

FRAGILITY AND ANTI-FRAGILITY OF ITALIAN VOLUNTEERING IN THE POLYCRITICAL CONTEXT

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Abstract. Volunteering is a multifaceted phenomenon of great relevance to the social sciences. Several studies confirm how it significantly contributes to mitigating and partially alleviating the effects of crises (Guo et al., 2021; Della Porta, 2020) and, more generally, the distorting effects of capitalism and the market (Rago & Venturi, 2020). Despite the fact that crises increase the range of social needs to which institutional welfare alone cannot respond, it is noted that Italian volunteering has changed during the Covid pandemic, experiencing a crisis due to a reduced capacity to involve and activate individuals willing to engage in activities of general interest (Eurispes, 2022).

In 2021, there were about 360,000 non-profit institutions (NPIs) active in Italy and about 261,000 with volunteers (76.1% of the total NPIs). The aim of this paper is to describe the different forms of “organised volunteering” and to analyse specific contexts in order to identify the factors that, at territorial level, could influence the traditional way of volunteering and allow new forms of engagement and civic participation to emerge.

Specifically, we analyse the data collected by the permanent censuses of non-profit institutions in order to classify NPIs according to structural characteristics, human resources, activities carried out, and other qualitative information such as scope (mutual versus public benefit), target of mission (individuals versus community), network of stakeholders, and category of vulnerability addressed. This analysis makes it possible to identify different types of volunteering and their changes over time, providing the empirical basis for new reflections on the fragility (or not) of organised volunteering in Italy.

1. Introduction

Volunteering is an activity undertaken spontaneously by individuals without monetary remuneration (Fiorillo & Nappo, 2015). In our work, we focus on volunteering in nonprofit institutions (NPIs), which we define as organized volunteering. It is particularly important to analyse this type of volunteering because it serves as a key resource of labour and initiative for the nonprofit sector (Beatton & Torgler, 2018). Organized volunteering significantly contributes to the functioning of NPIs, enabling them to expand their service offerings and reach more beneficiaries. The literature has long addressed this topic using both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine its evolution in Italy over the past decades.

Building on sociological and political studies (Ranci, 2006; Biorcio & Vitale, 2016; Ambrosini & Erminio, 2020; Caltabiano et al., 2024), we also aim to investigate this phenomenon from a statistical and economic perspective to better understand the internal dynamics of NPIs and underscore their critical role in promoting territorial well-being, as highlighted by a growing body of literature (Terzo, 2021, 2022; Terzo et al., 2023, 2024).

Based on these premises, the aim of our work is to investigate the evolution of organised volunteering between 2015 and 2021, using data from the ISTAT census of non-profit institutions. Through this analysis, we intend to identify and describe emerging patterns, paying particular attention to the dynamics of growth, changes in the types of activities carried out, and the geographical distribution of volunteers. This study will enable us to better understand the changes taking place in the non-profit sector and to provide useful recommendations for improving policies to support volunteering, with the ultimate aim of promoting the well-being and sustainable development of communities and regions.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The next section presents a descriptive analysis of volunteering in NPIs using the 2021 data from the Istat permanent censuses of non-profit institutions, highlighting the main changes compared to the previous census in 2015. Section 3 presents the results of a shift-share analysis to examine changes in volunteering across regions and sectors between 2015 and 2021. Finally, section 4 concludes.

2. The Nonprofit Institutions Census and data on volunteering

2.1 The Nonprofit Institutions Census

Istat carried out the censuses of non-profit institutions according to a definition of NPIs contained in the System of National Accounts (1993 and 2009) and used by the Handbook on Nonprofit Institutions (United Nations, 2003), which complies with the basic requirement of prohibiting the distribution of profits (SNA 1993, par. 4.54). The strategy for the permanent census of non-profit institutions is based on two key elements: the Statistical Register and the sample survey, conducted periodically, to gather information also on thematic issues and to conduct time series analysis. The statistical register, updated annually, is the sampling frame for the survey. The sample survey ensures: a) an integration of the information content of the statistical register through thematic focus; and b) validation of models to estimate eligibility and main variables of the units included into the statistical register.

In 2022, Istat carried out the second permanent census of NPIs, with a sample frame, which include 110,000 units (30% of units gathered by the Statistical Register of NPIs). In April 2024 Istat disseminated the first results of the Permanent Census of non-profit Institutions, based on NPIs Register updated on 31 December 2021, reference period of sample survey.

Collected data allow to improve the measurement of the contribution of organised volunteering to the enlargement and strengthening of civic society participation. Census surveys have always collected information on volunteers operating in NPIs and the definitions adopted are coherent with those adopted by the ILO, by the Handbook on Nonprofit institutions, and with Third Sector Reform legislation, as well.

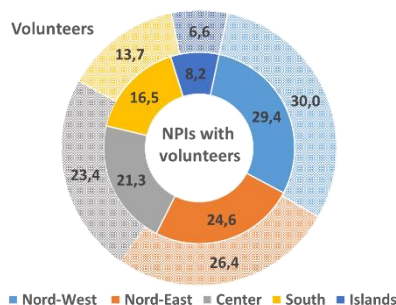
2.2 The organised volunteering in 2021: main characteristics

The Second Permanent Census of NPIs allowed to update the data on non-profit volunteering: in 2021, the 71.3% of NPIs operated with the contribution of 4.617 million of volunteers. Italian volunteers represent a crucial resource for the non-profit sector, contributing significantly to addressing vulnerability and mitigating the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic emergency. The 71.3% of total active NPIs in Italy operated with 4.662 million of volunteers. More than half of total number of volunteers (58.3%) involved in non-profit sector are males, the 41.7% are females. The presence of volunteers is more consistent in areas of Northern Italy (56.4%), compared to the Centre (23.4%), the South (13.7%) and the Islands (6.6%) (Figure 1).

Even considering the presence of volunteers in relation to the resident population, the Northern and Central regions show higher figures than the national average (equal to 790 per 10,000 inhabitants), with 1,165 volunteers per 10,000 inhabitants in the Northeast, 892 in the Centre, and 887 in the Northwest. The South and the Islands show 492 and 509 volunteers per 10,000 inhabitants, respectively.

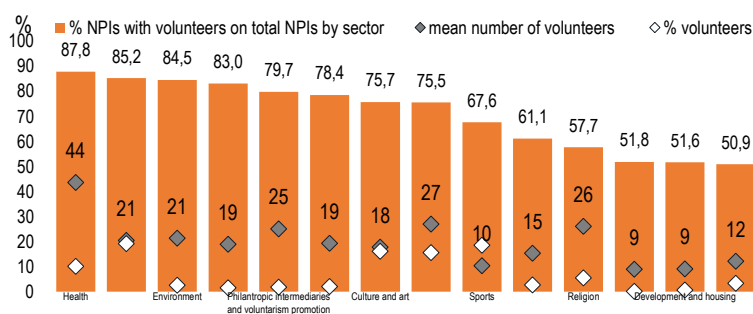
The first three activity sectors, Culture, sport, and recreation, gather the 53.8% of total number of volunteers (Figure 2). NPIs active in Social Assistance and Civil Protection share the 15.6 % of volunteers, Health sector the 10.1%, Religion the 5.6%. NPIs with the largest organisational structure are those active in the Health sector, with 44 volunteers on average per institution (the national figure is 18 volunteers per NPI). The Social Assistance and Civil Protection follow this sector, with 27 volunteers per institution, the Religion sector (26), and the Philanthropy and Promotion of Volunteerism (25).

Figure 1 - NPIs with volunteers and volunteers by macro regions. Year 2021, percentage values.



Source: Our data processing from Istat – Non-profit Institutions Census.

Figure 2 - NPIs with volunteers on total NPIs of sector, volunteers by activity sector, mean number of volunteers by activity sector. Year 2021, percentage values.

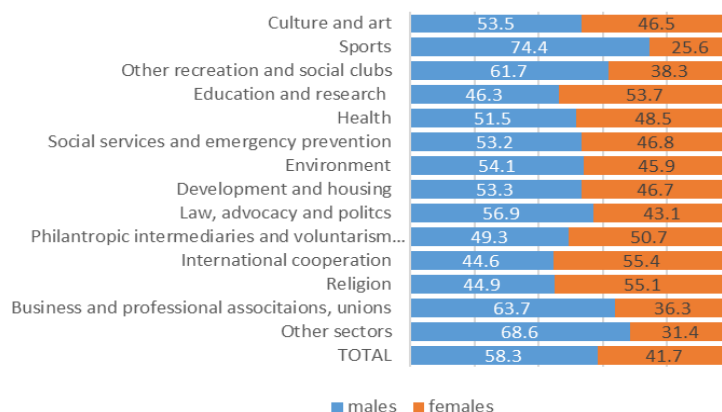


Source: Our data processing from Istat – Nonprofit Institutions Census.

The activity sectors with the highest incidence of female volunteers are Cooperation and International Solidarity and Religion (with 55 volunteers per 100 volunteers); Education and Research (with 53.7%), Philanthropy and Promotion of Volunteering (50.7%), and Health (48.5%) (Figure 3).

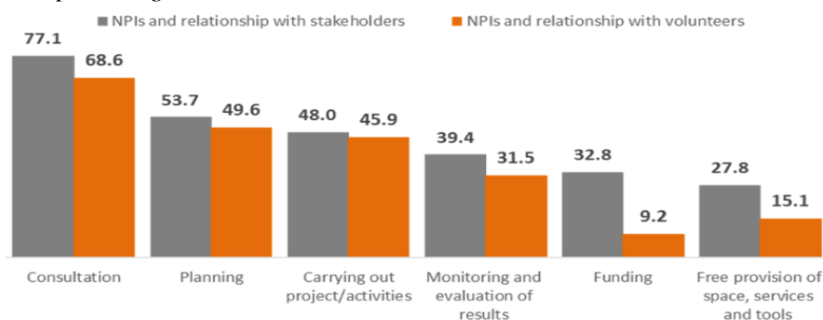
The 56.6% of NPIs with volunteers have significant relationships with them, compared with 46.8% of total NPIs (Figure 4). More than two-thirds of NPIs consult their volunteers in defining activities (68.6 %). Under half involve them in planning (49.7%) and implementing projects (45.9%). One-third of NPIs involve their volunteers in monitoring and evaluation of their activities.

Figure 3 - Volunteers by activity sector and gender. Year 2021, percentage values.



Source: Our data processing from Istat – Nonprofit Institutions Census.

Figure 4 - NPIs and NPIs with volunteers by type of stakeholder involvement. Year 2021, percentage values.



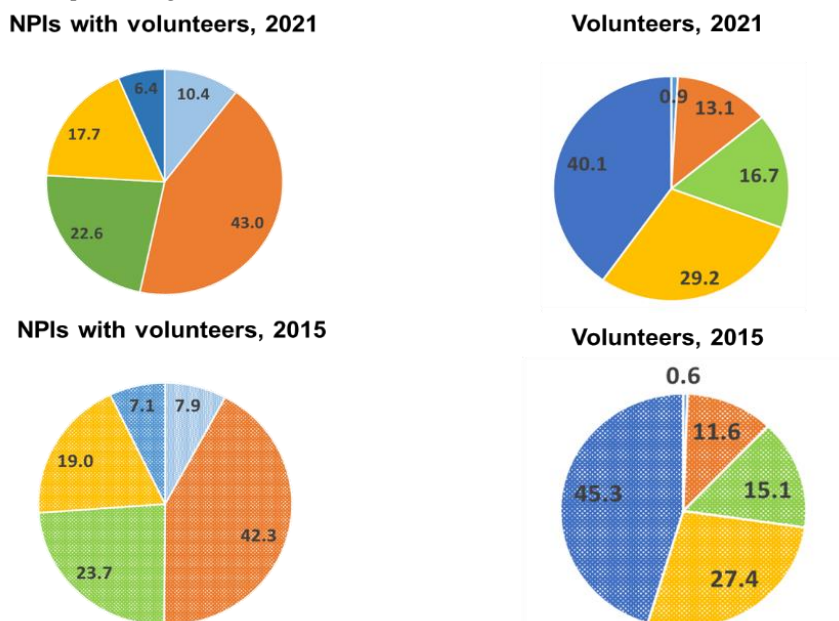
Source: Our data processing from Istat – Nonprofit Institutions Census.

2.3 The dynamics of nonprofit volunteerism through time

The analysis we carried out highlights a consistent decrease of the number of volunteers active in the non-profit sector. As manner of fact, the comparison with the last census (which refers to year 2015) shows a 15.7% of decrease (in 2015 active volunteers were 5.528 million). Inevitably, the number of NPIs with volunteers decrease as well: in 2015, the quota was equal to 79.6%, reporting a decrease of 16.5 %.

Looking at the structure of NPIs, which rely on the contribution of volunteers, allows to better describe how non-profit volunteering is changing. NPIs with volunteers range in size from extremely large to extremely small. The first evidence concerns a downsizing of the sector, which seems to be taking place. More specifically, in 2021, the share of medium and large NPIs (units with more than 20 volunteers) decreases (from the 26.1% in 2015 to 24.1% in 2021), while volunteering small-sized NPIs grows (Figure 5). Compared to 2015, NPIs with 1 or 2 volunteers increase from 7.9% to 10.4%, and units with 3-9 volunteers grow by 0.7% (from 42.3% to 43%). Moreover, the share of volunteers of medium-sized institutions grows slightly (29.7% volunteers compared to 27.4% in 2015). Large NPIs also downsize organizationally, from 130 volunteers on average in 2015 to 111 volunteers in 2021.

Figure 5 - Nonprofit institutions with volunteers and Volunteers by size. Year 2021 and 2015 (percentage values).



Source: Our data processing from Istat – Nonprofit Institutions Census.

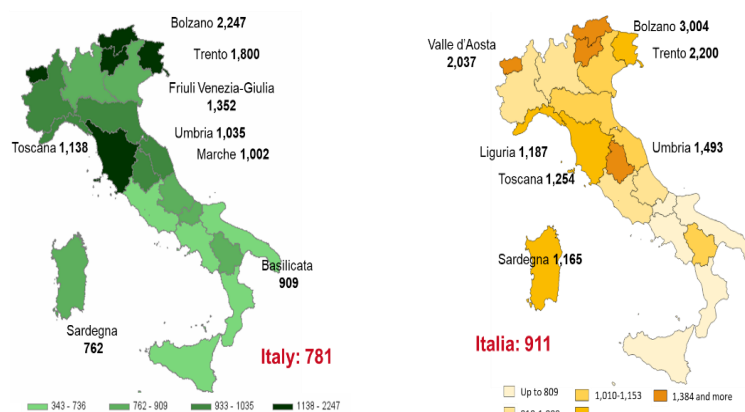
The trend just described can be explained by considering the period which the data collected refer to, which is when Covid-19 emergency was still ongoing. Therefore, is important to consider that the restrictions and the social distancing imposed affected the activities of both organisations and individuals. If some organisations certainly suffered from the impossibility of carrying out their activities

(which in some cases were completely suspended), some others have intensified and have reshaped themselves in order to cope with the crisis and to ensure the support for the weakest and most vulnerable segments of society. In this context, the contribution of volunteers has been relevant in addressing the vulnerabilities and hardships that have arisen because of the health emergency.

By looking at the gender of volunteers, it can be noted that the composition of female volunteers and males engaged in the non-profit sector is similar to the one described in 2015. In fact, the decrease is evident for both categories, although lower on females (-17.3% for men, -15.3% for women).

As for the regional distribution of volunteering, the analysis highlights that, although we can observe the decrease of volunteering in all areas of Italy, the share of volunteers in the Southern and North-Western regions is slightly higher compared to 2015 figures. Nevertheless, by comparing the data through the two years, the ratio of volunteers to local population (which the figure 6 refers to) shows the same picture in terms of distribution of volunteers in Italian regions.

Figure 6 - Non-profit volunteers per 10,000 inhabitants. Year 2021 and 2015.



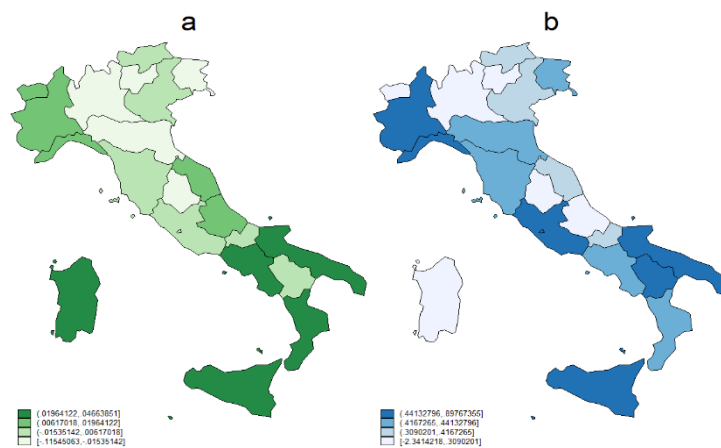
Source: Our data processing from Istat – Nonprofit Institutions Census.

3. Understanding changes in organised volunteering between 2015 and 2021: some empirical insights

In this section, we present the results of an analysis using the standard shift-share methodology (Dunn, 1960; Esteban-Marquillas, 1972). This approach is key to understanding the dynamics of volunteer distribution within the non-profit sector between 2015 and 2021, disaggregated by region (NUTS-2) and sector of activity per the International Classification of Non-Profit Organizations (ICNPO). Originally

developed for regional economic analysis, shift-share has been adapted to identify variations in volunteering patterns due to regional and sectoral characteristics. Shift-share decomposes changes in volunteering into three components: national, structural, and local. The national component reflects trends affecting volunteering countrywide. The structural component captures how sector-specific characteristics influence volunteering, based on public awareness, funding, and needs. Finally, the local component examines how local factors, such as politics and socio-economic conditions, affect volunteering levels, highlighting how regions deviate from national trends. To present the results clearly, two maps are shown in Figure 7, offering a comprehensive overview of volunteer distribution dynamics. The first map (Figure 7a) shows the structural component, with positive growth mainly in Southern regions, while most Central and Northern regions show negative variation. The local component (Figure 7b) reveals a more heterogeneous distribution, with high values in Southern regions like Sicily and Puglia, as well as Central-Northern regions like Lazio, Piedmont, and Liguria.

Figure 7 - Shift-share analysis results.



Source: Our elaboration on Istat data (Nonprofit Institutions Census).

In order to analyse the behaviour of the two structural and local components together, we carry out a sign analysis. This analysis consists of classifying the regions into four clusters according to the joint direction of the two components, summarised as positive or negative, as can be seen in Table 1. It is clear that the sign + indicates a positive trend, while the sign - indicates a negative trend.

Table 1 - Analysis of signs: description of clusters.

Cluster	Structural component	Local component
1	+	+
2	+	-
3	-	-
4	-	+

Figure 8 shows the results of the sign analysis in a quantile map. We report three clusters as there are no regions that show a negative sign of the structural component and a positive sign of the local component (cluster 4). The majority of regions have a positive sign for both components and therefore fall into cluster 1. In this cluster we find all the Southern regions with the exception of Basilicata. Cluster 2 includes all the regions that make up the North-East macro-region according to the NUTS 1 classification. It is interesting to note the case of Lombardy, the only region to show a negative trend in both components.

Figure 8 - Shift-share analysis: analysis of signs.

Source: Our elaboration on Istat data (Nonprofit Institutions Census).

The results presented above show significant regional differences. The most interesting data undoubtedly concern the South of Italy (the Mezzogiorno), which shows positive results for both the local and structural components in almost all its regions. This may reflect a community response to the shortcomings of the welfare state, exacerbated by the pandemic. Local characteristics, such as certain traditions of solidarity and community networks, together with the expansion of sectors particularly affected by the crisis, may have contributed to the strengthening of

volunteering. In addition, local initiatives, infrastructure improvements, and new forms of volunteering were able to respond effectively to emerging needs. This strengthening of volunteering could be seen as a measure of resilience and adaptation to socio-economic difficulties, with a significant difference compared to other regions of the country.

The Mezzogiorno, with its socio-economic fragility, has experienced a crisis that has highlighted and accentuated its structural vulnerabilities. However, the community's response through volunteering represents a dimension of antifragility. In other words, while the multiple crises has exposed the weaknesses of this area of the country, the active response and strengthening of volunteering show how communities can turn difficulties into opportunities for development. It is interesting to note the results for Piedmont and Liguria, which show similar dynamics to the Southern regions. Both regions are experiencing a marked demographic decline, particularly in the inner areas. The decline in population, due to low birth rates and migration to other areas, reduces the number of young people and increases the proportion of elderly people. This phenomenon leads to greater territorial vulnerability, as resources and services are often concentrated in urban areas, leaving rural areas more isolated and less well served. As in the Southern regions, volunteering can be a response to structural deficiencies and the limited capacity of the welfare state to address new social risks. Finally, the results from Lombardy can be interpreted in terms of a kind of crowding-out effect. The progressive professionalisation observed in the non-profit sector could indeed lead to a gradual replacement of volunteers by paid workers with specific skills. This phenomenon reflects the role of Lombardy, which is characterised by a high level of employment in the non-profit sector, in attracting resources and investment, thereby promoting greater structuring and specialisation of the services offered.

4. Concluding remarks

The results of this exploratory study offer important insights into the state and evolution of organised volunteering in Italy. Our findings indicate that analysing volunteer work in the non-profit sector requires considering the framework of changes it has undergone and will continue to face (Ranci, 2006; Licursi et al., 2022). The pandemic led NPIs to suspend or reschedule their activities, making volunteer contributions more crucial than ever in addressing emerging vulnerabilities and difficulties (Ambrosini & Erminio, 2020). The Third Sector Reform has also impacted NPI organisational practices, the effects of which will become clearer with upcoming census surveys (Caltabiano et al., 2024). This analysis represents a first step towards understanding the factors driving change in organised volunteering, with territory playing a significant role (Biorcio & Vitale, 2016). The forthcoming

data will provide a clearer picture of the characteristics and peculiarities of organised volunteering, its activities, and its role in supporting vulnerable social categories, the community, the environment, and the care of common goods (Citroni, 2022; Moro, 2022).

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