

GIOVANNI VALOTTI
MARTA BARBIERI
GIORGIO GIACOMELLI
LAVINIA LENZI
LORENZO LUCIANO
FRANCESCO VIDÈ



Beyond Performance Bureaucratization: A European Comparative Analysis

In recent years, planning and performance management in Italian public administration have shifted from procedural compliance toward results and public value. The Integrated Activity and Organization Plan (PIAO) is intended to foster integration and simplification, but also exposes the gap between formal reform and organizational change. Comparative European evidence shows that planning effectiveness depends less on formalization than on selective, coherent, and context-specific use. For Italian municipalities, the managerial priority is to turn the PIAO from a compliance document into a governance infrastructure linking objectives, resources, organization, and decision-making.

PIAO//PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT//ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY//IMPLEMENTATION CAPACITY//LOCAL GOVERNMENTS



GIOVANNI VALOTTI

is a Full Professor of Public Management in the Department of Social and Political Sciences at Bocconi University.

MARTA BARBIERI

is Associate Professor of Practice in Public Management at SDA Bocconi in the Government, Health & Not for Profit (GHNP) Division.

GIORGIO GIACOMELLI

Giorgio Giacomelli is an Associate Professor of Practice in Public Management at SDA Bocconi in the GHNP Division.

LAVINIA LENZI

is a Fellow of Public Management at SDA Bocconi in the GHNP Division.

LORENZO LUCIANO

is a Fellow in Public Management at SDA Bocconi in the GHNP Division, and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Rome Tor Vergata.

FRANCESCO VIDÈ

is Assistant Professor of Practice in Public Management at SDA Bocconi in the GHNP Division.

The Italian public administration (PA) is undergoing one of the most consequential transformations in recent decades. Unlike the reforms inspired by New Public Management, which focused primarily on internal efficiency, cost containment, and improving service delivery processes, the current reform cycle is explicitly oriented toward impacts and the creation of public value (Giacomelli et al., 2022). This shift in perspective is not merely terminological; instead, it profoundly affects how administrations are expected to plan, manage, and evaluate their actions. The National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) has served as a powerful catalyst for this change, linking access to extraordinary resources and the ability of administrations to demonstrate concrete results and tangible benefits for their communities (Galasso, 2022). In this context, planning can no longer be limited to ensuring compliance with regulatory

obligations or organizing internal activities and responsibilities; it must become a roadmap guiding strategic choices and supporting policy implementation over time.

This is the backstory for the Integrated Activity and Organization Plan (PIAO), conceived as a tool to reconstitute a planning system that has become progressively fragmented and stratified over the years (Deidda Gagliardo and Saporito, 2021). The ambition here is not merely to reduce the number of planning documents, but to build a unified framework in which strategy, organization, human resources, performance, transparency, and risk prevention are consistently aligned (Barbieri, 2022). However, this very ambition shines a light on a drawback that the people who work in PAs every day know only too well: the formal adoption of new measures does not automatically guarantee a substantial change in organizational behavior (Turrini et al., 2010; Hinna and Ceschel, 2020). The Italian experience in performance management shows how advanced systems may be implemented on paper, but the information they produce is underutilized in practice. In fact, these data are often employed primarily to fulfill regulatory or reporting obligations rather than to guide strategic decisions, allocate resources, or foster organizational learning processes (Ongaro and Valotti, 2008).

In this sense, the challenge facing the PIAO, and planning reforms more generally, is not the technical quality of the constituent documents as much as the ability of administrations to leverage them as tools to effectively prioritize their tasks. It is precisely this gap—between reform design and concrete implementation—that gives rise to the central question of the research we will be discussing here: What conditions enable planning and performance management systems to become functional governance tools, rather than merely formal compliance mechanisms?

PUBLIC VALUE, ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY, AND IMPLEMENTATION

The underlying theoretical framework of our study

is the public value perspective. Starting with Moore's seminal work (1995), this approach redefines the role of public organizations, shifting the focus from delivering services to achieving collectively relevant outcomes that are democratically legitimized and supported by adequate operational capacity. From this perspective, public action is assessed based not only on what it produces, but on the value it helps generate for the community.

In subsequent years, the literature has clarified that public value is always socially determined (Meynhardt, 2019)—and therefore dynamically defined—and rarely represents the result of a single organization's action. On the contrary, said value increasingly emerges from co-creation processes involving a plurality of public and private actors, each bringing different resources, skills, and interests to the table (O'Flynn, 2007; Bryson et al., 2017; Cepiku et al., 2021). In urban settings, this implies that local governments are operating less often as mere service providers and more often as coordinating actors, tasked with managing complex territorial networks (Sancino and Hudson, 2020).

While public value defines the normative framework of administrative action, a crucial question remains: How do we move from strategic aspirations to concrete results? The literature on public value is less than explicit in clarifying the mechanisms that make such a transition possible. This is where the concepts of administrative capacity and implementation capacity come into play (Andrews and Boyne, 2010; Peters, 2015). Traditionally, the former was associated primarily with the availability of financial and human resources. Over time, this view has expanded to include managerial skills, performance systems, leadership, and political-institutional conditions (Christensen and Gazley, 2008; Hammerschmid et al., 2014; Lee, 2024). However, numerous studies show that these elements are not enough to guarantee productive policy implementation. Ongaro and Valotti (2008) described this phenomenon as an "implementation gap," in other words, when reforms and tools are formally adopted but remain weakly integrated into organizational routines and decision-

making processes.

Following this observation, we analytically distinguish between administrative capacity and implementation capacity. The latter is an organization's concrete ability to activate, in daily practice, systems, tools, and competencies, turning strategic objectives into coordinated and sustained actions over time. This is not limited to whatever resources are available, but instead depends on how they are combined, aligned, and utilized within a specific institutional and organizational context. Therefore, implementation capacity is, by definition, contextualized. Similar rules and tools can produce very different effects depending on administrative traditions (Jugl, 2025), political conditions, organizational culture (Giacomelli et al., 2024), and internal dynamics in agencies. This explains why reforms that are identical, formally speaking, can generate profoundly divergent outcomes in different local settings.

CAPACITIES DO NOT ADD UP—THEY COMBINE

In recent research, one of the most noteworthy contributions to the practice of public management is the move away from an additive view of administrative capacity. In fact, the idea is now widely questioned (Annesi et al., 2025) that an increase in capacity (more resources, more skills, more tools) automatically leads to better results. Evidence shows, in fact, that various dimensions of capacity, i.e. financial, managerial, strategic, collaborative, and organizational, operate as a system of interdependent elements. What matters is not so much the level of each dimension in absolute terms, but whether they are combined in a coherent fashion. If this coherence is lacking, even seemingly abundant capacity can prove ineffective.

For example, strong financial capacity may not produce results if it is not accompanied by strategic prioritization mechanisms that allow resources to be funneled into a few key objectives. Similarly, strong political support may remain untapped if the organization lacks managerial routines that can

transform policy directives into concrete action (Wang et al., 2012). In some cases, excessive levels of managerial control and formalization can even lead to rigidity and delays, stifling adaptability and discouraging the meaningful use of performance information (Andrews and Boyne, 2010; Gascó-Hernández et al., 2022).

To interpret how planning translates into implementation capacity, a recent study proposes examining three interconnected macro-dimensions: people, processes, and plans (George, 2021). This approach allows us to move beyond a purely document-based assessment, viewing planning as an organizational process. The “people” dimension concerns who is involved in formulating the strategy, what roles they play, and how open they are to internal and external contributions. The “processes” dimension examines how planning is structured over time: cycles, integration with budgeting and performance, and feedback and learning mechanisms. Finally, the “plans” dimension analyzes the output of planning as an artifact: clarity of priorities, linkage to resources and timelines, and the ability to guide action.

A comparative analysis of international cases, framed by 3P model described above, shows that the most mature planning systems are not necessarily the most detailed or complex; instead they are the ones in which these three dimensions are aligned and mutually reinforcing.

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN CASES: ONE GOAL, MANY PATHS

The ten European cases we analyzed span five countries with distinct administrative traditions (Jugl, 2025); they clearly demonstrate that there are multiple paths toward effective strategic planning. Indeed, no single reference model emerges, but rather a variety of approaches consistent with their respective institutional and cultural contexts.

Some cities, such as Utrecht and Rotterdam, base their implementation capacity on strong integration between strategic planning, budgeting,

TABLE1. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CASES

CITY	PEOPLE DIMENSION	PROCESSES DIMENSION	PLAN DIMENSION	ADMINISTRATIVE CAPACITY	LEVEL OF INTEGRATION
UTRECHT	Medium: predominantly internal involvement, limited co-creation	Very high: formalized processes, integration between KPIs and budget	Very high: selective, measurable, time-bound priorities	Very strong financial and managerial capabilities; strong strategic capabilities; limited collaborative capabilities	Very high (strong integration of strategy, budget, and performance)
ROTTERDAM	Medium-low: centralized, expert-led model	Very high: risk management, standardized monitoring	High: focused on operational stability	Very strong financial and managerial capabilities; moderate strategic capabilities; weak collaborative capabilities	Very high (financial resilience as an integrating pivot)
MALMÖ	High: strong focus on legitimacy in the eyes of citizens	High: budget as a central tool, periodic reviews	Medium-high: mandate objectives, narrative approach	Strong financial capacity; good strategic capacity; moderate managerial capacity; strong collaborative capacity	High (strategy integrated into the budget, less stringent KPIs)
STOCKHOLM	Medium-low: formal political-administrative roles	Very high: strict annual budget reporting	High: clear macro-objectives, limited operational detail	Very strong financial and managerial capacity; strong strategic capacity; weak collaborative capacity	Very high (consolidated, hierarchical integration)
BILBAO	High: SDGs and participatory tools	Medium-high: accountability based on transparency	Medium: many initiatives, low selectivity	Good strategic and collaborative capacity; moderate managerial and I capacity; solid financial capacity	Medium (coordination more transparency- than system-reliant)
BARCELONA	High: strong political leadership and dialogue	Very high: interactive operational planning and oversight	Very high: multi-level and operational architecture	Very strong strategic, managerial, financial, and collaborative capabilities	Very high (multi-level integration among tools)
MÜNSTER	Very high: participatory future-building processes	Medium-high: intensive, formalized processes	Medium: regulatory based, project-oriented	Strong strategic and collaborative capabilities; moderate managerial capabilities; solid financial capabilities	Medium (integration driven by processes rather than dashboards)
MUNICH	High: institutionalized participation	High: formalized, iterative processes	High: structured, systemic plan	Strong strategic and financial capabilities; moderate managerial capabilities; good collaborative capabilities	High (alignment between strategy, investments, and budget)
BRISTOL	Very high: city-wide partnership model	High: formal performance governance	High: multi-level, mission-oriented plan	Strong strategic, managerial, and collaborative capabilities; moderate financial capacity	High (urban vision linked to organization's performance cycle)
BIRMINGHAM	High: partnership and focus on recovery	High: quarterly monitoring based on KPIs	Medium-high: missions and recovery plan	Strong managerial capacity; strategic and financial capacity under reconstruction; good collaborative capacity	Upper-middle (integration processes improving)

and performance, with a marked emphasis on financial sustainability and results monitoring. Here, managerial discipline and clear reporting mechanisms are key levers for ensuring consistency and continuity in public action. Other cities, such as Malmö and Bilbao, focus more on transparency, citizen-centered approaches, and alignment with shared frameworks of meaning, such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Here, implementation capacity is strengthened primarily by external legitimacy and stakeholder engagement, rather than by particularly dense control systems. Cases such as Barcelona and Bristol demonstrate more integrated configurations, in which political leadership, operational tools, and public accountability infrastructures reinforce one another. Here, planning becomes a coordination platform among different actors, capable of supporting both strategic direction and concrete implementation. Finally, in the German experience, the firmly established institutionalization of planning ensures stability and continuity, but may make communication less clear and documents less accessible. Table 1 summarizes these configurations as a comparative map, not as a ranking of cities.

HIGHS AND LOWS IN THE EXPERIENCE OF ITALIAN MUNICIPALITIES

The experiences in our country display a level of heterogeneity that should always discourage speaking of them “in the singular” (Agasisti and Porcelli, 2023). That being said, the Italian landscape displays a common trend: The considerable formal robustness of planning systems is not always accompanied by a corresponding capacity for their strategic utilization.

The documents produced by local governments are, in fact, often comprehensive and consistent with regulatory requirements; however, these characteristics do not automatically translate into a greater capacity for learning from the contents or guiding public action. This tension between form and actual use emerges clearly from recent empirical

analyses, which show that planning, monitoring, and evaluation systems tend to have a proliferation of objectives and indicators, limited strategic selectivity, and a predominantly compliance-oriented use of performance measures (Fontana, 2024). In many cases, in fact, the objectives contained in municipal plans are numerous and not clearly oriented toward the entity’s actual priorities; the risk here is transforming planning into an exercise in ensuring exhaustive coverage of all activities, rather than a tool for selecting specific tasks and focusing on primary concerns.

The use of indicators and compliance approaches

A particularly critical issue relates to the use of indicators, which is often heavily influenced by individual evaluation and reward mechanisms rather than by the need to improve service quality or foster organizational learning (Spano and Monfardini, 2018; Saporito, 2020). Since individual performance is prioritized, and it ends up steering target setting toward what is easily achievable and demonstrable, at the expense of more complex but strategically relevant dimensions, such as impacts (Fontana, 2024).

In these circumstances, the orientation toward public value tends to remain a formal declaration, one only partially translated into constructive information and decision-making systems. The risk, which has already materialized in previous reform cycles, is that the PIAO will end up reinforcing a compliance-driven approach, instead of representing a shift toward planning as a tool for effective organizational governance. If administrators don’t reflect on how they should be using indicators, the task of integrating documents may simply mean reorganizing pre-existing requirements, without affecting the underlying organizational practices. The challenge is not to add tools, but to rethink how existing ones are used to support for organizational decisions and behaviors.

Limitations of administrative capacity

These strategic and managerial challenges are compounded by structural limitations related to the

administrative and organizational capacity of local authorities, as highlighted in a recent report by the Court of Auditors on the status of implementation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). The document notes that while many entities formally comply with planning and reporting requirements, they exhibit persistent organizational weaknesses: a shortage of qualified technical staff, high turnover, and difficulties in ensuring administrative continuity and overseeing crucial phases such as detailed design, contract awards, and procedural monitoring (Court of Auditors, 2025). These limitations frequently result in misalignments between planning and implementation, with timelines that are not always consistent with the actual progress of projects, delays in updating data, and a predominantly reactive approach to addressing critical issues. Overall, the picture presented by the Court of Auditors is not of an emergency, but of a structural difficulty: the tools exist and are formally sound, but administrators struggle to turn them into levers for learning, integration, and adaptation, especially when implementation complexity is high, as is the case with the PNRR (Court of Auditors, 2025). Under these conditions, planning tends to serve a primarily descriptive and reporting function, further reinforcing a downstream use of the relative tools once operational decisions have already been made.

Input-oriented systems

Another explanatory factor for this dynamic can be found in the strong path dependency of planning systems, historically oriented toward resource-based approaches (in particular, historical current expenditure). In the past, the trajectory of development of the regulatory framework and control systems prioritized the possibility of tracing resources and covering activities, reinforcing a planning approach that moves from available inputs toward defining objectives and indicators. Even where the language of performance and public value has been formally adopted, day-to-day operations continue to be guided by a predominant focus on resources and activities: planning starts from what

needs to be done and what is fundable, rather than from the public value outcomes the PA intends to be achieve (Fontana, 2024). This approach fosters planning rigidity that makes compliance a natural response to existing constraints. Since control, accountability, and evaluation systems continue to reward organizations that demonstrate they have made proper use of inputs and they follow procedures, organizational actors are incentivized to construct plans which are exhaustive and formally flawless, but not necessarily selective or outcome-oriented. In this sense, compliance is not merely an unintended outcome, but the consistent product of a system that minimizes administrative risk by prioritizing formal security over the decision-making risk inherent in truly strategic planning (which, inevitably, entails uncertainty regarding the outcome).

The international experiences analyzed in the previous section suggest that strengthening implementation capacity is often associated with adopting backward planning approaches. In this type of process, planning begins by defining expected outcomes, impacts, and strategic priorities, and then working backward to select actions, allocate resources, and develop monitoring and evaluation systems.

In Italy, however, the transition to backward planning faces major structural obstacles.

On the one hand, regulatory and oversight pressure (heightened in the context of the PNRR) still leads to prioritizing procedural compliance and formal reporting; on the other, the organizational culture of local PAs remains oriented toward input management, partly because administrative and accounting responsibility is concentrated in this area (Fontana, 2024), and is the prevailing topic in the bodies representing local interests (for example, when discussing the budget).

RETHINKING THE PIAO AS A GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORK

The challenge for Italian local governments is not to

TABLE 2. PROSPECTS FOR THE EVOLUTION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT PLANNING MODELS IN ITALY

Key dimension	As-is model	To-be model
Role of planning	Planning as a formal requirement and a tool for assessment; used primarily for reporting purposes, "downstream" of decisions	Planning as a tool for governance and decision-making guidance; used proactively and integrated with management
Selectivity and strategic priorities of a	Proliferation of objectives; low selectivity; difficulty in clarifying true priorities	Few explicit strategic priorities; clear order of priority and explicit trade-offs
program-oriented approach	Input-based approach: objectives derived from available resources and historical activities	Backward planning approach: objectives defined based on expected results and public value, consistent with existing constraints
Objectives and uses of performance management;	Indicators focused on measurability and individual evaluation; emphasis on activities and outputs	Outcome-oriented indicators and decision support; progressive decoupling of goal setting/individual evaluation processes
Integration of planning processes	Parallel and poorly coordinated planning processes (DUP, Budget, PIAO, staff forecasting)	Integrated planning of strategy, budget, and human capital as a unified decision-making framework

mechanically replace an input-based model with an outcome-based one, nor to introduce new planning tools. Rather, it's about gradually reconfiguring practices for using existing systems, so that the PIAO can act as an organizational infrastructure for learning and strategic realignment. This implies progressively transitioning from comprehensiveness to selectivity, from reporting to learning, and from separating planning and management to integrating the two. In other words, the transition moves from formal robustness to strategic usability, from compliance to implementation capacity, from an input-based approach to one inspired by backward planning. This is where local authorities in Italy have the chance to evolve toward models that are more established in international experience which can enhance the planning function within public administrations (Table 2).

The research suggests interpreting the PIAO not as a meta-document or Plan of Plans, but as an organizational governance infrastructure. This means taking a fresh perspective, moving from comprehensiveness to selectivity, from reporting to learning, from separation to integration of planning and management. In this light, the PIAO can become

a space for aligning strategic objectives, available resources, and organizational capabilities, fostering more informed and adaptive decisions over time. The basic premise here is that planning is not a linear exercise, but a continuous process of verification, reassessment, and adjustment.

For those who lead public administrations, therefore, the main message does not concern the formal quality of plans, but rather the ability to create the conditions for these plans to be effectively implemented, taking into account operational constraints and organizational traditions. It is therefore essential to clarify what the real strategic priorities are, identify the relevant decision-making information, and understand how the organization learns from the outcomes of planning.

Working on implementation capacity ultimately means shifting the focus from documents that meet formal reporting requirements to the quality of the organizational practices that are put into action. The quality of management in local governments now depends on how effectively city administrators navigate the tension between strategic intent and the day-to-day use of tools.



MANAGERIAL IMPACT FACTOR

- **Planning and performance systems produce value** only if they guide organizational decisions, priorities, and behaviors, beyond the formal quality of documents.
- **For public managers, the challenge is not to introduce new tools**, but to use existing ones to select a few strategic priorities.
- **The effectiveness of planning** depends on the ability to link priorities and available resources, and to monitor implementation over time.
- **The PIAO can become a governance framework** if it clearly states the trade-offs between objectives, the budget, and organizational capacity.
- **Strengthening implementation capacity** means moving from compliance to the intentional use of planning, transforming strategic aspirations into verifiable, sustainable results.



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