Control and Contain: a "Hidden Strategy" where a Common Strategy is Lacking: Perspectives from Italy

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> **Abstract_** *This article examines the configuration of homeless services in Italian metropolitan areas from a neo-institutional perspective based on the results of a number of local focus group studies conducted by fio.PSD, and on initial evidence from national research on homelessness and homeless services. The article highlights how the absence of a strategic common framework to combat homelessness in Italy, at local, regional and national level, has an isomorphic effect on local service systems, such that even without an express policy, local authorities and service providers invariably configure services to allow for the simple check, containment and management of homelessness.*

> **Keywords_** *Services for homeless people, strategies to combat homelessness, control*

Introduction

The international debate on strategies for combating homelessness and housing exclusion, which was started in Europe by FEANTSA, has been ongoing for a number of years (see for example, European Consensus Conference 2011; European Parliament, 2011; European Economic and Social Committee, 2011). In particular, the point has been highlighted that "[t]he most successful strategies display effective governance with strong co-operation between all involved. There is also

a need for thorough information and evaluation (…) but accurate and consistent data on homelessness is still lacking in most Members States. Strategies are generally made more effective with targets" (European Commission, 2010, p.10).

In this respect, the Jury at the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness stressed how these elements "should be monitored and reported upon: clear targets (…); an integrated approach covering all relevant policy fields; proper governance; proper data collection; a strong housing dimension; taking account of changing profiles of the homeless population, and particularly the impact of migration" (European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, 2011, p.24). However, in Italy this recommendation has received very little practical attention to date, although "a plan for tackling extreme poverty and homelessness" was announced as a top priority in the last Italian National Strategic Report on social protection and social inclusion. In addition, for a number of reasons, housing exclusion in Italy is not subject to specific policies, nor is homelessness and housing exclusion taken into consideration by political decision-makers in their portrayal of homelessness – more attention is given to the significant social and relational distress related to homelessness.

Various cultural, financial and methodological factors have undoubtedly contributed to the unwillingness of institutions to implement a strategic programming of homelessness and housing exclusion services. Italy is a country unused to planning its social policies in an accountable and evidence-based manner; social policies have instead always been strongly linked to the family unit and left to the organisational competence of local administrations, in most cases getting less than 50% of their financial requirements from central and regional government. The economic crisis, which since 2009 has significantly affected a country whose public finances were already in a precarious state, has led the current government to undertake repeated and systematic cuts in all areas of social policy, effectively removing the financial support needed for the relevant services to operate in an acceptable manner. This has created a difficult situation with regard to national and local programmes, and in the area of homelessness and housing exclusion, this absence of strategy has been further exacerbated by the almost complete absence of reliable data on homelessness and related services.

Over the years, government institutions have formally adopted the strategies needed to combat homelessness and housing exclusion, for example in the various National Action Plans for Inclusion, and the National Strategic Reports on Social Protection and Social Exclusion, which were implemented over the years within the Open Method of Coordination among European States. All but one proved disappointing; starting in 2008 and concluding in February 2012, fio.PSD, with the Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (the Italian Statistics Agency, ISTAT, 2011), the Director

General for Social Inclusion of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, and Caritas Italiana, conducted research, which provided for the first time a dataset on homelessness and housing exclusion services and homeless people in Italy.

While waiting for the complete dataset, relying on the first evidences of this research, fio.PSD started some qualitative and more focused in-depth analysis to better understand the whole pictures of services against Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Italy.

For practical reasons, primarily due to the limited means available, the focus was only on Italian metropolitan areas, but the interpretation of data was enhanced through focus groups and discussions within the auspices of the fio.PSD and some local policy-makers. The views of people considered to fall within the sphere of homelessness and housing exclusion were collected, and findings from work groups with homeless people that had been held in preparation for Italian participation in the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness in 2010 were taken into consideration.[1]

Background Information

The Italian welfare system has been defined as 'Mediterranean' (Ferrera, 2005; Gal, 2010); that is, while its features approximate the fundamental features of the Corporatist welfare regime devised by Esping Andersen (1990), due to the much greater role given to the family in care-giving (the State has a subsidiary role); the non-universal, fragmentary and largely inefficient nature of social protection devices and their relative public cost; the preponderance of money transfers (mainly male breadwinner oriented) over services; and the individual-client nature of access to social protection, a separate regime type is warranted.

According to ISTAT, around 23.5% of the Italian population is at risk of poverty and social exclusion (a Eurostat summarised indicator) against a European average of 23.1%. All data are characterized by large territorial differences between the centre, north and south of the country; in the south, poverty rates can be up to six or seven times those of the more northerly areas. For example, the rate of relative poverty, which according to the calculation threshold adopted by ISTAT is around 10.8% in Italy overall, is slightly above 4% in Lombardy, Emilia Romagna and Veneto, and rises to 25% in Sicily and 27.5% in Calabria.

Expenditure on social protection, on the other hand, is 25.7% of GDP, in line with the European average, but its distribution is grossly imbalanced with a clear preponderance of pension costs over other components (51% of the total) and a

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[1]   The project, including its methodology, was managed by the author.

negligible, to the point of irrelevance, investment in the direct fight against poverty (0.1%). This 0.1% includes the direct public expenditure for Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (HHE), which, with little more than 400 million euro per year, is a small part of the budget, also further reduced in recent years.

It is clear that policies aimed at reducing homelessness and housing exclusion in Italy are considered as residual and irrelevant in social policy planning, even though the attention paid by the media is certainly greater than that given to other categories of distress and there is good general public awareness of the homelessness issue; the result of this awareness tends, however, to be public participation in charitable deeds rather than in any express acknowledgement of rights in this area.

Housing-related costs are equally invisible at national, regional and local level, being almost totally absent from Italian public balance sheets. In cultural terms, this helps in establishing – in Italy and Mediterranean countries in general – a widespread portrayal of homelessness and housing exclusion as a type of 'fatal adversity', or a misfortune that occurs in the lifetime of a person and his/her family, and in the face of which not much can be done, except to offer temporary relief from the difficulties it can cause.

This situation is very different from countries with a liberal or corporate model, where homelessness and housing exclusion is culturally perceived as being mainly a fault; or from social-democratic countries where homelessness and housing exclusion is seen as a risk against which there must be welfare protection as for any other type of social risk (Pezzana, 2009), and where, in activation or protection terms, policies and social funds for homelessness and housing exclusion exist, are more adequate, and appear to be more effective.

Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Italy: A Brief History and Overview

The Italian legislator officially recognised homelessness and housing exclusion as an area for specific intervention in the field of social-welfare services in October 2000, with Law N. 328 regulating the integrated system of welfare services and intervention in Italy. Art. 28 of this law established the need to adopt specific measures against homelessness and housing exclusion in a temporary but uniform manner throughout the country, and to integrate these with a system of local measures and social welfare services in order to outline the issue of homelessness and housing exclusion in a progressive and structured way.

Constitutional reform in 2001, which was federal in origin, established that all expertise in matters of social intervention should be dealt with only by the regional councils, leaving the head of central Government the sole task of determining the basic level of civil and social entitlements to be guaranteed throughout the national territory (Art. 117(m), Italian Constitution). This reform removes the powers of strategic direction from the central Government, assigning them to the regional systems of service and social intervention, thus depriving Law 328 of its main potential. Some extraordinary allocations were made in the area of homelessness and housing exclusion between 2001 and 2004, but the basic levels of social welfare benefits designed to combat homelessness and housing exclusion were not defined, suggesting that it was not considered a specific priority and was not subject to strategic planning in any of the regional legislation subsequently adopted in Italy.

Nonetheless, welfare services for homeless people do exist and have been in place in Italy since the Middle Ages, most notably those run by religious congregations and municipal administrations – such services were created both for reasons relating to religious and humanistic piety and for the control and protection of public order. A large part of these services, which arose as private charities, were national-ized in 1865, a few years after the creation of the Italian state (1861), but they effectively remained public charity organisations, operating within institutions that were not uniformly distributed and that were outside any public structural plan. It was only during the 1970s, due to pressure from, and the experience of a number of social welfare organisations, that the system was subject to some sort of planning, with the establishment of different types of public professional social services at a territorial level, created to deal with all forms of social distress, including homelessness and housing exclusion.

New private non-profit initiatives have arisen in recent years, flanking public services but rarely coordinating with them, promoted by volunteer associations and the social cooperatives that have been appearing in Italy. The financial crisis of the 80s and 90s, the increase in the complexity of social distress, and the influx into the country of a growing number of migrant workers have progressively led to a situation where public social services are unable to meet demand on their own, which has created two fundamental dynamics in the area of homelessness and housing exclusion. The first is an increase in statutory activity in the field of home-lessness and housing exclusion, with a progressive limitation of activity by public social services in dealing with primary needs – use is mainly made, instead, of the old, large receptive structures that traditionally provided services to homeless people. The second is increasing collaboration between the public sector and various private, non-profit organisations that have established self-financed services for combating poverty and exclusion over the years, very often advocating strongly for social justice.

This has led to increasingly diminished public commitment in the direct management of services and an ever increasing assignment to the non-profit sector of public tasks and operations, for payments that were insufficient *per se* to cover management costs, but which were useful to the private services in allowing them to integrate their own financial resources – the assignment was thus very welcome, even at the cost of a subsequent limitation of their original social criticism mandate. Thus, in the years 1990 to 2000, various formal and informal networks of social welfare services dedicated to homelessness and housing exclusion were set up within a framework of mixed welfare, though services were not always uniform territorially, and were badly coordinated at a supra-local level.

As we have seen, Law 328/2000 tried to rationalise this group of services, make their programming more coherent, and increase their coverage across the country; this was not entirely successful, however, despite the fact that many civil society organisations such as fio.PSD put pressure on the authorities for almost ten years to find suitable definitions of welfare, poverty and social exclusion. Beyond primary levels of welfare, no other strategy has been adopted to date, whether at national level or regionally, and the various measures against homelessness and housing exclusion outlined by the government in the National Reports sent to Brussels within the framework of the Open Method of Coordination are clearly considered inappropriate; such measures include the reduction of property taxes and a food stamp system for poor families with three or more children.

Current Service Provision

Up to the end of 2011, no official public data on homelessness or homeless services were available in Italy. The first dedicated homeless survey was conducted by ISTAT (the national statistic office), fio.PSD, Caritas Italiana and the Welfare Ministry in 2011 (ISTAT 2011). From the available results it is clear that services are heterogeneous and geographically fragmented, with a greater concentration of users in larger metropolitan areas but a continuing imbalance between supply and demand, particularly in terms of inconsistencies between meeting primary needs such as food, hygiene and clothing, and meeting the need for adequate housing solutions. Against this background, the survey reveals a marked presence of assistance, care-taking, guidance and social counselling services, but fails to outline how local service networks deal with human promotion and social inclusion. Clearly, the lack of suitable and accessible facilities cannot provide basic security for those who decide to embark on a social inclusion project.

Since the Italian welfare system does not envisage provisions such as a guaranteed minimum wage or the right to accommodation (nor are there sufficient government housing schemes to meet current needs), the lack of dedicated facilities cannot be remedied via other welfare provisions. Moreover, the surveys shows that there is no strategic approach to the definition of local services, as shown both by the quantitative imbalance among various activities and the poor contribution of public administration to the structuring of local service networks in terms of direct management and financial contributions. The data also shows that just 50% of the dedicated services receive public contributions. This means that Italian public institutions cannot ensure interventions based on state funding and competences, providing evidence of the government's lack of strategic interest in the area.

A Neo-institutional Perspective on a Strategic Issue

The overall data reported above, together with daily experience in service management, led fio.PSD and its 80 member organisations, both state-run and privately owned (together accounting for approximately 70% of total service users), to investigate further the factors and trends actually determining the overall configuration of the system, so as to resume the effective promotion of an evidence-based strategic approach aimed at overcoming homelessness and housing exclusion according to FEANTSA guidelines.

In addition to data, the managers of many fio.PSD member organisations agreed that the scope of services aimed at overcoming homelessness and housing exclusion has weakened over the years. Many providers believe that the increase in demand for services aimed at meeting primary needs, the growing institutional and environmental pressure on the sector, decreased welfare resources, and the weakened social consensus on the use of public finances to fight serious poverty have all contributed to the recent development. The frustrating result is a tendency to privilege the "management" of homelessness and housing exclusion rather than working to overcome it, as evidenced by increasingly homogeneous operational procedures.

Consequently, a model was sought that would be capable of interpreting current processes in order to examine the forces interacting in the sector and how they may impact on the explicit or hidden strategies upon which the structure of the sector is based. An organisational and institutional approach was chosen. In particular, the "institutional paradox of change" devised by Di Maggio and Powell (1983) proved helpful as an interpretative device. The authors noticed that when groups or organisations are structured as a "field", rational players try to change the organisations in which they operate, making them increasingly similar to one another.

This paradox proves true from several perspectives. To begin with, it is useful to understand and explain similarities rather than differences among the organisations operating within any sector, which was the objective of our work. In fact, it is revealed that in the Italian context of homelessness and housing exclusion services, in spite of many differences and fragmentation at macro level in the organisation and effectiveness of "local service networks", at micro level, the service units (which is the level we focused on) present a lot of similarities and a growing rate of homogeneous functioning. The empirical requirements of the model aimed at outlining the organisational field are best suited to the Italian structure of "local service networks" fighting against homelessness and housing exclusion. For the field to exist, the authors require that it be institutionally defined through increased interaction among organisations in the field; the emergence of inter-organisations dominance structures and defined coalition models; and the development – among organisations – of the mutual awareness of being involved in a shared task. As was shown before, what we call "local service networks" for the prevention of homelessness and housing exclusion in Italy have undergone a transition since the 1990s, incorporating all those steps: state bodies, and formal and informal coordination bodies run by the state, started playing a role as aggregators of legitimating inter-organisational coalitions, whereas local and multi-regional associations of organisations started consolidating mutual awareness and collaboration processes.

The concept of institutional similarity introduced by Di Maggio and Powell proves useful to understand how mutual adjustment trends emerge among organisations, even in a relatively uncompetitive sector, which is characterized by free demand, non-profit and largely self-funded organisations lacking an explicit shared strategic commitment. Thus, the services surveyed by ISTAT in 12 metropolitan areas were considered not according to their functional objectives but their prevailing strategic intentions. The latter were derived from both the nature of the service and the initial mission of home organisations, as reported in institutional presentations and by managers interviewed.

The 32 functional macro-types included in the ISTAT research were re-classified into five strategic clusters as follows:

- *Services for the management of homeless social "emergency" in the short term (EST)*; this cluster includes so-called low-threshold services which envisage temporary stays with low levels of psycho-social and educational support, such as services to meet primary needs, street units, emergency night shelters, dormitories and a significant number of day shelters.

- *Services for the management of homeless social "emergency" in the medium-to-long term (ELT);* this cluster includes services characterized by temporary care-taking connected to primary needs, which envisage, however, a higher level

of relational intensity and longer accommodation time than the aforementioned cluster, and those receiving assistance, if "compliant" with the requirements of the local service network, are more likely to benefit from concrete access to a social inclusion process. Those services include semi-residential communities and parts of residential communities, smaller canteens and those with indirect access mediated by an operator, daytime centres equipped with laboratories or structured activities, information and guidance services managed by professional staff trained to propose access to customised inclusion projects.

• *Services for the social accompaniment of homeless people in the short term (AST);* this cluster includes many social counselling and assistance services, and is characterized by the drive to provide concrete guidance and support in accessing local services more broadly, although services in this cluster lack their own resources and act, rather, as mediators in supporting access to other services. This is the case in many counselling centres and assistance structures managed by volunteers, which are often connected to centres catering for primary care needs as well as social offices in many local administrations not specifically engaged in homelessness and housing exclusion services.

• *Services for the social accompaniment and promotion of homeless people in the medium-to-long term (ALT);* this cluster includes services envisaging longer stays connected to the implementation of a structured approach to social inclusion professionally supported by local operators. They include the majority of residential communities, protected homes and self-managed homes, structured and professional social care-taking and social assistance, job and therapeutic structured services.

• *Services for the enforcement of homeless people's basic rights and for the correct assessment of their situation (BRA);* this category includes services exclusively or mainly dedicated to helping homeless people recover their civil rights and exercise them on a permanent basis.

Like all classifications, these are ideal types and there is no assumption that all services will fit perfectly within any particular cluster; it is likely that it will need to be developed and improved in the future, as more data become available.

With the assistance of managers in public and private services, the forces operating in the organisation of homelessness and housing exclusion services were analysed and classified, according to the proposal made by Powell and Di Maggio, as *prescriptive forces, mimetic forces and compulsory forces*, in an effort to reconstruct institutional isomorphism. Forces leading to *prescriptive isomorphism* were considered, including organisational change taking place as a result of cultural pressure from the actions of other organisations and/or the external environment,

including political and social institutions. The forces leading to *mimetic isomorphism* included all changes deriving from the imitation of other organisational models, and change occurring when current organisational technologies are not sufficiently clear, objectives are ambiguous, and symbolical uncertainties are generated by the environment (all particularly apparent in the evolution of this sector in Italy, especially in the 1990s and 2000s). The forces leading to *normative isomorphism* included all the often contradictory pressures faced by homelessness and housing exclusion services as they grew more aware that their tasks were being delegated by the public administration, with the ensuing need, in spite of poor resources, to strengthen the professional standing of services and operators, quality and accountability, and managerial efficiency. The final stage envisaged the combination of both processes and was aimed at understanding the development of local homelessness and housing exclusion service centres' strategic approaches over the last number of years as a result of the interaction of such forces.

Findings

Although both types do not overlap directly, the new classification of services according to the strategic and intentional scheme proposed here, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, led to the following distribution of services, relatively different from the functional one presented in the ISTAT survey:

Table 1: New classification according to the strategic objectives of the HHE services surveyed by ISTAT in Italy.

	Types of services according to their strategic and functional objectives				
Municipality	**EST**	**ELT**	**AST**	**ALT**	**BRA**
Bari	14	5	2	0	1
Bologna	34	11	8	16	6
Catania	31	13	13	14	6
Firenze	31	20	12	28	9
Genova	42	17	8	43	4
Milano	86	69	27	109	17
Napoli	32	18	1	18	5
Palermo	32	10	0	9	2
Roma	94	22	12	38	3
Torino	28	10	1	18	3
Venezia	27	9	6	15	3
Verona	19	3	0	11	0
Total	**470**	**207**	**90**	**319**	**59**

Source: Revision of ISTAT 2011

Table 2: Macro-functional aggregate of Italian HHE services in ISTAT 2011

Municipality	Night shelters	Primary needs	Daytime accommodation	Social counselling	Care-taking
Bari	2	13	1	3	4
Bologna	15	33	5	15	6
Catania	6	25	8	14	24
Firenze	22	33	4	24	17
Genova	18	40	9	21	25
Milano	42	78	21	70	100
Napoli	9	28	1	16	20
Palermo	4	24	3	12	12
Roma	27	66	6	53	19
Torino	20	19	6	6	8
Venezia	5	26	4	15	11
Verona	8	14	2	4	5
Total	**178**	**399**	**70**	**253**	**251**

Source: ISTAT 2011

The micro-data which would allow attributing the users' access of individual sets included in the new classification are still unavailable, but it may be presumed that their distribution would reflect that of the functional classification, with the majority of users accessing EST and ELT services and much fewer using AST and ALT services. In contrast, the distribution among BRA services would probably differ, for example in the case of those used where legal, bureaucratic or judicial needs exist, both by users participating in social inclusion projects and users who simply benefit from primary need services. The most striking figure is related to social counselling and assistance, and caretaking services – these are mostly grouped among ALT and ELT services, where they account for over 70% of the total, instead, as one might expect, of more "hard services", such as housing or employment support, making up the bulk of services.

The unequal and fragmented distribution of the various strategic service types among the various regions of Italy is confirmed, and there appears to be greater readiness to structure ALT services and local systems in a more balanced way in northern cities. An empirical survey showed that in the cities of southern Italy, local service networks have been set up more recently, and most EST and ELT services have been opened recently. While data were being analysed, the isomorphic forces being deployed were also identified. This required the analysis of a number of items, which may be summarised as follows:

Table 3: Forces operating in the HHE inter-organisational field in Italy

Coercive Forces	Mimetic Forces	Normative Forces
Public procurement strategic planning of HHE service procedures and terms / prevalence of formal over substantial criteria	Lack of shared definitions and representations of HHE also among services	Progressive formalisation of the skills of social operators
Networking approaches among organisations and role of the state in local service coordination	Difficulties in assessing the results of interventions on HHE in terms of social inclusion / mere quantitative measurement of output	Cultural approach to public procurement
Media representation of HHE services as positive services if they are "charities" addressing primary needs	Markedly relational and subjective nature of the intervention / difficulties in checking operators	The technical assessment procedures of the quality of services are mainly based on formal output requirements rather than on outcomes consistent with social inclusion
Security pressure from the external environment on HHE	Difficulties in achieving a standard identification of the causes of individual HHE	Professional associations among organisations
Insufficient funding to support adequate operational budgets for complex actions against HHE /marginalisation of the sector	Uncertainty deriving from the lack of a stable system of measures comparing HHE services (basic assistance levels – minimum wage – claiming the right to a home)	Multi-dimensional, integrated and complex approach to HHE
Immigration laws forcing most migrants not immediately working with a permanent contract to move to HHE	Lack of a shared culture on the strategic planning of services among the organisations operating in the sector	Incidence of a culture based on assistance rather than promotion for many services, particularly on a voluntary basis
Continuing widespread representation in public opinion and by decision makers of HHE as "fault" or "choice" and public order issue.	Pressures deriving from the economic and financial crisis and ensuing reduction of the innovation capability/possibility of organisations	
Difficulties in obtaining private funds from donors for services not leading to immediate tangible results (canteens, dormitories, etc.)	Main focus on the local situation and poor European "vocation" of local service networks	
Difficulties in claiming the right to a dignified existence also for the "outcast" in a social and economic system based on capitalism and laissez-faire		

Source: fio.PSD 2012

As shown above, from the viewpoint of coercive forces, the Italian situation seems to be particularly affected by cultural aspects, such as the institutional representation of homelessness and housing exclusion. Also from the viewpoint of mimetic processes, cultural aspects and the lack of precise regulatory instruments and definitions relating to homelessness and housing exclusion are the main sources of uncertainty, ambiguity and bewilderment, i.e. one of the main reasons – along with the pressure resulting from the economic and financial crisis – that leading public and private organisations consider existing operational models as their main points of reference. Meaningfully, the majority of Italian organisations, with a few notable exceptions, focus almost exclusively on local or neighbouring contexts, without expanding the range of their "mimetic inspiration" to wider European contexts. Such parochial attitudes are also present when regulatory pressure is considered, since the growing professionalization of social work dealing with homelessness and housing exclusion, and the increasing bureaucratic nature of public procurement processes and accountability, are not counterbalanced by an equally great ability on the part of organisations to show their stakeholders the real needs of such operational approaches, given that they are not, themselves, fully convinced of their strategies.

In this context, the lack of an evidence-based strategic planning culture within local service networks in Italy seems to have a significant and transversal impact on how organisations tackle changes, both inside the organisations themselves and at network level. Although local territorial and cultural differences hinder the acceptance of different experiences within highly comparable approaches, the organisational changes underway seem to reveal at least three different trends, of which one plays a secondary role. They are described below.

1) EST ➔ BRA/AST ➔ ALT

A large share of traditional organisations that have been operating for over 40 years are faith-based and focussed on the supply of services to meet primary needs, although they were originally based on assistance and charity. Over the last number of years, thanks to their inclusion in the formal and informal networks of local organisations, a process seems to have begun leading to professionalized interventions and greater guidance in inclusive and promotional terms. This does not mean that such organisations have abandoned their traditional operations, nor have they relinquished volunteer work. Rather, it means that many have experienced a strengthened professional and specialist component, and have taken on social inclusion as an element of their core mission, starting to offer services that are more complex and assistance-intensive, and envisaging local integration. Of course there are exceptions, but it is not by chance that recently developed BRA and ALT services are among such organisations.

Despite this trend, operators have noticed over the last 2-3 years that those organi-sations have resumed focussing on primary needs, clearly still perceived as their core function by the external environment. In this respect, recently activated BRA services may be understood as signalling the need for new and specific advocacy actions and for confirming the right to social inclusion for homeless people, something that cannot be effectively exercised through the existing social and assistance processes

2) BRA ➔ ALT ➔ EST/ELT

A different trend – one which appears on the surface to be of an opposite nature – is acknowledged by many organisations arising from social movements after the 1970s and with marked advocacy and promotional characteristics. These organisa-tions have mainly started small-scale services with strong relational, cultural and planning intensity and are deeply involved in local networks, which they have often promoted. Since the very beginning, their core business has been in advocacy-care and over the last number of years, with the growing demands of homelessness and the external environment, they seem in most cases to have expanded to include services meeting primary needs, as well as emergency night shelters, street units and low-threshold professional activities. In Italy, this is undoubtedly connected to the lack of universal welfare mechanisms capable of meeting primary needs, for example a minimum wage or sufficient government housing schemes; this imposes stronger demand for survival on operators in this sector. However, it should be noted that this kind of organisation, rather than focussing its attention on new advocacy objectives, has largely opted for strengthening interventions aimed at meeting needs.

In the final analysis, this trend seems to be complementary to, rather than opposing the previous trend. Pragmatically, the final result is the same, leading to increased resources devoted to emergency care and the containment of emergency.

3) BRA/EST ➔ AST

This trend is less common than the other two and seems to have developed among the few homelessness and housing exclusion services still directly managed by the state. Those services were initially focussed on two not always consistent direc-tions: meeting needs through large traditional structures, and the enforcement of rights through professional social services. Today, they seem to be more integrated. Their integration is marked by a qualitative improvement of services, but they seem less capable of responding from a quantitative viewpoint and in terms of duration, thus leading to an increase in the share of users approaching other networks with the resources to meet their needs. The financial crisis in the public sector and the high cost of direct public management have had a significant impact in this respect.

Consequences of the Lack of a Strategic Approach

None of those participating in this research had ever been involved in a strategic planning action organized by local homelessness and housing exclusion services as per the proposals made in this paper, nor had they heard of such an approach being taken in any of the 12 cities in question or their respective regions. At national level, the lack of this kind of strategic process is well known. The participants declared that they had only ever been involved in elementary attempts at coordinating different services, with this having limited repercussions for the choices of their respective networks – choices were mainly determined by the growing needs of users and the changes in available local resources, rather than by an intentional strategy aimed at tackling homelessness and housing exclusion at the local level.

It may be concluded that there is a significant correlation between the analysis and trends above, and the lack of an intentional strategy for planning local homelessness and housing exclusion service networks. Certainly, an intentional, planned strategy based on the criteria illustrated in this paper would not have led to an isomorphic reorganisation of the services according to the two extremes illustrated above, unless it involved the deliberate relinquishment of a focus on social inclusion in favour of meeting and containing the primary needs of homeless people. If the plan were simply to focus on management and control, it would be difficult to explain why so many resources have been devoted to care-taking and social assistance. In contrast, provided that social promotion and inclusion are the final objectives, the clear prevalence of structures to meet primary needs leads one to think that achieving real social inclusion approaches, accessible for all, would be difficult with such a configuration. The great number of facilities where services are being supplied, including protected homes (the only locations which may be classified as actual housing resources) account for only 5% of the facilities and 0.5% of users, which also means that in addition to influencing the inter-organisational change in this sector, the availability of existing facilities and human resources has played a major role in determining the conservative set-up of organisations.

The absence of innovation in how individual services have been conceived, designed and managed in Italy over the last 10 years is further evidence of the tacit isomorphic adjustment of the system to functions aimed at controlling and containing homelessness and housing exclusion.

Over the last number of year it seems that some sort of unintentional "hidden strategy" has been implemented in Italy to control and contain homelessness and housing exclusion. A "hidden strategy" here means a real strategy made by real actors (often hidden themselves), but outside of a declared and accountable framework. A hidden strategy relies more upon conscious omissions than upon particular acts or a lack of resources; stereotyped discourses and the inertial power

of traditional practises are the main leverages used by its strategists to pursue their goals. By considering the homelessness and housing exclusion field in the light of these goals, the isomorphic effect among service units becomes evident. One of the most obvious results of such a hidden strategy was the weakening of services promoting assistance, care-taking and support from the inside and by preventing services from providing structured responses.

Conclusion

In the absence of an effective universal welfare system, in a context where specific intentional and shared strategies are not implemented, the local and national inter-organisational field of homelessness and housing exclusion services cannot produce effective solutions. It is isomorphically limited, instead, to a homelessness and housing exclusion management function at local level, merely aimed at controlling and containing the issue of homelessness by meeting primary needs at a socially acceptable level. This outcome is not only ineffective in terms of the promotional objectives declared by the organisations in this sector, but also with reference to the objectives of mere control and containment. A vicious circle emerges, in which the access of homeless persons to emergency services is not subject to substantial preventive mechanisms, the possibility of moving away from assistance services is very limited, and the total expenditure needed to deal with the emergency is likely to grow. If increased expenditure is not available, the only remaining option would be to stop meeting the needs of an increasing share of the population, with all the social and political consequences that are implied by such an 'exclusion within exclusion.'

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