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## **Scales and forms of action in the partial demobilisation of the Italian Forum of Water Movements.**

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### **Introduction**

On the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> June 2011, about 26 million citizens blocked in Italy a major attempt to privatise the water and sewage networks of the country, approving two referendums that cancelled the main legal tools that were facilitating the access of private actors to the water services. Amplified during a dynamic and participated grassroots electoral campaign, the issue of water and of its privatisation had already penetrated in the Italian society in the years that preceded the vote, thanks to the diffused work of a relatively stable network of social movement actors, the Italian Forum of Water Movement (*Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua* – FIMA). Emerged in 2006 in part as a spin-off of the Social Forum process, the FIMA proved to be able to establish longstanding links between large-scale Italian organisations and committees engaged in local or regional struggles against water privatisation attempts. Through the organisation of highly participated initiatives of direct democracy (the mentioned referendums, campaigns of signature collection, and citizens' initiatives) this collective actor succeeded in aggregating and in shifting to the national scale the numerous pre-existent water mobilisations, slowly becoming a relevant player in the Italian political scenario.

In the years that followed the referendum victory, however, the FIMA started to experience serious internal tensions: conflicting strategies of action emerged, and the Forum reduced its ability to give life to long-lasting, participated campaigns. At the same time, part of the FIMA contrasted the internal attempts to consolidate the organisational structure that emerged from the vote, while new proposed shifts of the action to the European level or to other issues failed to bring the level of participation at the intensity that characterised the previous FIMA campaigns. Occasionally, these internal conflicts induced some local and regional water committees to abandon the Forum.

This article analyses the characteristics of the phase of demobilisation (Tilly & Tarrow 2006) of the quite successful Italian campaigns on water privatisation, in the years that followed the 2011 referendum victory. In social movement studies, demobilisation phases are probably the less investigated sections of a cycle of contention. Understandably, researchers tend to focus their attention on the mechanisms that characterise the rise of a mobilisation, or in the peaks of enthusiasm and creativity that social movements can bring in the public debate. However, the analysis of the different paths of demobilisation can reveal crucial information on the structure of a large movement, on its internal distribution of power, and on the underlying informal

agreements – sometimes broken during this last stage – that were permitting the coexistence and the collaboration of numerous and different social movement actors during the previous phases of the mobilisation.

In the case of the Italian Forum of Water Movement, the tensions that characterised the demobilisation phase mainly regarded two dimensions, which constitute the core of this research. The first dimension relate with the presence of a national/local dichotomy in the FIMA, linked with broader issues of centralisation, structuration, and changes of scale. The Forum network tried to combine during its life an ambitious national strategy of action aimed at changing the Italian legal framework on water, and a distributed leadership role of the local committees and actors, which had a sort of veto power on the initiatives of the FIMA. The second line of tension regards the well-known dichotomy between tendencies toward institutionalisation and tendencies toward radicalisation of the action, which emerged in complex and hybrid forms during the demobilisation of the FIMA.

The article analyses in depth the two proposed lines of tensions, presenting at the same time an historical description of the rise and development of the water privatisation issue in Italy. In the first section, I derive from interviews, previous academic descriptions (Fantini 2013; Carrozza 2013; Cernison 2014), and publications of the militants (Ciervo 2010; Martinelli 2011; Oddi 2008; Bersani 2011; Gutiérrez Aguilar *et al.* 2008) a timeline of the water struggles in the country. This chronology focuses on the main actor that sustained the water campaign through time, the FIMA, and on its structural evolution: initially conceived as an event, the Forum became a process, and finally a relatively stable national infrastructure. In this reconstruction, I dedicate a particular attention to the period between 2011 and 2015, which constitutes the phase of demobilisation that I analyse in the rest of the article. The second section introduces the national/local dichotomy that characterised the Forum structure, showing that a weak nature of the national infrastructure and a contemporaneous leadership of the territories was one of the conditions to create the water network, and to maintain its action alive. Moreover, the section presents the formal mechanisms of internal control that the FIMA introduced in order to root its national actions in the local territories. The third section adopts the same dichotomy as a tool to analyse the development of campaigns and initiatives in the FIMA. In particular, I adopt the national/local dimension to present the shift to a lower scale and the decreased resources of the central office during the recent demobilisation phase. The fourth section introduces the classical distinction between institutionalisation and radicalisation (della Porta 1995; Tarrow 1994) as a second lens, in part overlapped with the national/local one, to interpret the evolution of the FIMA during the years that followed the referendum. Finally, in the conclusion I propose two new lines of research – the increased levels of resistance against formal organisations and against a shift to larger issues – that might permit to link the recent demobilisation process of the Forum with general tendencies that the current Italian social movements of the left seem to experiment.

## **Origins and evolution of the Italian Forum of Water Movements**

An uninterrupted and long lasting mobilization against the attempts to privatize water has existed in Italy from the early 2000s, supporting the idea of water as a common good for about

fifteen years. The main political actor that has promoted, coordinated and given continuity to the issue on a national scale is the network of social movement organizations *Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua*.

In this chronological presentation, I describe the evolution of the FIMA and of the water struggles distinguishing three periods, which should not be considered, however, as distinct phases in a unique cycle of protest<sup>1</sup>. In a first section (2000 – 2008), I depict the emergence in Italy of a discourse opposing to the idea of privatizing water, which resulted in the process that gave life to the FIMA and to the first campaigns that this network organized. A second section (2009 – June 2011) describes the Italian referendum campaign on water, and the effect that this complex campaign had on the network of supporting organizations. Finally, a last section provides an overview of the evolution and of the difficulties that the FIMA experimented after having won the referendum (2011-2015).

### *The emergence of an organised opposition to the privatisation of water (2000-2008)*

A network of social movement organizations dedicated to the theme of water privatization developed in Italy in the early 2000s, following two different impulses. The first motivation to mobilize derived from the rising number of privatization attempts in Italy and in the rest of the world. Since the article maintains a national focus, I do not provide a complete description of how the idea of privatizing water emerged at the global level and was applied in the country (See Cernison 2014: 78; Oddi 2008; Carrozza 2013; Canitano, Montagnani and Peruzzi 2008 for detailed overviews). It is important to stress, however, that political and economic actors promoted in the early nineties the privatization paradigm as a set of market-driven policies to address problems of scarcity, pollution and inefficiency in the water management (See Bakker 2007; Goldman 2007). In this neoliberal view, private actors and policy makers consider water as a scarce resource with an economic value, and propose to transfer its management from public authorities to firms. According to this paradigm, a privatization of the system should increase the investments in the water sector, and provide a better-designed, ecological service (See e.g. Dublin Principles 1992; Bonn International Conference on Fresh Water 2001). In particular, these principles and the connected privatization policies entered in Italy in the second half of the 90es, in the process of implementation of the so-called Legge Galli<sup>2</sup> that reorganised water management in Italy. According to the militants (see in particular Oddi 2008), this law, not explicitly inspired by the logic of privatization, promoted an industrialization of the water distribution. Shifting the scale of water management from the very local to a medium geographical scale, it created the condition that permitted the access of private actors in the sector, followed in a second phase by a deep penetration of financial tools and actors (“*finanziarizzazione*”, IW1) in the water societies.

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<sup>1</sup> The network experienced numerous phases of intense activism and of relative demobilization during its existence: for instance, a phase of virtual inactivity emerged even in the middle of the demanding referendum campaign of 2010/2011. In this article, however, I do not aim at describing these complex waves of mobilization in detail.

<sup>2</sup> Law 35 of January 1994, “Disposizioni materiali di risorse idriche”.

The second impulse, in part emerged as a reaction to this privatization paradigm, regards internal social movement dynamics, which mainly characterized the World, European and national Social Forum processes. After the so-called Cochabamba water war, the emblematic and successful case of resistance to water privatization that contributed to modify the political scenario of Bolivia (Gutiérrez Aguilar et al. 2008; Kohl and Farthing 2006; Assies 2003; Shiva 2003; IW10), different actors in the Social Forum networks started to conceive the attempts to privatize water as a clear example of how neoliberal politics can affect people. Moreover, organizations coming from very different political areas proved to be able to build unusual alliances, and to produce an articulated counter-discourse on the theme. In Italy – as it happened in numerous other contexts – environmentalists, consumer rights organizations, radical and traditional trade unions, catholic networks, groups opposing to neoliberalism at the global level, organizations active on water, on agriculture, or in the Latin American context constituted the heterogeneous core of the mobilization (IW1; IW10; IW7).

In particular, the Italian economist and activist Riccardo Petrella dedicated a strong attention to the theme. Starting from 1998, he wrote or contributed to write different versions of a socially oriented water manifesto (Petrella 2001), promoting its application at different geographical and institutional scales. Emanuele Fantini<sup>3</sup> (2013: 21) indicates the creation of the Italian Committee for the World Water Contract (CICMA) – the national branch of the international organization/process that Petrella was coordinating – as the birthdate of the Italian water movement. The CICMA played a major role in introducing the theme of water privatization in the discourses of numerous Italian organizations, of various local institutions, and in the European Social Forum held in Florence in 2002 (Fantini 2013: 22; Cernison 2014: 82). One year later in the same city, numerous organizations involved in the Social Forum process<sup>4</sup> promoted the first Alternative World Water Forum, an event that aimed at contrasting the multi-stakeholder, market oriented World Water Forums (see Cernison 2014: 73 for details). These elements permit to indicate – at least in its first phases – the Italian and the international water mobilisations as a spin-off movement (McAdam 1999) emerged in the late phase of the Social Forum processes.

Due to these international experiences and to the network of organizations that emerged from them, water became a key theme in the social movement milieu of Florence and Tuscany. It is in this region, therefore, that the activists experimented numerous ideas, organizational configurations, and forms of action lately adopted at the national level by the FIMA. In particular, a Tuscany Water Panel emerged from two Social Forum regional meetings in 2004 (Gutiérrez Aguilar *et al.* 2008: 133). This informal structure lately evolved in the Tuscan Forum of Water Movements (FTMA), slowly assuming the form of a single issue, partially independent organization. In 2005, the initial core emerged from the Social Forum process started to connect with numerous local committees already engaged on the water issue in their territories, coordinating their action on a broader scale. In this form, the FTMA gave life to a citizens' initiative campaign aimed at introducing a regional law, which conceived water as a common

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<sup>3</sup> The book chapter of Emanuele Fantini is a very useful source to understand the first steps of the water mobilization in Italy. In particular, Fantini well describes how the organisation CICMA – *Comitato Italiano Contratto Italiano sull'Acqua* played a crucial role in bringing the water theme at the centre of the agenda of numerous Italian social movement organisations.

<sup>4</sup> A complete list of these organizations is available at the URL <http://lists.peacelink.it/economia/msg00688.html>

resource instead than as a commodity. Even if the regional government discarded the initiative, this campaign of institutional direct democracy, quite unusual for a network emerged from the Social Forum process, had an unexpected success in terms of participation. The activists collected about 43 thousand signatures in six months (*Ibid.*), almost 15 times the number legally required to submit the proposal. Furthermore, during the campaign numerous new organizations and local associations started to join the initial network, testifying the attractiveness of the water theme.

A similar process, shifted on a national scale, gave life to the Italian Forum of Water Movements. It is important to stress that the expression “Italian Forum of Water Movements” mainly indicated at first an event, a three day meeting held in Rome from March 10 to 12 2006<sup>5</sup>. In five preparatory meetings (from July 2005 to January 2006), a relatively small number of core activists supported the rise of a national process on the theme. Initially, this first nucleus of militants worked at extending the network, identifying and connecting the areas of the country where a conflict on water was already present. The FIMA, therefore, emerged from two distinct kinds of actors. On one hand, a solid backbone of organizations not always linked with a single territory, which had already organized events and campaigns together; on the other hand, a group of dissimilar, previously unconnected, but in some cases very strong territorial committees, engaged in local battles almost exclusively on the water theme.

[...] it was in March 2006 when Rome hosted the Forum that brought to the birth of [...] the Italian Forum of Water Movements, which appeared with this double function or ability to aggregate local committees and associations and national organizations active on the topic. It immediately set an important goal, which was the citizens’ initiative that constituted the first phase of the Forum. (IW1:2)

After the Forum meeting of March 2006, the FIMA started to operate as an actor in the Italian political milieu, collectively creating the text of a law proposal on water, and giving life to an intense campaign of signature collection to support the new national citizens’ initiative. As in the previous Tuscan campaign, the initiative proved to be a successful way to increase the participation and to consolidate the network of organizations: in July 2007, the FIMA actors had already collected more than 400 thousands signatures, convincing the Italian parliament to block for one year every attempt to privatize water.

At the organizational level, the increased number of practical tasks (campaign coordination, signature collection, organisation of the national meetings) contributed to consolidate the network structure of the FIMA, giving a certain centrality to Rome. The Forum established an office in the capital (composed of both volunteers and employed activists<sup>6</sup>), entered in contact with the national media and with the parliament, and created a complex website to coordinate the initiatives of a rising number of militants and supporting organizations. Taking into account the experiences of horizontal participation of the Social Forums and the ideas of centrality of the

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<sup>5</sup> The same expression slowly started to refer to the process and the political campaigns sustained by the organizations that participated to the event. Finally, the meaning shifted again and it currently indicates a relatively stable network of organizations, with a coordination center (with only operative functions) in Rome, national assemblies, and a well-defined structure of regional and local committees.

<sup>6</sup> In some moments, only a single militant, a young spokesperson, was paid for his work.

local actors emerged (among others) in Cochabamba, the FIMA and its components, however, introduced some elements aimed at counterbalancing this tendency toward centralisation. For instance, the FIMA officially defined itself as “[...] a national reality founded on independent territorial struggles”<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore, the FIMA named its central office *segreteria operativa* (operative office), indicating in this way the very practical function of this organism, which the Forum actors insisted to differentiate – at the semantic level and in their decisions – from a classical centre of coordination with a political and directive role.

### *The referendum campaign (November 2009 – June 2011)*

In November 2009, the centre-right majority of the Italian parliament introduced a single article on water in a generic, multi purposed law, the so-called *Decreto Ronchi*<sup>8</sup>. This article, combined with other elements of the existent legal framework on water resources, aimed at ending the numerous in-house public water services still active in Italy, *de facto* forcing the local authorities at introducing the participation of private actors in the service. The FIMA actors strongly reacted to this political choice, taking a very risky and unusual decision for an Italian network of social movement actors: they decided to organize three referendums (reduced to two by the constitutional court)<sup>9</sup>, which aimed at abolishing the main components of the Italian legislation that were permitting the participation of private actors in the water sector.

The referendum campaign lasted two years, involving hundreds of organized actors and the entire Italian media environment. Briefly summarising this complex event<sup>10</sup>, I present the evolution of the water referendum campaign dividing it two main phases. In the first period (late 2009-2010), the actors already organized in the FIMA decided to constitute an official “committee of proposers”: this committee was including organizations that were not part of the FIMA, but was explicitly excluding the political parties<sup>11</sup>. In this phase, the referendum proposers engaged in a first intense phase of mobilization: relying on the experience that they made with the local and national citizens’ initiatives, the FIMA network collected more than 1.4 million official signatures to call for the vote in less than three months. The militants collected signatures in squares and small parks in almost every Italian town, relying on the highly differentiated set of resources of the numerous organisations supporting the FIMA. In part, this first phase of mobilization followed a pattern that was already present during the citizens’ initiatives campaigns. The militants organized hundreds of different events at the local level,

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<sup>7</sup> “[...] una realtà nazionale fondata sulle singole vertenze territoriali”. Report of the National Assembly of the Territorial Committees of the Italian Forum of Water Movements, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2009. Both the definition and the name given to the assembly indicate the important double focus on the national and the scales levels of action.

<sup>8</sup> Article 15, Law 166 approved on 20 November 2009.

<sup>9</sup> The water referendums have been voted together with two others: the first opposing to nuclear power, and the second to a particular right for the ministers to being excused from avoid appearing in trials.

<sup>10</sup> For reasons of space, I cannot treat in detail the events that characterized the referendum campaign on water. For a complete description, see Cernison (2014: 65-104), Bersani (2011), Carrozza and Fantini (2013). I conserve, here, a focus on the relationship centre-territories during the campaign.

<sup>11</sup> Political parties could promote the referendum participating to a separate committee of support, or through the involvement of their local branches.

from the traditional leafleting to the swimming pool parties, and the national office limited its activities to a role of coordination, relationship with the media, and link with the legal institutions. In part, new elements slowly emerged. In particular, the central office increased the number of paid professionals, and created its first centralized Facebook page. Furthermore, the activists started to adopt Facebook to invite people to their local events, and they experimented interesting forms of “coordinated-but local” initiatives. For instance, during a networked action named *H2Ora*, they grouped different initiatives under a common name and symbol, launching them at the same hour in numerous territories.

The second period (January – June 2011) constitutes the Referendum campaign in the strict sense. After having organized a decentralized national demonstration in December 2010<sup>12</sup> and a national one in March 2011, the activists started to engage in a very creative phase of communication with the citizens, relying on both local initiatives and on an intense wave of communication on social media. In a sort of *crescendo*, a growing number of local committees gave life to flashmobs, bike tours, and leaflet distributions on the beaches; they participated to Facebook appeals, distributed viral photos and videos; they finally convinced numerous mainstream media to cover their activities, and the main political parties of the left to support the referendum. As a result, the FIMA and the larger committee of proposers succeeded in winning the water referendums: about 55% of the Italian voters participated in the election, and more than 95% of them asked to abolish the laws connected with the water privatization attempts.

Interestingly, this phase of mobilization that preceded the vote hosted at the same time mechanisms of centralization and of decentralization of the action. On one hand, the national focus of the campaign, the large number of people that the FIMA had to reach in a limited time, and the need to dedicate an increased attention to the media concentrated numerous organizational tasks in the hands of the central office of the FIMA in Rome. At the same time, the campaign involved during its final phase (May-June 2011) an impressive quantity of contemporaneous events, while the number of activists and organizations grew in a way that was faster than expected. Therefore, the central office decided, on one hand, to give an even higher level of freedom to these organizations: as a result, the activists could better adapt the referendum message to their style of communication and to their forms of action. On the other hand, it experimented new ways of coordinating in a loose way these decentralized actions, for instance creating leaflets and symbols that the activists could customize, or inviting the local groups to publicize their initiatives in a new interactive section of the campaign’s national website (See Cernison 2013 for details).

There were indications, mainly coming from the referendum committee than from the national office of the Forum, differently applied in the territories. So, this was more or less the general background of the campaign. At the same time, I think, it also happened the opposite. Meaning that there was, let us say, a two directional relationship. [...] Sometimes what happened in the territories became a practice [that we tried to] diffuse to the others, because it was evident that it was working, that in this territory they were using, I don’t know, a message or a type of actions or initiatives that were appearing to most of those involved in the committee as something useful to spread. So, a two-directional relationship, I might say. (IW1)

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<sup>12</sup> Following more or less the H2Ora model presented in the previous paragraph.

*After the victory: demobilization, new forms of action, and conflicts (2011 – 2015)*

In the years that followed the referendum success, the activity of the FIMA organizations continued, relying on a strongly reduced number of activists largely pertaining to the previous core of water militants. In this ‘latency’ configuration, the FIMA continued to act at the national and at the local level, sometimes trying to reach the international scale with some initiatives. At the national level, the reduced participation increasingly limited the ability of the Forum to give life to large-scale campaigns: for instance, the signatures collections reached lower numbers than those that characterised the previous phases of mobilisation. At the same time, the Forum proved to be able to use part of the prestige that it achieved during the referendum in establishing deeper and more formal interactions with the institutions. In particular, the Italian parliament slowly established an intergroup supporting the idea of water as a common good, an official counterpart of the Forum that included deputies and senators of four different parties. At the international level, the FIMA participated to the Alternative World Water Forum in Marseille, in March 2012, and supported the European Citizens’ Initiative to introduce a right to water. In this last campaign, however, the Italian network contributed with about 68 thousands signatures – an astonishing small number taking into account the previous results of the Forum – while the mobilization on the water issue seemed to have reached other countries, such as Germany (with more than 1,3 million signatures), Austria, Slovenia, Slovakia, Belgium, and Greece<sup>13</sup>.

The local level of action, after the national efforts linked with the referendum, seemed to have returned at the centre of the FIMA activities. In particular, in November 2011 the network organized a long lasting campaign (formally not yet concluded) called “My vote must be respected – civil obedience”<sup>14</sup>, which aimed at forcing the Italian water agencies to adhere to the results of the second water referendums. In this campaign, the FIMA militants tried to convince their supporters, and the citizens who voted their proposals in June, to adhere to a unilateral reduction of the water bills, refusing to pay a 7% portion of the water price<sup>15</sup> explicitly eliminated by the second water referendum. Even though this campaign conserved some of the traditional elements of the previous actions of the Forum (e.g. the use of a flag as the main activists’ symbol, a national coordination of personalized local events), it clearly constituted a major change in the FIMA strategies, and in the selected form of action. In this campaign, the level of engagement required to the adherents was considerably higher (from signatures, leafleting and votes, to an independent choice of self-reduction of the bills), with the consequence of reaching a smaller number of people. Even though the campaign proved to be not particularly successful, numerous FIMA committees resisted to the idea of returning to the previous models of action, and in particular to the signature collection campaigns.

At the same time, an internal debate on the role and on the structure of the FIMA central office emerged. Some of the local and regional committees asked for a redistribution of the reimbursement of the electoral expenses, a quite consistent amount of money able to sustain

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<sup>13</sup> Data retrieved the 25 May 2015 from the URL <http://www.right2water.eu//results?lang>

<sup>14</sup> “Il mio voto va rispettato - Obbedienza civile”,

<sup>15</sup> This 7%, called “*remunerazione del capitale investito*” (remuneration on the investments), was an always granted remuneration of every funds invested in water services. This mechanism is crucial to attract private investors in the sector.



through time a relative stable national infrastructure. Furthermore, some activists openly criticized the decision of the FIMA central office of configuring itself as an association, a choice that its members described as a purely practical and necessary step<sup>16</sup>. This debate, and the increasingly reduced resources of the network, obliged to limit the number of paid activists in the office, creating among other things a smaller, “cheaper”, and easier to manage version of the FIMA website.

[These were] Serious problems. Because on one hand everybody, without exceptions, [indicated the] assembly and power to the committees, the committees are the real leaders of the water movement. Then, there is always a minimal need for a small level of national coordination, and this created the problems. Because some committees see the small, generous, involved, insufficiently payed group of the national office as an equivalent of a central committee. [...] But in these cases, in my opinion, there is an idea of participation that is still a little primitive [...]. (IW3)

Due to the conflicting views regarding forms of action and fears of institutionalisation, some of the local water committees (in particular in Tuscany, Puglia, Veneto and southern Lazio) entered in open conflict with the FIMA centre, arriving in some cases at abandoning the Forum.

Notwithstanding these internal tensions and the resulting difficulties to organise national actions, the FIMA sometimes succeeded in maintaining a key role in the Italian water politics. For instance, through a new signature collection it blocked a law proposal of reform of the public services (Trovati 2016). Furthermore, the Forum tried to intervene on other issues and to give support to other social movement initiatives. In particular, it actively participated to the Italian branch of the campaign against the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and it was one of the main organiser of the network *Blocca lo Sblocca Italia*<sup>17</sup>. Finally, the FIMA gave a formal support to the referendum against oil drilling held in April 2016 (Cernison 2016), and actively supported a campaign of signature collection aimed at giving life to a new wave of multi-thematic referendums, the so-called *Referendum Sociali*<sup>18</sup>.

## **Relevance of local actors and fears of centralization in the FIMA distribution of power**

The Italian Forum of Water Movements is the result of the collaboration between organizations and committees characterized by different dimensions, scales of action, experiences in previous political campaigns, set of goals, and models of political participation. National trade unions, spontaneous committees, single-issue associations and local branches of

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<sup>16</sup> Having a legal status (e.g. forming an association) is compulsory in Italy to create job contract and pay salaries.

<sup>17</sup> The network opposed to the so-called *Decree Sblocca Italia*, which intervened on numerous issues including constructions, highways, oil drilling, and incinerators. The network tried to aggregate the numerous local struggles that the decree should affect.

<sup>18</sup> At the moment of writing, the campaign seems failed, at least in part: only a minority of the proposals reached the minimum number of signatures required to call for a referendum.

opposing political parties entered in contact in the FIMA network, succeeding in giving life to numerous national and regional campaigns.

At a formal level, this network of organizations elaborated an apparently common internal infrastructure, aimed at permitting the participation and the internal distribution of power among its components. Three 'institutions' contribute to define the FIMA strategies, and to put its decision in practice. First, the national assemblies, which host some hundreds of militants almost once a year. Second, a restricted group of national coordination, which includes members coming from the regional committees and the national associations active on the water issue, and meets on a more frequent basis (almost every month). Third, a central 'operative office' in Rome, strictly dedicated to coordination and communication tasks, and lacking decisional power. Furthermore, the FIMA activists created an uninterrupted and very lively space of debate through the national mailing list, and they gave life to two external groups that support their initiatives: a national coordination group for local authorities, and – mainly during the referendum - a committee of support that hosts the political parties adhering to the water campaigns. Finally, a similar structure of coordination (in particular the assembly, the coordination group and the mailing list) is sometimes reproduced at the regional level, and in phases of intense mobilization other thematic national committees (e.g. on communication) emerged and coordinated their activities through meetings and mailing lists.

Behind this structure, but in relationship with its components, it is possible to observe a divide in the FIMA. This internal dualism largely descends from the characteristics of the network during the very first steps of the mobilization and from the different dimensions, traditions and political experiences of the organizations that adhered to the process. As we explained in the previous section, the FIMA emerged from a group of actors involved in the Social Forums, in some cases linked with well-established organizations active on a national or international scale (e.g. Attac, Rete Lilliput, Arci, but also the large trade union CGIL). During the process that gave life to the First Italian Forum of Water Movement, to the Italian citizens' initiative on water, and to the FIMA itself, these actors monitored, and lately aggregated local experiences of struggle against water privatization with characteristics of single issue committees<sup>19</sup>. As a result, a dichotomy between, on one side, a multi-issue backbone emerging from a common experience, and on the other side a series of different committees centered on the water issue constantly remerged in the FIMA history, creating a tension regarding different ideas of structure, of internal democracy, of scale and form of action. When the referendum mobilization ended, the divergence among actors followed at least in part similar lines.

The opportunity to give life to national initiatives, the pragmatic need to create a stable national infrastructure, and the tension with the ideal of territorial power and participation present in the network created in the Forum a constant need to counterbalance and mediate the changes of scale with the local committees already active against the water privatization attempts. During its entire life, the FIMA mainly relied on three mechanisms to avoid fears of centralization. First, it adopted the consensus decision-making rule in its local and national

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<sup>19</sup> E.g. the committees of Arezzo or Aprilia, engaged in local struggles against the privatisation of their water. However, every local committee had a different composition, with some of them emerging from trade unions (mainly in Tuscany), experts, or long course political activists. Labelling all of them as semi spontaneous single-issue experiences will be wrong.

meetings. When a vote was nonetheless required, the voice of large organizations – such as the national trade unions – counted as the voice of smaller associations and committees. Second, the FIMA explicitly granted in its founding documents a particular centrality to the local committees and to the territorial struggles<sup>20</sup> that they represent. In the Final Declaration of the 1<sup>st</sup> Italian Forum of Water Movements (2006), for instance, the points dedicated to the role of the committees are more than those dedicated to the creation of a common national struggle. Third, the assembly gave to the central office of the Forum only operative tasks, and the local committees constantly monitored its dimension, its internal composition, its relationship with other organizations. On this point, however, different views continuously emerged. On one hand, part of the FIMA network aimed at increasing or maintaining stable the number of paid professionals, seeing the central office as a key tool to obtain recognition in the institutional and in the media spheres. On the other hand, this idea met a growing resistance in the Forum: some actors started to request the introduction of systems of rotation of the office composers, and finally the number of professional figures in the office entered in a stable decline after the victory.

In the interviews and in the FIMA documents, the activists often attested this independent and constituent role of the territorial struggles, and the loose nature that the national level has or should assume. A key militant defined the local actors as “sovereign local committees, but of course with a political commitment to unity” (IW3:15). Similarly, a second activist described the inhomogeneous composition of the territorial committees and their links to other campaigns and struggles as the roots from which the national mobilization emerged and took its current form:

“[T]he local committees are committees that somehow represent the roots of a tree, which than has a crown that is a national crown instead. But “the National” does not exist: there is a sphere that is national, or a sphere of decision that is the one of the national coordination group, which meets more or less every month and a half.” (IW6).

Finally, a report of one of the meetings of the FIMA national coordination group clearly addressed the theme of the independence of the local and regional committees, with the aim of reducing the possible internal conflicts in the months that immediately preceded the referendum:

In addition - following [a theme raised in] some speeches – we restated that a distinction between the “territorial” and the “national” levels does not exist. No political body within the national Forum can decide, rule, or interfere in the decisions of any territorial committee. At the same time, we define “committees” and “territorial forums” those groups that recognize the principles and the method of the

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<sup>20</sup> Here the terms “territorial struggle” roughly translate the expression *vertenze territoriali*. This term, adopted in the Italian left since the early 2000s in opposition to the concept of NIMBY, indicates a new tendency to root the mobilization to local territories directly affected by the action of a public or private project. In my opinion, the expression probably imitates the similar label “*vertenza sindacale*”, which describes single and relatively isolated trade union struggles.

See also the (late) definition given at the URL

<https://sites.google.com/site/fedelanzi/home/socialmente-giovani/cosa-e-una-vertenza-terr>

Italian Forum of Water Movements: the principles determined in the 2007 national citizens' initiative and the method of participation and group sharing.<sup>21</sup>

As these quotes permit to observe, the predominant role of the local committees and the ephemeral nature of the national level indicate the primary importance that some FIMA actors give to horizontality, and to the risk of centralization and shift to an aggregated, uncontrolled national level of the Italian water struggle. In order to understand the emergence of conflicts, the different proposed strategies of coordination and forms of action, the prevalence of a local or national focus in the FIMA, it is important to take into particular account these concerns. In the next section, therefore, I concentrate the attention on the attempts made in order to organize national campaigns in this complex context, continuously mediated and combined with opposite tendencies to shift the action to a local scale.

### **Scale of action: the Forum and the referendum as continuously negotiated shifts of scale**

Ideally, one of the main principles of the FIMA is the fact that every national action has deep local roots and emerges from the territorial level of the mobilization. Margherita Ciervo, geographer and water activist, well describes this process and her view on how the Forum should always work:

The Forum is characterized by the manner in which policy and initiatives emerge as the [network's] local nodes share their experiences and proposals. Two examples are the citizens' initiative for a public water management [...] - created following an analogous experience organized at the regional level by the Committee of Tuscany - and the raise of the Group of Coordination of the local authorities supporting a return to public water services (November 2008) - created following the experience of the Committee of Puglia - [...]. Indeed, the key strengths of the movement are its deep roots and diffusion in the territories; its ability to aggregate different experiences and cultures and to connect the local struggles with the national dimension of the mobilization; the dialogue, openness and collaboration with the institutions. (Ciervo 2010: 159-160)

Always taking into account these principles of sharing and of a bottom-up emergence of campaigns and proposals, the FIMA frequently moved in its scale of action from the territorial to the national level, and in the opposite direction. Shifts to the international scale, however, proved to be more difficult to organize. The creation of the FIMA in 2006 - as an event, a process, and a network of organizations - can be described as the result of two combined scale shifts. On one hand, the activists involved in the Social Forums imported the water privatization issue in the Italian (and Tuscan) context, so moving the action from the international to the local level. On the other hand, a set of local and regional actors, engaged in territorial struggles<sup>22</sup>, accepted to

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<sup>21</sup> *Report del Coordinamento nazionale*, 14 December 2010 (Catania). Retrieved at the URL <http://www.acquainsicilia.org/2010/12/14-novembre-2010-riunione-del-coordinamento-del-forum-italiano-dei-movimenti-per-lacqua>

<sup>22</sup> Once again, *vertenze territoriali* in the activists' jargon.

give life to a new combined national struggle<sup>23</sup>, yet asking and obtaining a local control and a territorial connotation of it.

During the phases of intense national mobilization, this centrality of the territories in the FIMA had considerable effects on the strategy of action and on the communication of the Forum. In the campaigns of signature collection for the 2007 citizens' initiative and for the referendums, the FIMA adopted a decentralized strategy of action, successfully taking advantage from the capillarity of its local branches. For instance, the Committee of Referendum Promoters, in a report dated 30 march 2010 indicates that

[T]he campaign, in order to be highly effective, should be highly decentralized, but at the same time it is necessary to run a frame of coordination at the level of provinces and regions, in order to permit a correct organization of the collection of signatures and certificates.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, a stronger national coordination slowly started to emerge during the 2010 campaign. A PR professional, a webmaster, and some other paid activists entered in the FIMA national office. The Forum's website interacted with the committees to make public the enormous number of events organized at the local level. The demanding bureaucratic and organizational tasks involved with the distribution, correction and delivery of the signature modules gave life to an increased national structuration of the FIMA.

It is during the months that preceded the 2011 referendums, however, that the strategies of national coordination and of decentralized organization developed, interacted, and sometimes entered in conflict. First, on 4th December 2010 the FIMA adhered to an international day of mobilization on water, with the additional goal of asking for a stop of the privatization processes in the pre-referendum period. In this occasion, for the first time the territorial committees expressed their discomfort for the national shift that the referendum campaign was requiring: as a result, they obtained the right to participate to this event organizing a series of contemporaneous regional marches, instead than a national demonstration. Second, the local activists continuously controlled part of the Forum communication strategies, conceding only a partial freedom of action to the central office, and blocking some of its initiatives. For instance, the activists almost ignored and did not spread one of the most elaborated 'gadgets' that the central office proposed during the campaign, a bottle conceived by the famous designer Philippe Starck. Similarly, the local committees diffused only to a minor extent a set of communication tools (fliers, web elements, and posters) produced for the FIMA by a professional agency of Milan. Instead, they preferred to create their own contents, to rely on previous FIMA symbols, or to have the freedom to personalize and reinterpret new symbols distributed by the Forum central office.

Interestingly, during the last two months (from April to the 13<sup>th</sup> June 2011) that preceded the vote, the actors involved in the Forum gave life to a national strategy of action that successfully took advantage from the relative weakness of its central hub, and from the freedom of the local networked organizations. The FIMA central office, and in particular its communication sector,

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<sup>23</sup> *Vertenza nazionale* in the activists' words.

<sup>24</sup> Report of the Committee of Promoters, 30 March 2010. Retrieved the 26<sup>th</sup> May 2015 from the URL <http://www.rifondazionetivoli.it/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=281>

abandoned its initial attempts to diffuse homogeneous messages to the citizens, and to increase the coordination of the local committees, two tasks that became increasingly difficult due to the rising size of the mobilization. Instead, it concentrated the attention in the creation of actions, messages and symbols that the activists could easily readapt and personalize, and in gathering and sharing on the web or at the national level contents independently produced by the local committees. A FIMA activist involved in the coordination of the 2011 campaign interestingly connects this decentralization of the communication campaign with the internal composition of the Forum network, and with the referendum success:

Indeed, even in the sense of... let's say, in the communication.. which is something that we have often discussed, even there it was a total chaos, which essentially was the richness of the movement. In the sense that we were able to structure and propose to the territory some things, and to construct tools as the posters or, well, the web banner. Yet, then, some of these things were taken, readapted and transformed, we received suggestions from the territories, the territories themselves produced things ... So, I mean, it was a sort of a creative chaos from this point of view. It is not by chance that [emerged] a massive use of the social networks, probably for the first time in Italy they had the capacity to promote a message in such a viral way. (IW6)

In the phase of demobilization that followed the referendum victory, the tensions between national and local scale of actions became more serious. Some territorial committees, after numerous years of participation to national initiatives, asked to refocus the action on the local level, and to limit in different ways the relevance and the structuration of the national level. In part, the FIMA accepted these demands: the Forum central office became smaller, and the main Forum's action in 2012 and 2013 – the diffused self-reduction of the bills called *my vote should be respected* – was inherently local and direct in its organization. At the same time, large-scale actions, such as the first European Citizens' Initiative on water, did obtain a very limited participation, in particular if compared with the results of the previous water campaigns of signature collection. This partial reorganization of the action to the local level, however, could stop only in part the conflicts between the central core of the FIMA and its periphery: as a consequence, the network's central office experienced a serious decrease in its resources, and some of the regional and territorial committees abandoned the network.

### **Institutionalization and radicalization in the demobilization process of the water campaigns**

Of course, the tension between national and local strategies in the FIMA emerged in combination with other, less visible cleavages, such as the participation of the different actors to alternative national political projects in a phase of high competition in the Italian left, or the normal rivalry between organizations in large social movement networks. Furthermore, a classical division between tendencies toward institutionalization and tendencies toward radicalization (e.g. Tarrow 1994; della Porta 1995; Santoro & Fitzpatrick 2015) appeared during the demobilization phase that followed the referendum, in part overlapped with the previously presented dichotomy between territories and center of the FIMA.

The referendum victory of 13<sup>th</sup> June 2011 constituted, in many respects, a great success for the FIMA and its allies. The Forum's initiative obtained a strong substantial influence (Giugni 1998; Gamson 1990), reaching part of its goal and interrupting a generalised privatisation of the system. Moreover, the campaign contributed to a major structural change in the Italian broader political spectrum, which accelerated the decline of the government lead by Berlusconi. In the year that followed the vote, the expression "common good" (often degraded and separated from its initial economical meaning) became a sort of buzzword in the Italian political debate. However, the coalition of actors linked with the FIMA slowly entered in a new phase, characterized by a relative demobilization and internal conflict. In particular, the victory opened for the FIMA the possibility of becoming a legitimate interlocutor of the institutions and of the parties on the theme of water. With all probability, the possibility to survive to the demobilisation phase through this possible "acceptance" (Ibid.) was one of the key elements that characterised the newly emerged FIMA conflicts.

The referendum created a need to organise, which I consider important because at the end, from my point of view [...] this organisation remained active. The Italian Forum of Water Movements gave life to a structure that today is still working. Without the existence of this structure as a legacy of the referendum period, with all probability, it would be very difficult that the different institutions, from the commissions to the European Parliament, would call someone to intervene or discuss with them. [...]robably, many territorial committees have seen in this structuration, in this organization, the end of the scope or of the function of the Forum. (IW1)

The author of this quote, a key activist who clearly interprets in a positive way the increased structuration of the FIMA, well describes the emergence of a line of tension that separated two kinds of actor. On one side, the militants willing to take advantage from the victory creating a stable national structure, able to interact in relationship with the institutions. On the other side, the activists that feared a similar transformation, seeing it as connected with risks of centralisation, of professionalization, and of cover support to party-related political initiatives.

As I wrote in the previous sections, the Forum had a "backbone" of well-connected organizations, active on numerous issues at the same time, which aimed at maintaining alive the water issue at the national level through a series of well-defined actions. In particular, the aggregation of previously unconnected spontaneous actors, the interactions with the national institutions, the creation of a small yet well distinguishable center of coordination, and sometimes the extension of the conflict to other issue usually characterized the strategy of this core. At the same time, numerous local and regional actors feared mechanisms of cooptation of the national infrastructure in the party politics, or the creation of what a national activist ironically called "the Great Marquise of the Common Goods" (IW6, i.e. a multi issue national project, able to become an independent political actor). Furthermore, the FIMA included complex and well-developed regional experiences, characterized by different model of internal structuration, participation, and distribution of power. In some cases, and in particular in Puglia, these regional committees followed ideals of deeper level of direct democracy, and of higher power of control given to the assemblies.

The committee of Puglia [is] a regional committee organized in its regional territory in province committees. It created a very interesting working model, in its network structure, based on voluntary

work, *assemblearismo*, shared decisions. Surely, an interesting and important experience, but I doubt that we could have replied – at least I doubt – that we could have replied it at the national scale, where you mainly have to enter in a continuous dialogue with some kind of actors.<sup>25</sup> (IW1)

The consensus mechanism, the decentralization of the action, the weak political nature of the central office, but also the level of personal engagement that the activists in this office demonstrated, permitted to overcome these differences during the first phases of life of the FIMA. However, during the demobilization process, these differences tended to become more relevant and the number of actors requiring a rotation of the charges in the national office or a focus on direct actions increased. In a quite paradoxical way, for some years these increasing internal differences (probably combined with a diffused will to find a compromise) caused a rise in the variety of the forms of action that the Forum adopted. On one hand, for instance, in 2013 the FIMA established a direct link with the parliament supporting the creation of a water intergroup, which included deputies and senators of four political parties (Forum Acqua 2013). On the other hand, the Forum was contemporaneously organizing the campaign of self-reduction of the water bills *My vote should be respected*, a form of locally centered direct action that required a level of engagement that was surely higher than the one of the previous campaigns of signature collection. Two years later, however, the tension between the two strategies reached a higher level, causing in some cases a defection of the local committees that were aiming at maintaining the campaign of self-reduction at the core of the FIMA actions. Reduced in participation and in economic resources, the activity of the Forum (as national network and central office) significantly decreased, creating serious difficulties to the organization of new large-scale national initiatives.

## Conclusions

In this article, I reconstruct the evolution of the campaigns against the privatisation of water in Italy, focusing on the Italian Forum of Water Movements, which is the main political actor that contributed to aggregate at the national level and maintain through time some struggles that were already emerging at the local level. In particular, the paper analyses the phase of demobilisation that followed the two victorious referendums on water held in June 2011. This detailed reconstruction of how the FIMA network loose part of its ability to organise national campaigns, and maintain its internal structure efficient, permits to highlight two main lines of conflict that characterised the demobilisation phase: on one hand, the tension between local and national levels of actions, and on the other hand the classical dichotomy between institutionalisation and radicalisation. The article centres its attention, in particular, on the first of these two lines of opposition, showing that a multi-level difference between local committees and actors with a national project has characterised the Forum since its very first steps.

The analysis presented in this article describes phenomena that we can find in numerous other mobilisations, in particular in the Italian context. It illustrates, in particular, part of the

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<sup>25</sup> The interviewee probably refers to the national institution, the European ones, and the media



difficulties that an old and stable social movement infrastructure encounters when it decides to aggregate and shift on a higher scale numerous single-issue local struggles. Furthermore, the article indicates what I consider as two key themes, which are crucial to understand the contemporaneous Italian social movement milieu. The first of these themes regards the increased resistance – in particular in the Italian committees –against the emergence of well-structured organisations. The second theme, which mirrors the first one, concerns the increasing difficulty that the national social movement actors encounter when they try to aggregate, and sometimes generalise, the numerous and lively Italian local conflicts.

Two additional questions, in particular, seem to emerge from this analysis of the demobilisation process that followed the water referendum, and can inspire further studies. The first question regards the possible causes of two phenomena: on one hand, of the diffused fears of centralisation that emerged, and tend to emerge in numerous other Italian struggles; on the other hand, of the increased need to aggregate, generalise and shift to new scales or issues the Italian local struggles. This last need, in part present in every social movement, seems to have become insistent (and somehow obstructed) in the recent Italian mobilisations. The second question concerns the lack of a generalisation of the water struggle. While the current paper focuses on the issue of scale, and describes the water mobilisation as a negotiated scale shift, it does not treat the attempts – to a large extent failed – that some of the FIMA actors made to move the water struggle to broader themes, or to include it in larger political processes. For instance, during the year that followed the water referendums, a larger issue concerning the common goods seemed to emerge in the media, in traditional politics, and in the social movement milieu. However, the “water people” migrated only to a minor extent to the numerous themes connected with this larger issue. In my opinion, researchers might connect the two presented questions, investigating why in the Italian water mobilisations and in other similar phenomena the level of resistance against centralisation, aggregation, or generalisation of the struggles seems on the rise.

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## **Interviews**

**IW1** – Journalist and militant connected with the Italian water struggles

**IW2** – Media consultant that helped to develop the FIMA strategy during the referendum

**IW3** – Long course politician and activist, key militant in a local committee in Northern Italy

**IW4** – Young lawyer, part of a local committee in Northern Italy

**IW5** – Young local activist

**IW6** – Member of the FIMA central office

**IW7** – Member of the FIMA central office

**IW8** – Local FIMA activist, president of an association and active in numerous other local struggles

**IW9** – Media activist, former member of the FIMA central office

**IW10** – Long course activist, local informal leader of a regional committee of the FIMA

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## **Acronyms**

**FIMA** (sometimes called Forum): Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua | Italian Forum of Water Movements

**FTMA**: Forum Toscano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua | Tuscan Forum of Water Movements

**CICMA**: Comitato Italiano Contratto Mondiale sull'Acqua | Italian Committee for World Water Contract