

The Dark Side of the Moon. Generative Mechanisms and Perverse Effects in the Implementation of Italian Poverty Reduction Policies

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Abstract

In *recent* years, also due to the economic crisis, the fight against poverty has finally entered the Italian political agenda. Several measures, at first experimental and then extended in a structural manner to the whole country followed one another in a short period of time, generating at the same time expectations and 'bottlenecks'. The social services system has been and will continue to be a key player in this process. Our contribution, based on qualitative research work developed over the last few years, aims to develop an analysis of the implementation of three measures using the 'street-level bureaucracy' approach. The focus of the analysis is to identify the 'double-face' of social workers: as agents of change and as passive recipients, coping with the constant changes actuated by policy makers.

Key words: *minimum income, implementation, street level workers.*

Introduction

Over the last few years, from 2013 to 2019, a series of reforms to combat poverty have been implemented by the Italian government. The first pilot project, the 'New Social Card' (CAS) was implemented in the major metropolitan areas. The second, 'Support for Active Inclusion' (SIA) was implemented at a national level and was followed by another measure called 'Inclusion Income' (REI). Most recently, in March 2019, another

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measure has been launched that has replaced 'Inclusion income', called 'Citizenship Income' (RdC). Together with the introduction of national measures, many Italian regions have begun to implement their own measures to combat poverty, measures that are often complementary (or compensatory?) with respect to national ones⁴.

Our contribution aims to develop an analysis of the implementation of the first three measures using the 'street-level bureaucracy' approach. The focus of the analysis is to identify the 'double-face' of social workers: as agents of change and as passive recipients, coping with the constant changes actuated by lawmakers. The space for change will therefore be institutional, organizational and professional (Hjørne et al. 2010; Klemmer et al. 2019).

In this constantly changing scenario, it is worth asking the question of whether and how social services have been able to adjust locally to these continuous modifications and if they have been able to deal with the increasingly heterogeneous welfare recipients.

As a matter of facts, a fundamental role in the fight against poverty has been progressively re-assigned to the social services system, putting somehow back at the center of political attention social policies after years of cuts. Social services are supposed to make a considerable effort to act as a reference point for an integrated network of services, involving employment services, schools, health care and non-profit.

Our analysis is configured as a second level analysis, which seeks to identify common dynamics in the implementation of the different measures against poverty, collecting and systematizing different research works we have conducted over the past few years. Research works were carried out, mainly, through in-depth interviews and focus groups: in the first case, during the pilot intervention, the research activity covered 11 metropolitan areas, involving about 90 social workers, educators, third sector operators and employment services employees; in the second experience, regarding the active inclusion support, a regional and urban context perspective was used, focusing on the welfare system of three Italian regions and on that of the respective regional capitals; finally, an exploratory research was carried out during the Inclusion income implementation in a specific Italian social district.

Many questions are then raised, with the intention of stimulating a reflection for policy and future research, being aware of a general lack of evaluation work and official data (especially at local level).

The outline of this conference paper is as follows: the first section provides an overview on the development of the policy context regarding policies to combat poverty between evolution and stagnation; the second section describes the theoretical framework; the third section proposes a comparison between the different measures with respect to certain domains (conditionality, generosity and governance); in the end, we focus

⁴ To date, at least ten Regions out of twenty have rolled out a regional policy to combat/fight poverty.

on perverse effects and generative mechanisms in the implementation of such measures and provide some recommendations for policy and for evaluation research.

1. Italian reduction poverty policies: evolution or stagnation?

If we look at some characteristics of the measures to combat poverty experimented in the last 20 years in Italy, we can underline some aspects related to welfare and reduction poverty policy, such as dualism, control, means testing, conditionality and the paradigms of these policies.

The specific configuration of the Italian welfare system and assistance policies to combat poverty has been focused on categorization and has led to the fragmentation of welfare and poverty reduction policies (Kazepov and Barberis, 2013).

The mixing of occupational and family welfare has interacted with important forms of differentiation. On the one hand we have categories and groups of workers with access to benefits. On the other we have the territorial differences that have been consolidated structurally, both in terms of quality and social protection coverage. The most obvious outcomes of this process have been the consolidation of high institutional fragmentation and coordination difficulties between the different actors involved in the planning and implementation. This is reflected in the fragmentation of social-welfare practices and it is an important aspect in the analysis of welfare policies and local implementation (Fargion, 1997).

In Italy, we see an historical dualism in social assistance between the state and local levels. A specific element of the "decentralization of the Italian model" is the role of the transfers of implementation to the regional and local level (the role of transfers is provided from the state level). Territorial fragmentation at the micro level appears more evident in the policies, such as the fight against poverty, traditionally linked to municipal size, however with scarce and/or unstable financing and frequently the delegation of implementation to the private social sector (Kazepov, 2009).

In the absence of one national policy design to reduce poverty, the Italian welfare system is dualistic and categorical. In other words, it is made up of beneficiaries with insurance coverage called "the insiders" and those that are little or not at all protected, "the outsiders" (Saraceno, 2013). Territorial fragmentation and the categorization with stringent criteria for the beneficiaries, which has long characterized the Italian welfare system, follow the more general social policy tendencies of other European assistance systems and the paradigmatic change of the minimum income schemes. In the evolution of the social protection system, in fact, minimum income schemes cease to represent a social right and assume an 'ancillary and subordinate role' to the right to work (Busilacchi, 2018).

The term conditionality refers to the different 'conditions' welfare recipients are subjected to when accessing state support (Watts et al. 2014). These are: conditions of category; conditions of circumstance; and conditions of conduct (i.e. behavioural conditions). This is of particular importance for the role that the measures to combat poverty have assumed over the last years in their supposed ability to activate people, thus modifying their behavior. One of the tools in which this path or process of change is sanctioned is the personalized pact or project for the individual or family.

The personalized project continues to be a 'cornerstone' for Italian government measures to combat poverty starting with the 'Social Card' and followed by the 'Support for active inclusion'. In both of these measures and in the subsequent ones (REI and RdC), conditionality is a 'counterpart' of receiving any economic benefit. It is a binding behavioral conditionality for the maintenance of the provision or a pact between the State and the recipient. Rarely does the project become a social 'right' to use services in 'Essential level of performance' logic (LEP)⁵.

With the more recent measures for reduction poverty with the 'Inclusion Income' and most recently with 'Citizenship Income', conditionality has more and more become strongly related to the social and employment services, that are intended as an 'essential level of performance' by law. How has this or how is this impacting the practices of operators? This question is a relevant aspect in the implementation process.

Conditionality is also intended to control beneficiaries preventing possible abuses in the face of limited resources. As Robert Castel notes, the contractual logic underlies the 'pacts' in their various forms, from the actual "insertion contracts" signed by the beneficiary and the public institution, to the lighter 'accompanying paths' (Gambardella et al., 2013)⁶.

These aspects are strongly related to a paradigm of poverty reduction policy, with a critical interaction between beneficiaries, the content of policy and governance. Italy applies a generic use of the "workfare" paradigm for different beneficiaries. This aspect has been reinforced in the last citizenship income policy without, however, the availability of effective public employment services (Agostini, 2019).

Italian poverty reduction policies have been historically experimental (See Figure 1).

In Italy, minimum income schemes have been tested in some cities since the late 1970s (Turin 1978, Ancona 1981, Catania 1983, Milan 1989). Subsequently, starting in 1998 at the instigation of national legislation, the minimum income was tested in many other cities.

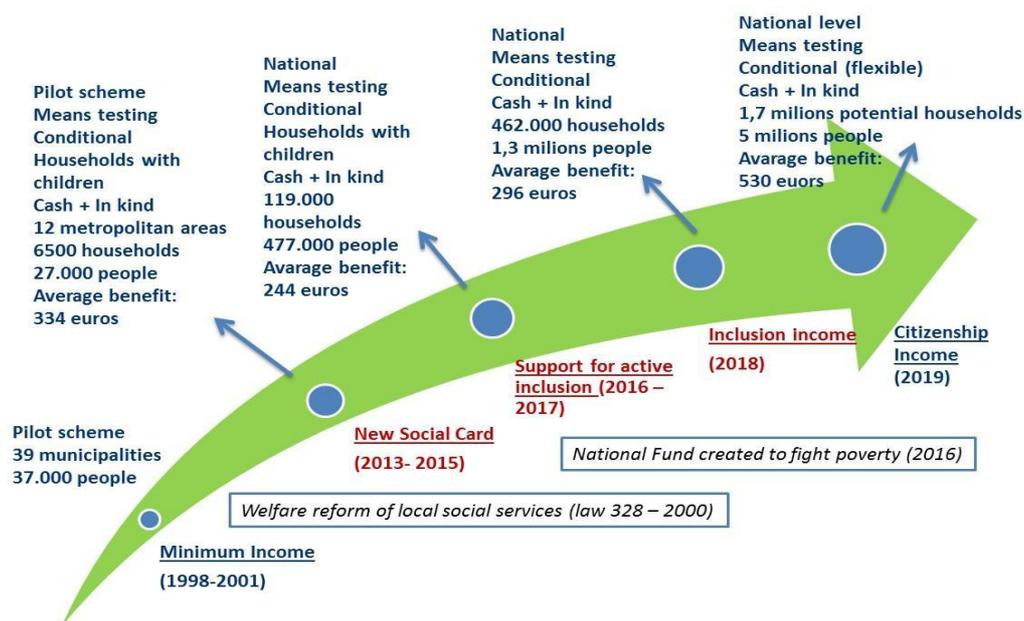
⁵ In the Italian Constitution, the essential levels of performance (abbreviated as LEP) are indicators referring to the possession of civil and social rights, that must be determined and guaranteed at the national level. The task of defining them lies with the State but their fulfillment is the responsibility of the State and the various territorial bodies (the regions, provinces and municipalities).

⁶ Robert Castel states that the "commercial exchange, seriously underestimates the disparity of situations among the contractors" (Castel 2004, p. 83).

Only beginning in 2018, with the introduction of the “Inclusion Income” and followed by, what was called the “Citizenship Income”, Italy has begun to approach the standards of other European countries that have a guaranteed minimum income or some national measure to support people in poverty. Nevertheless, children are absent in the most recent policy, despite the fact that we know that absolute poverty in Italy is inversely proportional to age (Saraceno, 2011).

The first experimentation with the minimum income was in 1998, involving 39 municipalities and 37 thousand people. It highlighted a target group of families composed mainly of single women, elderly people living alone in the north, and large families in the south (Saraceno, 2002).

Figure 1 - The evolution of national measures



Then we have two important changes due to the national reform of social services, law 328, from 2000, which allowed some regional experimentation and also created a social card for retirees in poverty.

After the minimum income experimentation, from 2013-2015, the government experimented with what was called a ‘New social card’ (CAS). This card was for families in poverty having at least one minor. The recipient had to follow requirements set and managed by the social services leading to a path of social inclusion. This, in practice, however meant the exclusion of a significant number of potential beneficiaries. Perhaps this was intentional to reduce fraud (that is the “stigma of marginalized target”) and/or for the exclusion of vulnerable targets such as migrants without a permanent residency permit.

With the *Budget law* of 2016 the ‘Support for active inclusion’ (SIA) began. It was intended to be a universal measure. The granting of the subsidy should have been to accompany individuals on a path of inclusion, but in fact the measure became only a ‘bridge policy’ that simply extended the original social card over the entire national territory.

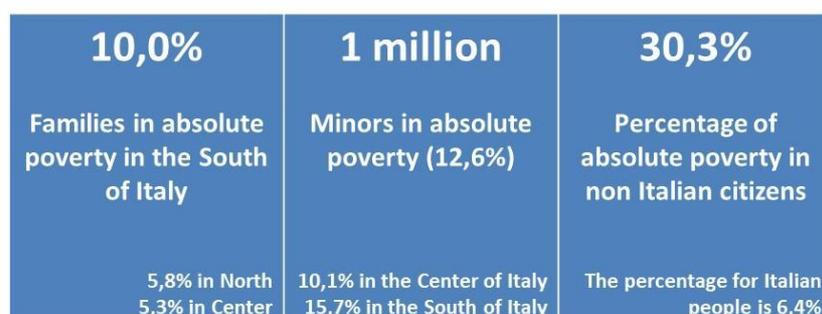
The *Budget Law* of 2018 transformed the previous law into what was called, the ‘Inclusion Income’ (REI). Inclusion Income was a universal measure, at least on paper, having fewer restrictions for access. The benefits were provided through an electronic payment card. The active part of the measure consisted of a "personalized project", which aimed at promoting the social and / or work inclusion of the person in poverty. Again, an agreement was stipulated with the local social services. In cases where the condition of poverty had been tied exclusively to the lack of work, the personalized project was replaced by a ‘service agreement’, which was stipulated between the unemployed beneficiary and the Employment Center on the recommendation of the local social services.

In 2019 this program was replaced with ‘Citizenship Income’ (RdC). In line with the previous measures, the new Citizenship Income consists of an economic benefit paid monthly through an electronic card. The recipient is again bound to a personalized agreement with the social services for work and or social inclusion. This agreement applies only to specific beneficiaries: individuals, families with at least one unemployed member and families with non-employable members.

We know that in Italy poor families have increased and there is a significant correlation between poverty and employment status. Baldini and Gallo (2018), for example, estimate that 56% of the families in absolute poverty have worker who is employed at 80%. Moreover, Italian National Institute of Statistics’ poverty data from 2018 highlights some interesting facts (See Figure 2): 10% of families in absolute poverty live in the south; the minors in absolute poverty are 12.6%, with 15.7% in the south; and there is a 30.3% incidence of poverty among foreign citizens, with only 6.4% for Italians (ISTAT, 2019b).

The intensity of poverty is decreasing, but the incidence of poor families composed of single parents and single parents with children has increased by 5% in one year. There has been an increase in the incidence of absolute poverty among families living in small northern municipalities and among households with children aged between 14 and 17 living in the center of Italy.

Figure 2 – Poverty in Italy



ISTAT, 2019b

It is possible to hypothesize that the slight improvement of the situation for the poorest families, in the context of the economic crisis, can be linked to the “Inclusion Income” (REI) (INPS, 2018). Unfortunately, we do not have sufficient impact evaluation results for beneficiaries, but only some evidence from the implementation processes (INAPP, 2017; Leone, 2017; INAPP, 2018) and a first analysis of a CAS measure on children (Raciti and Vivaldi Vera, 2019). The absence of impact evaluations is related to the overlapping of different measures that had an impact more in governance systems than in results - beyond the economic benefit- for beneficiaries.

2. Theoretical Framework: from poverty reduction policies to integrated policies using Program theory, Implementation and Street-level research

All theory-oriented approaches for the evaluation process have in common the idea of trying to explain what happens over the course of time due to the intervention and to identify the mechanisms activated by the actors involved (Weiss, 2007). Program theory evaluation consists of an explicit theory or model of how the program causes the intended or observed outcomes and an evaluation that is at least partly guided by this model (Rogers, 2007). In some evaluations, for example, the program theory is developed by the evaluator based on a review of research literature of similar programs or relevant causal mechanisms through discussions with key informants, through a review of program documentation, and/or through the observation of the program itself (Rogers, 2000).

The implementation represents the second theoretical framework of reference. The analysis of the implementation is not concerned with verifying whether the objectives of the intervention are working or if they are appropriate, but questions the validity of the program theory and assumes that the choice of policy will lead to an uncertain effect, because the interaction between the intervention and the context is itself uncertain (Berman, 1978; Brown and Wildavsky, 1983). In our research, the implementation context represents not only the theoretical reference but also the empirical context.

In his book “Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services”, Michael Lipsky (1980) analyzed the behavior of front-line staff in policy delivery agencies. Lipsky refers to these frontline workers as “street-level bureaucrats”. This is our third theoretical reference. These are the public employees who interact directly with citizens and have substantial discretion in the execution of their work.

These street-level bureaucrats implement public policies and they often have to respond to or interact with citizens with only a limited amount of information or time to make a decision. Moreover, very often the rules followed by the street-level bureaucrats do not correspond to the specific situation of the beneficiaries. In

response, street level bureaucrats develop their own coping mechanisms. They are able to do that because they have a certain degree of *discretion* or autonomy in their work (Tummers and Bekker, 2014).

Brodkin, suggesting the necessity to study the "practices" of policies, notes how changes in the structures of social and welfare policies and the decentralization processes, concerns discretion and the taking of responsibility for underlying the levels of implementation (Brodkin, 2000). The author therefore proposes a reformulation of street-level bureaucrats by introducing the concept of street-level workers, referring to the actors involved in the implementation processes. She does not define them as bureaucrats, but those able to carry out reforms through their daily practices performed in the public context (Brodkin, 2011).

Street-level research is understood as a theoretical part of project. It provides an analytical point of departure for the study of complex organizations and for the study of social policies, locating those studies within the variety of institutions, which put policy into practice. Beyond its theoretical purposes, street-level research, as applied theory, can be used to extend the range of policy evaluation and the evaluation of social policies in welfare and other policy contexts (Brodkin, 2003). Street-level research helps address critical gaps in our understanding of policies and how they work. This approach is most valuable when policy implementation involves change in organizational practice, discretion by front-line workers, and complex decision-making in a context of formal policy ambiguity and uncertainty.

All major European systems of social assistance in the last fifteen years have been reconfigured through a growing integration of measures of a different nature, that is, minimum income policies with selective universalism and other categorical measures. This trend has probably strengthened internal consistency and efficiency of systems to combat poverty, but on the other hand, marked the end of policies of minimum income as a social right (Busilacchi, 2018). Italy has followed this tendency, but does not have a real "policy mix" to truly fight poverty, despite the levels of fragmentation in the local labor market and offerings and quality of local social services. It means that single measures to reduce poverty, from the social card to citizenship income, require a strong integration between actors and a stronger role of professionals to define and respect conditionality in the absence of diversified policies; such as policies to support female employment, especially for those with a low level of education; conciliatory policies; public housing and childhood welfare.

Focussing on the concept of integration, there can be different levels of integration depending in different contexts: from simple 'linkage' to full integration, from the simple dialogue between institutions to the coordination with the assignment of roles and functions, or to full integration with the creation of new structures according the 'one stop-shop' approach (OECD, 2015). Furthermore, integration processes do not necessarily achieve the desired results, especially in terms of the ability to activate users on a job-related

basis and where significant results have been produced, it necessitated a time span of at least a couple of years (Eftheia, 2018).

What indeed appears to be the basis of Italian reforms is the idea that the right to a minimum income is not separable from the sphere of the right to work. This theoretical problem influences policies. There is confusion in the objectives of Italian social policies. The main objective of reduction poverty policies has become to fight unemployment. The assumption is theoretically incorrect, generating confusion between policy objectives. It is empirically inaccurate and negatively affects implementation processes (Busilacchi, 2018).

3. Poverty reduction policies: an overview

It is possible to compare the different Italian measures experimented in the last years using three dimensions:

- Conditionality for access (access requirements; work requirements; individual pact commitments; welfare sanctions).
- Level of benefit (capacity to decrease the distance from the poverty line).
- Governance (management and delivery standards defined at central level).

This last dimension, at a local level, can be declined into two other categories: integration with other measures and the governance between different actors. This includes the private sector as well.

It is interesting to analyze the relevance of these dimensions in the main reduction poverty policies over their evolution (See Table 1).

Table 1 - Development of Italian measures to combat poverty: a possible comparison

	Level of conditionality	Level of benefit ('generosity')	Level of centralization	Level of integration with other social assistance measures	Local governance (level of integration between local welfare system and employment service)
New Social Card	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Medium
Support for active inclusion	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Medium
Inclusion Income	High	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
Citizenship Income (not observed)	Very High	Medium	High	High	High

Adaptation of Busilacchi 2019

Level of Conditionality

In order to compare the different measures of conditionality the dimensions considered are as follows: access requirements, work requirements, individual pact commitments and sanctions.

On the whole, the analysis of the various measures to combat poverty in our country shows how, over the last few years, it has become evident that the Italian welfare system has decided to adopt the conditionality approach as a basis, at least formally, for its implementation; from a brief article dedicated to conditionality in the 'New Social Card regulation act' to a complex structure of procedures aimed at strengthening conditionality and the related sanctions stated in the other national measures. As regards the Inclusion Income, the sanctioning approach stipulates: the suspension of the benefit in case of failure to actively engage in a professional integration program⁷; the revocation in case of refusal to actively engage in a professional integration program; and increasingly stringent sanctions due to a mendacious declaration, i.e.: between €500 and €3,000 depending on the amount received. Furthermore, changes in the family composition, which may determine a reduction in the amount of the benefit to be granted needs to be notified within 2 months otherwise unduly paid sums will be recovered⁸.

It has to be pointed out that the 'Citizen Inclusion act', in the penalty section, explicitly stipulates imprisonment of up to six years in cases of false declarations by welfare recipients.

Thus, in the transition from one policy measure to another, the following phenomenon seems to be happening: the more the measure broadens its scope in terms of coverage of disadvantaged households/individuals, the more the attention is placed on conditionality and related sanctions.

In doing so, it seems that Italy is following in the footsteps of other countries, in particular the UK, where a great deal of emphasis has been placed on this issue. There has been much debate on conditionality and its effects on welfare recipients both at the academic level⁹ and at the cultural level with movies such as 'I, Daniel Blake' by Ken Loach.

Yet, in Italy an important distinction needs to be made between what is expected on paper (that is officially by the current legislation) from what actually happens or has happened. Since a national or local conditionality monitoring system is not in place (not yet, at least), to date it is impossible to know if and how commitments provided in the individual plans have or have not been respected.

⁷ Recipients of the Inclusion Income support have to prove that they are registered with the public employment service and actively seeking work by taking part in a vocational programme aimed at getting them into work.

⁸ See MISSOC data base (<https://www.missoc.org/>).

⁹ See, for example, the research project Welfare Conditionality – www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk.

As we shall see later, for social workers involved in the first experimental scheme, the application of conditionality has in some cases been a problem in building a relationship of trust with the beneficiary. Yet, no general evidence is available for the other measures. One of the few indicators available comes from field work carried out within an Italian social district and has shown that making conditionality procedures more complicated and more stringent has meant that social workers have had to adapt these rules to the context they work in and to the 'profile' of welfare recipients. In most cases these are women with medium-low schooling level, working modest jobs, with dependent children, living in rented houses and without personal transportation (D'Emilione et al., 2019).

The question of how social services or social workers address the issue of conditionality and, in particular, sanctions is a complex issue with regards to which "scholars have noted that welfare bureaucracies are more apt to process paper than to process people" (Lens, 2008, pg. 199).

Generosity

In order to assess the 'generosity' of the different guaranteed minimum income schemes let's compare the amount available for a household with two children receiving the Inclusion Income and the relative absolute poverty threshold. An unemployed couple with means not exceeding the reference ceiling of €5,535 and having two children aged between 4 and 8 are entitled to a monthly amount of €461.25 if all qualifying conditions are met¹⁰. However, if they are living in a metropolitan area in the center of Italy, according to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2019b), that family would need to receive more than 1.500 euros per month to live above the poverty line. Considering the average amounts provided for the different measures already mentioned, it is impossible not to notice the distance between the minimum scheme and the poverty line. Even the most recent measure, the Citizenship Income, cannot guarantee leaving behind a situation of poverty and deprivation.

Governance

Before going into detail of the three dimensions regarding the governance of the above-mentioned programs, it is useful to briefly describe the institutional context in which such policies have been developed.

The first three policies taken into consideration assign a fundamental role to social services in the concrete management of the measures. Even if a territorial network involving multiple actors was created to support welfare recipients, the responsibility for individual cases was maintained by the local social services system. An important change took place with the implementation of the last measure, 'Citizenship Income', where

¹⁰ See MISSOC data base (<https://www.missoc.org/>).

public employment services play a key role in managing certain categories of users (e.g. short term unemployed).

The design and management of the social services system in Italy involves different levels of public responsibility, mainly regional and municipal. The State transferred to the regions legislative functions and administrative competences in the field of social services and some of these competences have been delegated to the municipalities. Every municipality, acting in accordance with regional legislation and depending on the availability of budgetary resources, implements its own policies of social intervention within its territory. At the municipal level, most of the resources have been allocated to families with children, disabled and elderly people and, in a residual manner, to fight poverty and social exclusion, to support immigrants and for people with addictions. It is necessary to highlight the fundamental role that municipalities have in the planning and management of the social services system.

At the local level these must be interpreted in light of the number of municipalities involved, about eight thousand. This 'administrative issue' is obviously a core problem when a national social policy is supposed to guarantee homogeneity at the national level in terms of quality of public services (D'Emilione et al. 2019). Regarding the issue of territorial homogeneity, a focus survey on the expenditures of municipalities for social services in 2016 states that *"geographical differences, per capita expenditure ranged from 22 euros in Calabria to 517 in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, where more services were available to citizens. The South only benefited from 10% of the resources for social welfare services, in spite of its resident population that represented 23% of the total"* (ISTAT, 2019a).

In this context, addressing the issue of governance of the previously mentioned measures to combat poverty implies keeping in mind, at least, three fundamental aspects:

- The different territorial scale of interventions, since the experimentation of the new social card in the 12 metropolitan areas differs markedly from other measures implemented at the national level.
- In the transition from one measure to another, the use of a increasingly more detailed regulation regarding procedures to be followed at both the regional and municipal level and the standardisation tools to be used in the everyday social workers' practice in order to reduce 'discretion'¹¹.

¹¹ Within the implementation of the 'Support for active inclusion' and, even more, in the Inclusion Income, great importance was given to the creation of guidelines in order to reduce the discretion of social workers. This action was supposed to influence the working practice of social services, almost introducing working protocols. Such an approach has, as already happened in other experiences, its pros and cons (Skillmark and Oscarsson, 2016). It affects the practical intervention of a profession that, by definition, already has a strong educational background and specific professional tools.

- The integrated selection of interventions and services was intended to be a minimum level of performance within the service delivery process. This last aspect implies that the citizen-recipient of the welfare measure has the right to receive a service in an integrated way, just as the system of services at the local level has the responsibility to provide it. To date, this *integrated approach* is proving to be complicated to put into practice. As a matter of fact, the integration between the local welfare system or social service system and the public employment services, even if fostered in recent years has rarely resulted in cases of ‘good practices’, at least not in the territorial context where this collaboration was already underway.

This is mainly due to a substantial separation between the categories of users involved. Previously the poor and the most vulnerable people went to social services and the unemployed or young jobseekers went to employment services. Therefore, these two types of services were accustomed to dealing with specific needs and specific user profiles.

But what happens when user’s categories overlap? What happens when the proportion of working poor or employed households suddenly begins to increase due to an economic crisis?

This second issue revealing a new category of users represents one of the greatest challenges for social services and operators involved in the implementation of measures to combat poverty in Italy. In the same way, the question of how welfare services relate to poverty also arises (Morris et al. 2018). Do Italian social workers also need a conceptual framework in order to deal with poverty (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2009) or, as we shall see later, does it simply represent a need for more human and financial resources?

4. Street Level Workers: perverse effects and generative mechanisms

We have identified some relevant questions related to our main scope of research: Theory Based Evaluation (TBE), paradigm of policy, Street Level Worker (SLW) and Implementation.

In terms of paradigms of poverty, in recent years, the debate on the European social model and on the politics of welfare in EU countries has been influenced by many factors, such as the advent of the economic crisis and finally the establishment of activation policies oriented to the paradigm of social investment. How does this impact local governance and street level workers?

A continuing theme in relationship to social work and the welfare state is the role of social workers as practical or real policy actors in implementing welfare policies. Three key contributions to the field of public policy analysis are focused on the recognition this:

1. Street level bureaucrats have discretion and power in implementation (what is the role of SLW in the implementation of minimum income support schemes?).
2. Their behaviour is systematically influenced by the organisational and institutional environment in which they work (what strategies do they adapt?).
3. The efforts to control their behaviour undermines their responsiveness to beneficiaries, therefore new approaches are needed to support them as part of a responsive public bureaucracy (how do social workers become an agency of change over time?).

Under the conditions of the transformed welfare state, the question of how social workers deal with their 'double-mandate' remains crucial. We define the double-mandate of social workers as them both being agents of change and passive recipients, i.e. *subjected to the changes* actuated by law.

The trends in institutional frameworks of developed welfare states, as well as their paradigms and governance, have severely changed the role of social workers and street-level workers. In the implementation process, street-level workers transform actions and, in fact, define not only implementation strategies, but they contribute to defining the policies themselves. Moreover, the heterogeneity of contexts, that is the same policy implemented in two different territories and the transition from the pilot intervention (such as CAS) to the national measure (such as SIA and REI) generated an amplification of many problems identified during the experimentation. In fact, the problem is also that there has been no time allotted to ensure institutional learning from one program to the next. The rules changed and the objectives of policies became more related to a workfare paradigm.

How have changes influenced the tasks and behaviors of social workers in their tangible work with beneficiaries?

We will focus on the results of three main research projects: New Social Card evaluation process (2015)¹²; Research on Support for Active Inclusion (2017)¹³ and an explorative research on Inclusion Income (2018)¹⁴.

In *New Social Card evaluation process (2015)* we implemented semi-structured interviews with institutions, stakeholders, and focus groups that involved about 90 social workers in 12 Italian cities. The research approach and the content analysis methodology (Grounded Theory and the hermeneutic analysis of texts) were used for the analysis of the narrative material collected and the main features of the institutional

¹² INAPP, 2017.

¹³ INAPP, 2018.

¹⁴ The research work carried out in the social district of Pomezia (Lazio Region) developed over a period of about 7 months, participating as non-active observers in meetings between services and REI recipients, developing a local database on welfare recipients and organizing a final seminar to return the research findings, also in the presence of some political referents of the territory.

context in which the pilot scheme took place, testing the adaptability of local services to implement the new measure.

In *Research on Support for Active Inclusion (2017)*, we implemented interviews of the regional stakeholders and focus groups with social workers in the three cities involved (Bologna, Trieste and Bari).

In an *explorative research on Inclusion Income (2018)* we have now some results from single interviews and observation in a territorial social service (Pomezia social district). The objective has been to understand how the system of welfare services at the local level is being organized in this transitional stage, that is, from the official introduction of the Inclusion Income to the transition to the current Citizenship income (RdC).

The results of this analysis have been revised through the use of a theoretical approach, ‘theory based evaluation’ and ‘street level workers’. It is possible to identify, in CAS and SIA, several weaknesses, which were highlighted by the social workers, and mainly linked to the temporal misalignment of the complex governance. The lack of coordination between the provision of the economic benefit and the start of social services support caused some significant problems for the measure’s management (D’Emilione et al. 2019):

- The difficulty of combining social work practice with conditionality.
- The duration of the personalized projects was often too limited to obtain appreciable results.
- The impossibility of monitoring and checking the progress of personalized projects.
- Delays and demotivation of users.
- Complications in the administrative management and in the use of evaluation tools.

In many cases, the time lag between monetary benefit and activation projects, administrative problems, and too few human resources have all had a major impact on social services. These aspects have generated significant extra work and a work overload situation, which sometimes led to operators’ progressive disinvestment and demotivation.

We identified the perverse effects of rules and practices looking at three aspects of street level work: conditionality, the integration of services (welfare and/or employment) and governance (at both a national and a regional level) (See Table 2). It is possible to identify three main perverse effects.

As we see the application of conditional mechanisms does not facilitate the construction of a relationship of trust with welfare recipients, because of barriers to an appropriate conditionality system and it limits the policy design. Then, there are inadequate service systems, a lack of employment opportunities, complex sanctioning system, missing data and a soft application of conditionality versus a bureaucratic approach.

Table 2 - Perverse effects and generative mechanisms of social workers

	Perverse effects (problems)	Generative mechanisms (learning)
Conditionality	Not conducive to the building of a relationship of trust with welfare recipients	Working with different/new kinds of welfare recipients improves practices in social services
Integration (social and work services)	Different linguistic codes between different services	New types of working partnerships and collaboration with employment services and the private/third sector fosters coordination and dialogue
Governance (national/regional/local)	Complex management of information flow and time lag between monetary benefit and the activation of projects	Strategic role of regions , when a regional measure integrates the national one with the local welfare system

An integrated management between social services of the municipalities and employment services is not a widespread practice in Italy. Many aspects affect this difficult relationship: different linguistic codes between different services in the personalized project; the historically weak role of labor services and weak partnerships and the weak competences of operators in charge of ‘new beneficiaries’. Since it is a question of making people interact, it is advisable to keep in mind that forcing people with different skills to work together is often very complicated. Organizational challenges like mutual esteem and respect among participants, common communication codes and the effectiveness of the communication processes have to be taken into account (Petch et al., 2013). Other perverse effects are complex management styles and long lags between the funding and the real application or activation.

Despite these difficulties, to respond to these main problems and perverse effects, it is possible to identify some generative mechanisms of learning for social workers, both organizationally as well as professionally (Sauris, 2018): “New social card” and “Support for active inclusion” (and, we know, Inclusion Income too), have identified new types of beneficiaries. These are: people who have fallen into a temporary poverty condition and those people in poverty having a social exclusion status already noted to the system.

If, in a ‘non-sanction manner’, these aspects were re-interpreted, such as the duration of projects, we could evaluate inclusion according to needs instead of simply normative rules. Conditionality could be an effective tool for users’ access to services. This would permit the restoration of centrality to social services in the families’ choice to undertake an assessment by integrating the multidisciplinary team with employment service operators in the cases of families or individuals who only require training and/or employment guidance.

Here we identified two different impacts of conditionality: traditional targets or those who are in poverty and lack economic resources and employment, who are often associated with forms of hardship and little

family care capacity and the “new poor” or “working poor”. Integration, if applied to new beneficiaries, could become an additional tool for social services. It could be a relief for welfare recipients and a new form of agency. When working with the “new poor”, it would be easier for social workers to identify emerging needs, improving the competences of social workers, dividing the planning responsibility and all management functions with municipalities and the district.

When there is an administrative and organizational capacity or ability to identify new solutions to meet the management challenges imposed by the measure’s implementation, then the processes are identified as a success factor and the supervision of new users previously unknown to social services is recognized as a value added to the process.

One problem remains however. In regional and local contexts where the level of poverty is low, the measures intercept only people in extreme poverty, because work inclusion is very difficult to identify in this case (Leone, 2017). Another generative mechanism concerns the strategic role of the regions. When there is a regional measure that integrates the national one, it is possible to imagine more space for governance and autonomy of street level workers. Furthermore, in implementing the measures, the regional level plays an important role in determining the quality of governance with employment services (Leone, 2017).

Conclusions

In evaluating the impact of social assistance and activation measures in reduction poverty policy it is important to consider the tension between “theoretical problems” (paradigms on poverty reduction policy) and “policy problems” (how policy change and how politics use minimum income schemes, without considering context, effect and impact of the measures). Following the TBE approach, we can identify some design and policy problems, highlighted by street level workers and the implementation of three different measures to fight poverty.

- Programs by themselves do not produce change, but provide and activate resources for change.
- Even if a program achieves its objectives it does not necessarily mean that it works.
- Programs are theories, but a program can work even if the theory is wrong.

An advantage of street-level research is that it allows analysis to reach beyond formal administrative categories and to unpack the policy experience. In this sense, street-level research is a crucial link in the causal chain. If we wish to attribute outcomes to policy, we need to be able to specify the policy intervention, not as imagined or reconstructed in administrative measures, but as experienced. Street-level research directly investigates what the implementing organizations produce (Brodin, 2003).

Street level workers, in welfare services, work as mediators, negotiating dilemmas and implementing strategies (Hjörne, 2010). In these ways, three dimensions are central for the analysis of the implementing processes and the impact of measures on beneficiaries: agency dimension (from autonomy to control), discretion dimension (from responsiveness to standardization), and professional dimension (from demand to supply), which are always in tension with case management, the integration services and new users.

Dilemmas and strategies could be analyzed in the three action contexts of street level workers observed: conditionality, integration between services and governance, and institutionally and organizationally. In these dimensions it is possible to observe a divide, for example, between conditionality by law and case management in poor economic contexts as in Southern Italy. New risks emerge for social workers: the delegitimization of a trust relationship between services and citizens and the discretion in the assessment of conditionality (Leone, 2017; Saruis, 2018).

Looking at implementation strategies and the theory of programs, we have identified a challenge for social workers and policy practices; the relationship between different kinds of service needs to create a third dimension in relating to local communities and the participative social programming (Vitale, 2013). Local strategies and administrative strategies have to overcome the “logic of performance” (LEP) and broaden the “degrees of freedom” of the operators to mobilize and integrate different local resources (Leone, 2017).

It means ensuring that the evaluation and the analysis of these measures consider different models of ‘taking charge’ of the families or individuals in conditions of poverty and that these measures be adopted by the services and can be adapted to the characteristics of the different forms of poverty. It means, for example, considering children as beneficiaries and subjects relevant to impact evaluations. In fact, considering social workers as mediators, in local and territorial dynamics, permits them to overcome the objectives-means-results approach in their evaluation and enables them to identify the causal link between the effects of the case management models, the behaviors of the beneficiaries and, finally, the results of the programs.

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