**Final Assignment — The Birth and Death of Italian Babies**

Minerva University

SS156 - Comparative Politics in Practice

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**Table of Contents**

**Final Assignment — The Birth and Death of Italian Babies**

**Introduction**

Italy again broke the European record for the lowest birth rate, with only 379,000 births in 2023 (roughly six newborns per thousand residents) (Reuters, 2024; Orlandi, 2024; Rossi, 2024; Basso, 2024). With a rate of 1.2 babies per woman, way below the 2.1 rate for a stable population, it is impossible to sustain a working population without immigration (Migliaccio & Bloomberg, 2024) while also having the highest population of older adults in the EU (Carbonaro, 2024). A (declining) birth rate is an emergent property that reflects the collective outcome of numerous interacting factors, including individual reproductive decisions, economic conditions, cultural norms, and government policies, which cannot be fully understood by examining these components in isolation (Kearny et al., 2022).
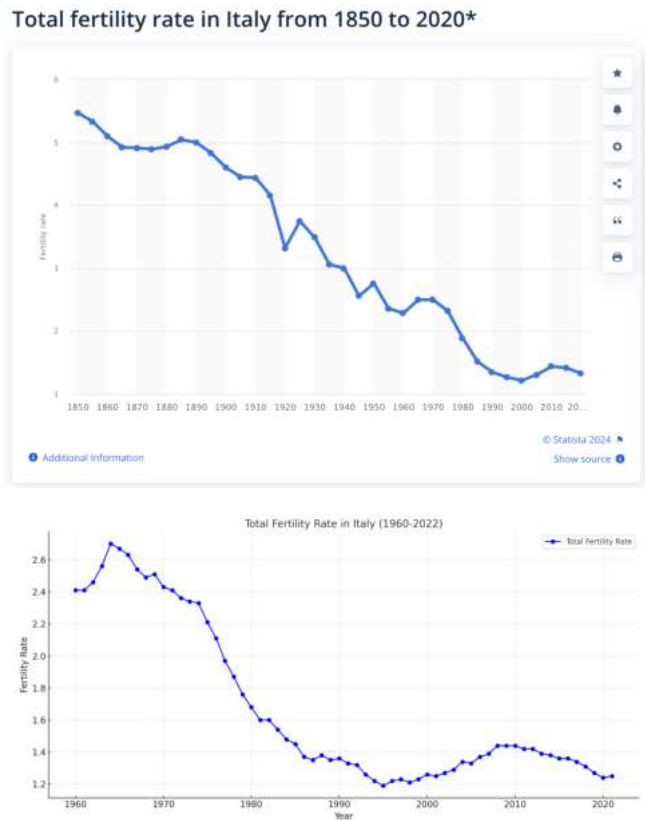
## Total fertility rate in Italy from 1850 to 2020*





*Figure 1.* *Italy's fertility rate spanning from 1850 to 2020 (Statista, 2024) and from 1960 until 2022.*

A declining population poses significant challenges, including slower economic growth, labor shortages, increased dependency ratios, and the risk of economic stagnation, as fewer working-age individuals support an aging population (Jones, 2022). Italy is at a dangerous crossroads — increase birth rates, accept more immigrants, or make peace with a declining population.
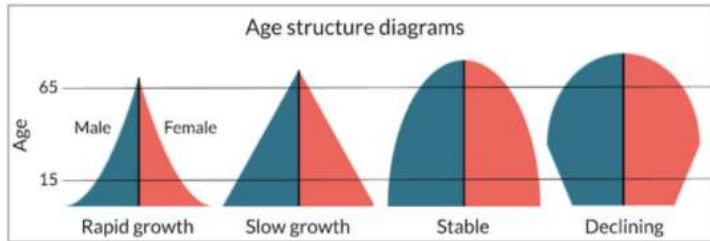
*Figure 2. A population pyramid shows age and sex distribution, indicating growth with more young individuals and decline with more post-reproductive individuals (Khan Academy, n.d.; Basso, 2024).*

However, it has not always been like this. Italy is stereotypically known for its large families (Aprea et al., 2024). Figure 1 indicates that since the country's unification in 1861, birth rates have declined similarly to most countries, with a particularly steep drop during World War I; nevertheless, Italy celebrated the birth of many babies in the 1920s, 1940s, and 1960s (Statista, 2024). This paper explores the nonlinear and complex challenge of identifying the causes of the emergent property of staggering low birth rates since the 1940s, the consequences of immigration, and the shift in social norms over the past 8 decades through an institutional and structural analysis based on the initial decomposition of the system (Figures 3 and 4).
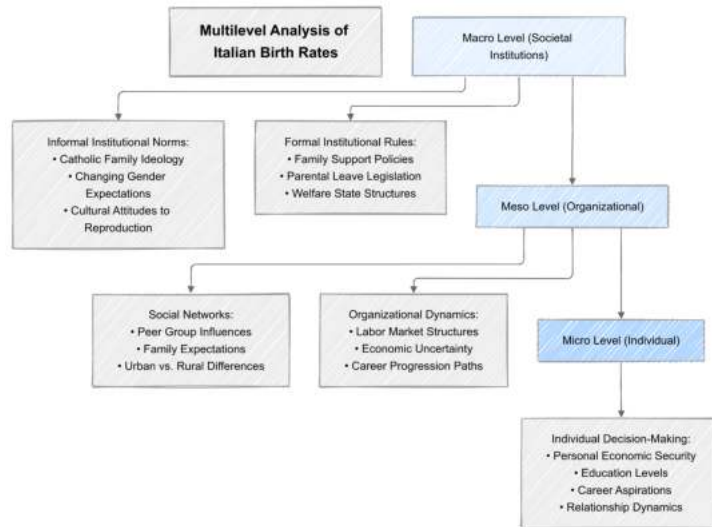
**Figure 3.** The explanatory challenge based on the three main levels of analysis. The multi-level approach allows us to track historical changes since the 1940s while highlighting potential policy intervention points through key institutional components like family services and labor markets. Alternative decompositions, such as regional or purely economic analyses, were considered but rejected as they would miss critical systemic factors and institutional dimensions that have shaped Italy's demographic transition.

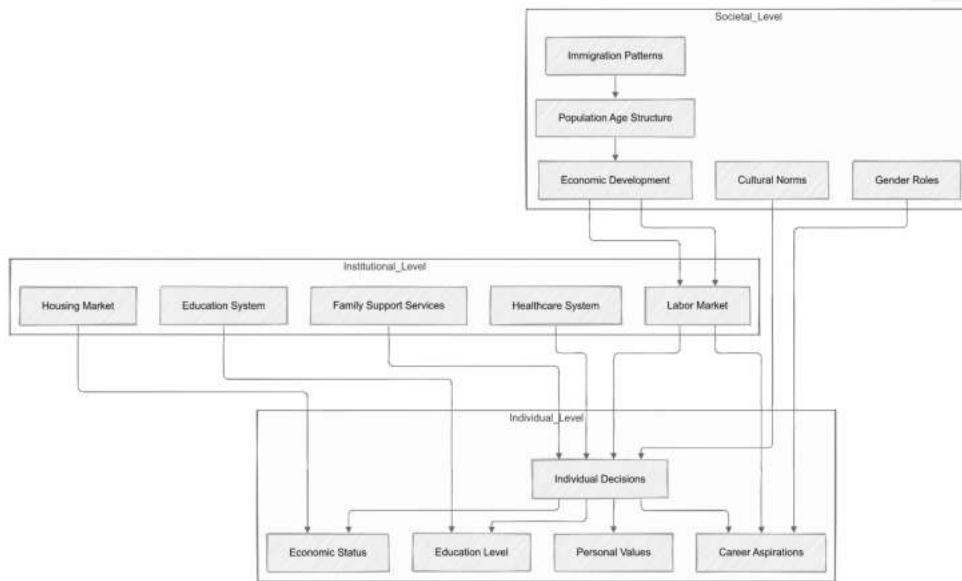*Figure 4.* Initial decompositions of the system. This system mapping decomposes Italy's fertility decline into three interconnected levels - individual, institutional, and societal - revealing crucial feedback loops between population structure, economic development, and personal choices.

**From babies to *niente* — a change in regime[1]**



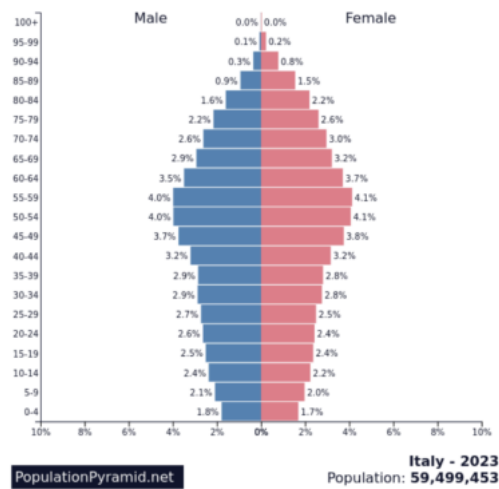***Figure 5.*** *Italy's 2023 population pyramid shows a declining population, with a high 45–64 age group likely influenced by immigration (Population Pyramid, 2023; Basso, 2024).*

In the 1950s, Italy's total fertility rate (TFR) was approximately 3 (Kertzer et al., 2008; United Nations Population Division, n.d.), and, in 2023, a rate of 1.2 raises the question of how this system changed at such a fast pace.
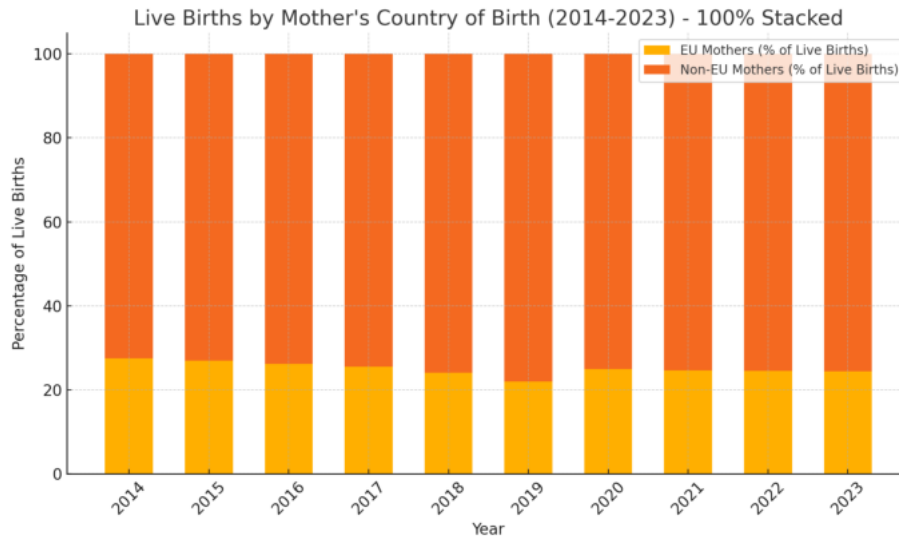
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[1] #systemdynamics

**Figure 6.** *Live births by mother's country of birth since 2014 as a percentage. Out of all*

*the births in the country over the past decade, 75% were children of immigrants (Basso, 2024)[2].*

Using Folke et al.'s (2004) framework of regime shifts, Italy's demographic transition can

be analyzed as a shift between two distinct basins of attraction in phase space. Its models of fertility

transition reveal two distinct attractors separated by critical thresholds crossed between the 1960s

and 1970s. The first attractor, dominant until the 1960s, maintained a fertility rate around 3.0

through specific reinforcing feedback loops: large families were culturally valued and

economically beneficial (providing labor for family farms and businesses), women's primary role

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[2] This figure was created for my SS146 assignment to quantify a governance problem. I also focused on declining birth rate in Italy but focusing on immigration, state capacity, and social inclusion (#SS146-governanceconcepts). I made all the calculations on this spreadsheet. I have also cited my assignment, as am I building up on it for this class. All the calculations were mine base on data I found on the Eurostat databases. I have include this figure as I will hint at immigration playing a major role in the following sections of this paper. I also find it particularly interesting that even at a very low birth rate, ⅔ come from immigrant parents, indicating that maybe the issue is with the native-population and their informal rules.

was domestic caregiving and social institutions like the Catholic Church reinforced pro-natalist values. This created a stable basin of attraction where economic structures, social norms, and institutional policies all reinforced high fertility rates. The system maintained stability through balancing loops - for instance if economic pressures temporarily reduced births, cultural and religious pressures would push back toward higher fertility. The critical transition began when multiple variables simultaneously approached tipping points: women's workforce participation exceeded 30%, urbanization shifted family economics away from agricultural models where children provided labor value, and the availability of contraception combined with reduced Church influence allowed fertility preferences to manifest (Alderotti, 2022). Once these critical thresholds were crossed, the system began moving toward its current low-fertility attractor.
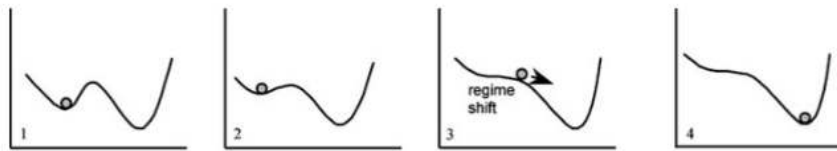


***Figure 7.*** *Folke's (2004) diagram of a regime change.*

This framework is particularly useful for analyzing Italy's case because it captures the self-reinforcing nature of each regime. The current low-fertility basin is maintained by multiple feedback loops shown in the system mapping: economic pressures lead to delayed family formation, which affects social norms around family size and influences individual reproductive decisions. Immigration has emerged as a key factor in this new equilibrium, with 75% of births over the past decade being to immigrant mothers. This suggests that the system has adapted to maintain some level of population stability even within the low-fertility basin (Basso, 2024).

Understanding these dynamics through a phase space lens helps explain why simple policy interventions often fail to shift the system back to higher fertility rates that would all need to change significantly to cross the critical threshold back to a higher fertility regime.

**Institutional analysis**

*Formal rules[3]*

Analyzing a higher level of analysis, rational choice institutionalism classifies formal rules as regulatory laws made of ADICO or the attributes, deontic, aim, conditions, and or else (Ostrom, 2005), breaking them down even further into either position, boundary, choice, aggregation, information, payoff, and scope rules (Streng & Odera, 2021).

| Aspect | Noce Law (1950) | Current Laws (2020s) |
|---|---|---|
| Historical Context | Post-WWII, Italy focused on rebuilding the economy and ensuring maternal welfare. | Contemporary Italy, addressing declining birth rates and demographic challenges (e.g., aging population). |
| Key Provisions | - Paid maternity leave at 100% wages for 3 months (later reduced to 80%). <br> -Ban on dismissing pregnant workers. | - Parental leave compensation increased to 80% for the first two months; extended leave at 30%. <br> - Social security exemptions for mothers with three or more children. |

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[3] #SS156-FormalRules

| | -Creation of workplace childcare facilities for mothers. | - Kindergarten bonuses to subsidize childcare costs. |
|---|---|---|
| Target Population | Working mothers (mainly industrial workers). | Broader inclusion of parents, including fathers, immigrant families, and self-employed individuals. |
| Focus of Policy | Protection of maternal health and rights in the workplace. | Economic incentives to reduce the cost of raising children and encourage larger families. |
| Role of Women's Advocacy | Cross-party collaboration led by Teresa Noce (Communist) and Maria Federici (DC). | Broader gender-neutral framing, though advocates for gender equality in caregiving, have supported reforms. |
| Cultural Emphasis | Reinforced traditional gender roles (mother as primary caregiver). | Promotes gender equality by encouraging shared parental leave. |
| Scope of Coverage | Limited to employed mothers; excluded many categories like agricultural workers. | More inclusive, covering self-employed parents, fathers, and low-income families. |
| Implementation Challenges | Uneven enforcement, especially regarding childcare facilities. | Sustainability concerns due to financial costs and limited effectiveness in reversing declining birth rates. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Economic Rationale** | Social justice in maternal welfare; limited focus on long-term economic growth. | Direct link to economic sustainability, addressing dependency ratios and labor force shrinkage. |

*Table 1.* *Comparison of the Noce Law and current laws (Dalla-Zuanna & McDonald, 2023; LDP, 2023; Schievenin, 2016).*

In the 1950s, for example, a cross-party collaboration resulted in Law 860, commonly known as the "Noce Law," which provided extensive maternity protections[4] (Dalla-Zuanna & McDonald, 2023). The Italian government has made numerous attempts in the past 5 years to increase birth rates through economic incentives, such as exemption from social security contribution if a mother has three or more children, parental leave also increase to 80% of pay as well as a kindergarten bonus in the 2024 Budget Law (Health Systems & Policy Monitor, 2024).

| | **Law 860 (Noce Law) (1950)** | **Current Family Welfare Laws (2020s)[5]** |
|---|---|---|
| **Attributes** | Employed women, specifically those working in industrial sectors or hazardous jobs, and their employers. | A broader range of parents (mothers, fathers, immigrants, self-employed individuals), and families with multiple children. |
| **Deontic** | Must (be provided) | |
| **Aim** | ● Guarantee maternal health | ● Mitigate the financial burden of |

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[4]Including paid leave, protection against dismissal, and access to childcare facilities, illustrating how women politicians overcame party antagonism to prioritize gendered social issues in Italy's nascent welfare state (Dalla-Zuanna & McDonald, 2023).

[5] Given there are many laws regarding family incentives in the country, especially in the past 5 years, I have groupled them into this category. They include the 2024 Budget Law, as well as the other smaller programs to incentivize childbirth.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | and welfare by ensuring income security during pregnancy and the postpartum period. Protect women's employment and prevent discriminatory dismissal.<br>● Encourage workplace support through childcare facilities. | raising children to encourage higher fertility rates.<br>● Promote gender equality and shared caregiving by extending parental leave to fathers.<br>● Support diverse family structures, reflecting contemporary values of inclusivity. |
| **Conditions** | ● Employed pregnant women and new mothers in specified sectors.<br>● Benefits and protections are activated during late pregnancy and early postpartum (e.g., six weeks before and after childbirth).<br><br>**Exclusions:** Agricultural, domestic, and certain other categories of workers were often excluded due to the law's narrower scope. | ● Parents of young children, typically up to the child's early teenage years.<br>● Eligibility is often tied to employment status, number of children, and timely application for benefits.<br>● Incentive Structure: More flexible and inclusive conditions, covering self-employed parents, immigrants, and low-income families. |
| **Or else** | ● Employers who violate these | ● Families that do not apply or do not |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | mandates (e.g., dismiss pregnant workers without cause or fail to provide maternity leave) face legal penalties under labor law. Enforcement mechanisms include labor inspections and judicial remedies. | • meet the eligibility criteria simply do not receive the benefits.<br>• The state's obligation lies in maintaining the system and ensuring availability; if the state or employers fail to comply, oversight agencies and courts may impose corrective measures. |
| **Type of rule** | • **Choice Rule for Women:** Women are granted the right to choose to use maternity leave if eligible.<br>• **Payoff Rule for Employers:** Compliance with maternity leave and workplace childcare obligations is enforced, ensuring that employers bear the costs but avoid legal penalties. | • **Boundary Rule for Eligibility:** Conditions define the eligibility boundaries for receiving benefits.<br>• **Payoff Rule for Families:** Families that meet conditions receive financial and social incentives, effectively lowering the cost of child-rearing. |

***Table 2****. ADICO comparison between Noce Law and current family welfare laws.*

Using Ostrom's (2005) ADICO framework, the Noce Law of 1950 targets employed mothers in industrial sectors (Attributes) to address post-WWII reconstruction needs. It mandates paid maternity leave and prohibits dismissing pregnant workers (Deontic), aiming to protect

maternal health and ensure job security (Aim). The benefits apply specifically to women in designated sectors for a set period around childbirth (Conditions). Employers face legal sanctions and fines for non-compliance (Or Else). Overall, the Noce Law functions as a Protection Rule, safeguarding maternal welfare and economic stability during societal rebuilding.

Modern family welfare laws differ significantly from the Noce Law in terms of the ADICO framework. The Attributes now include parents, immigrant families, and self-employed persons, addressing a variety of family patterns. The Deontic aspect establishes parental leave pay and childcare subsidies as entitlements, whereas the Aim moves from protection to encouraging larger birth rates and lowering child-rearing costs. Conditions are more inclusive, encompassing more families based on employment, family size, and timely submissions. Unlike the Noce Law's punitive Or Else element, modern rules are based on eligibility requirements, with noncompliance resulting in benefit ineligibility. These rules serve as Incentive Rules, promoting family growth and economic engagement through inclusion and positive reinforcement.

| ADICO Component | Italian Citizenship Income (Reddito di Cittadinanza, RdC[6] |
|---|---|
| Attributes | Households meeting specific criteria, such as residency in Italy for at least 10 years (last 2 continuous), income and asset thresholds, and employment status. |
| Deontic | **Must:** Eligible households are required to participate in job-search activities or vocational training to receive benefits. |

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[6] The Reddito di Cittadinanza (Citizenship Income) provides monthly financial support to low-income Italian households while requiring beneficiaries to actively seek employment and participate in job training programs (Aprea et. al., 2024).

| Aim | Alleviate absolute poverty and promote labor market participation by providing financial assistance to low-income households. |
|---|---|
| Conditions | Eligibility depends on income thresholds (using the ISEE indicator), asset ownership limits, and household composition (equivalence scale applied). |
| Or Else | Households failing to meet requirements lose access to financial assistance, while non-compliance with participation obligations results in benefit cessation. |

*Table 3. ADICO analysis for the Italian Citizenship Income (Reddito di Cittadinanza, RdC).*

Aprea et al. (2024) critique Italian family welfare laws using the ADICO framework, highlighting a contradiction where both the Noce Law and current laws (Attributes and Deontic) require employers to support parents. However, the Italian Citizenship Income (Reddito di Cittadinanza, RdC) imposes strict eligibility conditions and an equivalence scale that unfairly penalizes large families (Aim and Conditions). This inconsistency increases economic vulnerability for larger families and discourages family growth, thereby limiting the effectiveness of formal welfare rules[7][8].

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[7] #SS156-RulesandOutcomes
[8] See Appendix B for a graph I created for my SS146 assignment on the RdC.

*Informal rules[9]*



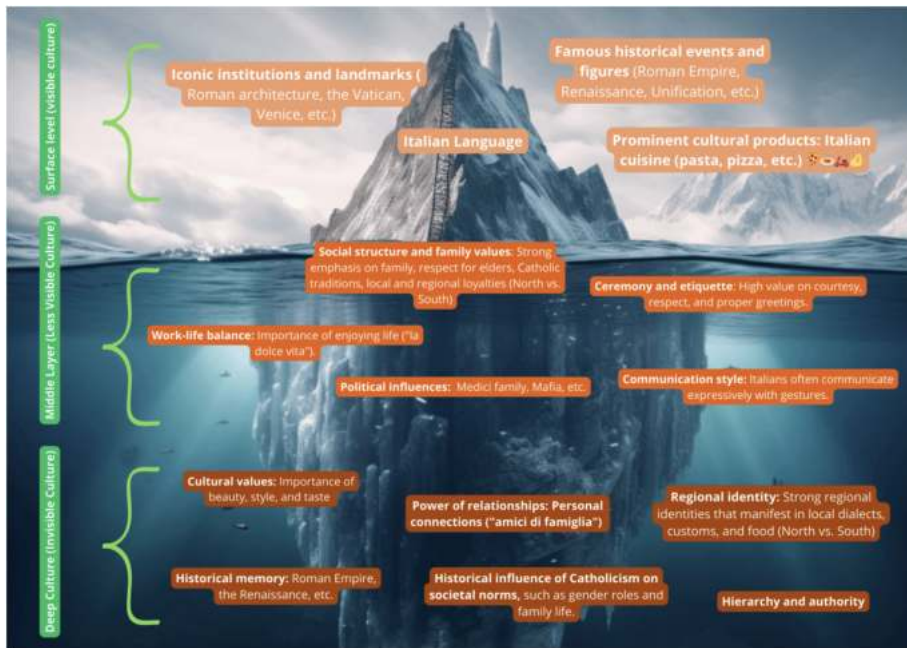***Figure 8.*** *Iceberg model of culture (Basso, 2024-b).*

Laws and formal rules are insufficient to shift a regime and increase birth rates, and institutions play a crucial role in shaping society. According to new institutionalism, cultural norms, practices, and narratives shape how society and the individual perceive maternity, constraining actions through conformity (Ostrom, 2005).
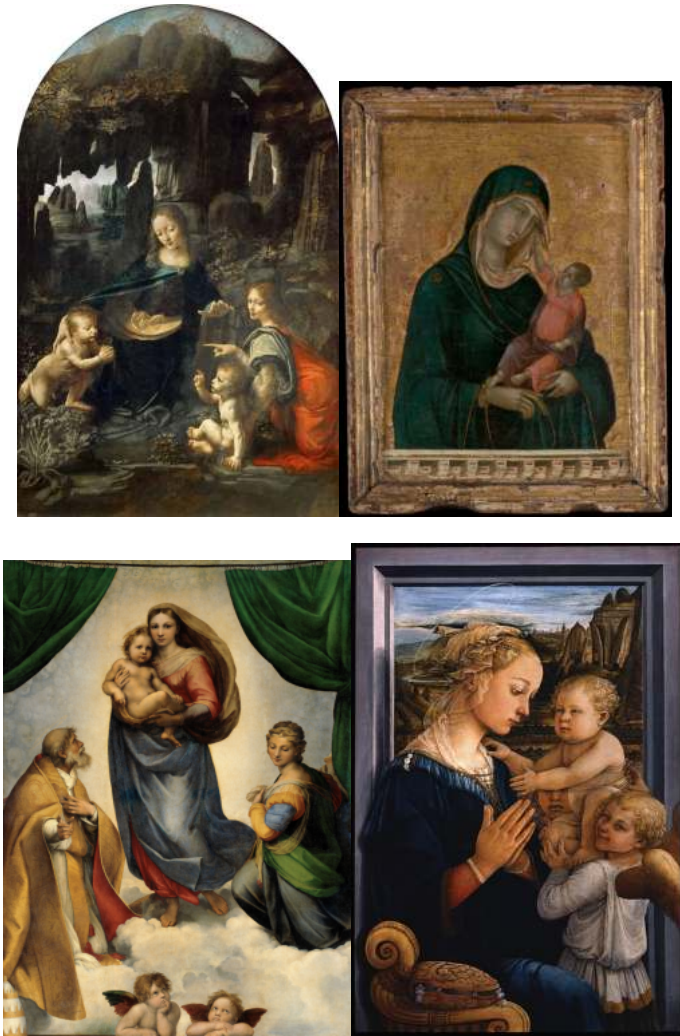
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[9] #SS156-InformalRules

*Figure 9.* Compilation of famous paintings depicting the image of motherhood (School of Advanced

Study, University of London. (n.d.); Turco, 2022; Lazzari, 2018).Top left: Leonardo da Vincis's

"Madonna of the Rocks" (1483–1486); top right: Duccio di Buoninsegna's "Madonna and Child" (circa

*1300); bottom left: Raphael's "Sistine Madonna" (1512–1513); bottom right: Filippo Lippi's "Madonna and Child with Angels (circa 1465).*

**Practice: Gendered division of household labor**

A prevalent informal practice is the gendered division of household labor, where societal norms and Italian Catholic ideologies compel women into caregiving and domestic roles (Meggiolaro & Scioni, 2024). This unwritten rule limits women's labor market participation due to unpaid domestic work, leading to delayed childbearing or fewer children (Gornick & Meyers, 2003). This conflict between professional growth and family life discourages larger families (Bianchi et al., 2006). Historically, cultural depictions reinforce motherhood, as seen in paintings symbolizing the Madonna (Figure 9) and expressions like "mamma mia" (School of Advanced Study, University of London, n.d.; Turco, 2022; Lazzari, 2018). Modern films such as "La Ciociara" (1960), "Mamma Roma" (1962), and "Figlia Mia" (2018) continue to portray motherhood as central to women's lives (D'Amelio & Lerner, 2017).

*Figure 10.* Movie posters for "Mamma Roma," "Two Women" (La Ciociara), and "Daughter of Mine" (Figlia Mia).

**Narrative: Financial stability necessitates dual-income**

The narrative that dual incomes improve living standards and financial security is driven by Italy's high living costs and economic uncertainties, compelling couples to rely on two incomes (De Cirio, 2018). This shapes individual goals and aligns with societal expectations of economic prudence for family well-being (Friedline et al., 2021). Belloni and Dal Lago (2013) note that this financial necessity is linked to policy gaps, such as insufficient childcare and inadequate parental leave, which do not ease economic pressures on families. Consequently, the belief that dual incomes are essential reinforces the informal preference for smaller families, contributing to Italy's low birth rates.

***Figure 11.*** *Movie poster for Gli equilibristi (Balancing Act), a 2012 film by Ivano De Matteo highlighting*

*the economic struggles of maintaining a household without dual incomes in contemporary Italy.*

Looking at Figure 6, it is worth mentioning that although ⅔ of the live births in the country come from immigrant mothers, Italy's integration efforts encourage immigrants to adopt local norms, including smaller family sizes and shifting perceptions of motherhood, meaning their contributions to birth rates will align with Italian demographic trends over time rather than creating significant changes (Basso, 2024; Migliaccio & Bloomberg, 2024)[10].

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[10] #SS156-RulesandOutcomes

*Institutions and bureaucratic operations[11]*

Formal and informal institutions shape agencies addressing Italy's low birth rate, with the Noce Law (1950) establishing legal frameworks for the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies and the Ministry of Health. Over time, these agencies expanded to include immigrant families, translating laws into policies like INPS's[12]  paid parental leave and childcare subsidies (Assegno Unico Universal[13] and Bonus Nido[14]). However, informal rules, such as the gendered division of household labor, create gaps between policy intentions and outcomes, with these informal institutions sometimes reinforcing or undermining formal policies.

Peters (2009) would classify Italy's bureaucratic agencies as both Weberencia and neo-Weberian bureaucracies given its blend of traditional hierarchical structures and rule-based procedures emphasized by Weber and increased flexibility, responsiveness to public needs, and inter-agency collaboration. Structurally, the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (MoLSP) have hierarchical frameworks with specialized departments dedicated to maternal health with the MoH's Department of Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health, led by Dr. Maria Grazia Siliquini, focusing on maternal health services. Under Director Pierpalo Barraso, MoLSP's Directorate General for Social Inclusion oversees Assegno Unico Universale and Bonus Nido. These ministries use forums like the National Family Policy Council and task forces to coordinate efforts, avoid policy overlaps, and ensure effective family welfare initiatives. Moreover, regional governments use **decentralized** structures to adapt national policies

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[11] #SS156-BureaucracyOperations
[12] National Institute for Social Security
[13] Universal Child Allowance or a financial support program designed to provide monthly payments to families based on income levels, number of children, and additional needs, such as disabilities.
[14] Childcare subsidy program that reimburses families for nursery school fees, further incentivizing early childhood care and enabling parents to balance work and family responsibilities.

to local needs. For instance, Emilia-Romagna's Regional Law on Family Support provides extra subsidies for rural families, addressing local challenges and supporting economic stability. This approach ensures flexibility and responsiveness to unique demographic needs, thus creating a mix of Peters' (2009) Weberian and neo-Weberian bureaucracy.
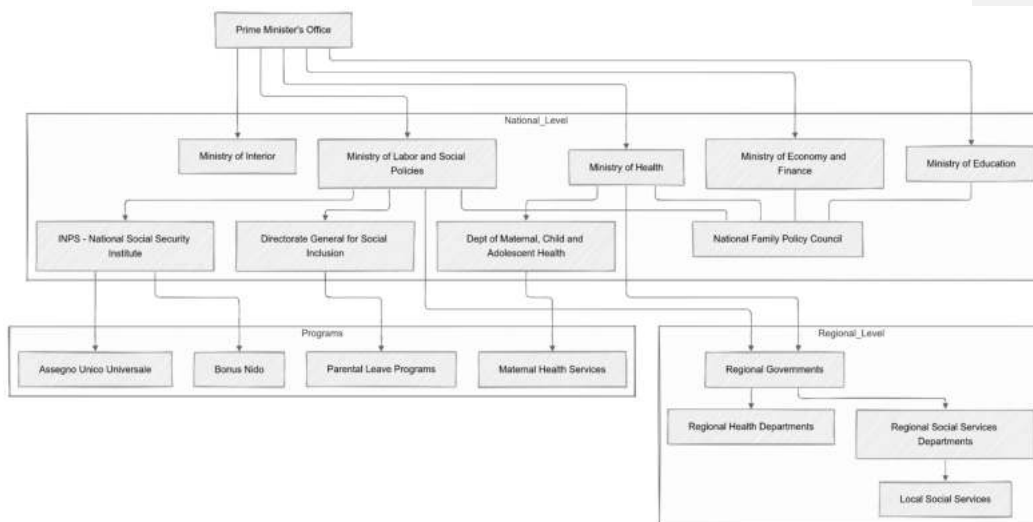


*Figure 12. Italy's family policy is managed through a mix of national and regional institutions, blending hierarchical structures with decentralized implementation, as seen in Peters' (2009) hybrid Weberian model.*

**Structural analysis**

*Governance Networks[15]*



Self-Governed Network     Lead Organization Network     Network Administrative Organization

Lead Organization

Network Administrative Organization

○ Network members that are collectively involved in network governance
→ Stronger relationship
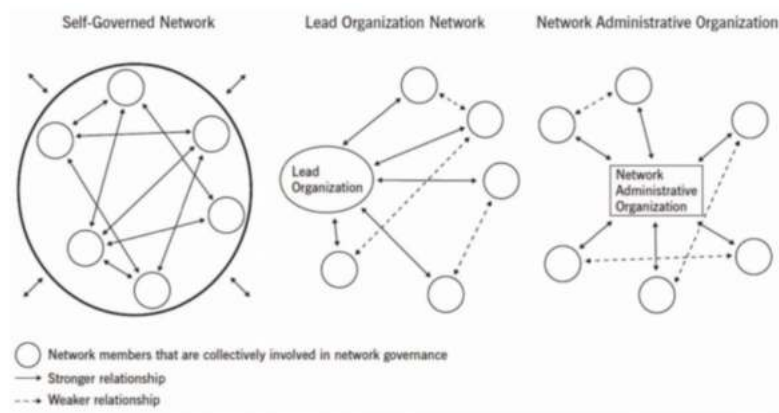- - → Weaker relationship

***Figure 13.*** *The three types of governance networks are as follows (Odera & Budig, 2020, p. 4).*

The institutional shift cofunctions with the structural transformation to create feedback loops across different levels to achieve a regime shift, as multiple institutions, such as cultural norms mixed with laws, interact. They create a governance network.
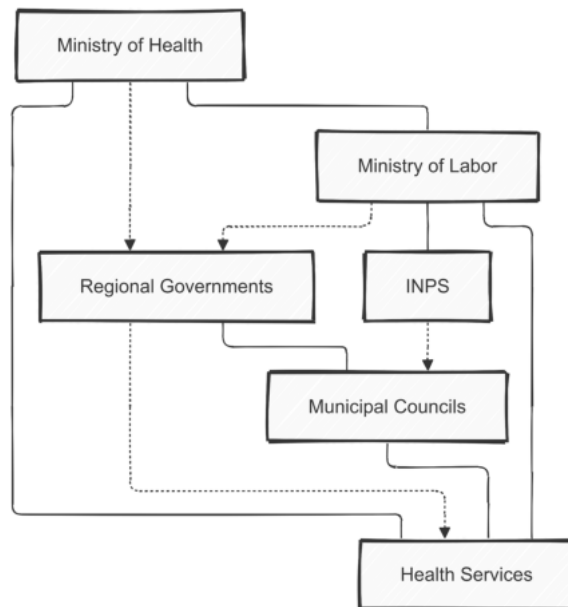
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[15] #SS156-GovernanceNetworks

***Figure 14.*** *Participant-governed network according to (Odera & Budig, 2020, pp.4-5). Dotted lines show weaker relationships, while normal lines show stronger relationships.*

While Italy is a parliamentary democracy, with governance characterized by a balance of power between centralized national structures and localized administrations (Senato della Repubblica, n.d.), the governance networks addressing the low birth rate issue can be understood through the lens of the participant-governed network, where members govern the system themselves (Odera & Budig, 2020, p.5). Additionally, Italy's governance approach to demographic challenges has evolved from the post-World War II era to the present day. As Italy transitioned from a Weberian to a neo-Weberian model with increasing inter-agency collaboration, the

participant-governed network offers flexibility[16]— like childcare subsidies in regions like Emilia-Romagna, family bonuses for large families in Tuscany, and maternal health programs in Lazio (Giorgetti, 2020; Correale, 2022; Lazzari, 2017)  —, enabling the adaptation of certain family welfare policies to local needs, and fosters collaboration that generates innovative solutions to address the complexity of the declining birth rate (see figure 4). Needless to say, the decentralized nature of the system can lead to coordination challenges and policy fragmentation with conflicting priorities between national and regional authorities, as well as slow decision-making processes, as evidenced by the implementation of the Assegno Unico Universale which, despite being a national policy, has faced regional disparities in application and effectiveness (Dalla-Zuanna &McDonald, 2023). While the network structure enhances responsiveness and inclusivity, it also faces difficulties with unequal resource allocation, which may hinder the effectiveness of family welfare programs in certain regions (Odera & Budig, 2020). At the same time, appearing similar to a Network Administrative Organization (NAO), Italy's family welfare governance is distributed across multiple entities rather than centralized. The central government sets policy direction, INPS handles financial administration, and regional governments adopt policies locally, creating an interconnected network of governance rather than a single administrative body.

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[16] As learned through research, Italy does not allow flexibility regarding parental leave since Legge 151/2001 ensures a standardized approach to parental leave benefits across all regions.
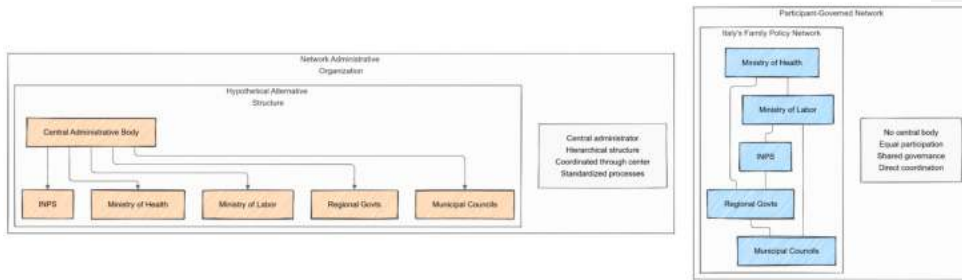
*Figure 15.* Comparison between NAO and participant-governed network according to (Odera & Budig, 2020, pp.4-6).

*Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali[17] vs. Differenza Donna[18][19]*
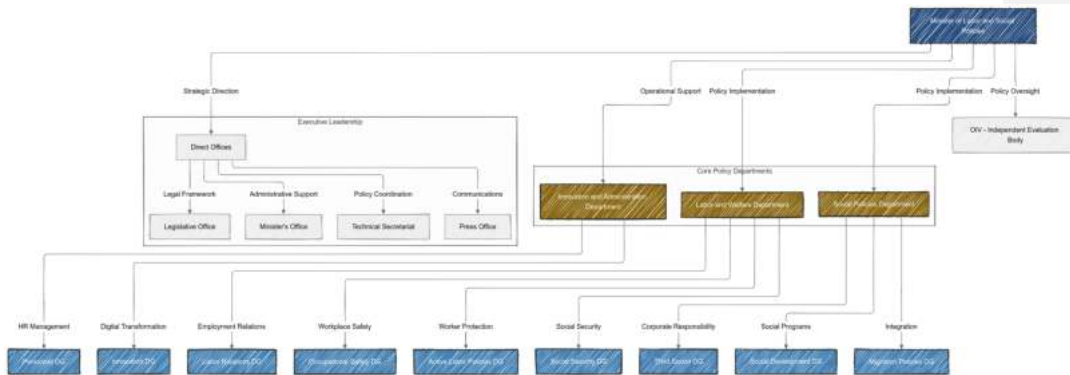


**Figure 16.** *The Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (MoLSP)'s current structure (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2024, March 1).*

Driven by the need to sustain Italy's labor force and mitigate the economic impact of an aging population, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (MoLSP) addresses low birth rates by promoting, in theory, family-friendly work policies and economic incentives (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2024). It operates through a hierarchical institutional framework that integrates labor and social welfare under one body and the Independent Evaluation Body (OIV) for accountability. Its three main departments—the Social Policies Department (social welfare and migration), the Labor Department (worker protection and employment relations), and the Innovation Department (administrative efficiency and digital transformation) — have distinct but interconnected goals with action mechanisms that involve strategic direction from the top level,

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[17] Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (MoLSP)
[18] #SS156-GovtAgentsActions
[19] #SS156-NongovtAgentsActions

executed by specialized Directorate Generals (DGs) and supported by technical secretariats to ensure policy coherence (Figure 16) (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2024). The Social Policies Department, for example, implements the Assegno Unico Universale, while the Labor Department promotes parental leave policies.
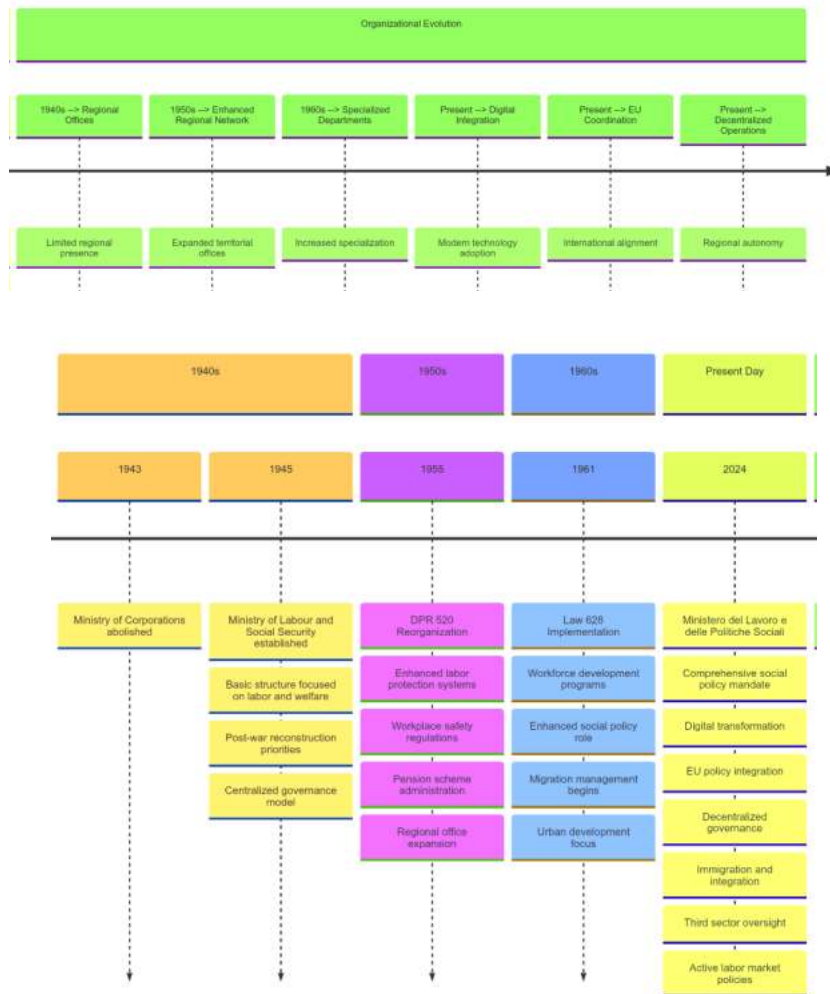
*Figure 17.* *MoLSP's timeline over the years (Agenzia delle Entrate, 2009; Normattiva, 1947; Presidente della Repubblica Italiana, 1994; Presidente della Repubblica Italiana, 1996; Consiglio di Stato, Sezione Sesta, 2012; Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, 2013).*

Needless to say, it hasn't always been like this, as this ministry, founded in the 1940s, underwent a structural transformation, functional expansion, and administrative development (Figure 17) (Agenzia delle Entrate, 2009; Normattiva, 1947; Presidente della Repubblica Italiana, 1994; Presidente della Repubblica Italiana, 1996; Consiglio di Stato, Sezione Sesta, 2012; Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, 2013). In its structure, the ministry evolved from an essential post-war labor agency into a sophisticated modern institution that integrates digital systems and EU policies while managing diverse social programs through a decentralized authority structure. Its functions expanded from basic labor regulation and social security in the 1940s to added workplace safety and pension management in the 1950s, to workforce development and migration in the 1960s to present-day comprehensive social policy portfolio, including immigration integration, third sector oversight, and more. Lastly, under an administrative lens, MoLSP evolved from a centralized to decentralized governance with a progressive regional office expanse, as well as integration with modern technologies and international bodies (Agenzia delle Entrate, 2009; Normattiva, 1947; Presidente della Repubblica Italiana, 1994; Presidente della Repubblica Italiana, 1996; Consiglio di Stato, Sezione Sesta, 2012; Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, 2013).

MoLSP, however, is constrained by this very structure, such as the DGs mentioned above when, for example, it wants to implement a program like the Assegno Unico Universale, as its decentralized model further limits its freedom, as **regional governments**, which are responsible for adapting and executing national policies, often have conflicting priorities or lack adequate resources, leading to regional disparities in policy outcomes (Consiglio di Stato, 2012). Moreover, the Ministry is required to comply with European Union directives on social inclusion, which

restricts its ability to implement region-specific measures, such as increasing allowances for economically disadvantaged areas (European Commission, n.d.).
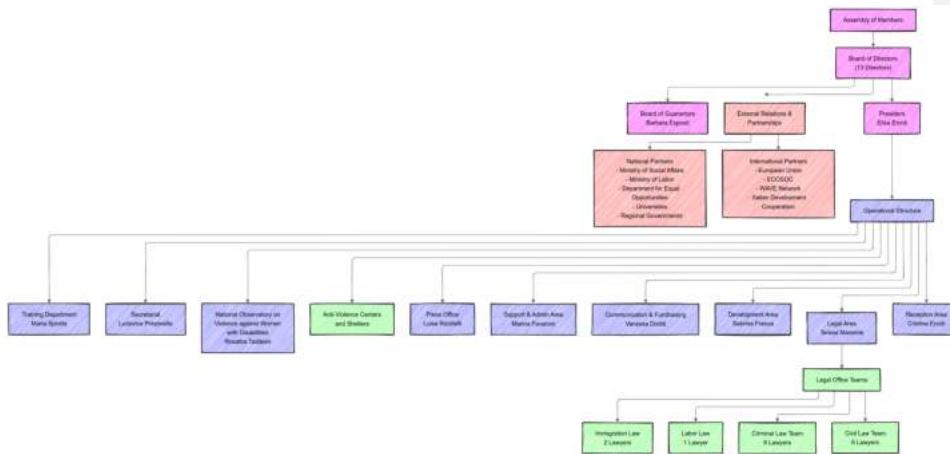


***Figure 18.*** *Differenza Donna's structure (Differenza Donna, n.d.-b).*

Non-government actions, however, have a different kind of agency, as is the case of Differenza Donna (DD), an NGO with a mission since 1989 to fight gender-based violence through women's economic independence (Differenza Donna, n.d.). As shown in Figure 18,  Differenza Donna operates with multifaceted goals and motivations shaped by both formal and informal institutions. At its core, the organization aims to combat gender-based violence and discrimination through direct intervention (through anti-violence centers and shelters), advocacy (through legal and policy work), and cultural change (through education and research) (Differenza Donna, n.d.-c). It exhibits agency by strategically positioning itself at multiple levels of the cause — from providing immediate support to victims through its network of shelters to engaging in high-level policy discussions through its consultative status at ECOSOC. These goals are pursued within a

complex institutional environment where formal rules (like public funding requirements and legal frameworks) interact with informal cultural norms (such as traditional gender roles and societal expectations) to both enable and constrain the organization's agency (Differenza Donna, n.d.-c).

The organization's degree of freedom and limitations are significantly shaped by institutional factors. Formally, while its structure as an NGO provides operational flexibility, it must navigate bureaucratic requirements from multiple funding sources (including the Ministry of Social Affairs and European Union) and comply with various regulatory frameworks across different regions. Its agency is enhanced by, for example, strategic partnerships with universities and international organizations, allowing it to influence policy and practice beyond direct service provision (Differenza Donna, n.d.-c). However, informal institutional constraints, particularly deeply embedded cultural norms about gender roles and family structures in Italian society, create resistance to change. The organization addresses these limitations through a multi-professional approach, employing experts from various fields (psychologists, lawyers, sociologists) to tackle issues from multiple angles (Differenza Donna, n.d.-b).

Italy's decentralized governance and entrenched gender norms hinder consistent family welfare policies, exacerbating the nation's declining birth rate.

*The complexity of it all*[20][21][22][23]

After discussing how formal and informal rules influence the change in the regime from a stable fertility rate to a declining one, given the government and non-governmental organizations and different levels of analysis, the entire system is more complex than one thought.

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[20] #complexcausality
[21] #systemmapping
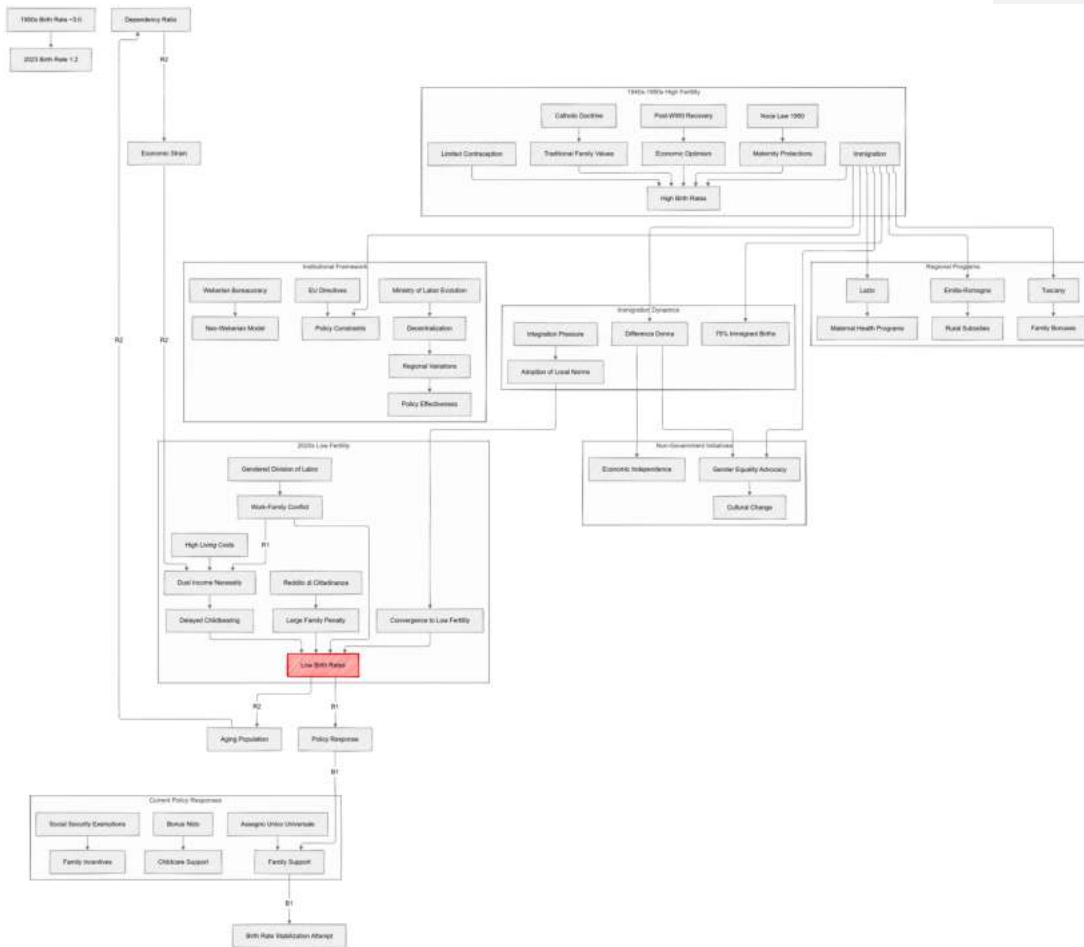[22] #emergentproperty
[23] #levelsofanalysis

*Figure 19.* A complex causality diagram combining all of the elements creates the complexity of the system and gives rise to the emergent property of declining birth rates. This model incorporates nonlinearity across different levels of analysis in Figure 3.

Compared to Figure 3, Figure 19 encompasses the complexity and nonlinearity of the system across multiple levels that give rise to the emergent property of the astonishingly low birth rate. At the individual level, personal decisions about family size are influenced by economic pressures and gendered norms (informal rules). These individual choices aggregate to societal trends, creating demographic shifts. At the **institutional level**, the policy framework shapes the environment in which these decisions are made, such as the RDC inadvertently penalizing large families through restrictive eligibility criteria (formal rules, deontic). At the **societal level**, deep-rooted cultural norms, influenced by Catholic traditions and historical family structures, reinforce gender roles and discourage larger family sizes. These layers interact in nonlinear ways; for example, economic strain at the individual level exacerbates dependency ratios at the societal level, creating feedback that reinforces the declining birth rate.

Two primary feedback loops characterize this system's dynamics. First, the **R2 reinforcing feedback loop** amplifies the decline in birth rates through a self-perpetuating cycle: low birth rates lead to an aging population, which increases the dependency ratio, causing economic strain on households and governments. This strain reinforces the necessity of dual incomes, delaying or reducing family expansion, further entrenching low fertility rates. To stop this loop, we must apply Folke's (2004) framework of resilience and adaptability in achieving a regime shift to reduce the system's rigidity by addressing the structural contradictions in programs like the Reddito di Cittadinanza, which penalizes larger families, would reduce systemic barriers to change.

The **B1 balancing feedback loop**, on the other hand, introduces stabilizing mechanisms through policy responses like family subsidies, childcare support, and maternal health programs. However, these policies are often undermined by structural inefficiencies, regional disparities, and cultural resistance, limiting their ability to counteract the reinforcing loop. To strengthen it  Italy

must enhance the reach and effectiveness of family-friendly policies, thinking long-term and taking into account cultural norms.

The system's nonlinearity arises from these feedback mechanisms, where small changes in one area—such as more inclusive family support—can produce disproportionately large effects elsewhere, like increased fertility rates.

Italy's transition from high to low birth rates represents a complex regime change triggered by feedback loops at the individual, institutional, and societal levels. Formal rules (e.g., the Noce Law) and informal norms (e.g., gendered labor division) maintain a low fertility state that is fueled by economic pressures, cultural transformations, and legislative constraints. Attempts to address this through policies frequently fail due to structural inefficiencies and geographical differences.

**Word count:** 2,312

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45

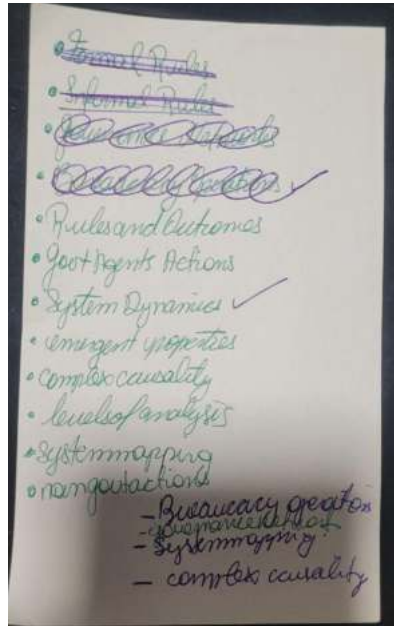**Appendix A — HC and LO application**



*Figure 20. My messy to-do list for the LOs and HCs in this assignment.*

- **#FormalRules:**

Since I have struggled with this LO in the first 2 assignments, I have incorporated feedback to improve. I did this systematically based on this feedback:

This is an incomplete application of the new institutionalism approach that is to be used for analyzing formal rules, that is, the application of ADICO from a rational choice institutionalism perspective. You mentioned that you used ADICO but did not show how you analyzed the format of the appropriate written rules using the ADICO format/syntax and distinguish them based on the AIM.

**3** #ss156-FormalRules

First, I identified two formal rules that, although they have a similar AIM and Deontic, vary across time periods, with the Noce Law being passed in 1950 and current laws on maternity leave being as recent as 2024 (see Table 2). This comparison is built on Table 1's contextual information. Then, I compared these rules's ADICO elements, setting them apart by the type of rule, particularly when introducing a rule that, even though it is formal, dismantles the previous due to its specificity (RDC) (see Table 3). I critique them, especially in comparison to the times they were created; although the Noce Law was revolutionary at the time, it is now outdated and does not encompass modern-day issues, such as immigration and paternal leave.

- **#InformalRules:**

Since I had gotten good scores in previous assignments in this LO, I decided to have a bit of fun and include other unique sources of informal rules. This is my favorite LO but I had to apply it more carefully by being more systematic about the practices and narratives. Although I wanted to talk about immigration, like in my first assignment, discussing gender expectations as practice and the narrative of income seemed more appropriate because women are central to the discussion of low birth rates. I also included the iceberg model of culture (figure 8). This LO is challenging because it talks about unwritten behavior and norms and is often difficult to find evidence.

At a very general level, and in the context of this assignment, you have demonstrated depth of knowledge on how to analyze informal rules. In the next assignment be more systematic and clearly show how BOTH practices and narratives function as rules. When you are identifying the practices you need to specify the routinized actions, standard operating procedures, or the logic of appropriateness that demonstrate to actors how they are supposed to behave, and show the connection to specific behaviors. As for narratives you also need to do the same; clearly specify and justify the narrative that stipulates the way that people are supposed to behave; e.g., to justify look for specific statements made by individuals or in documents. And use evidence to show that they are widely upheld in the society and that most people follow them.

🔵 #ss156-InformalRules

Just because they are unwritten, it does not mean they are not codified in pop culture, particularly through movies and paintings, therefore, I included brief examples of how the Madonna has been portrayed numerous times in paintings and films. On a personal note, I grew up in a house with a smaller version of Da Vinci's "Madonna of the Rocks" (1483–1486), showing that these narratives are present in people's daily lives even if they don't notice them.

- **#GovernanceNetworks:**

I applied this LO first under the structural analysis to discuss the different models. Figures 13 and 14 indicate how this system operates under a participant-governed network. Notably, I was in doubt being the NAO and the participant-governed network, so I decided to compare them in Figure 15. The main difference between them in this system lies in the fact that Italy's family welfare governance is distributed across multiple entities rather than being centralized. Even if this was not clear in the assignment, Italy is highly decentralized with five provinces having special statuses given its linguistic and cultural differences, so it is natural that the government hardly maintains the country unified under a very centralized system. I then discuss PGN's advantages and disadvantages, notably flexibility and slow responsiveness respectively.

- **#BureaucracyOperations**

I applied this LO after #informalrules because it required me to distinguish the institutions that carry out their functions, pointing out their structures. I opted to do that over time, showing how it was a Weberian bureaucracy but with increasing inter-agency cooperation became a neo-Weberian bureaucracy (Peters, 2009). Additionally, I compared the flexibility of decentralized regional structures, such as Emilia-Romagna's Regional Law on Family Support, with national efforts, highlighting how Peters' (2009) Weberian and neo-Weberian models shape the responsiveness and adaptability of bureaucratic agencies in addressing Italy's low birth rate. See Figure 12.

- **#RulesAndOutcomes:**

In my analysis, I applied the **rules and outcomes** framework by examining how both formal policies, such as the Italian Citizenship Income (Reddito di Cittadinanza, RdC), and informal cultural norms interact to influence birth rates, as detailed in Table 3. I critically evaluated how the formal rules of the RdC impose stringent eligibility conditions that disproportionately penalize large families, thereby undermining government mandates that employers support parents, creating a conflicting regulatory environment. Additionally, I analyzed the enforcement of these rules, highlighting how bureaucratic limitations and entrenched cultural norms about gender roles exacerbate economic vulnerabilities for large families, ultimately discouraging family expansion. To address these issues, I proposed solutions such as integrating more inclusive equivalence scales within the RdC and reinforcing supportive informal norms that encourage larger family formations, thereby harmonizing formal policies and mitigating the negative impact of existing informal constraints.

- **#NongovtAgentsActions and #GovtAgentsActions:**

I applied these LOs together in the section called "Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali vs. Differenza Donna", where I break down the motivations, goals, agency, and degrees of freedom of an NGO and a government ministry. I then juxtapose the motivations, goals, agency, and freedom of the government ministry MoLSP and the NGO Differenza Donna, highlighting them as two sides of the same coin. I meticulously deconstructed MoLSP's structure and its evolution over time (Figures 16 and 17), analyzing its agency and comparing it to Differenza Donna's actions (Figure 18). This comparative analysis allowed me to determine which agent—government or non-government—possessed greater agency and freedom in achieving their objectives. I then connect them to the formal and informal institutions from the previous sections.

- **#systemdynamics:**

This is my least favorite HC and probably the hardest to apply in this context. Unlike Keita Ueno's (2023) example, I did not have enough data to use STARS 6.3 and actually calculate the regime shift and had to be creative. Since I also wrote about this same topic for my SS146 quantifying governance assignment, I had a quantitative analysis spanning only from the past 10 years, relatively insignificant when compared to the 80 years I tried to cram into this assignment (note that the reason for what was the fact the birth rate was higher in the 1950s). So I used Folke's (2004) model to identify and map Italy's fertility transition through a phase space model with two distinct attractors - a historical high-fertility regime (around 3.0 births per woman) and the current low-fertility regime (1.2 births per woman) (Figure 7).

- **#emergentproperties:**

Applying this HC was interesting because the topic itself is an emergent property. Multiple factors, as we have seen, contribute to a declining birth rate, so I had to understand the multiple levels first

and then figure out where the nonlinearity comes from to give rise to the declining rate. This application is closely linked to #levelsofanalys, #systemmpping, and #complexcausality because, at the same time that I knew the declining birth rate was the emergent property, I had to break the system down to understand where the linearity came from and how it resulted in the birth rate. Comparing the system to what it was in the 1940s and 1950s also gave a sense of how the emergent property came to be although I tried to make this a historical analysis since path dependence would probably make the analysis linear.

- **#complexcausality:**

In the introduction, I mention that I would analyze this explanatory challenge through the lens of complexity which is a product of the nonlinearity between the different levels of analysis. With that being said, I included multiple elements that increase the complexity of the system. It was, then, in the end, that I applied this HC (see section "The complexity of it all") to its fullest in a causality diagram (Figure 19). I identified what happens at the different levels and how they interact with each other through feedback loops, either reinforcing or balancing, and discussed how we can make an intervention in the reinforcing loop (R2) using Folke's (2004) resilience.

- **#levelsofanalysis:**

As explained below in #systemmapping, I applied this HC throughout the assignment, notably in the introduction (Figure 3), and included it in every analysis, such as informal rules (being lower level mostly with individual behaviors) and the organizational level ( e.g.: Differenza Donna). It is also present in Figure 12 when I write about how family policy is managed through a mix of

national and regional institutions. This entire assignment is about how different institutions at different levels of analysis give rise to the emergent property of a declining birth rate. Lastly, I also applied this HC in Figure 19, explaining how we can tackle the feedback loops, either reinforcing or balancing, at different levels to attempt to change the system.

- **#systemmapping:**

I applied this HC twice over the course of the assignment. First, I applied it in the introduction (Figure 3), where I deconstructed the system based on an initial understanding of it. I included multiple agents at different levels of analysis (see #levelsofanalysis) so I could track historical changes since the 1940s while highlighting potential policy intervention points through key institutional components. Alternative decompositions such as regional or purely economic analyses were considered but rejected as they would miss critical systemic factors and institutional dimensions that have shaped Italy's demographic transition. Note that Italy, as I wrote in #governancenetworks is extremely regional, and it would be the scope of this assignment to write about the 20 regions in Italy.

The second way I applied this HC was in conjunction with #complexcausality in the section "the complexity of it all" (Figure 19). When I created the causal diagram, I broke down the system based on the elements discussed in the paper, building up on Figure 3, to include formal and informal rules, as well as MoLSP and other elements. In the end, this became a system mapping based on this assignment.
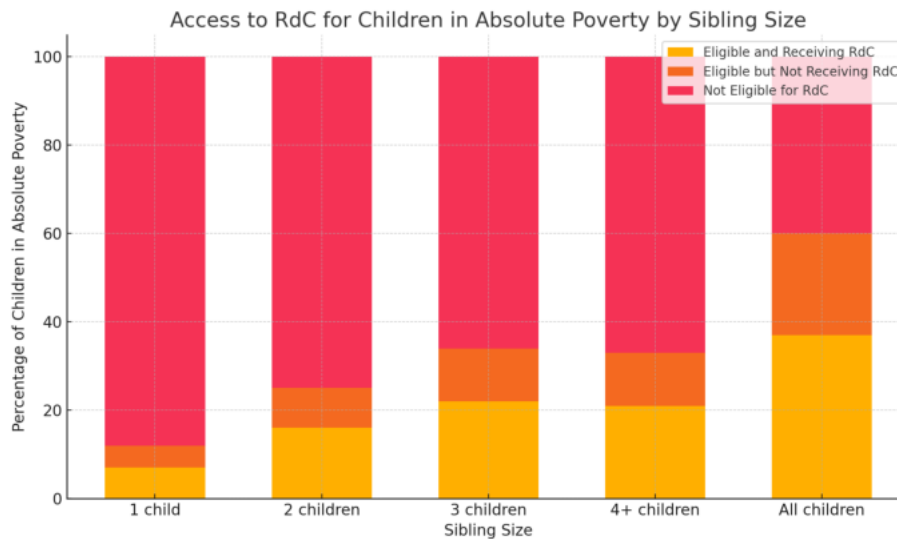
**Appendix B - RDC Graph**



***Figure 20.*** *Stacked bar chart showing access to the Reddito di Cittadinanza (RdC) for children in absolute poverty by sibling size. The chart breaks down the percentages of children who are eligible and receiving RdC, eligible but not receiving, and those not eligible, across different sibling sizes.*

As mentioned in the footnote, I created this data visualization for my SS146 final assignment and you can read my SS146 assignment here although I don't what my scores will be like. As outlined by Aprea et al (2024), the RDC actually penalizes large families.

**AI statement:** I used Grammarly to correct grammar mistakes; ChatGPT to help with my citations and summarizing the main points from the HC handbook so I could know how to apply some of the HCs; and then I used Claude AI to generate graphs based on my deconstructions of the system.