

The global reach of the new Italian associationism

Challenges in the exploratory analysis of the phenomenon

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution and impact of Italian associations abroad in the context of recent emigration trends. Italian migration has diversified in profiles, motivations, and paths since 2008, challenging traditional analysis models. Italian associations, which historically supported emigrant integration and cultural identity preservation, now adapt to new emigrant generations and skilled professionals. Using data from various Italian and international sources, the research highlights the associations' roles in legal, professional, and emotional support, particularly through digital technologies. Case studies from Argentina and China illustrate their critical functions during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings emphasize the associations' importance in maintaining cultural ties and providing practical assistance, underscoring their relevance in a globalized world.

Keywords: transnationalism; diaspora networks; migrant integration; associative structures; cosmopolitan migration

Introduction

In recent decades, Italy has witnessed a significant increase in emigration, reflecting social, cultural and economic transformations in an increasingly complex global context. Recently, academic interest in the analysis of Italian emigration has grown, focusing on the quantitative and qualitative changes of the phenomenon. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), more than six million seven hundred thousand Italian citizens resided abroad on 30 December 2022 (MAECI, 2023: 185).

Extensive field research has been conducted to understand the factors and dynamics influencing Italians' migration decisions, going beyond the traditional 'push and pull' model of analysis and considering both the conditions that limit mobility and the incentives for it (Pugliese, 2018).

The 'new Italian emigration' which has originated from Italy since 2008, differs from previous waves in the variety of migratory profiles, the diversification of motivations and the complexity of individual migration paths. Fully capturing the complexity of

current Italian migration is a major challenge. A crucial aspect that requires further investigation is the evolution of Italian associationism abroad and its organisation in association networks (Moffa, 2014; Pugliese, 2014).

The heterogeneity of the experiences, interests and socio-political complexities of Italian emigration is expressed in the wide range of organisational forms through which the associative life of Italian citizens abroad, Italian-descendants or foreign citizens who have become naturalised Italians and emigrants is combined (Bonifazi, Heins & Tucci, 2021). Exploring its dynamics, both in its structural and institutional aspects and in its vital expressions through ethnographic and in-depth studies, can offer vital insights into the understanding of contemporary Italian migration and the responses of Italians abroad to ongoing geopolitical upheavals.

However, the investigation of Italian associations abroad remains an under-explored field. More in-depth studies in this direction could make a significant contribution to the panorama of emigration studies. The lack of systematic information and poor documentary collection generate a fragmented representation of a phenomenon that, on the contrary, is complex and deeply rooted in Italian history.

In this article, we present an analysis based on the results of a study conducted by the Documentation Centre on New Migrations at the University of Salerno (Ce. Do.M.-UniSA). This study examined data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the General Council of Italians Abroad (CGIE), and the Federation of Italian Associations in the World (FAIM).¹

The contextual framework of associativism

The complex history of the associative networks of Italians abroad bears witness to the persistence of Italian migratory movements over the centuries. These networks, rooted in the massive waves of migration from the 19th century to the present day, involve millions of individuals. In the beginning, the formation of emigrant associations and the creation of networks between Italy and the destination countries were driven by the desire to provide practical and moral support to those embarking on the migratory adventure. The main objective was to facilitate the Italian migrant's integration into the new host community, while preserving his cultural identity. Italian associations abroad, founded both 'by Italians' and 'for Italians', played a crucial role in the fabric of communities scattered around the world, establishing transversal links across national and continental borders. In particular, in the 1960s and 1970s, associations played a fundamental role in keeping alive the link between emigrant communities and Italy, as well as with their communities of origin, both through official institutions and through the sharing of customs and traditions. Even

¹ A more extensive and detailed description of the work performed can be found in Moffa G. 2024

today, there is still a strong link between regional or sub-regional associations and the traditions rooted in specific geographical areas, from which the migratory flow originated. The evolution of migration flows has influenced migrant associations and their networks over time. This adaptation has been driven by changes in the needs of Italian communities abroad and the demands of host institutions and countries. Recently, the presence of new generations of Italian-descendants and young skilled emigrants (Brandi, 2012, 2014; Tomei, 2017) has led to a redefinition of the functions required of associations (Angrisano, Caldarini, Di Gregorio and Moffa [Angrisano et al.], 2022). This change has caused a gradual detachment of some Italians abroad from traditional forms of community participation, prompting associations to renew themselves to meet the new demands. At the same time, there is evidence of a new dynamism among young Italians abroad, characterised by less formal but essential initiatives for the Italian diaspora. These initiatives sometimes take place within the historical associations, but more often in new autonomous associative realities (Caltabiano, 2022). Available research indicates that some organisations have the capacity to move away from conventional patterns and adopt more flexible and adaptable approaches. They integrate into intercultural and multi-ethnic communities in which they operate, transcending the migratory space (Simon, 1979) between the country of origin and destination. The recent emergence of new online aggregation schemes adds value, enabling an effective and simplified response to a wide range of relational and practical needs, traditionally handled by migrants' associations, such as assistance with bureaucratic paperwork, legal advice, training, networking for recreational and professional purposes, social assistance, and psychological support. Spontaneous and informal forms of aggregation through digital technologies enrich and complicate the associative fabric of Italian migrants and Italian-descendants, giving rise to multiple and transnational memberships that cross physical and digital migratory spaces (Moffa and Di Gregorio, 2023). However, due to their changing and multifaceted nature, it is impossible to fully capture and represent these experiences. The identity dynamic of contemporary migrants, who are increasingly immersed in a cosmopolitan and digital context, manifests itself through the creation of networks and ties within the diaspora using digital tools. This fusion of factors, including their geographical mobility, cultural flexibility and technological competence, facilitates the formation of transnational connections and solidarity in increasingly innovative and multifaceted ways. An eloquent example of this new form of associative aggregation can be observed in the organisations of Italian researchers abroad. Their presence in various nations, both in those historically linked to Italian emigration and in emerging ones, and their ability to coordinate in an interconnected manner and across national borders, outline a new paradigm in Italian associationism in the world. It should be underlined that, despite the predominance of virtual interactions, the new landscape of Italian migrants' associations is often structured according to traditional geographical conventions. For instance, in the case of researchers' associations, shared participation in the physical context defined by national or regional borders, combined with the

feeling of Italian belonging, constitutes the founding element of collective identity. These and similar examples highlight the persistence of a strong desire to establish connections based on shared identities, both cultural and geographical, despite the increasing diversity of social interactions and the wide availability of services on digital platforms. Associations, both those aimed at Italians and those formed by them, remain a distinctive element in the contemporary migration landscape. A relevant aspect is the presence of associations also in unconventional locations for Italian emigration, such as Scandinavia, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore and China. A survey conducted by the undersigned highlighted a lively Italian association scene in China, with Shanghai and Hong Kong as cities of particular interest for the establishment of organisations of Italian migrants and expats. These new associations respond to the needs of the growing cosmopolitan community, highlighting the need for a transnational network among compatriots.

Associative networks in Italian emigration: structural and functional aspects

The concept of 'network' is essential to understanding the functioning and evolution of Italian associations abroad. Networks are composed of interconnected nodes, each representing an individual, group, or organization, linked by different types of relationships such as kinship, friendship, professional ties, or shared interests. In the context of Italian emigration, these networks facilitate the exchange of information, resources, and support among members, helping to address the diverse needs of emigrants and their descendants.

The functional aspects of association networks involve the roles and activities of the nodes within the network. These may range from offering direct services and support to members, to advocacy for the rights and interests of Italians abroad, promoting cultural and educational initiatives, and facilitating social and professional integration in host countries. The effectiveness of these functions depends on the network's ability to mobilize resources, coordinate actions, and adapt to changing conditions and members' needs.

Italian association networks have historically facilitated the social and economic integration of emigrants, providing access to employment, housing, education, and health care, while preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of community. The advent of digital technologies has transformed these networks, enabling new forms of connectivity and collaboration across geographical boundaries (Moffa & Di Gregorio, 2023). However, digitalization poses significant challenges: the shift to online communication requires skills and resources that not all associations possess, and the proliferation of online platforms may cause fragmentation and competition among associations, complicating the coordination and representation of the interests of Italians abroad.

The evolution of Italian emigration and the emergence of new association networks require continuous in-depth study. Studying the dynamics of Italian associations abroad can offer valuable insights into migration and integration processes. By examining the challenges faced by these associations, researchers and policymakers can develop effective strategies to support Italian communities abroad and enhance their contributions in host countries and in Italy.

In the current migration context, the motivations and goals of Italian migrants have undergone profound transformations. Although they increasingly involve individuals with low schooling (Pugliese, 2017; 2018; SVIMEZ Report, 2020), their aspirations and life projects differ significantly from those of previous generations. This change is reflected in association dynamics, which now emphasize more the cosmopolitan aspects of the migration phenomenon (Caldarini, Di Gregorio, Moffa, 2022; Moffa, 2022).

Over the last two decades, historical Italian emigration associations have shown a progressive decline both in the number of members and in their ability to involve new generations of Italian emigrants. This phenomenon has contributed to a perception of disaffection towards associationism as an expression of a sense of collective belonging. Spokespersons of historical associations have frequently reported this decline, noting how their activities can be perceived as nostalgic and irrelevant to younger generations. This awareness has generated a sense of urgency for research projects aimed at examining the phenomenon and the challenges of the Italian associationist scene, both in its institutional organizational forms and in the more spontaneous and informal ones.

The contributions of the National Council of Emigration (CNE), the General Council of Italians Abroad (CGIE), and the Forum of Italian Associations in the World (FAIM) have highlighted the emerging issues, underlining the contradiction between the decline of association structures and the recovery of Italian migration flows. The 2014-15 States General of Associations, which led to the creation of FAIM, represented a decisive moment for the promotion of a more horizontal associative model. However, the requests of the States General and the representative bodies did not receive adequate institutional attention, accentuating the perception of distance between Italy and its communities abroad and creating a 'vacuum' in the instruments of assistance and support.

A detailed analysis of the state and perspectives of Italian associationism abroad was conducted by FAIM in the volume *"L'associazionismo dell'emigrazione italiana in transizione"* (2023). This study offers an articulate picture of the needs and dynamics of Italian communities around the world, describing the change between the historical and recent waves of migration.

The future of challenges and opportunities for Italian associations abroad

The analysis of the issues discussed so far reveals a complex panorama of challenges and opportunities for Italian associations abroad, influenced by recent migration flows affecting major global cities (Sassen, 1991). Research indicates that Italian associations abroad face a wide range of needs, from traditional to emerging ones, reflecting constantly evolving dynamics. In this context, association networks play a crucial role in connecting different worlds, transmitting relevant knowledge and values in a cosmopolitan environment.

The surveys conducted in the field highlight several key elements that influence the health of associations. It is important to note that these factors are considered in a differentiated manner, taking into account the specific experiences of each association. Significant inequalities in needs and criticalities emerge between associations active in Europe and those in North America, Latin America, the Arab Emirates, and China. In this regard, the specific cases of Argentina and China are exemplary, offering a detailed representation of the association dynamics and the peculiar needs of the respective communities.

Argentina

Italian associations in Argentina are faced with a diaspora of Italian-Argentines driven by the aspiration to improve their living conditions. Italy represents a coveted destination or a springboard to other European countries such as Spain. Italian citizenship and a passport are essential both as a symbol of belonging and as a practical tool to improve one's personal situation. Italian associations provide legal support, documentary assistance, and guidance in the naturalization process. They focus their efforts on protecting the rights of Italian-Argentine descendants, promoting policies for the recognition of citizenship, and combating the Italian government's indifference on this issue. The right to citizenship is seen as an incentive for mobility and cultural and economic exchanges, consolidating the bond between the Italo-Argentine community and Italy (Moffa and Di Gregorio, 2023).

Their key functions include:

- *Awareness-raising and advocacy:* Associations raise public and institutional awareness of the challenges and rights of Italian-Argentine descendants, promoting more inclusive and accessible policies.
- *Bureaucratic and legal support:* They offer legal advice and practical assistance in acquiring Italian citizenship, helping the community navigate the complex administrative procedures.

- *Creation of support networks:* Facilitate networking among Italian-Argentines by providing an environment to share experiences, information, and useful resources (Moffa and Di Gregorio, 2023).
- *Monitoring:* They closely monitor government policies and practices related to citizenship.
- *Promotion of cultural and historical ties:* Promoting knowledge and appreciation of Italian culture and history among Italian-Argentines, strengthening the emotional and cultural ties with Italy.

People's Republic of China

Italian associations in China face a more recent and cosmopolitan emigration, characterized by skilled professionals and young entrepreneurs. Their activities focus mainly on three areas:

- *Legal and bureaucratic support:* They provide legal assistance to help Italian migrants navigate Chinese bureaucratic complexities (Moffa, 2022).
- *Professional networking:* Promoting networking events and training opportunities to facilitate the professional integration of Italian migrants into the Chinese labor market (Moffa, 2022).
- *Assistance in times of crisis:* During the COVID-19 pandemic, Italian associations in China played a key role in providing emotional and practical support, liaising with local institutions, and supporting the families of isolated Italians (Moffa and Di Gregorio, 2023).

In short, Italian associationism abroad is constantly evolving to face contemporary challenges and respond to the needs of the various Italian communities around the world, demonstrating its crucial importance in an increasingly complex and interconnected global context. Despite the difficulties, association networks play a fundamental role in providing support and stability during periods of crisis and uncertainty (Moffa, 2022). The response of Italian communities in China to the pandemic highlighted the ability of association networks to operate on a transnational scale and adapt to new challenges, offering practical and emotional support (Moffa and Di Gregorio, 2023). Italian associations abroad remain vital actors in the lives of emigrants and their descendants, with their ability to adapt to changing conditions and to address different needs determining their future relevance and impact. Ongoing research and collaboration with these associations are essential to fully understand the complexities of Italian emigration and to promote a more inclusive and supportive environment for Italians abroad.

Italian Associationism abroad: adapting to global changes and local realities

We are facing a new scenario, characterised by multiple and complex factors that influence migration experiences. Migration is now experienced not only as an economic challenge related to work or the search for income, but also as part of a broader life project, which may include the desire for new cultural experiences, educational opportunities, and engagement in social change through active participation in non-governmental organisations.

Studies show that these transformations are reflected in association dynamics, which capture and enhance the more cosmopolitan aspects of the migration phenomenon. This change in the identity and motivations of emigration represents a paradigm shift within Italian diaspora associations abroad. Organizations are no longer just reference points for social assistance and cultural promotion, but become places where people with different origins and backgrounds can meet and exchange ideas. As Caldarini, Di Gregorio, and Moffa (2022: 31) argue, <<not without some difficulty, however, an attitude of “world citizens” also emerges within and outside the established organizations, based on a less identity-based and therefore more cosmopolitan feeling >> (cf. Moffa, 2022).

Drawing on recent studies (Moffa, 2022; Angrisano et al., 2022; Moffa and Di Gregorio, 2023), we can outline the transformations that have affected various associations in different areas, from technology to association policies. This process has led, in many cases, to the creation of:

1. New, more flexible forms of association, adapted to the changing needs of contemporary migration flows.
2. New modes of communication, designed to foster active participation of members regardless of their formal membership in the organisation.
3. Innovative engagement strategies, offering targeted and customised services in line with the specific needs of members.

The needs of Italian associations abroad vary significantly depending on factors such as the length of stay in the host country, professional qualifications, family ties, generational changes, and the level of integration in the local society. The association framework is strongly influenced by the social, economic, and political context of the host countries. Historical studies (Tintori, 2018) have shown that Italian associations often arise in response to specific crises or opportunities, facilitating the aggregation and mobilisation of Italians abroad. Initially formed as mutual aid societies during periods of economic hardship or political persecution, associations have evolved into more complex entities, embracing activities ranging from cultural promotion to social assistance, from professional networking to political lobbying (Moffa and Di Gregorio, 2023).

Despite these positive transformations, associations encounter material difficulties that hinder significant progress. The main challenges can be summarised as follows:

1. **Generational change:** the founders and original members of associations often belong to older generations with deep ties to their Italian roots. Younger generations, on the other hand, may feel less inclined to participate in traditional forms of association. This generational gap can undermine the continuity and relevance of organisations.
2. **Integration of new technologies:** The adoption of the internet and digital platforms has revolutionised the way associations operate and interact with their members. These technologies offer new opportunities for involvement, awareness-raising, and service delivery. However, they also require associations to adapt to new methods of communication and changing member expectations, necessitating new skills and resources not always available in traditional structures (Tirabassi, 2024).
3. **Financial sustainability:** Many Italian associations abroad rely on membership fees, donations, and occasional funding from local or Italian governmental institutions. Securing constant funding can be difficult, and economic crises or changes in public policy can affect the availability of resources. In addition, different legal frameworks in host countries may pose administrative and regulatory obstacles.

The migration policies adopted in recent decades by Italian governments reflect the transformation of Italy from a country of origin to a country of destination for migration flows. This change has led to a decreasing relevance of the emigration phenomenon on the government agenda, accompanied by a worrying inattention to Italian communities abroad and, particularly, to the functions and needs of Italian associations around the world.

Emerging Issues: the evolving role of Italian associations abroad in community and cultural preservation

In conclusion, the results of our study highlight how Italian associations abroad continue to play a fundamental role in preserving Italian culture, providing support to emigrants, and promoting a sense of community and belonging. The field studies reviewed revealed significant differences in the needs and challenges faced by Italian associations in different parts of the world.

The response of the Italian community in China to the pandemic and its serious consequences is an emblematic example of the ability of association networks to activate on a transnational basis and innovate in order to face unprecedented and sudden challenges. In this context, associations provided emotional and practical

support, acting as intermediaries with institutions and filling gaps in support for suddenly isolated Italian citizens and their ‘broken families’ (Moffa, 2022: 118). During the pandemic in China, as elsewhere, associations were an essential point of reference for Italian communities abroad, offering stability and spaces for sharing and connection, both physical and virtual, in a period of severe crisis characterized by fear, isolation, and uncertainty for the future. The exceptional nature of the pandemic situation has underlined the crucial role of association networks in global dynamics, reaffirming their importance in effectively addressing social challenges and providing capillary and concrete support to Italian migrant communities.

A further positive element emerging from the field studies is the strengthening of associative networks in a transnational direction, although this development occurs independently from the institutional channels representing Italian communities abroad. These networks typically develop through forms of digital communication, creating a digital migratory space whose access is mediated by the services offered by commercial technological platforms such as Meta or WeChat (Moffa and Di Gregorio, 2023). Recognizing the value of Italian associations abroad in the context of international relations and supporting this trend with targeted and conscious policies can be an advantage both for Italians abroad and their communities, and for Italy itself. The skills, knowledge, and relational abilities of associations can be a precious resource for the social and economic development of territories and for the well-being of all Italian citizens, acting as catalysts for opportunities and innovative ideas.

The current cognitive panorama shows how Italian emigration associations are in a delicate phase of transition, having to balance the preservation of a heritage of experience, knowledge, and rooted traditions with the need for innovation imposed by new global opportunities and challenges. A topic that deserves particular in-depth study from different analytical perspectives is the lack of involvement of new generations in the historical associations of Italians abroad, which concerns both Italian descendants and young people who have recently emigrated from Italy. On the one hand, the crisis of participation reported by many representatives of historical associations could indicate a greater integration of the new generations in the host societies, reducing the need to turn to ethnic-based organisations to satisfy the needs of sociability and belonging. On the other hand, this crisis of participation stimulates historical associations to innovate in order to maintain their relevance and preserve their cultural, material, knowledge, and relationship heritage.

The proliferation of social pages and groups dedicated to Italian migration, as highlighted by Cevoli and Ricci (2017), highlights a growing demand for individual support and services, increasingly met through spontaneous social networks of Italian migrants. This shift in the approach to seeking support and resources suggests the need for further investigation that considers the multiple contextual realities and

informal and less obvious social networks. The lack of comprehensive data on the size and composition of these associations prevents a comprehensive view of the new emigration associationism.

The analysis of associationism can be a fertile field of investigation, enabling a better understanding of the relational dynamics of Italians abroad and their social, political, and cultural implications at local and transnational levels.

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