Network Approach and
Planning and Control System in Public Entities.
The case of the Italian Regional Governments.

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Abstract

In recent years in public sector the development of the Network Approach prompts modifications and refinements of the traditional planning and control system of public entities and a reorientation of such a system towards the network level.

This paper presents the results of a research project investigating whether public entities have actually changed their planning and control system and so whether they are aware of the need to operate according to network principles. More specifically focus is made on the case of Italian Regional Governments now involved in public networks as a result of the current process of administrative devolution and federalism.

The results of the documentary analysis conducted highlight a variety of situations which point to the proposal of a framework for mapping the Regional Government approaches towards public networks. This framework, based on the contents of planning and reporting documents, can be generalized for all public entities involved in a network. It can support the interpretation of the behaviour of each public entity and subsequently the proposal of specific initiatives to develop and strengthen the public network.

Keywords: public network – public entities – planning and reporting documents – Regional Governments

1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the Network Approach on part of public sector research, as development of the theoretical framework known as "Public Governance". This approach emphasizes the ability of public entities to address and direct behaviours of the various players comprising a network, for the purpose of creating public value and as such satisfying public interest.

The development of the Network Approach prompts modifications and refinements of the traditional planning and control system of public entities and a reorientation of such a system towards the network level.

Despite this, while the Network Approach is presently highly relevant in public sector research, to date less attention has been paid to planning and control system of public entities involved in a network.

This paper presents the results of a research project investigating whether public entities have actually changed their planning and control system once they have become players in a network. Highlighted as a consequence is whether public entities are aware of the need to operate according to network principles in order to create public value.

More specifically, focus is made on the case of Italian Regional Governments which are particularly significant for different reasons.

First of all, the current process of administrative devolution and federalism in Italy has reinforced Regional Governments' powers and responsibilities as well as their importance as actors in the political and economic arena, where they are in charge of regulating and influencing the behaviours of a number of local authorities, institutions, controlled entities, private entities, etc.

In other words, Italian Regional Governments which are now involved in new relationships must cooperate with numerous social and economic, private and public players and must create, as such, a *public network*. This generates the need for suitable planning and control systems (focused on inputs, outputs or outcomes, based on the top-down or bottom-up approach, etc.), for the development of interaction and guidance of the network in the direction of public interest.

Furthermore, Italian Regional Governments, being provided with extensive autonomy, can actually modify and integrate traditional documents of their planning and control system. This can lead to different approaches towards *public networks*.

Therefore, in this context, the present paper addresses the following research questions:

1. Are formal planning documents drawn up with the involvement of a number of public and private organizations in the network?
2. Do the contents of formal planning documents focus on inputs, outputs or outcomes? Do they have a multi-perspective approach?
3. Is network financial and social reporting adequate?

The structure of this paper is organized as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature related to the Public Governance and the Network Approach in the public sector;

Section 3 presents a concise overview of Italian Regional Governments, particularly significant as a public network example; Section 4 explains the methodology of the research; Section 5 reports the main results of the analytical documentary analysis relating to Italian Regional Governments in order to look at the awareness of these public entities of the need to operate according to the network approach. Finally, Section 6 concludes with final remarks and suggestions regarding further research.

2   Theoretical Background

For more than fifteen years, in advanced countries (and in some developing nations as well at the end of the nineties) the generalized process of public administration renewal known as New Public Management led, among other things, to the decentralization of state functions and powers and to the increasing autonomy of other public entities (Hood, 1991; Mussari, 1997; Dunsire, 1995). This reform process not only led to innovations, but often also caused the "*hollowing out of State*" (Rhodes, 1997: 53) and the considerable fragmentation of the responsibility for the satisfaction of citizens' needs (Longo, 2005; Rebora, 1999; Rhodes, 1997). New Public Management, moreover, focused on the internal and intra-organizational dimension of each public entity, has especially stressed the introduction to public entities of efficiency and effectiveness principles, business management techniques, "client" orientation and competition mechanisms, which mask the need for trust and co-operation with the language of the market (Rhodes, 1996).

As a consequence of these contradictions and of various difficulties in the implementation of this reform process, since the mid-nineties the principles of New Public Management have given way to those of Public Governance. This theoretical framework refers, principally, to the need for stakeholder engagement, transparency, democratic principles and political accountability, generally disregarded by New Public Management (Bekke, Kickert, Kooiman, 1995; Minogue, Polidano, Hulme, 1998; Sorensen, Torfing, 2009)[1]. It pays particular attention, moreover, to the social, economic and political environment, highlighting that the present complexity of public needs (health, local development and territorial competitiveness, education, etc.) cannot be faced within the confines of a single efficient and effective public entity (Kickert, 1997). This is because public needs involve various levels of government (local, regional, etc.) and actors (such as public and private entities, non-profit organizations, citizens, etc.). So, in order to satisfy public interest and create public value, it has been become more and more crucial to ad-

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[1] Specifically the *Public Governance* as a concept has been differently defined in relation to several scholars who have dealt with it. Nevertheless, the definitions given to this concept have some common elements concerning: the enlargement of the number of actors interacting with public entities (Kooiman, 1993; Meneguzzo, 1995); the need of coordination, often from the public entities, through the activity of management and control (Kickert W., Klijn E.H., Koppenjan J.F.M., 1997; Mayntz, 1999; Pierre, 2000; Peters, Pierre, 1998); the adoption of network model as structure of governance, alternative to the hierarchical or market model (Borgonovi, 2000 and 2004; Mayntz, 1999; Meneguzzo, 1995; Rhodes 1996 e 1997; Stoker, 1998).

dress and direct the action of the various aforementioned actors, according to their individual autonomy and to an inter-organizational dimension, and thus create a so-called *public network*.

The development of the theoretical framework of Public Governance, in fact, has increasingly highlighted, albeit with different degrees of emphasis made by various scholars, the need for "*governance of complex networks in a specific social context, consisting of many different actors, such as parts of national, provincial and local government, political and societal groups, pressure, action and interest groups, societal institutions, private and business organizations, etc.*" (Kickert, Klijn, Koppenjan, 1997: 39). This should not be taken as proof of the decline of the role of public entities but rather of their ability to adapt to external changes (Pierre, 2000).

In literature three schools of thought have developed about public network theory and research (Berry et al., 2004; Oliver, Ebens, 1998; Longo, 2005; Meneguzzo, Cepiku, 2004 and 2008):
-   social network analysis, belonging to sociological tradition;
-   political science, referring to policy change and network impact on policy outcomes;
-   public management, including organizational studies.
This paper refers to research and studies on networks in public management literature that is relatively more recent than sociological and public policy studies[2].

Public management literature contains a rich variety of definitions and descriptions of the public network.

Some studies focus on cooperation, collaboration and interaction among the different actors comprising the network, highlighting that these entities, both public and private, are not units which are subjected to hierarchical authority, however are united by common interests.

As such, according to O'Toole (1997: 45) "*Networks are structures of interdependence involving multiple organizations or parts thereof, where one unit is not merely the formal subordinate of the others in some larger hierarchical arrangement. Networks exhibit some structural stability but extend beyond formally established linkages and policy-legitimated ties. (…) The institutional glue congealing networked ties may include authority bonds, exchange relations, and coalitions based on common interest, all within a single multiunit structure*".

Additional studies generally capture what goes on in public networks, with emphasis made on which public interests are satisfied and how interdependent network members influence the making and implementation of public policy. In these terms public networks have been defined as "*more or less stable patterns of social relations between interdependent actors, which take shape around policy problems and/or policy programmes*" (Kickert, Klijn, Koppenjan, 1997: 6). Specifically, they usually involve

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[2] Each of the three schools has been active for more than two decades, with the sociological work dating back to the 1930s, the political science literature to the early 1970s, and the public management research to the mid-1980s. Each has contributed important insights and fertile frameworks to the disciplines in which they are grounded (Berry et al., 2004).

"*formal and informal structures, composed of representatives from governmental and nongovernmental agencies working interdependently to exchange information and/or jointly formulate and implement policies and programs that are usually designed for action through their respective organizations*" (Agranoff, 2003: 7).

Notwithstanding the various interpretations which are found in literature, scholars generally agree that a public network is characterized by the following main *features of complexity* (or *key variables*) that can reveal the level of its effective functioning (O'Leary, Bingham, 2007; Considine, Lewis, 2003):

1. continuous interaction between network members, caused by the need to exchange resources and information and to negotiate common purposes. In fact, the actors in the network, as already mentioned, are not merely linked by hierarchical arrangements, however are more interested in the building of trust and more likely to see success as a result of joint action (*need to develop the active engagement of all network members*);

2. different network member perspectives on the appropriate long-term objectives to be achieved (related to efficiency and effectiveness in terms of output and outcome) and on the best strategies to be carried out at a network level, in function of their different stakeholder groups (*need to set shared long-term objectives for network planning*);

3. regulation of responsibility for results, particularly difficult due to the complexity of accountability relationships; "*with non single authority, everyone is somewhat in charge, thus everyone is somewhat responsible; all network participants appear to be accountable, but none is absolutely accountable*" (Agranoff, McGuire, 2001: 309-310). Despite these difficulties, because trust, interaction and co-operation exchange are critical in holding the network together, the need for accountability to network members and external stakeholders is essential with respect to the priorities and objectives stated as well as for the results achieved (*need for financial and social accountability*).

In this regard the single public entity involved in a network can have two different roles: it can either be an actor like the others (in a public network characterized by equal and interdependent relationships) or, on the contrary, it can be the leader and the catalyst actor (Agranoff, McGuire, 2001) in a public network in which different actors occupy different role positions and carry different weight within the network[3].

In the first case, network management is a diffused function carried out by any of the participants forming the network. The structure of the network cannot be imposed upon externally, however, is the result of the interaction of multiple actors which govern and influence each other with their individual goals and reasoning. In this complex network perspective, decision-making becomes a negotiating process involving all network mem-

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[3] In the political and sociological studies, public entities are considered as the leading actors of the public networks (Berry et al., 2004; Jessop, 1998; Pierre, 2000; Rhodes, 1997; Stoker, 1998).

bers at the same level (Dunsire, 1996; Considine, Lewis, 2003; Kettl, 2002; Kooiman, Van Vliet 1993)[4].

In the second case the public entity has the role of providing network guidance. This requires, under the leadership of the public entity, the identification of public interests that must be satisfied. Consequently pinpointed is the definition of public network strategic priorities, choice of action to be taken which ensures consistent policy implementation, the availability of necessary resources (human, financial and technical) as well as the monitoring of all activities for the purpose of moving towards the achievement of results across the network level. In this context, the effective functioning of the public network entails the active involvement of its members in the decision-making process (network actors' engagement). All members have their own individual interests that must be met, however they contribute as a whole to the satisfaction of network interests as well. The success of the network depends on the public entity's ability to enhance the participation of other network actors, to manage and coordinate all relationships and to prevent, minimize or remove any cooperation obstacles which may exist among the other actors, allowing for network priorities to be shared and the optimization of the impact of joint interventions.

In this perspective, like a "*broker of relationships between different actors of networked governance*" (Ansell, 2000), the public entity supports and makes "responsible" decision-making possible, within and between all network members, by balancing social forces so they are developed in the direction of the public interest as much as possible (Ansell, 2000; Agranoff, McGuire, 2001; Klijn, Koopenjan, 2000; Mayntz, 1998; Provan, Milward, 2001).

Public entities, therefore, be they catalyst actors or peer network members, must adapt their planning and control system in such a way that they are able first of all to define or contribute to define long-term objectives and strategies for the public network and then to monitor and assess the outcomes of joint policies.

In literature the perspective of the public entity, as a single network member with its own planning and control system, has not been explored sufficiently. This approach is of interest because changes adopted in the planning and control system can demonstrate whether the public entity is aware of the need to operate according to network principles or whether it is still operating with a traditional approach.

Taking into account the *features of complexity* (*key variables*) identified in the literature reviewed above and focusing on the single public entity perspective (often neglected by scholars), the results of research aimed at analyzing the attitude of public entities towards the network approach (with particular reference to Italian Regional Governments) are reported here as follows.

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4 According to Kickert (1997) the public entity cannot dominate and unilaterally, hierarchically dictate, but is, nonetheless, not completely horizontally equivalent to all other actors. Its role is special and unlike the roles of the other actors. So the public network lies somewhere in the grey intermediate area between the extremes of hierarchy and market.

3   The Network Approach in Italian Regional Governments

The process of administrative devolution and federalism has taken place in Italy since 1997 and has led to the creation of new roles and responsibilities for territorial public entities, including Regional Governments. With the reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution, moreover, Regional Governments have been granted exclusive or shared competency on several subjects (such as health, environment, tourism, etc.), leaving only fundamental matters (such as justice, defence, immigration, etc.) to the central government.

This reform process means that Regional Governments must develop new relationships with other actors operating in the same context (local authorities, forms of inter-municipal cooperation, healthcare organizations, regional executive agencies, local public enterprises, private entities, non-profit organizations, consumer associations, etc.), and as such create *public networks* which they lead.

Regional Governments, like other public entities, have actually always been involved in a variety of relationships with other private or public subjects having an effect on public interest. The difference first of all consists in the supposition of true awareness that the actors in a public network are interdependent because they are unable to attain their goals individually, but rather need the resources of other actors to do so, with the resulting introduction of instruments consistent with this condition (Kickert, Kljin, Koopenjan, 1997).

As a result, Regional Governments must first of all enhance their traditional planning role more and more, with their regulation and coordination of activities of all of the various actors in the social and economic scenario. Compared with the past, there is a difference in the nature of the interaction once largely based on the law, hierarchical authority and the financial resources transferred. Interaction is now also related to trust, cooperation, exchanges of information and know-how, interdependency and need to face "*wicked problems*" (defined by Rittel, Webber, 1973 as challenges that cannot be handled by division into simple elements which are virtually isolated from one and other).

Regional Governments are always responsible towards the community for the results obtained within the limits of their competencies. So they need instruments first of all for the declaration of state priorities, long-term objectives and strategies, in order to direct the network towards public interest and the creation of public value, and then to be accountable for financial and social results obtained at network level.

The network approach does not eliminate the distinction between Regional Governments and the other actors, however affects the range of regional planning and reporting which must be broadened with consideration as well of other network members' activities, because only through them network strategies can be carried out.

As a result, scenario changes require improvement in and modification of traditional planning and reporting documents for the purpose of satisfying the need to guide the network as well as the demand for the accountability of resources used and results achieved by the network.

As far as these aspects are concerned, in 2000 regional planning and reporting documents were concerned with a legislative decree which only outlines a general

framework, allowing each Regional Government to define details according to its own information needs. In fact, Regional Governments have the faculty to introduce other documents and develop new forms of communication beyond those defined by the law.

In literature, however, the Italian Regional Governments' choices have not yet been studied sufficiently in terms of their consistency with the network approach.

The present investigation is aimed at analyzing whether accounting autonomy of Regional Governments, within the framework of the norms established by the State, has led to the use of documents which satisfy the network need for information and if so whether the awareness of being part of and operating within a public network is widespread among these public entities.

4   Research Methods

This study, as mentioned, looks at Italian Regional Governments now involved in public networks as a result of the current process of administrative devolution and federalism. Because they must cooperate with a variety of interdependent actors, traditional planning and reporting documents are not consistent with the need to steer the network towards public interests and as such create public value.

As the phenomenon in question is complex and largely unexplored, research done is of an exploratory nature. In fact, relative literature has not yet developed a precise hypothesis regarding the relationships between planning and control system documents and the role of public entities involved in a public network.

Due to the lack of references and empirical research on this issue or a suitable database, the study was therefore based on an analytical documentary analysis focused on the research questions from Section 1 and on the features of complexity highlighted in the theoretical background of Section 2.

The documents taken into consideration (about 60) were collected starting from September 2008 via the official websites of fifteen Italian Regional Governments[5]. The study focused on planning documents (specifically statements of long-term objectives and strategies) and reporting documents (resources used and results achieved) relating to the same time period.

The starting point for the planning documents in particular was the year 2007 (covering the 2007-2009 period) or the year 2006 (covering the 2006-2010 period when referring to the legislative mandate). All reporting documents selected, however, relate to the year 2007[6].

The exploratory study is aimed at examining the ability of the Regional Governments to develop the following *key variables* (aforementioned *features of complexity*):

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5 Italian Regional Governments with special autonomy (Friuli Venezia Giulia, Sardegna, Sicilia, Valle d'Aosta, Province Autonome di Trento e Bolzano) were not taken into consideration because they are subjected to special laws.

6 Italian Regional Governments must approve reporting documents by June of the following year they refer to and then these documents are usually published online in the following September.

1. engagement of all network members;
2. setting of shared long-term objectives for the network;
3. financial and social accountability to network members (that is network accountability).

The analysis, in relation to planning and reporting documents, refers to the three aforementioned *key variables* that can support the interpretation of the relationship between the public entity and the network. In other words, these key variables can explain the awareness of belonging to and operating within a network through the proxy of planning and reporting documents, since they reveal whether the public network is merely a theoretical model or whether it functions effectively.

To overcome difficulties in measuring these three *key variables*, research was developed as follows:

1. identification of possible options for each key variables (see Table 1):

   - first, the *engagement of all network members* can be alternatively related to the decision-making process for network planning, referred solely to the planning of the principle activities of the network, restricted to passive involvement with or without a clear definition of network objectives to be achieved (namely, the public entity adopts a top-down approach) or unknown (that is there is no online public access to planning documents);
   - second, *shared long-term network objectives* can focus on inputs (if they refer to quantities, expenditures or cost of resources such as personnel, equipment, etc.) and/or on activities (if they are related to the type of network member activities) and/or on outputs (if they refer to quantity and quality of goods and services produced by network members) and/or on outcomes (if they pay attention to impact on the external context);
   - third, *network accountability* can develop a financial and social perspective or only refer to some aspects while disregarding the outcome and/or output and/or activity perspectives;

2. assignment to each option of a score on a 0-4 point scale, ranging from a weak to a strong "awareness scale";

3. analysis of planning and reporting documents of the public entities selected;

4. determination of the score obtained by the public entities selected.

Finally, the integration of the three *key variables* enables the interpretation of the awareness of public entities that they belong and operate in a public network.

Table 1 – Measures of key variables

Key Variables and Research Questions	Options	Score
Engagement of all network members (First Research Question: *Are formal planning documents drawn up with the involvement of a number of public and private organisations of the network?*)	Organization of conferences, round tables, meetings, etc. for decision-making process related to network planning (*active engagement at whole-of-network level*)	4
	Organization of conferences, round tables, meetings, etc. for decision-making process only related to sectorial planning network (*active engagement only at sectorial level*)	3
	Planning documents including context analysis and long-term objectives related to the network, but without any active contributions by other network members (*passive engagement*)	2
	Planning documents including context analysis and activities to be carried out at network level, but without a clear definition of long-term objectives and without any contributions by other network members (*passive engagement and no clear network planning*)	1
	No access to planning documents	0
Setting of shared long-term objectives for the network (Second Research Question: *Do the contents of formal planning documents focus on inputs, outputs or outcomes? Do they have a multi-perspective approach?*)	Objectives in terms of inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes (*multi-perspective approach*)	4
	Objectives in terms of inputs, activities and outputs (*lack of impact perspective*)	3
	Objectives in terms of input and activities (*lack of result and impact perspective*)	2
	Purely financial objectives (*priority to financial perspective*)	1
	No objectives (*lack of objectives*) or No access to planning documents	0
Network Accountability (Third Research Question: *Is network financial and social reporting adequate?*)	Financial and social reporting related to the whole-of-network level (*focus on financial, human, technical resources and on activities, outputs and outcomes*)	4
	Financial and limited social reporting (*focus on financial resources and on activities and outputs*)	3
	Financial and activity reporting (*focus on financial resources and on activities*)	2
	Purely financial reporting (*priority to financial resources*)	1
	No access to reporting documents	0

5   Research Results

All documents selected were analyzed according to the *key variables* reported in Section 3 (*engagement of all network members*, *setting of shared long-term objectives for the network*, *network accountability*).

Table 2 reports the score obtained by each Regional Government as well as the mean and the standard deviation (SD) of *key variables* considered. The scores indicated were assigned according to analytical documentary analyses taking into account information about stakeholder involvement with specific initiatives, or at least with data collection for context analyses (*key variable 1*), the number and type of long-term objectives (*key variable 2*), the number and type of information in the reporting phase (*key variable 3*).

Table 2 – Score of Key Variables

Regional Governments	Key Variables			
	Engagement of all network members (*kv1*)	Setting of shared long-term objectives for the network (*kv2*)	Network Accountability (*kv3*)	Total
Reg. Gov. "A"	4	4	0	8
Reg. Gov. "B"	4	4	3	11
Reg. Gov. "C"	4	2	1	7
Reg. Gov. "D"	3	1	1	5
Reg. Gov. "E"	3	4	3	10
Reg. Gov. "F"	4	3	4	11
Reg. Gov. "G"	3	4	1	8
Reg. Gov. "H"	4	4	3	11
Reg. Gov. "I"	3	4	2	9
Reg. Gov. "J"	3	1	1	5
Reg. Gov. "K"	3	3	3	9
Reg. Gov. "L"	3	1	2	6
Reg. Gov. "M"	3	4	2	9
Reg. Gov. "N"	4	2	4	10
Reg. Gov. "O"	4	4	3	11
Mean	*3,5*	*3*	*2,2*	*8,7*
SD	*0,52*	*1,25*	*1,21*	*2,19*

The results reported on Table 2 highlight the fair degree of awareness Regional Governments have of the need to operate according to the network approach: the mean score of the fifteen Italian Regional Governments is 8,7 on a total of 12.

Despite this, Regional Government public networks appear to be unbalanced at the planning phase.

The mean score of the variable "*Engagement of all network members*" is in fact 3,5 on 4 and the variable "*Setting of shared long-term objectives for the network*" is 3 on 4. Seven of the public entities examined involve other network actors (such as local governments, private entities, trade unions, citizens associations, other public entities, etc.) in conferences, round tables or meetings for the purpose of planning network activities. The other Regional Governments adopt similar initiatives only at a sectorial level, typically for health, transportation, tourism, agriculture and urban development sectors.

Furthermore, in many cases planning documents reveal a multi-perspective approach with objectives in terms of inputs (e.g. financial resources, personnel units, etc.), activities (e.g. organization of conferences, EU funding project drafting, etc), outputs (e.g. number of promotional events for tourism, number of scholarships granted, etc.) and outcomes (e.g. growth of the entrepreneurial culture, development of regional economic competitiveness, etc.), even if the standard deviation of the *key variable 2* has the highest value (highlighting a great variety of situations).

The attention paid to the planning phase, with intensive effort to define *ex-ante* the activities of network members and the goals they must obtain, is probably aimed at avoiding conflictual situations. In other words, Regional Governments know that they must coordinate a variety of entities and, to successfully complete their institutional functions, they attempt to prevent contrasting attitudes or stonewalling.

Research shows a lack of attention given to the reporting phase: the mean score of the variable "*Network accountability*" is only 2,2 on 4. Only two Regional Governments draw up reporting documents at a network level with respect to financial, human and technical resources used, activities carried out and results obtained in terms of outputs and outcomes. Five public entities focus their reporting on the financial resources used, on the activities and output developed. On the contrary, other Regional Governments do not have an adequate network financial and social reporting, as the contents of their reporting documents pay attention to the financial resources used, only in some cases to the activities developed, however without mention of the results achieved in terms of outputs or outcomes.

This situation can hinder the growth as well as the daily functioning of the public network, because only effective network accountability, with emphasis on network results, can enhance the trust and co-operation essential to keeping network members together.

Research therefore reveals that planning and reporting documents take into consideration the fact that Regional Governments are presently players in a network, however data collection, related to the *key variable 2* and *3*, highlights a variety of approaches: the more traditional or that more willing to promptly communicate with stakeholders (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – Network Planning (*kv2*) and Network Accountability (*kv3*) of Italian Regional Governments
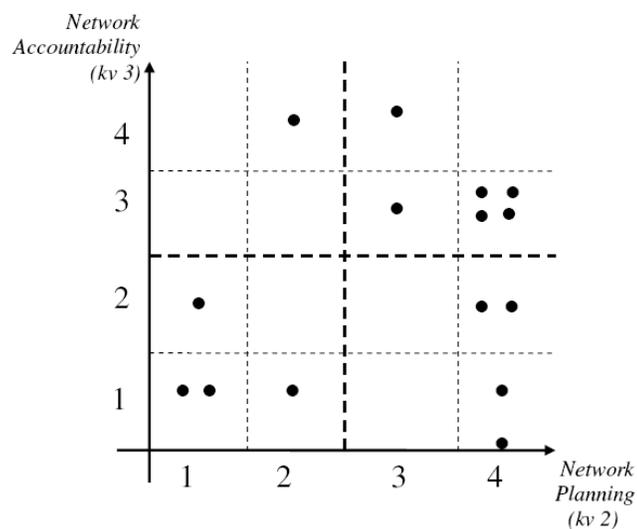
According to the various contents of planning and reporting documents (different types of objectives stated for network planning and different forms of network accountability), Regional Governments can be classified into four types of approaches towards the public network (see Table 3):

Table 3 – Framework for Mapping the Regional Governments' Approach towards the Public Network

		NETWORK PLANNING	
		Financial and Activity Objectives	*Multi-perspective Objectives*
NETWORK ACCOUNTABILITY	*Multi-perspective Accountability*	In-depth Accountability Network Approach	In-depth Planning and Accountability Network Approach
	Financial and Activity Accountability	Bureaucratic Network Approach	In-depth Planning Network Approach

- *Bureaucratic Network Approach*: planning and reporting documents concern, as in the past, activities and financial resources; this means that Regional Governments operate essentially to prevent conflicts among actors that have to work together, so they plan in details what must be done and the entity of financial resources to be utilized and then account for the activities carried out and the resulting expenditures. No mention is made however of the results achieved;
- *In-depth Planning Network Approach*: Regional Governments adopt a multi-perspective approach with emphasis on financial resources, activities, outputs and outcomes, but only in the planning phase; on the contrary, reporting documents focus on financial resources used and activities carried out, without information on outputs and outcomes; this approach can represent a first step towards the awareness of network approach; in fact public entities usually starts to operate in a network perspective beginning from the traditional and well-known phase of planning;
- *In-depth Accountability Network Approach:* Regional Government planning documents only highlight activities and financial resources, however particular attention is paid to the reporting phase with information on the activities developed, resources used, results achieved in terms of outputs or outcomes; this approach is generally adopted by Regional Governments next to electoral vote, when politicians need to communicate what they have realized to increase citizens' consent;
- *In-depth Planning and Accountability Network Approach*: Regional Governments draw up documents with a multi-perspective approach in the planning and reporting phases.

6   Conclusions

The Network Approach represents a new challenge for public management research which for a long time has paid attention to decisional, organizational and managerial features of a single public entity. Networks, as complex conglomerations of different entities, are particularly suitable to interpret the functioning of public entities that presently must take a variety of actors into consideration if they wish to achieve their institutional scope.

The main objective of this paper is to present the results of research investigating whether and to what extent public entities are aware of the need to operate according to the network approach.

The research reported focuses on Italian Regional Governments, particularly significant as a public network example, and on their planning and control system.

The results of the documentary analysis conducted highlight that these public entities are actually aware of the need to operate according to network principles to create public

value and as such satisfy public interest. On the other hand, however, study results also bring to light a variety of situations which point to the proposal of a framework for mapping the Regional Governments' approach towards public networks.

This framework, based on the contents of planning and reporting documents, can be generalized for all public entities involved in a network. It can support the interpretation of the behaviour of each public entity and subsequently the proposal of specific initiatives to develop and strengthen the network.

Additional research should study how to help public entities improve network management. The proposal, for example, of a set of output and outcome indicators which are based on literature, on best practices or on surveys and diversified according to the type of institutional functions carried out, can improve planning and reporting activities at a network level and, consequently, enhance co-operation and boost network performance.

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