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STREAM: 5. Social Work and Social Policy: Control or Empowerment?

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**TITLE:** Implementing social policies: a case study about new needs, discretion and responsibility in social work

**ABSTRACT:** The increasing complexity of people's needs, mainly connected to individualization of biographical experiences and fragmentation of work careers brought about welfare services to attempt the personalization and adaptation of their actions to individual situations (Esping-Andersen, Gallie, Hemerijck, Myles 2002).

These changes lead to modify institutionally structured spaces of discretion and responsibility attributed to social workers: they often have to analyze claimants' requests and personal conditions integrating qualitative and quantitative evaluation tools, construct and delivery interventions with multi-professional competences and a combination of measures and steps, activate supporting networks composed by public and private actors.

Sometimes policies and legislative tools are formally adapted to this new connotation of needs, sometimes their official recognition takes more time. In any case, changing problems modify social workers' tasks and responsibilities. They can 'use' their spaces of discretion to adapt services to emerging daily needs to face and to 'cope' (Lipsky, 1980).

The combination of new and traditional social problems and policies influences services' practices and changes their connotation; at the same time, social workers' ideas, competences and decisions affect policies and services system configuration (Brodkin, 1997).

These interactions can create new strategies of intervention and modify the policy aims and their effects.

A case study conducted in central Italy, in the Municipality of Bologna, analyzes institutionally structured spaces of discretion, social workers' 'use' of decisional autonomy in everyday practices, and finally its impact in the institutional and political responsibility on equity and quality of welfare services.

The study has been conducted using the 'vignettes' technique (Finch, 1987), from the bottom-up perspective. This approach has given the possibility to analyze services and policies requested by claimants' needs and made to contrast poverty and social exclusion.

**KEYWORDS:** street-level bureaucracy, changing needs, social work, discretion

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## 1. Discretion and social work

Observing public policies from a bottom-up perspective, Michael Lipsky (1980) highlights the importance of *street level bureaucrats'* role in their implementation. These are public service workers - e.g. teachers, policemen, judges, social services practitioners - *'who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work'* (Lipsky, 1980, p.3). They have discretion *'in determining the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies'* (*ibidem*, p.13).

The sector of social policies and services is very interesting for the analysis of discretion and the role of *street-level bureaucrats*: social workers are often observed with a special attention. In fact, a relevant part of the studies about this topic concern this policy area and the connected services (e.g. Brodtkin, 2008, 1997; Thorén, 2008; Winter, Skou, Beer, 2008; Ellis, 2007; Carrington, 2005; Riccucci 2005; Evans, Harris, 2004; Meyers, Glaser, MacDonald, 1998).

Their aims can be especially examined as a sort of contradiction: *'On the one hand, service is delivered by people to people, invoking a model of human interaction, caring, and responsibility. On the other hand, service is delivered through a bureaucracy, invoking a model of detachment and equal treatment under conditions of resources limitations and constraints, making care and responsibility conditionals'* (Lipsky, 1980, p.71).

Lipsky establishes that street-level bureaucracy discretion is ineludible and, by observing social services, Brodtkin suggests that it can be considered also 'desiderable' (Brodtkin, 2008, p.317): they are structured in a special balance between a certain degree of flexibility, required to adapt intervention to applicants' requests and needs, rules and bonds in order to protect them from abuse and to guarantee equality and fairness. As a matter of fact the more norms are 'open' to receive variations, the more relevant professional competences and responsibilities are required to manage them, for choices being less oriented by definite indications. Actually constraints, basing and justifying professionals' decisions, are useful too to protect them.

Even with relevant differences among countries (and sectors in the same country), concerning the universality, availability, continuity and accessibility (Barberis, Sabatinelli, Bieri, 2010, p.199), social rights have often a weak status and cannot be legally claimed. The process foreseen by Marshall (1976) for their inclusion in a complete citizenship, after civil and political rights, hasn't been completed in many contexts. Differently by the civil and political rights requiring a passive attitude by institutions called to intervene just in case of conflicts or problems, the social rights are conditioned by their disposition to play an active role in promoting social inclusion, equality and participation and to invest resources in these objectives.

The conditions established by Lipsky to define the broadest degree of discretion look in some way 'extreme' in social policies and services: 1) resources are generally inadequate compared with the request of intervention; 2) the aims to pursue are often ambiguous and not very defined, also for a better adaptation to the various situations that services could have to face; 3) results are difficult to be measured; 4) the informative asymmetries between practitioners and applicants can be relevant, also because these are, in many cases, people in fragile conditions and with reduced negotiation capacity (Lipsky, 1980, pp.27-28).

Furthermore Lipsky (*ibidem*, p.6) underlines the possibility for street-level bureaucrats to exercise a more relevant influence on weaker citizens with reduced abilities to express a clear demand and to conduct a negotiation with professionals.

These conditions make social workers' spaces of discretion often very large and interesting to be analyzed. Drawing from Dworkin (1977), Ham and Hill (1986) and Evans and Harris (2004), discretion can be classified into three types, adapted to social work practices:

1) It can be considered firstly as an area of autonomy in decision-making assigned by laws to professionals involved in delivering services. Decisions are taken *within norms and standards*. In this sense, discretion is a real 'tool' for social work, used to adapt the norms, objectives and general guidelines to specific and concrete situations, whose characterization is never completely predictable from the norm.

2) Secondly, the discretionary decision is taken in 'empty spaces' detectable in rules: professionals are required to interpret regulatory deficiencies, inaccuracies, inconsistencies, overlapping norms or conflicting goals and to fill them, in order to develop practical solutions for incoming requests. In this case, they decide *among standards and norms*. In these sense, discretion becomes essential to make services work.

3) Thirdly, discretion can be individuated in the possibility of violating the rule in order to preclude or permit the applicants to have access to services or to measure which norms are required to be considered to process differently. The omission of information or other actions allowing citizens, despite having title, to take advantage of certain benefits, can be included in this type of discretion. In this case decisions are taken *out of the norms and standards*.

As suggested by Evans and Harris (2004), even in the latter sense, discretion is not to be considered in an essentially negative conception. Its sense must be established case by case, because it can have also the effect to improve norms and services. It is unavoidable and always present in some degree. So that we could talk about discretions rather than discretion.

Several factors shape and influence the managing of spaces of discretion, professional decisions and the concrete configuration of services: a) political and normative factors (Kaiser and Soss, 2000; Meyers, Glaser and MacDonald, 1998; Sholtz, Twombly and Headrick, 1991); b) organizational factors (Lin, 2000; Meyers and Dillon, 1999; Howe, 1991); c) cultural factors, values and perceptions (Ricucci, Marcia, Lurie and Seop Han, 2004; Winter, 2001; Brehm and Gates, 1997); d) contextual factors, external to services (Thorén, 2008; Rothstein and Stolle, 2001; Elster, 1995). All these factors interact among them in a special balance of individual and collective aims, values and influences.

The daily social work can be easily described, with a picture proposed by Lipsky (1980, p. 9): there is a sphere with a street-level bureaucrat in its centre, to which many arrows are addressed; the arrows represent the pressures exerted on him, to be taken into account and to be reconciled through his own decisions (e.g. professional codes, regulatory constraints, limited resources, control mechanisms, pressures from political side, applicants, peers' group).

According by Lipsky, professionals tend to reduce the complexity of their work and limit the stress of constant choices, shaping individual and collective strategies: categorizing requests and applicants and standardizing decisions. The risk is to reduce excessively the flexibility of services and create occasions for abuse. These strategies don't result exclusively, as it sounds for Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats, from a rational approach designed to 'cope', to curb and contain difficulties, but they are also shaped by values, ideas and philosophies on services. These affect actively and proactively the decisions taken by professionals in their daily work (Moore, 1987).

Furthermore, the sector of social policy is facing relevant mutations from both sides of requests and offer of services.

In fact, on the one hand, requests for interventions are becoming more complex and broader because of demographic, social and economic transformations, concerning new population groups, proposing new needs and imposing new challenges to welfare systems (Ranci, 2009).

On the other hand, political and economic reasons, especially connected to sustainability, inspire reforms aimed to reorganization, rationalization of costs, involvement of new public and private actors and

introduction of new philosophies of interventions (like activation, see: Serrano Pascual, 2007; Jenson, 2006).

With the rupture of the virtuous link between the growth of economy and investments in social policies, the welfare systems have begun to be reorganized to achieve a greater efficiency and effectiveness.

At the same time, demands for services and interventions have begun to grow, stemming from rising elderly population, increasing of women' presence in the labour market, which leave some traditional care tasks, changing of family patterns (e.g. for increasing divorces, cohabitations, single parent's families), growing of migration and of labour market flexibility

Furthermore, norms are said as 'viscous': difficultly they can be rapidly adapted to a fast and complex change. Vested rights, interests and lobbies can try to curb policies transformation. Especially when their aim is to reduce investments or reallocate the available resources. In sensitive situations needing politically relevant decisions, the formulation of laws and indications can be inaccurate: this makeshift suspends or freezes social and political conflict and gives the possibility to attribute the responsibility for problems or difficulties to the operative levels, explaining them as errors or shifts of procedures (Evans and Harris, 2004, p.887).

People working at the street-level meet citizens everyday and must give answers to their requests. Even to say 'no', they have to understand and interpret needs, and formulate solutions, considering their normative boundaries. And if rules are not adapted to new needs, they must still carry on the service and decide with the ones they have. Their decisional autonomy, discretion and responsibility, grow up.

Lipsky has dedicated special attention to the resources issue (Lipsky, 1980, pp.29-39), connecting their shortage with growing discretionary in the selection of applicants. Selection criteria to have access to services can be not enough defined and professionals may, and they have to, formulate new solutions to allocate available measures and services.

They risk to be the real politics, taking relevant decisions and defining informal social policies and integration models, built outside of democratic mechanisms for decision-making. They also risk to feel the weight of a too big responsibility, the other 'face' of discretion, and one of the causes of the burn out syndrome (Freudenberger, Richelson, 1980).

In short, at the heart of significant challenges and changes in welfare state, there are professionals working at the intersection between demand and offer of services: technical and political figures who, for various reasons, are concerned with the regulation, planning, design, organization, delivery and evaluation of services and interventions. They have to manage the everyday work and simultaneously to 'absorb' the changes in services and needs, in a complex process that affects learning and practice.

These changes influence conditions, constraints and assumptions that street-level bureaucrats must take into account in their daily work, hence their spaces of autonomy are modified. Their main connotations and bonds have inspired new studies in Europe and in the United States, as reported by Evans and Harris (2004) in a vast literature review.

## **2. The case study: aims and methods**

A case study conducted in a medium sized city (around 400.000 inhabitants) in central Italy, the Municipality of Bologna, has aimed to identify and analyze the 'spaces' of discretion, their formal and informal 'boundaries', how practitioners are using their decisional autonomy in everyday practices, how

responsibility is distributed among different administration levels, how concrete services and their content are influenced by these conditions.

The study was conducted using the 'vignettes' (Finch, 1987) technique, from a bottom-up perspective. This has given the possibility to analyse services and policies to contrast poverty and social exclusion, raising from claimants' needs.

### ***2.1. The research context***

Traditionally, Italian welfare system has been described as residual, familistic, fragmented and categorical (Kazepov, Carbone, 2007; Ranci, 2004; Ferrera, 1996), despite relevant differences among welfare sectors (social security, social assistance, health, education).

Considering social assistance, the NL 328/2000, the national framework law, has tried to introduce a new setting in this sector, just partially realized (Gori, 2010).

The new regulation of social policies for assistance have been described with a sort of oxymoron: 'selective universalism' (Granaglia, 2008; Franzoni, Anconelli, 2003). The same concept highlights the law has been not so innovative in improving the status of social rights in Italy: 'universalism' refers to the applicants, considered and evaluated solely on their needs and means, regardless of any categorical criteria; the 'selectivity' concerns the benefits delivery, established by the 'gravity' of their needs, still subordinated to the availability of resources.

The selectivity preserves an extremely vertical relationship between citizens and institutions, confirming the subordination of the opportunity to take advantage of assistance to political decisions and financial availability. In fact, the law doesn't guarantee mandatory interventions, once needs have been established. It only foresees that policy planning would have defined minimum level services, that have never been established. The policy area remains fragmented and scarcely regulated.

The role of Regions, in fact, is in planning policies, while competences in their organization, concrete regulation, definition of intervention, measures and decisions about delivery are attributed to Municipalities. Whereas the two upper levels of government, the State and Regions, define only general principles and objectives and influence social policies mostly with the definition of the available funds and resources. Hence Municipalities are the most relevant authorities in defining social policies and services for assistance: this sector has a micro-regulative connotation, with very weak national and regional boundaries. A similar situation opens relevant spaces of discretion for local institutions in benefits' delivery and the national framework becomes very fragmented and differentiated.

The considerably local autonomy in this policy area means that local contexts are the ideal dimension to conduct a study on practices in social work: here is where the regulation of social policies and services are mainly decided and where social workers change norms and rules in concrete measures. The bottom up perspective becomes particularly adequate to observe a little regulated policy area.

Municipalities can better adapt policies and services to local needs, they can better integrate public financings with local third sector or profit actors' resources. They can still have difficulties in facing systemic challenges and, considering they have a reduced financing possibility, surely this is not the better dimension to define and guarantee social rights. Hence the policy area remains little regulated, making discretion and operative responsibility growing up. Studying street-level bureaucrats' roles, tasks, decisions, responsibilities and 'spaces' of discretion becomes extremely interesting.

Thus the local regulation is the key legislation for the assistance policies and social services.

The choice of the Municipality of Bologna for the case study gives the possibility to observe a street-level bureaucracy involved in tackling a major transformation of social needs and a relevant reorganization of the services and their aims, made in 2008<sup>1</sup>, supported by decidedly partial politic guidelines, also because of a long crisis in local politics.

In fact, the '*Community profile*' of the Province of Bologna, published in 2009, marks a significant quantitative and qualitative change in social services' demand: requests' for assistance increase because of elder population growth, problematic access to houses, difficulties in keeping jobs and increase of atypical contracts, arrivals of homeless people from various Italian and foreign contexts. Signs of the economic crises were already individuated by this institutional document. A very complex picture of the potential social demand for services emerges, which have been associated with adjustments and changes in local policies.

## **2.2. Methodology and tools**

The research began with a careful literature review and a deep investigation of the legislation and regulatory documents. This analysis is a fundamental step in studying implementation and discretion, because it allows to draw the formal characteristics of organization, practices and all constraints, practitioners must, in some way, take into account in their daily work as well as in their actions and strategies.

In fact, the examination of rules and regulations was aimed to frame the context of study and to reconstruct the 'spaces' of discretion as institutionally structured: what are the formal objectives and priorities of services, how they are organized, how decisional autonomy and responsibilities are distributed, which mechanisms of accountability, oversight and control are activated.

Since the competences on social services, in Italy, as established by Title V of the Constitution and by LN 328/2000, are assigned to the exclusive jurisdiction of regional and local level, most of the scanned documents refer to these institutional levels. Laws, formal rules and acts were supplemented by 'grey' documents, prepared by technical practitioners and teams.

Surely, the complexity of concrete practices cannot be described by formal indications. The rules are just one of the factors affecting them. The study of discretion and its use is fundamental to understand them. Thus the empirical phase, a more 'direct' contact with the studied object, is essential in order to rejoin the research's aims and explore the chosen topics.

Qualitative methods have been often privileged in the study of implementation in a 'bottom-up' perspective (e.g. Ferrazza, 2008; Gains, John, Stoker, 2008; Thorén, 2008; Ellis, 2007; Fargion, 2006; Petter, Byrnes, Choi, Fegan, Miller, 2002; Ellis, Davis, Rummery, 1999; Davis, Ellis, Rummery, 1997), giving the possibility to explore in deep contexts, although the quantitative ones have been experimented too (e.g. Brodtkin, Majmundar, 2008; Gains, John, Stoker, 2008; Winter, Dinensen, May, 2008; May, Winter, 2009; Nielsen, 2006; Riccucci, 2005; Hill, 2003; Mole, 2001; Rothstein, Stolle, 2001). Brodtkin (2008) has codified a specific method to study the topic of discretion in services' practices, combining the organizational and ethnographic techniques and using direct observation in study cases. Direct observation have been often considered the best technique for this topic, consenting researchers to verify informal practices, decision mechanisms, individual or groups' strategies and dynamics.

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<sup>1</sup> The social services' organization is established by the municipal act Pg n. 136480/2008, *Il sistema cittadino integrato degli interventi e servizi sociali. L'organizzazione*; their regulation is established instead by Pg n.184742/2008, *Regolamento generale in materia di servizi sociali*.

Direct observation has also well known limits, individuated and described by scholars, like the difficulty in the systematization and generalizability of results and the relevant influence of researchers on the context as external elements.

A direct observation difficult to realize is connected to the role of 'gate keepers', who preserve the access to the research contexts and informations that organizations or groups don't like to be diffused. This seems particularly true for social services and all those cases where discretion is broader and so is professionals' responsibility. Furthermore, they have to guarantee their applicants' privacy and peace.

Thus the choice was to switch to another research technique ('bottom up') starting from the applicants' requests and needs.

Short descriptions of hypothetical social cases were proposed social workers and they were asked to imagine their pathways in the local services system.

The vignettes were the chosen technique, for a few reasons connected with the research's aims: they give more standardize and comparable information, they are less intrusive tools and reduce in professionals the sense of being 'spied' and evaluated; they can be used in qualitative interviews to go in deep in problems; they give the researcher the possibility to explore practices from a bottom up perspective.

Some precautions consented to improve these devices' potential:

- seven different vignettes tried to propose various cases to be analyzed by the interviewed social workers, noticing differences in practices connected with applicants' characteristics;
- the same vignette was proposed to different social workers, to compare their answers and compose a more realistic picture of effective practices;
- not just social services workers were interviewed, but also their managers and coordinators and professionals working in other organizations that operate closely with them and in daily contact, so they can observe practices and decisions; the governance system was exploited for its informal potential of accountability; being impossible (for institutions' indisponibile) to interview social service applicants, the advocacy role of third sector was very precious to catch their point of view and difficulties in the contact with services.

The vignettes used in the research were not built *ad hoc*. They have been taken from two studies conducted in Europe and Italy from 2005 to 2010: the first one, '*Rescaling social welfare policies in Europe*' is a comparative research conducted in 9 Countries, and coordinated by the *European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research* in Vienna (Kazepov, 2010); the latter, '*The territorial dimension of social policies: actors, processes and impact. Multilevel governance in a comparative European perspective*' was conducted in Italy and coordinated by the University of Urbino 'Carlo Bo' (Kazepov, 2009).

Both of them were aimed to analyze the territorial rescaling of social policies and the configuration of governance systems and both have explored these topics not only in the formal distribution and attribution of competences to different institutional levels, but also from an organizational perspective and from the point of view of practices, considering the process of decision-making from the formulation phase to the delivery of services.

Thus, the narrative part of the vignettes were taken from these researches and the relative questions were readjusted for this study.

The relevant advantage has been to use instruments constructed by European and Italian experts on social policies, already widely 'tested' in national and international contexts, with established significance in shaping differences in practices in social work.

The narratives cover seven potential applicants for services, some information on their conditions, demands offered; the interviewed are invited to report their potential pathways, step by step, into the local services system.

The reported cases in vignettes are about: Mr. A, a dismissed employee in industry; Mrs. B, a divorced woman; Mrs C, a housewife with children; M, a young unemployed; The D a family with three children; Mrs. E, a single mother; Mr. M, an irregular worker.

This is an example of one of the vignettes:

**A.1. Mr. A, a dismissed industrial worker**

*A.1.1. Mr. A's story*

Mr. A is a 40 years old male, who has worked regularly full time for 15 years as an unskilled factory worker, paying all the foreseen insurance-based contributions. The factory where he worked closed down. The production was moved abroad and the ownership (a multinational firm based in another country) decided to close the plant and gradually all employees were dismissed. Consider the following conditions:

- a) Mr. A has some health problems (influencing his work capabilities for a job in his old profession), but not enough to qualify for a disability pension.
- b) Mr. A has no parents alive.
- c) Mr. A lives in a rented apartment and has no private savings.
- d) Mr. A supports a wife (housewife).
- e) They have no children.
- f) There are no prospects for reemployment in the foreseeable future given his present skill level (as for formal education, he has only achieved a high school certificate).

*A.1.2. Variations*

Would the answers given above change considering the following variations:

- A.1.2.1. Mr. A is 58 years old and has paid contributions for 25 years
- A.1.2.2. Mr. A has two children attending compulsory education.
- A.1.2.3. Mr. A has serious alcohol problems
- A.1.2.4. Mr. A has been on unemployment benefit since then.

30 qualitative interviews were conducted, in a face to face modality:

- 10 classic semi-structured interviews were conducted with services' top and medium managers;
- 20 semi-structured interviews, constructed with the technique of 'vignettes', were conducted with social workers and their coordinators in public services and third sector organizations;

Furthermore, 24 interviews were directly taken from the two mentioned researches to improve and enrich the analysis.

The talks were aimed to obtain a reconstruction of the citizens' pathways into the social services. Thus, beyond the different interview devices, the service system was examined in the following aspects: - the formal organization: principles, rules, competences, actors, practices, objectives, priorities; - the services' targets: what are the applicants' characteristics, who has really access and who doesn't, which are the priorities; - the access: evaluation tools and conditions; - the measures: which interventions, timing and modality for delivery; - sanctioning non-compliant behaviour: who decides, which sanctions; - possibilities for complaints; - modalities for evaluation of services, reporting and supervision; - modalities for coordinating different institutions, services and organizations.

After some introductory questions about his role and the organization of affiliation, each professional was usually proposed only one vignette, selected according to his specialization and role, to be analyzed in details. In some meetings, social workers' competences and availability made possible to treat more than one case.

The request was then to try to imagine, step by step, which possibilities and opportunities would have had the case in the local social services system, including private organizations' intervention.

Often, the hypothetical 'cases' offered the social workers the opportunity to introduce real examples of their experiences, enriching the information. They were able to interpret vignettes flexibly, evidencing important

variables that could influence their answers. Furthermore, as reported in other studies conducted with the same technique (Brondani, MacEntee, Bryant, O'Neil, 2008; Barter, Renold, 2000; Hughes, 1998; Finch, 1987), often, they explicitly expressed their favour for this modality of being interviewed: they recognized the proposed case stories as realistic and interesting. The adaptation of the discourses and of the level of conceptualization to their everyday activities seemed definitely to facilitate the collection of information, increasing the value of their practical knowledge, stimulating both the information sharing and confidence in the researcher's work.

Interviews were recorded and successively unregistered to be analyzed. Their average duration was about 50 minutes. Emerging issues and themes were identified and the interviews' contents were categorized in order to better compare and highlight the various points of view, positions and thoughts about the research's topics and aims.

### ***2.3. Analysis and findings***

Coherently with the national framework law and with the regional law (RL 2/2003), local regulation defines a universal social policy system. It doesn't fix targets' categories, but only general criteria for needs' assessment, typologies of services and benefits, economic standards to define users' contributions, guidelines for outsourcing contracting out services. But the possibility to have access to benefits is conditioned by the availability of resources, hence the system becomes, once more, universalistic and selective, leaving open spaces to operative discretion in selecting applicants and creating new, informal, categorization choices. As the actual rhetoric in social policies, the local regulation purposes are oriented to individualization of intervention, autonomy and activation of applicants in terms of personal (and familiar) responsibility and skills. These aims are associated to the valorisation of territorial resources and competences - third sector, private, informal and formal support. No new resources or professionals have been assigned to manage these new tasks. At the opposite, demand is increasing and funding are decreasing, as it is happening also in other contexts . It's interesting to analyze how social workers interpret and realize these new aims and how they conciliate them with scant resources' managing.

In fact, it would be very difficult understanding the actual connotation of services from these formal and so general documents. Their weak definition explains why many 'grey' materials, elaborated in technical teams<sup>2</sup>, try to concretize political decisions, giving social workers more indications for conducting their tasks.

The social research's devices give more possibilities to better understand how services are actually working. Observing them from a bottom up perspective, through vignettes, the empirical research has tried to trace applicants' pathways in services, proceeding step by step: a) access, b) professional assessment, c) individual assistance projects, d) delivery, e) accountability and possibility of complaint.

Obviously, these stages do not occur in reality as linear and consequential; they have been arranged in a logical pattern in order to reduce complexity and to be analyzed, but their combination can be very different.

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<sup>2</sup> The main team is the CORE (*Comitato del Responsabili dei Servizi sociali territoriali*), which brings all the municipal social services coordinators together. Its thematic subgroups are working in this sense.

## a) *The access*

The access to social services in the Municipality of Bologna is managed by 'The Social Desks' (*Sportelli sociali*), located in each City District, as the only 'gateway' to 'Territorial Social Services' (*Servizi Sociali territoriali*), placed in the City Districts too.

Here are received the requests of all citizens, and information and guidance on all social services and private opportunities are offered. Furthermore, these services manage the social assistants' agendas and, considering the applicant's needs and requests, they establish the first contact with them for a professional assessment and the admission to public benefits.

The Social Desks' workers are not social workers, they are administrative professionals with a brief *ad hoc* training to perform information and orientation about social services. In fact, the Municipality has considered unnecessary and too expensive to assign social assistants at these desks (Annicchiarico, Zucchini, Civitella, Pancaldi, 2009). But, to select at least the most appropriate offer, including access to professional social work, a sort of assessment of need has to be performed by these professionals, especially in selecting citizens to send to the professional social service. They have to make a decision considering very vague and general indication.

First of all, the residence. This seems to be an easy criterion to assess, but interviews have revealed that it can be a problem, especially for homeless people and all those people coming in Bologna, like in all urban centers (Mela, 2006; Martinotti, 1993), searching for a work and opportunities. The change of residence, which should be easily activated by any citizen (at least for Italians), may in fact be 'discouraged' in many ways, not only by social services, but also by Registry offices, complicating practices and prolonging the procedures' time. This mechanism acts as a sort of categorization of users. In fact, from 2008, with the entry of the new regulation, the services for homeless people (especially dormitories) have lost a lot of their users and demands and they have, for the first time in many years, empty seats<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the lack of national or regional minimum levels of assistance categorize citizens on the basis of their residence: services and benefits are differently developed and financed in Municipalities and Regions.

The formal indications say that the residence must be exceeded in case of citizens with 'significant links with the territory' (e.g. relatives, friends or associations helping them) and with 'imperative social needs'. These indications are difficult to interpret, especially for workers with weak professional tools, as Social Desks' ones. What's 'imperative social need'? Interviewed people propose different definitions: some of them consider it is health risk, someone else believe it's subsistence (food and accommodation). Thus probably the possibilities to have access to services can be different depending on the professionals' ideas. To be more precise, the Social Desks' workers cannot prevent citizens' contact with social assistants for professional assessment, but they can inhibit it, not providing information about this right or discouraging the demand. It's very difficult to consider their role as administrative, instead they seem to play real social work: they assess 'imperative social need' and 'significant links with the territory' and, basing on their evaluation, they encourage or discourage the passage to social assistants providing (or not providing) information and managing the social assistants' agenda, and they also identify urgencies and activate practices to switch times.

It 's important to establish 'the social link with the territory' too, because it defines which City District has to intervene for homeless people, who usually are a mobile population. The risk is that each service tries to send them to other Districts, to preserve its resources, complicating and delaying the time of intervention and creating discouraging and excluding mechanisms.

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<sup>3</sup> The Municipality is changing the statistics' system and actually it's impossible to have official updated data. Both public professionals and third sector organizations' social workers have signaled this situation while being interviewed.

As already highlighted, Lipsky dedicates a considerable reflection on resources. They are not only considered as benefits to be distributed to applicants, but also as the staff consistency with its professional competences and the available time to make decisions. Scant resources increase discretion and reinforce professionals' strategies to cope the stress given by continuous choices. The staff costs are usually a major expenditure for public institutions. In order to reduce them, they can try to introduce routines and strictly defined standards to speed and control their work and to use less-qualified professional with a lower cost (Folgheraiter, 2007). But where coming to decisions is needed and 'spaces' of discretion cannot be eliminated, being the professionals not directed by a certain technical knowledge and professional tools, the risk is that their decisions are to a greater extent based on perceptions, judgments, beliefs and personal values (Thorén, 2008, p.34).

### *b) The professional assessment*

The Professional Social Service (*Servizio Sociale Professionale*), organized in each City District, is divided into three target areas: adults (18-64 years old people), families and children, elderly<sup>4</sup>.

Here are social assistants: social workers with a long professional training and strong competences in assessment. Their task is to establish the possibility for applicants to have access to social benefits. The professional assessment is primarily conducted measuring the economic status: the availability of income and the condition sheet can be detected by an *ad hoc* index (ISEE, *Indice della situazione economica equivalente*), and through certifications of unemployment, leases, receipts for utilities, etc. However, as pointed out by scholars who deal with poverty by adopting the approach of capabilities (Sen, 1985), the availability of resources does not necessarily ensure the satisfaction of need; in fact, the possibility to convert resources into goods depends on both personal and context conditions.

This 'vision' emerges in professionals' methodology for assessment, where the analysis of economic status, measured by a technical index and 'objective' parameters, is associated with more 'subjective' tools. These tools cannot be standardized and easily measured, considering the applicants' personal circumstances and socio-relational context (e.g. goods' availability, relational resources, psychological and physical conditions), that require a certain degree of discretion given by the impossibility to prevent all the possible variables. Often, the same measured data are interpreted considering qualitative information. The result is a multi-dimensional interpretation of the case, conducted by the professional skills of social work.

The three target areas, adults, families and children and elderly are differently financed<sup>5</sup> and have different tools and traditions (Anconelli, Franzoni, 2003). This organization creates a new categorization in the access to public resources, and the mechanism of 'selective universalism' gives the possibility to receive social benefits, depending on the availability of the resources.

#### *Elderly (over 64 years old people)*

The social services for elderly (over 64 years old) have a long tradition in Emilia-Romagna Region (whose Bologna is the capital), more standardized measures and comparatively more funds. All interviewed professionals immediately underline as the demands by elder people are less problematic to meet. In

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<sup>4</sup> There is an area in each City District, dedicated to Social Desk (seen before).

<sup>5</sup> The Financial Statement 2009, approved on April 26<sup>th</sup> 2010, is available online at the link: <http://www.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/piancont/index.html>

fact, services and benefits are the most structured, guaranteed<sup>6</sup> and more widely available comparably to the other areas. The rules for access are quite defined and codified, and practices are more entrenched since the City Districts have managed this area for several years. Political attention is greater in order to satisfy these electors and their strong advocacy organizations. Private providers have an important role in this area, also because the applicants and their families are called to contribute (considering their means) for the received services. The Social Desks easily send elder applicants to Professional Services because they know they will be probably assisted and social assistants confirm this is a specificity of this area.

#### *Families with minor children*

The response of services for families with minor children' demand is more complex. The obligation to protect children, their health and their development, makes it almost mandatory the transition from the Social Desks to Professional services, for a more comprehensive analysis of the situation. However, the Social Desks' workers tend to inform the citizens in advance about a low probability of receiving any public benefits, excluding the risk of losing home or the availability of primary goods (e.g. food, medicines). Indeed, the imbalance between supply and demand for measures, requires services' activation only on extremely compromised situations. In general, lonely parents (usually mothers) can have easier access to public benefits, as they are considered more disadvantaged and for some measures, like cash benefits, resources are enough just to meet their requests. There's a strong rhetoric in favour of women' activation, but social workers recognize that real possibility to be effective in this aim are very reduced because resources and devices are very insufficient. In fact, this area is not enough financed and benefits are fragmented between local offices and national competences; categorization in receiving them is very consistent and depend on the *bread winners'* conditions. In this area, the third sector (especially catholic) plays a very strong role: not just a subsidiary role, but in a sort of replacement of a very weak and poor public sector<sup>7</sup>.

#### *Adults<sup>8</sup> (18-64 years old people)*

Interviews underline that the most disadvantaged area is that for adults, like in a sort of ranking based on deserve. Resources are very scant for this area and the demand for assistance is changing and increasing because of social changes and work reorganization. These conditions are leading the social assistants to apply not just the formal criteria to select people in need, but to introduce new and informal criteria, to further reduce the number of applicants to which distribute the available resources. The same happens in the other two areas, but it is especially evident in this one, because of the extremely reduced possibilities to accede to the public measures of assistance.

The vignettes highlight a very important difference based on the applicant's age: interviewed believe no support is expected for young people (a respondent would recommend a twenty-three unemployed: 'ask your mother'), while better possibilities are reserved to over-fifty people in similar conditions. They are convinced that difficulties in activation are greater for adults, despite the data on employment in Italy show relevant problems not only for workers at older ages, but also for young people<sup>9</sup>. Finding a first job or transiting from a job to another without any measure of support are very difficult situations, involving more

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<sup>6</sup> The Municipality of Bologna activated even a measure of Minimum income for elder people: <http://informa.comune.bologna.it/iperbole/salute/servizi/12:2571/2400>.

<sup>7</sup> It's the passive subsidiarity defined by Kazepov, 2009 and 2010.

<sup>8</sup> A clarification must be done: there is a specific sector for people with certified handicap and it is delegate to the local health services.

<sup>9</sup> National and regional data provided by the National Institute of Statistics are available on line: [http://noi-italia.istat.it/index.php?id=7&user\\_100ind\\_pi1\[id\\_pagina\]=5](http://noi-italia.istat.it/index.php?id=7&user_100ind_pi1[id_pagina]=5)

often younger age groups. Adult workers have usually redundancy payments (depending on the category they belong) and arrive to social services at the end of this support.

For the Civil Code (art.433 and following), the closest relative are obliged to basic support. For the law the twenty-three and the fifty-eight aged unemployed in vignettes, with the same needs, are in the same situation. While young people are less subject to social blame for their dependency from original families, it is socially less acceptable adults asking their parents or children' support. Thus, the services reproduce and reinforce this bias, by imposing younger people informal barriers to access to public resources.

Although not among the formal criteria for assessment of need, age becomes an element of distinction in the treatment of citizens by the services.

Like for the families and children' area, the third sector plays a very strong role in this one too, supporting and often replacing a public sector scanty provided.

### *Foreign citizens*

A final clarification concerns foreign nationals, from and outside the European Community. Additional criteria are applied for Communitarians in order to obtain the residence, which is the first requirement to have access to public benefits: they must demonstrate their possibility to self-sustenance, hence they are excluded from services. Extra-communitarian citizens are required to have regular presence in the territory, a condition depending on the availability of a work, as set by national legislation. If these conditions are satisfied, foreign citizens have access to the same services provided for Italians. If they are adults, support is very rare. The presence of minor children exposed to hardship and risk attracts institutional responsibility and increases the possibility of intervention on the urgency, rarely with broader aims (integration or activation).

### *Borderline and multidimensional cases*

Sometimes, the 'resistance' of the areas' categorization is tested and shows a certain fragility. The growth of social complexity reveals 'borderline' situations that are currently one of the most evident problems for services. It creates difficulties in the allocation of responsibility for assessment, care, setting of interventions.

There's a special project to assist lonely foreigners under 21 and the possibility, due to ill defined regulation, to include adults over 60 in the elderly area, if their difficulties can be assimilated to this target.

Furthermore, there are some conflicts in institutional competences on multidimensional cases, especially between health and social services (for example, to assist drugs or alcohol abusers, people with light mental disturbs or elders with mental problems). The very consistent risk is to create 'empty' spaces of assistance, where nobody takes care of multi-problematic people, attributing the responsibility to other services.

Although the statutory mandate is for an integration among services, the lack of formally defined operational protocols and established practices, make it consistently depends on the willingness and ability of each individual social workers.

The analysis of the Social Desks' and Professional Services' tasks highlights a combination of formal and informal criteria to define the eligibility and shows, despite a formally universal system, a categorization of applicants due to: citizenship, residence, organizational division in differently regulated and financed areas (based in a deserve ranking?), urgency, age. All that is conditioned by the availability of resources that requires to severely select applicants. In fact, applying the formal indications about recognizing social need without any categorization (universality means this) and the organizational division in differently financed

areas, the demands to meet remain too numerous to be satisfied and social workers have to introduce new criteria to reduce them. But this categorization process creates empty 'spaces' of assistance in the division of institutional competences among offices and services, with the risk to abandon weak citizens to themselves. Thus, sometimes social workers, using their spaces of 'discretion', break this categorization to meet the increasing complexity of social needs and multidimensional cases.

In short, the function of 'filtering' applicants of Social Desks, denied by all the formal documents but not always in the interviews, appears very clear: They can easily influence the possibility to have access to professional services, selecting information or discouraging applicants according to their category and the possibility of each organizational area. If applicants are able to 'overcome' this obstacle, they can, through a competent professional assessment pass this pre-categorization, receive a more 'open' screen conducted with professional social tools and able to better consider the complexity of the individual. It is not possible to highlight a greater probability of access to benefits (after all, this study is not quantitative), but there's a possibility to overrun, at least partially, the division of applicants into categories.

### *c) The PAI, Individual Assistance Project (Progetto Assistenziale Individuale)*

Professional assessments ascertaining the existence of actual needs can give, in general, four outcomes:

- 1) a full taken in care, with the drafting and formal approval of a PAI, establishing aims, provision of services and public (maybe through affiliated organizations) and private resources and fixed time to meet these aims;
- 2) the activation of a temporary PAI for limited interventions, only in case of a real risk for health and survival or pending the acquisition of residence, if the person shows a willingness to start a path of independence (it's a deserving logic, but very rarely applied);
- 3) the opening of a practice of social secretariat, which doesn't provide for the payment of benefits, but try to keep the applicants connected to the social service by giving them information about autonomous third sector organizations' opportunities or other public services, in order to create with them a relationship of entrust and empowerment and to monitor their developments and prevent harder risks;
- 4) Finally, the decisions do not proceed, and exit of applicants from services.

The choice among these possibilities is up to the social assistants. In case they decide to draft a proposal of a PAI, a pathway for formal approval starts.

The PAI proposal is then subjected to a process of examination and approval of the Local Social Services' manager. Practices activated at this stage depend on the importance of public benefits insert in the PAI proposal: for limited and urgent measures, their appropriateness is evaluated under the same social service area, by an internal team and by the service' manager, for more complex interventions, there is a joint assessments by a 'target teams' (adults, elderly and families) constituted by the areas coordinators from each City districts' services and some of their managers. Thereafter, the realization of the PAI is monitored in its definite steps, depending on the foreseen measures and changes that may occur in the applicant's situation.

The choices taken by the social workers before the PAI proposal are not monitored in any formal step. They are taken in private and discretion plays an important role. The successive steps, concerning the PAI approval and delivery, are supervised into teams and approved by managers. Their responsibility is on resources and how they are used. There's not a control on the preceding phase: in the access and selection of applicants.

The municipal regulation specifies that the applicants must be involved in the PAIs' formulation. Commonly, the social contract forms are seen as empowerment devices: they are pacts resulting from a negotiation between the service and the applicant, balancing their roles and establishing a clear relationship in which both undertake to take part in activation pathways (Fargion, 2007). Through the social contract, the intervention is not considered a purely technical matter elaborated by an expert and accepted by the applicant. It is related to a more 'horizontal' negotiation aimed to create a trust relationship in pursuing common aims and in mutual supervision. Individualization, independence and self-determination of citizens are affirmed, acquired as elements to reinforce and exploited to promote pathways to independence. However, the possibility that the PAI takes such a connotation depends by the concrete possibility of negotiation, derives also from the legal constraints, limited budget and time, the roles' definition. It depends on the availability of 'spaces' of discretion the social worker can use in the negotiation. These spaces become 'transparent' and can be, first of all, understood, then accepted or refused by the applicants in the negotiation. Through the contract forms the control on discretion is assigned to citizens.

The study case has shown good possibilities in participation to PAIs' formulation for the elderly area, often played by the applicants' children or other relatives, but very limited for families and adults, conditioned first of all by budget constraints. An exception must be done for the activation measures<sup>10</sup> managed by the social service (*borsa lavoro*) for which the use of written contracts is very diffused. And there's the possibility to negotiate on the contracts' conditions and to chose among the opportunities offered by third sector organizations and (less) by private firms.

In any case, even with limited possibilities of negotiation between social workers and applicants, the PAI is important in making the services' decision 'transparent'. In fact, to be concretely realized it has to be sent to other public offices and experienced organizations responsible for delivery. Even if not formally provided, they can assess its adequacy (measures, time, conditions) and decide to play an advocacy role in favour of the applicant, trying to informally renegotiate the PAI content with the social assistant. The interviewed have shown this is not a rare situation and especially third sector organizations often try to intervene in these situations. It creates a sort of horizontal and informal accountability system, a positive consequence of the governance system activated in the delivery phase.

#### *d) Delivery*

The PAI provides the measures for assistance, finding solutions for interventions projected on the basis of the availability of public and private resources and of the individual needs and requests.

The PAIs' approval and realization is supervised by managers into formal teams, concretely defining their duration and eventual sanctions for not allowed behaviours.

#### *The 'informal recalibration'*

The social service sector was traditionally calibrate on 'extreme' hardship and poverty, while actually an increasing part of the applicants are considered as people with no other problems outside unemployment and eviction. This change in demand is widely observed by all the interviewed and connected to trends

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<sup>10</sup> The job exchange ('borsa lavoro') is not regarded as a tool for job placement, but as a measure of empowerment before the transition to work-services provided by the Province.

even precedent the recent economic crisis<sup>11</sup>. The treatment usually reserved for such situations is the exclusion from public resources. Often these applicants are sent or invited to ask autonomous Third Sector organizations. Sometimes, and increasingly, social assistants try to revisit, reinterpret or exit from the regulation in order to find solutions to cope with the new requests, especially to resolve what they consider urgencies.

For example, the activation measures foreseen by the social service are dedicated and projected for people with social or psychological distress. They give the possibility to have a work, with a very low grant paid by the Municipality, in a protected situation. The social assistants, not having other ways to support unemployed people with economic problems, sometimes try to relieve their situation (especially when they have minor children and they risk to lose their house), at least for some months, giving them this inadequate possibility. It is just an *interim* solution, in the hope of a job placement and to prevent extreme implications.

Job placement is not the measure' aim and it is not the social services' aim. But the provincial and municipal job services cannot meet all the demands and they don't have the possibility to assign grants<sup>12</sup> for activation pathways.

The same problem concerns the calibration of criteria and aims of cash benefits, contributions or housing solutions. The same attempt is made by the social assistants to adapt these old measures to the new applicants, overcoming the services' aims and their rules. And also subtracting resources to their real targets, who have not disappeared.

Thus the informal decisions taken with informal criteria and with informal aims, to informally 'recalibrate' social services, enter into a formal procedures becoming formal choices. The social assistants need to share their individual responsibilities for these decisions within the service (in teams and with managers) because, obviously, there are formal approval processes to be accomplished.

In this case, discretion appears as a real social work tool, used to adapt the norms and tools to particular and urgent situations, interpreting them and making them flexible in order to satisfy not covered needs. But these exceptions are reserved to specific cases, evaluated outside the normal practices and they risk to create inequality of treatment among citizens, even holding the social workers' *bona fide*.

### *Self protection strategies*

In 2008, a local reform introduced a reorganization of social services and a new regulation. Even if it has tried to create a more efficient system, it has not readapted the legal devices and the available resources to meet the increasing demands. Funds have been cut, without clearly defining the criteria to select the applicants, and the foreseen measures have remained the same.

As already told, the not made choices at the political level must be made at the operative level, where they can no longer be postponed, but it implies a transfer of responsibility. And social workers may feel their 'spaces' of discretion excessive. In fact, in case of troubles due to the absence or to the concession of social measures, they are exposed to the protests by complaining citizens, politicians, press or public opinion.

The interviews have highlight that some social workers activate self protection strategies to cope these situations. Sometimes keeping themselves absolutely coherent to the norms, also when they believe it

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<sup>11</sup> The Municipality is implementing a new statistics and informative system and it is impossible to confirm the social workers' unanimous perception looking at very recent data. Both the *Local Social and Health Plan 2009-2011* and the *Community Profile of the Bologna Province 2009* report the same trend.

<sup>12</sup> Obviously, unemployed people belonging to precise categories receive automatically their allowance, at least for a period. But people who had flexible contracts, ex-entrepreneurs, young people searching for their first job and long time unemployed can just ask for social services.

would be opportune to behave differently. Sometimes giving priority to stronger people who are able to contact politicians or press. The new demand comes by less fragile people, compared with the 'traditional' applicants, who are characterized by more complex problems. For social workers it is necessary to activate a sort of creaming strategy, selecting and assisting who can create them problems. Sometimes activating interventions just to avoid scandals on situations that would attract the public opinion bias (e.g. the eviction of a family with little children or the death of homeless).

In this case, they are using their discretion to protect themselves because their responsibility is perceived as too large and exposing them to consistent risks and stress.

### *Aims and means*

The study case highlights resources mainly addressed by social workers to adopt urgency measures. The interviewees agree on the fact they cannot be decisive for the situations to which they are assigned. They are reserved to very seriously compromised situations and to prevent dramatic escalation.

In addition, existing benefits are not included in an organic system: some of them are directly financed by the Municipality, some are foreseen by the State, some are made available by the Third Sector. The risk is overlapping and 'empties' characterizing a fragmented system which hardly can be effective. Out of rhetoric and of regulation formal aims the applicant's autonomy very rarely is the ultimate goal of the PAI and of the social service.

Indeed, an inconsistent mandate with the available means may address the operator to exclude from services less compromised situations, focusing the attention on more serious situations. The real goal is to reserve resources to meet basic needs. A social project tending to a positive autonomy from the services would require a significant investment for a medium-long term. Survival, and not much more, tend to be ensured and the conflict requests, made by abler people, tend to be satisfied. In both cases, the aim is preventing problems for the services and for the professionals' themselves. They act in a sort of emergency perspective.

A discrepancy can be evidenced between their professional mandate and culture, aimed at affecting the best conditions for the applicants and the institutional mission, oriented to efficiency in the use resources and cut costs, even at the expense of effectiveness.

It not only creates a problem in the use of discretion but also a possible discomfort for the social workers caused by the impotence to meet the demands and professional aims.

The discretion shifts from a professional tool, used to adapt norms to specific cases, to a tool for self defence, used to resolve the conflicts and tensions with the applicants whose expectations remain unmet.

Social workers are bound on an impossible task, with inadequate tools, under pressure from various sources and, therefore, exposed at high risk of burnout, because of the personal frustration created by the impossibility to do a proper job with the available means.

### *The outsourcing effect*

Excluded the cash benefits, all the other services are delivered outside the professional social service, by other public and private organizations. The Municipality has a specific sector for public housing, while the work area belongs to the Province and the Local Health Service is an autonomous public subject (*Ausl, Azienda unità sanitaria locale*). The social services should have to work in coordination with all these services, whereas in the public housing sector there are fixed procedures, for the others each social assistance can decide if and how to integrate his decision with them.

For specific social services (e.g. shelters), the PAIs are transmitted to the public corporations for services (*ASPs, Aziende servizi alla persona*). There are three ASPs in Bologna, one for each area: elderly, adults

and families with minor children. They have recently received the role to manage private – profit and no profit - providers.

Subsequently, the access to a 'friendly' environment to receive an adequate service, to build meaningful relationships and motivation for autonomy, to be entrusted and empowered, depends on the responsibility of social workers and professionals mostly outside the public body. Members entities to provide services on behalf of public subjects or in their substitution have multiplied and have taken an increasing role.

These private, profit and no profit, organizations will undoubtedly be carrying their purposes, missions, procedures and operational decisions in the intervention to be reconciled with the public mandatory.

This creates additional steps of responsibilities between the political and the operational levels and the control from a top-down perspective of the implementation process becomes more difficult.

As we saw before, the governance system ensures a horizontal and crossing control among the different entities involved in the realization of the social projects. But the negotiation process already described is conducted among technical professionals. The question is how can political level hold the reins of the implementation process and guarantee its coherence in a so complicated and multilevel system. In fact, in the democratic systems, the final responsibility on policies, on their outputs and outcomes and their efficient and effective functioning, belongs to the political level. Hence, they are formally responsible even for the use of discretion made by the public and private professionals actually working at the realization of the services system.

A long 'chain' of responsibilities divides politics from citizens. The risk is to let a too much complex governance system control itself. A balance between accountability and coordination tools and technical and professional autonomies would be required. But this would need an investment of resources, contrasting with the actual trend of constraint. In fact, the accreditation and accountability system is not complete<sup>13</sup>, and really very embryonic, while the externalization of public tasks, consenting savings in public expenditure, has developed very fast. This enlarges very much the discretion 'spaces' given to social workers, who can be finally considered as the real politics, carrying on negotiations and taking important decisions on the citizens' treatment, with very limited control.

#### *e) Possibility of complaint and accountability*

Some devices finalized to receive the citizens' complaints are formally released by the State and by the Municipality of Bologna. However, the weakness of social rights, whose accessibility is subject to the availability of resources, and the scarce definition of the eligibility criteria, makes it difficult to appeal to the courts and legal aid.

The Municipality also offers the possibility to freely ask the Ombudsman. But, as is clear from the *Annual Report* on his activities 2009<sup>14</sup>, it is not a very known services. During interviews social workers themselves never indicate this possibility for applicants, thus probably they do not give them any information about this possibility.

An association of 'street' lawyers (*Avvocato di strada*<sup>15</sup>) provides advocacy actions and free legal assistance for homeless people. The vignettes highlight that the criteria of residence to be eligible for social benefits and the (already seen) difficulty in acquiring it, are significantly engaging the association.

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<sup>13</sup> The Region is currently working on this matter.

<sup>14</sup> Municipality of Bologna, *Relazione annuale Difensore Civico 2009*, February 2010, on line: <http://www.quartieresavena.bo.it/difensore-civico/relazioni>

<sup>15</sup> The Association has an English version of its website: <http://www.avvocatodistrada.it/indexEN.htm>

Sometimes, the same social workers ask the association to support people with problems with the Public Registry.

The most use devices for complaining consist in addressing the Social Services' superiors levels (coordinators and managers) for a review of the case or even the Mayor's Office. However, the demands and the solutions are set in a particularistic and individual style. The boundary between the patronage and it seems sometimes very weak and these mechanisms fail to be an input for better functioning services.

According to Goodin (2003), the accountability systems can be analyzed through their 'layers' of responsibility. The study case highlights a very complex distribution of responsibility, changing in the pathways' phases in social services. Just in some occasions the accountability system appears structured in layers. Indeed the accountability system is very complex and variable and characterized by formal and informal steps and mechanisms.

In the daily social work, the discretion and responsibility are mainly distributing in a scheme like that proposed by Lipsky, with the street-level bureaucrats in the centre of a sphere where several influences and pressures act on their decisions.

Differently the structure described by Goodin is activated mainly by the control on resources' distribution and when a conflict arises among social workers' decisions.

A relevant hierarchic control concerns resources: their distribution is connected to formal passages in teams and managers' supervision. Whereas a very weak supervision (usually no control at all) is exercised on the exclusion mechanisms acting in the access phase and professional assessment.

When any conflicts arise between citizens and social workers, these are called upon to justify their decisions to higher levels. Thus the pyramid of accountability is rearranged.

As already told, there is also a sort of informal accountability exercised by the third sector organizations engaged in advocacy roles or in delivering social benefits. They are usually involved in the PAIs' realization and they can informally put pressure on social services to change their decisions. This makes their choices transparent, and helps sharing discretion among social workers, third sector referents and applicants.

### **3. The real politics: social workers among new complex needs, discretion and responsibility**

The analysis of the social services system in the case study shows the social workers take relevant decisions, playing a decisive role in determining the inclusion and exclusion from public benefits.

The legislation rhetorically opts for a universal system, but the lack of clarity of the criteria to decide about eligibility, the division of the organizational context into target areas and the scarcity of available resources, acting in a strict selectivity, operate in a re-categorization logic.

Social needs are changing and norms have not been adapted to the new demand of intervention. If the goal of sustainability of public expenditure is a widespread need, it's more difficult to achieve, within political level, an agreement on priorities and on target funds. This may create political and social conflicts and curb the development of clear reforms, with scarcely definite aims and means to achieve them.

Thus the responsibility on relevant decisions and on their consequences is transferred to technical levels. Here the decisions cannot be delegated anymore and an answer must be formulate. If resources are reduced, a selection must be done and if the political level doesn't do it or doesn't do it clearly, social workers will do.

Postponing responsibility suspends the political and social conflict and has two additional advantages: *'First, when an issue blows up in a major way, and it's established that there has been a departure from procedures, blame can be allocated at the street-level. Second, it can be in senior managers' and*

*politicians' interest to leave individual decision about resource allocation to professionals, distancing themselves from the awkward day-to-day consequences of their strategic goals'* (Evans, Harris, 2004, p.887).

This means from the perspective of laws and regulations, the services systems can be not adapted to changing demands, but from the street-level point of view, the social workers must propose new solutions. To do it they use their discretion, interpreting and sometimes violating norms and filling the gaps left in the legislation. The complex managing social service process can be structured with old formal categories, which escape part of the demand, and new categories decided at the technical level. Social workers can try to create a special balance between norms and discretion to resolve emerging new social problems that politics do not face.

But, too broad decisional spaces assigned to social workers or too individualized decisions based on the applicants' needs may create problems of equity and the risk they incur in the citizens' protests. In this case, social workers may feel they are sovra-responsabilized and may use their discretion in the attempt to protect themselves from the risk of conflict with the applicants, and consequently with their superiors, and to dab the urgent situations the press may give attention. If the logic of self-protection becomes dominant, the services' aims will be bended in coping urgencies, losing their original mission and the possibility to be decisive in resolve social problems.

So relevant tasks entrusted social workers raise significant questions about the possibility for politicians to control policies' outputs and outcomes and to guarantee citizens equal treatment. Especially when functions are outsourced and the responsibility is partly transferred in non-public bodies, it becomes more complex to guide and supervise.

Discretion is detectable even in the accountability systems. They can be very complicated and characterized by formal and informal, vertical and horizontal, control, pressures and calls to responsibility.

The characterization of 'spaces' of discretion and the use social workers can make of them can imprint and shape the service system, even more than politicians' choices. They can use it to make services work or work better, but also to modify and fail policies aims. As Lipsky and other scholars highlight, discretion cannot be eliminated, but probably it can be valorised making its use transparent. Professional and practical knowledge can be included in political negotiation, also to contribute to adapt reforms to new needs. Indeed, the use of social contract forms in interventions can make the applicants understand and possibly share social workers decisions. Thus the relationship between them can become more horizontal and empowering and part of the control on the social workers' discretion is transferred to the citizens themselves.

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