

# Governance during a time of crisis: Addressing the waste crisis in Naples, Italy

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## Abstract

*The Naples waste crisis hit world headlines almost three decades ago and brought to global public attention the intersection of municipal services clashing with questions of waste management. The situation was mired in a complex social reality and more generally provided a window into the deprivation of services in the Italian South. While largely considered a problem that was resolved, the lessons and residue of this crisis are still a matter of current debate. The purpose/focus of this paper is to examine the governance of the waste management problems and how it evolved during the crisis. Central to this issue is the manner in which multilevel governance operated in this crisis, and how it manifested in the process and resolution of the issues involved. This paper also examines whether there was any input from civil society and to what extent this occurred. With different levels of institutional authority involved, this case study manifested a web of contrasting responsibilities both in vertical structures as well as different political strategies. The authorities involved in oversight of waste management included the European Union, the national government as well as regional, provincial and local governments. The management of this crisis provides important lessons for the future and provides a case study of multilevel governance. The case study for this research is the Naples waste management crisis, which was in the public arena between 2001 and 2009.*

*The purpose of this paper is not only to understand the waste crisis in Naples but to ascertain the governance mechanism and the inter-connectedness of the local, regional, national and even the European Union (EU) involvement in providing resolution to this crisis. The study included examination of the literature on the subject alongside an online focus group comprising four eminent Italian experts on waste management and in particular their understanding and appreciation of the Naples waste crisis. Their observations, some of which were drawn from/based on direct involvement in the specific crisis, are both critical to providing expert and context-based commentary.*

## Introduction

While Naples in Campania, along with other regions of the South of Italy, has long suffered from poor public services in its vibrant city life, the waste management crisis became a matter of public, national and international awareness stretching from the 1980s and into the new millennium. The crisis resulted from the lack of waste collection and, more importantly, illegal toxic commercial waste dumping in and around the province of Naples, Campania, Italy. In 1994, the Campania region formally declared a state of emergency, which ended in 2008, but this lengthy emergency period does little to explain the damage to human health and the environment. Due to the burning of accumulated toxic waste in overfilled landfills and the city streets, Naples and surrounding areas became known as the "land of pyres" (*terra dei fuochi*) where residents simply burnt rubbish as a gesture of protest. While it could be said that the crisis was due to local, regional, and national government's failure respectively to manage waste, there are other important factors that contributed to this crisis

including criminal activity. Part of the crisis resolution also included directives of the EU, engagement by the Commission and decisions of the European Court of Justice.

Waste management in Italy has been problematic across the peninsula. In the latter period of the 20th century, it was common for northern Italian cities to bundle their waste and send it down to southern localities. Regions, provinces and local communities in the South were receptive to receiving this waste as it provided extra revenue despite its evident negative connotations and the obvious risk of contaminating their own territory. Part of the context to this crisis is, of course, the impoverished region of Campania (and much of the Italian South). Moreover, the city of Naples' daily battle with inadequate public services and an ever-present organised criminality working on the sidelines and rendered any waste management solution ineffective. Governance, or the lack thereof, has been the uppermost cause in the chaos of the waste build up and crisis over the decades especially in Naples. There is also the criminality factor which has exploited the political impasse and stalemate and has made a business out of garbage – both municipal and especially industrial hazardous waste.

Especially since the 1980s, waste management in the Italian South had become seriously dysfunctional in a part of the world where substandard services were already a matter of concern. The case of waste management in the Campania region stood out. In the 1980s and 1990s, Naples and the Campania region continued to allow dumping of solid waste into overfilled landfills as no regional waste management plan was in place. The existing landfill in *Pianura*, for example, became overfilled with both hazardous and non-hazardous waste, with waste also coming from northern Italy. In February 1994, a state of emergency was declared in Campania by the government of the day, creating the Committee for the Waste Emergency in Campania. The state of emergency was designed to address the crisis of waste disposal centred on Naples. In the meantime, refuse collection services in this region were repeatedly interrupted, leading to the accumulation of large quantities of garbage along public roads marking the beginning of an ongoing waste crisis which would affect Naples and surrounds for the following decades.

The waste crisis in Naples added to the problems of the poor provision of public services, old waste management technology, municipal councils refusing to permit the opening of new landfill sites and criminal infiltration of waste management services. What soon emerged as the central issue concerned the connections between the population's health and the presence of dumps on the territory. What the risks for health actually were, who was entitled to assess them, and whether pollution from proximity to dumps caused health problems were all topics that came to the fore during a debate that took place within the Italian epidemiological community, alongside the political and governance crisis.

Between 2001 and 2009, the area of Naples repeatedly hit the headlines of national and international media due to the waste management crisis that on many occasions left the streets of the region filled with huge piles of waste. The environmental waste problem in southern Italy was by 2004 reaching epic proportions and the problem has been linked to increasing rates of cancer in the region amongst the general population. In June 2004, protestors blocked the rail links between northern and southern Italy, complaining about the re-opening of a previously condemned rubbish dump. The dump was brought back into service after household waste built up in the streets of the

Campania region, causing schools to close because of the public-health risks. This part of the Campania region was producing more rubbish than the landfills and incinerators could handle, and organised crime in Italy was profiting from illegal waste dumps springing up (Senior & Mazza, 2004). The army had been used on numerous occasions to help clear uncollected waste from Naples in both 2008 and again in 2011.

Unable to assign responsibility, the national authorities, frustrated in resolving the waste crisis, resorted to diktats of state of emergency decrees in the region. In doing so they centralised decision making on the crisis and overrode the local authorities from any further involvement. What this heavy-handed governance approach did was further alienate state institutions from the grassroots communities. Ironically this inability to handle the waste crisis had the effect of promoting greater local involvement and interest in the resolution of the crisis which in some circumstances was key to its resolution. The whole Italian peninsula was on notice to ascertain and focus on sustainable solutions for all Italians and not simply to fall back on the age-old explanations of matters doing well in the Italian north and not so in the south.

## **The EU involvement in the Campania waste crisis**

Early in the crisis, in 2004, the Naples waste crisis attracted the attention of the European Commission which cautioned Italy about some 28 cases of breaches of the European Union's environmental laws. The 5000 illegal or uncontrolled landfill sites in Italy drew particular criticism; Italy had already been warned twice for flouting the Hazardous Waste Directive and the Landfill Directive, and the EU Commission referred Italy to the European Court of Justice for further action (Senior & Mazza, 2004). In 2023 the Commission decided to refer Italy back to the Court of Justice for failing to fully comply with a Court judgment of 10 April 2014 on urban wastewater treatment.

The EU Commission was also concerned that the Naples waste management problem was also having repercussions on European tourism and its image of being a safe and healthy location. In 2013 the Commission threatened to bring Italy back to the European Court of Justice for failing to deal with the Naples waste issue. In 2010 the European Court of Justice had found that Italy had no adequate system for waste disposal in the Naples region and that the problem was a risk to human health and the environment. The Court further held that Italy had failed to comply with the EU waste legislation that mandates members to dispose of garbage in a way that does not harm the environment or the health of the citizens. Italy at the time offered to open new waste plants and landfills by 2016. The court ordered Italy to take immediate action to remedy the situation and failure to do so would bring the Commission to fine Italy for non-compliance. Italy eventually acted (Taylor, 2010).

## **The Berlusconi imposition – Sweep the problem away!**

Italian daily political bickering also played its role in the poor management of the crisis. In 2007 the unwieldy centre-left Prodi government was unable to obtain agreement to open a new landfill as it was blocked by Italy's more left leaning environment and social solidarity ministers. With the collapse of the Prodi government in 2008, Berlusconi and his centre-right coalition returned to power and the Naples waste crisis was immediately put on its agenda.

Berlusconi had made the Naples question a key theme of his election campaign, pointing the finger at the centre-left coalition in power at both the local and national levels for the garbage in the streets that Berlusconi said tarnished the image of the entire country. Berlusconi made clear towards the end of the election campaign that "The first task of the next government will be to liberate Naples and Campania from the mountain of waste that the Democratic Party has buried it in" (SMH, 2008).

Berlusconi gave the impression of concern for the Naples crisis and held his first Cabinet meeting in the impacted city. Yet again another waste commissioner was appointed, as though this would resolve the crisis. In May 2008 Berlusconi decreed protests in the vicinity of landfills, incinerators or any plant related to waste management, would be considered an offence punishable with imprisonment. Two months later Berlusconi initiated Operation Clean Roads, which brought in the Italian Armed Forces to aid in garbage removal from the Neapolitan streets. A part of the solution to the Naples waste crisis was the government's intention to ship 700 tons of rubbish per day to incinerators in Hamburg, Germany, while new incinerators were built locally.

Anxious not to have this crisis tarnish his government, Berlusconi was keen to bring the emergency in Naples to an end and only weeks after winning the April 2008 election, he declared that the waste conflict in Campania was fully resolved and the emergency had ended as of July 18, 2008, as a direct result of waste management measures implemented by his government (Reuters, 2008). This was of course not the case.

It was not long before garbage again filled the Neapolitan streets and kept filling them throughout 2008, 2009 and 2010. Berlusconi resigned in late 2011 and newly elected local governments in the Naples area managed the quantity of uncollected garbage in the streets, which declined from 2,500 tons to zero. Yet again the EU came to the rescue with tons of garbage transferred to the Netherlands by ship, beginning in January 2012.

Fears of a repeat of the garbage crisis of 2007-2008 re-emerged in 2010 when garbage yet again began accumulating in Naples with tens of thousands of tonnes of untreated waste accumulating around the city. The Italian government held emergency talks after riots broke out in a Naples suburb over plans to build a huge rubbish dump on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, in Terzigno, some 20 kilometres southeast of Naples in the Vesuvius National Park (Al Jazeera, 2010). Locals were fiercely opposed, and repeatedly blocked access to the existing waste disposal site there. One testimonial from the residents' resistance movement alleged that:

"We are living in one of the most polluted places in Europe, with very high cancer rates among the population...Why should we have to find room for more incinerators and dumps? Why is everything recycled in Treviso [in northern Italy], and nothing here?" (Ridet, 2010).

This crisis brought warnings from the European Union again after it sought to provide funding to bring waste collection and processing up to legal standards. Not surprisingly the beneficiary of this impasse was organised crime which had infiltrated much of the waste business – aided and abetted by corrupt politicians – from collection through transport to processing. The processes had deteriorated to such an extent that the city council stopped putting the relevant contracts out to tender. The impact of the waste

crisis on Naples was not simply one of image. Not only were tourists avoiding Naples but the rating agency, Moody's, downgraded Naples' long-term debt in 2008 out of the fear it would not be able to repay its debts. As one observer noted ahead of the city lay the task of rebuilding a tourism industry "where the timeless attractions of the Vesuvius volcano, Pompeii and the Amalfi coast, have been eroded by crime and garbage" (SMH, 2008).

## **Observations from the waste management focus group**

Part of this study involved consulting a technical focus group of Italian environment experts. The focus group comprised three environmental specialists who had intimate knowledge of the Naples waste crisis. A fourth member was an Italian social scientist who provided a social and political understanding of the context of this crisis. The Campania waste management focus group (2023) addressed the question of the waste crisis. Environmental expert Professor Umberto Arena, himself one of the experts called on to provide solutions to the crisis when it occurred made a rather startling admission that the crisis was poorly understood by government, policy makers and the media. He informed the debate that the two forms of waste – 1. municipal waste and 2. industrial hazardous waste (mostly from commercial entities) were different forms of waste. This waste difference had been poorly understood by the public as well as by government. Arena was at pains to clarify that municipal waste, which the media and public attention focused on, had less of a/lower health and environment impact than the more hazardous industrial waste which was less visible to the public and therefore less subject to public attention. Moreover, he advised that the municipal waste crisis was quickly resolved while hazardous waste remains a problem in all of Italy and arguably in most of the world (European Union Centre of Excellence, (Arena),2023).

Giuseppe Mancini, a second participant of the focus group, made clear that among the invisible actors in the regional waste crisis in Campania as well as in Sicily were the landfill owners who not only informed policy (generally in a negative manner) and who had been largely ignored as key actors in the crisis and were to some extent the connection to the criminal underworld. Mancini informed the discussion that the landfill owners had profited significantly from the landfill crisis and were also central to protracted legal cases involving the health of local residents, serious damage to the environment and evidence of incidents of both cancer and other dangerous illnesses in the resident community (European Union Centre of Excellence , (Mancini), 2023).

In respect of governance, our third expert Mario Grosso, noted that citizens, in a participatory manner had little or no say in the question of waste management whether they were in Naples or in the north of Italy (European Union Centre of Excellence, (Grosso), 2023).

Roberta Piazza (2023), the fourth and final expert in the focus group provided an analysis of the waste crisis from a social science perspective. Her understanding was that the waste management crisis in Campania and the rest of Southern Italy was and is a complex issue:

“...rooted in history of a government mismanagement corruption and organised crime involvement. These factors have significantly inverted engagement and participation of communities in waste management initiatives” (European Union Centre of Excellence, (Piazza), 2023).

She observed that the population lacked confidence in the governing bodies – at all levels. Years of corruption and mismanagement had created strong levels of distrust and scepticism of any government initiative. Moreover, there was a greater appreciation that organised crime and criminal organisations such as the Camorra, had infiltrated waste management activities and influenced policy and initiatives. Supporting this concern was a study by Romano et al. (2021) which sought to evidence the association between the environmental performance of waste management and occurrences of corruption and maladministration in Italy. Their argument demonstrated that “[Italian]...provinces with higher levels of corruption and maladministration also had higher production of urban waste per capita” (Romano et al., 2021, p. 1) and that “more opportunities exist to commit crimes while pursuing private interests at the expense of public administrations and citizens” (Romano et al., 2021, p. 1). The assertion made by this study of the existence of a relationship between corruption and urban solid waste management was both relevant as well as disturbing. As a result of this connection between corruption and waste management a new term emerged, “ecomafia”, and the criminal organisation Camorra is said to have declared “For us, rubbish is gold” (Pomeroy, 2008). In an interview in regards of this relationship a local Lega Ambiente<sup>1</sup> representative stated “Before 1994 they controlled the entire waste cycle”. He is further reported to estimate “Mafia involvement in crimes against the environment yield a turnover of 6 billion euros (\$8.8 billion) a year” (Pomeroy, 2008).

What is important to highlight is that while municipal waste was the most glaring and visible form of waste, it was in the field of industrial waste, its disposal and management that there was greater criminal economic profiting. For some time, in the post-cold war period, and in the middle of the Naples waste crisis, there was even concern that the Camorra (and other criminal organisations throughout Italy<sup>2</sup>) was involved in dumping and disposing of nuclear waste, an act according to one observer had included the involvement of international criminal actors (Kington, 2007).

Socio economic factors pervasive in Naples and much of the Italian south had also contributed to discouraging civil society engagement and involvement in initiatives of civic duty and participating in waste processes – the south is poor and faces numerous economic challenges.

Piazza also highlighted the simple lack of awareness and information within the local communities impacted by these waste dilemmas. As opposed to other western nations there was a notable lack of awareness of the environment and a lack of a culture of concern. Some have even highlighted the absence of a real green movement in Italy, let alone a political party, as evidence of this poor appreciation and understanding of the environment as an existential question.

Piazza sought to provide a more general overview of civic duty and community as per the Putnam thesis of 1995. While many of Putnam’s views in the context of Italy and especially the Italian South are contestable, the civic duty phenomenon has some relevance in the complexity of reasons for the public scepticism and avoidance of public issues such as the waste management crisis. Piazza, using Putnam, argued that

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<sup>1</sup> Lega Ambiente is an Italian environmental lobby organisation.

<sup>2</sup> The better-known criminal organisation based in Sicily, the Mafia, while the lesser known Ndrangheta criminal organisation is often thought to be based in Calabria. The Camorra is often regarded as primarily interested in criminal activities in Campania and its capital Naples.

democracy works better when there is an independent and long-standing tradition of civic community – something that was missing in the Italian southern traditions. Dialogue between institutions and citizens which Piazza emphasised indicating that “Building trust, ensuring safety, addressing disparities, improving awareness and bridging cultural gaps” are key to future transition to addressing a crisis like the one which affected Campania (European Union Centre of Excellence,(Piazza), 2023).

## **The Naples waste crisis case study: a semblance of Multilevel governance**

Emerging as an issue from this Italian case study including from the input of our focus group panel was poor government leadership in terms of competence. Equally, there was significant public distrust in public institutions and inevitable scepticism from the public and local communities (European Union Centre of Excellence, (Piazza), 2023). The panel highlighted the absence and marginalisation of prominent expert opinions on the environment in the face of political rhetoric (European Union Centre of Excellence, (Arena), 2023). This was again evidenced by diktat national emergencies declarations often made without consulting the governing authorities. This could only limit multilevel governance and cooperation between the institutions and as a result public opinion. Assigning a single meaning to multilevel governance as a term might be difficult as the term has been at the forefront of much research and examination. Hooghe et al. (2019) defined it as “...the dispersion of authority whether this is within a state or beyond it... Authority is the competence to make binding decisions that are regarded as legitimate”. This concept according to these authors, was distinct from federalism, decentralisation, unitary government or confederation. The Naples waste crisis clearly contained aspects of dispersion of authority in the pursuit of legitimate bodies offering resolution proposals. Moreover, as the research divulges the case of the Naples waste crisis saw multilevel governance levels working at cross purposes as many of them lacked the authority and the competence to emerge with a considered and balanced resolution. The multilevel process was sidelined or rarely evident.

Pasotti (2010) refers to “institutional proliferation” as being one of the ingredients of the Naples crisis meaning that political institutions were working at cross purposes and often in conflict with each other rather than in a scientifically informed and harmonious manner. The three environmental experts in the focus group (Arena, Mancini and Grosso, 2023) mentioned the role of criminality in the Italian waste crisis. However, their comments were qualified and contextualised. What this meant was that they acknowledged the existence of criminality in the waste business, but at the same time not wishing to whitewash and absolve the corrupt political authorities and their poor administration over the environment.

Hooghe et al. (2019) in addressing the democratic implications of multilevel governance noted that it had the effect of extending democracy by introducing elections at the subnational and supranational levels; that it created opportunities for accommodating territorial minorities; and finally, that it generally leads to greater variation in social policy within a country (p. 209). Traces of all three implications mentioned above were only marginally present in our case study. Relevant to the democratic implications in our case study, our focus group noted that the Naples crisis case and the failure of the political authorities to act on the waste crisis created a grassroots movement which would emerge as the key form of pressure on political

authorities to act. Democracy and active engagement by the population has been a factor in the events around the waste crisis. Multilevel governance in the theoretical sense rarely received attention in this crisis and even less so democratic engagement by the populace.

## **Findings and conclusion**

While many in Italy sought to put the Naples waste crisis behind them, in 2023, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) found that Italy continued to violate the human rights of residents living in and around Naples. The Court found that there has been a failure to manage a 15-year garbage and pollution crisis that contributed to higher mortality rates from cancer in the area (AP, 2023). While the verdict was preliminary, the Court found that the failure on the part of Italy to “...collect, treat and dispose of tons of waste in the Campania region adversely affected residents’ personal well-being” (AP, 2023). According to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) the Italian government’s inaction during the crisis was a violation of Article 8 (right to respect for private life and home) of the European Convention on Human Rights (Hickey, 2023).

What emerges from the research undertaken for this paper is that the Naples waste crisis was not simply a matter of the existing waste management policy gone wrong. To the extent that there was a policy it was either not implemented or not possible to implement. The waste crisis was said to have taken place in the period of 2004-2008, though our research indicates it began earlier and though it temporarily failed to attract media attention, the impact of the crisis has not disappeared as the ECtHR’s/Court’s deliberation in 2023 indicates. Moreover, given the state of Naples as a city, the chances of a further waste crisis recurring are high in light of the prevailing circumstances in both the city and province of Naples. National declarations of a “state of emergency” with no involvement of provincial or local governments and with political authorities imposing decisions without due consultation with experts is but another form of delegitimization of the required solution to this crisis. Political structures and different levels of government at odds with each other only exacerbated the crisis and prevented a smooth transition to its resolution. Furthermore, at the EU level, the European Union legal obligations were ignored and contravened. In this quagmire of institutional authorities all crossing each other, either grandstanding or advocating a different political program makes clear that no political body had the authority or legitimacy to make and implement a resolution to this crisis. Examining multilevel governance and its implementation in the Naples case, we can observe that there was little cross level governance but institutions working separately and often in conflict with each other. The crisis encouraged political grandstanding on the one hand and diktats on the other. Pronouncements of “states of emergencies” placed the primacy of political face ahead of scientific expertise and advice. The extent to which there was a democratic involvement provided to the people it took place under duress and primarily as a result of being shut out of the official decision-making process. In the case of the Naples waste management crisis multilevel governance could be said to have been sidelined and rarely present. It is difficult to ascertain whether multilevel governance as a positive process could have provided a different and better outcome for the people impacted by the waste management crisis of Naples and of the South in general. We simply do not have the luxury of ever knowing.



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