declared that they had organized spontaneous initiatives to react to the pandemic crisis. Most of these activities were financed with the ETS promoters' own economic resources (65%).

Despite the reorganization of services (and digitalization when possible) and the pro-activity in promoting ad hoc initiatives, the ETSs overall declare a perception of a reduction in the ability to affect social needs.

The 563 organizations included in the dataset showed serious concern about the future investments operated by the public administration system, which may further compromise the ability of the third sector to fully operate at all levels of society, from the very local to the national and the international level, and make a significant and rapidly increasing contribution to the health and well-being of society, especially during national and international emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The considerations that emerged from the analysis are still preliminaries due to the embryonic stage of the research project. The authors are aware that to support the early evidence descriptively presented, a further and deeper investigation is needed.

Therefore, the next steps of this research project are the following:

1. Qualitative analysis of the open-ended section of the questionnaire to explore specific aspects of the dataset, such as those related to the services designed during the

pandemic; the qualitative aspects of the collaboration established between public administrations and other non-profit organizations; and the future perspectives of these organizations.

2. The launching of a new version of the survey (in March 2022) to the same sample of organizations previously investigated to assess how their conditions have changed since the beginning of the pandemic. The new survey will be almost identical to the one analyzed in this paper aside from potentially new elements that have emerged from the qualitative analysis (point n. 1) that will help us to explore specific issues such as the reliability of the services created during the first outbreak.
3. A quantitative analysis of the two surveys will be run at the end of 2022 to investigate the research hypotheses that emerged in this descriptive analysis and the extent of change that occurred in the two-year period.

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Appendix A

The recent health emergency has been severely challenging the resistance of the third-sector organizations and entities (ETs). For us, it is very important to deepen the point of view of these organizations to contribute to studies on the impact of the pandemic and to the construction of new tools and to provide indications for policy makers.

The questionnaire is aimed at all Third Sector Entities (ETs), both those directly involved in the management of the emergency and those suffering from severe repercussions.

The research is conducted by the University of Rome “Tor Vergata,” the University of Naples Federico II and by Open Impact. The data collected will be used anonymously and integrated to respect the confidentiality of the individual body.

***compulsory**

Section 1: Descriptive information of the ETS

1. Name of the organization *.....
2. Email address.....
3. Job position.....
4. Number of employees.....
5. Number of volunteers.....
6. Establishment year.....
7. Municipality (or area) where the main services are provided *.....
8. Area or intervention *:
 - Municipal
 - Intermunicipal
 - Regional
 - Interregional
 - National
 - International

9. Main sector (Italian National Institute of Statistics—INSTAT) *:
- Environment
 - Social assistance/civil protection
 - International cooperation and solidarity
 - Culture, sport and recreation
 - Philanthropy and promotion of volunteering
 - Education and research
 - Trade union relations and interest representation
 - Religion
 - Health
 - Economic development and social cohesion
 - Right protection and political activity
 - Other
10. Legal form (please select one box only):
- Social cooperative (type A, type B, mixed, integrated)
 - Social enterprise (non-social cooperative)
 - Association of social promotion
 - Recognized association
 - Unrecognized association
 - Foundation
 - Voluntary organization
 - Network of Third Sector Body
 - Other type of Third Sector Body

Section 2: Relations with the public administration system

11. Have you received a request for collaboration from the public administration regarding the COVID-19 emergency? * (please select one box only)
- Yes
 - No (skip to question 17)
12. In what area of the COVID-19 emergency have you collaborated with the public administration?
- Emergency severe illness due to the high number of patients admitted to intensive and sub-intensive care.
 - Emergency diagnosis due to the high demand for COVID-19 tests to verify the contagion of the population.
 - Prevention emergency due to the high demand for medical equipment necessary to reduce the risk of contagion (masks, gloves etc.).
 - Emergency support for the relatives/families of the infected, due to the need to assist the families of patients in a state of isolation (with particular emphasis on families who are in conditions of social fragility).
 - Emergency access to food and necessities.
 - Other.
13. With which level of the public administration system did you collaborate?
- National
 - Regional
 - Local
14. Did you already collaborate with the public administration system?
- At national level
 - At regional level
 - At local level
15. With respect to the ways in which the collaboration was established, you noticed that there was a change in the procedures: *

No changes in procedures 1–2–3–4–5 High variation of procedures

16. According to you * (select one box online)
- The collaboration has significantly increased emergency response capacity
 - The collaboration has slightly increased the capacity to respond to the emergency
 - The collaboration did not significantly increase to respond to the emergency

Section 3: Third-sector initiatives for the COVID-19 emergency

17. Has your organization undertaken spontaneous initiatives to support the management of the emergency? *
- Yes
 - No (skip to question 23)
18. The initiatives have been taken with respect to which type of emergency: *
- Emergency severe illness due to the high number of patients admitted to intensive and sub-intensive care.
 - Emergency diagnosis due to the high demand for COVID-19 test to verify the contagion of the population.
 - Prevention emergency due to the high demand for medical equipment necessary to reduce the risk of contagion (masks, gloves etc.).
 - Emergency support for the relatives/families of the infected, due to the need to assist the families of patients in a state of isolation (with particular emphasis on families who are in conditions of social fragility).
 - Emergency access to food and necessities.
 - Other.
19. Briefly describe the type of initiative taken (max 100 words)
20. Was the initiative organized in collaboration with other Third Sector Entities (ETs)? *
- Yes, other ETs have joined the initiative promoted by my organization.
 - Yes, my organization has joined the initiative promoted by other ETs.
 - Yes, my organization has joined the initiative promoted by a network of ETs of which my organization is a member.
 - No, it was only conducted by my organization.
 - Other.
21. The economic resources necessary to face the activities related to the emergency have been collected: *
- From own resources
 - Through dedicated donation campaigns
 - Through the financing of the public administration system
 - Other
22. Enter the budget used for initiatives related to the COVID-19 emergency (number in euro).
23. Does your organization benefit from volunteers' support? *
- Yes
 - No (skip to question 30)
24. How many volunteers are currently assigned to activities related to the management of the COVID-19 emergency? (Insert number)
25. How do you select most of the volunteers who work for your organization? *
- Through word of mouth
 - Via social media or advertising tools
 - Based on the required specialized skills
 - With the widest possible participation

- Other
26. Among the volunteers who participate permanently in the activities, there are also: *
- People with disabilities
 - Immigrants
 - People over 70 years old
 - None
27. As a result of the COVID-19, has your organization recruited new volunteers? *
- Yes
 - No
28. If yes, how many new volunteers are contributing to the organization's activities?
(Please insert a number)
29. In your own opinion, when the emergency phase is over: *
- Fewer volunteers will be available
 - The same number of volunteers
 - More volunteers will be available

Section 4: Effects of COVID-19 on your organization

30. Have you noticed a reduction in the ability to intervene in comparison with the services normally proved by your organization? *
- No reduction 1–2–3–4–5 High reduction
31. Have you suffered budget reductions from the public administration due to the COVID-19 emergency? *
- No budget reduction 1–2–3–4–5 High budget reduction
32. Have the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 emergency required a rethinking of how your services are provided? *
- No 1–2–3–4–5 Deep rethinking
33. To what extent do you think that the application of the rules provided in the Code of Contracts affects the activities carried out by your organization? *
- Very negatively 1–2–3–4–5 Extremely positively
34. Co-programming and co-planning with public administrations are useful tools for post-emergency management. *
- Not at all 1–2–3–4–5 Extremely useful
35. Is it possible to rethink, either fully or partly, the digitalization of the delivery of your organization's services?
- Yes, completely
 - Yes, partly
 - No, except for few specific aspects
 - Not at all
36. Have the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 emergency led to a digitalization of your services? *
- Not at all 1–2–3–4–5 I managed to provide all services in a digital way
37. Do you think that the strong effort of the public administration (also in financial terms) can have an impact on future investments by the public administration on your organization? *
- Not at all 1–2–3–4–5 Extremely impactful
38. Before you finish the survey, please remember that your opinion is very useful to us. Therefore, leave any comments that may help us to improve the questionnaire for future investigations. Thank you again for participating.

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