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Spaghetti open data and confiscated Mafia assets: Italy's cities aren't waiting around for PM Matteo Renzi's promised reform.

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"This city doesn't need a mayor, it needs a marketing expert," said the former mayor of Florence, now Italian prime minister, Matteo Renzi.

Critics often refer to such now-infamous remarks when they try to suggest he is more slick promoter than structural reformer. But city reform is now firmly on Renzi's radar. In addition to his sweeping public administration proposals, his plans include the establishment of 15 metropolitan authorities with wide-ranging powers, each led by a mayor.

Having been here before, many in Italy's cities are sceptical of this ambitious reform programme. The institutional inertia that characterises the country's urban policy stems partly from the incomplete 1990s decentralisation process. The result is a system that remains highly centralised, with cities financially reliant on central government.

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But budgets have been heavily cut during the financial crisis and the pressure on cities is intense. Urban areas have experienced 5.5% population growth in the past decade. Cities such as Bologna and Venice have experienced a tripling of the migrant share of their population. At the same time, there has been a demographic shift in Italy and one in three people are now aged over 65.

Who pays for the rising demand for services from these social changes? The much-hyped recovery has yet to kick in. Economic growth remains sluggish and sovereign debt is at 133% of GDP – only Greece is worse – while the government owes €70bn (£55bn) to Italian companies. Meanwhile, with the current discussion of Rio's World Cup outlay, it's worth remembering that Rome is still paying debts from hosting the 1960 Olympics.

So far, so familiar. Across Europe, cities are looking to address the perfect storm of funding cuts and rising challenges. But in spite of this gloomy context we may be starting to see an explosion of creative solutions emerging in Italian cities.

What Italian cities are doing

In Turin, two young city employees set up an open innovation competition for public employees, called InnoVa.To. They issued a call for ideas to improve city services and products, and received 71 new proposals, many linked to smarter digital ways of meeting customer needs. As part of the campaign they engaged commercial city partners, linked to Turin's smarter cities green plan, to offer prizes for the winners.

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At the same time, two Italian cities have been shortlisted for the Bloomberg Mayors Challenge, one of which is Bologna, whose bid was developed after an open event with civic hackers and citizens. A city with strong radical traditions, Bologna is pushing the concept of the city commons: a shared and open citizen space. Their logo is a malleable icon that can be adapted and personalised to illustrate the subjective city experience.

The city also recently hosted the second meeting of Spaghetti Open Data, a community of civic

hackers working in several Italian cities to develop new apps and service developments. One of the coolest products emerging from this is Confiscati Bene, providing data on confiscated Mafia and criminal assets. The original data format was hard to access and navigate, so during the hackathon event in March the data was cleaned and reorganised in a more user-friendly way.

Although a hackathon event was recently held in the Italian parliament, one of the biggest barriers such groups face is the inability to find public authority employees with the skills to work in new collaborative relationships.

Across Europe the role of city authorities is evolving, moving away from a "command and control" model to more balanced partnerships. There is evidence – from Nesta's Creative Councils work in the UK, for instance – to suggest that in this process the local authority role is one of enabling, brokering and holding shared risk. These are new skillsets for public officials, especially in Italy where financial restrictions, a bureaucratic culture and archaic recruitment practices have traditionally limited organisations' opportunities to attract new blood.

Work being done in Lecce is widely viewed as important. Innovators to Change Public Administration is a pilot capacity-building programme for young local authority professionals. This work – run by the Puglia Smart Lab in conjunction with the Politecnico di Milano – seeks to equip participants with the attitudes and skills required to operate in a complex shifting environment.

As Italy has a chequered history of top-down reform, the jury is out on Renzi's plans. In the meantime, impatient for change, the country's creative urban networks are making progress by themselves.

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