

The Construction of Homelessness in Italy

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Definition(s) of homelessness

1. The social construction of the problem of the homeless in Italy is centred on the figure of the 'no abode' (*senza dimora*). Identification of this figure positions the problem in the area of 'serious marginalisation' or 'extreme hardship', and in most cases the accent is placed on particularly difficult situations and on the advanced stages of marginalisation processes: most often the term indicates those socially marginalized homeless that are characterised by multiple deprivation and by traits of desocialisation.

Persons without a home, but not characterised by these traits tend to be positioned differently, in another system of definitions. More traditional terms are used such as *senza casa* (homeless), *senza tetto* (roof-less) etc. These terms position the problem in the wide area of 'housing hardship', using a classification scheme based on the housing situation.

On the whole, the construction of homelessness in Italy can be characterised in two ways. On the one hand the problem is discussed (mainly) as a problem of social marginalisation, while on the other hand a sort of distinction is made between the two conceptual areas connected - in the international debate - with the notion of homelessness: housing exclusion (not having a home, in the wider meaning of the term) and social marginalisation. This separation reflects and confirms an accentuated (traditional) division between the two types of policy: housing policies and welfare policies.

As far as the social polarity of the problem is concerned, the homeless are seen as extreme forms/figures of 'social hardship' and of marginalisation, or of extreme poverty (also the view of the recent law on welfare), these being terms that point to determined dimensions of poverty, in some ways close to those of the notion of social exclusion.

With regard to housing polarity, however, the traditional (policy) main category is that of 'housing hardship', a broad category that includes a range of situations of poverty or housing risk - defined in terms of housing quality, overcrowding, cost, etc. Within this category more serious conditions can be identified including the extremes of genuine housing exclusion and

no housing. With reference to the INED classification, we can say that for severe housing exclusion the dominant criteria regard the type of housing - spaces not intended for housing - whilst about housing hardship in general the dominant criteria are quality and occupancy (occupancy with reference to precariousness).

2. There is no official definition. The term, now widespread, of *senza dimora* – adopted as a translation of ‘homeless’ - has not come into use through official definitions (central or regional government), but through local practices, the work of voluntary associations, NGOs and partly by social research workers. The FIOpsd (Federation of organisations for the no abode) played an important part in bringing the term into use. ‘*Senza dimora*’ is taken from the traditional bureaucratic term (*senza fissa dimora*: of no fixed abode, with the accent on having an address), but it exploits the connotations of the word *dimora*, which can also be used in Italian to refer to the deeper meanings of living and belonging to/settlement in a community. The term therefore focuses on uprootedness and roaming as signs of severe marginalisation. The strictly housing components (having or not having housing) are not central. They are part of the definition, but are only considered important if seen as part of the multiple dimensions of the problems of the no abode.

Local research and practices have contributed to the use of this term rather than others which either leaned towards housing aspects (without a roof, etc) or involved very restricted images, e.g. *barbone* (clochard, tramp). The images that have come into use have on the whole been more comprehensive and have acknowledged the breadth and heterogeneity of the phenomenon. At the same time they have contributed to a “social welfare” rather than housing identification of the problem and have perhaps assisted in legitimating the separation between the two fields.

In reality, this way of dealing with the situation involves considerable uncertainty, as is also seen in the substitution of terms that is rather frequent even among academics, with the use of *senza dimora* for *senza casa* and for *senza tetto* (and even for *disagio abitativo*: housing hardship). Also frequent is resort to additive or disjunctive definitions of the type ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘also’ (Tosi 1999, 105).

The reduction that is made with the focus on the no abode and the separation of the two fields have important consequences for policies. The construction of the problem - associating the idea of homelessness with a limited number of figures with specific social connotations - has consequences for the definition of the ‘important’ figures. For example nobody would include

the many gypsies and foreign immigrants who live in shacks among the 'no abode'. In fact as most do not fit the typical, conventional description of the no abode (see § 7).

Research

3. With few exceptions, the research on the homeless in Italy is of a local nature and primarily employs two methodologies: reprocessing of data on the use of specific services (data produced by services are the main source on which estimation and description are based), and qualitative analysis centred on individual case/life histories. This has provided a good knowledge of the processes of marginalisation that lead to homelessness and of the experience of homelessness itself. It is more difficult to obtain a systematic picture of the phenomenon on a national scale from this research (Tosi 2002).

4. The first attempt to quantify both extreme poverty and persons of no abode on a national scale was conducted by the *Commissione d'indagine sulla povertà e l'emarginazione* (Government Commission to investigate poverty and social exclusion) in 1992. It has been a fundamental point of reference for recent research, both in order to estimate the size of the phenomenon and because it traced the characteristics of extreme poverty and of the no abode in particular. The survey, accomplished in 1992 in 25 geographical areas throughout the country, was focused on four categories, considered as the main components of the "population in situation, or at risk, of extreme poverty" in this country: people with no abode, foreign immigrants, gypsies, people with mental health problems. Information was gathered through two main tools: a survey addressed to social workers and experts, mainly aimed to estimate the size of the four categories and the extent of extreme poverty; a sample survey on the four categories of population (3,759 interviews, in the 25 areas selected as regards immigrants, in 10 areas as regards other categories) (Commissione 1993).

According to this analysis, the number of persons with no abode was estimated as between 44,853 and 61,753. The estimates for people with mental health problems, gypsies, foreign immigrants in extreme poverty were at about 48,000, 68,000, and 323,000 respectively.

A general identikit of extreme poverty can be obtained from this survey. Considering the four groups covered by the survey as a whole, the Commission emphasises the increasingly young face of poverty and social exclusion, the great exposure of male population to the risk of poverty and a lesser degree of visibility of poverty among female population, the strong correlation between poverty and health, etc.

Substantially, those of no abode present these features with, however, some important specific characteristics: a greater degree of isolation - a greater number of unmarried, separated, divorced and widowed persons; a greater number in the middle age range; a worse state of health, due to alcohol and drugs in particular; a lower number of persons in work and greater resort to abusive sources of income or handouts; less use of social services.

The evidence provided by this research on the accommodation of the four groups in extreme poverty was the basis for a first estimate of housing exclusion in Italy proposed in the 1993 and 1994 Italian reports to the Observatory on Homelessness of IEANTSA (Tosi, Ranci 1995).

5. Subsequent attempts to estimate the size and trends of the phenomenon have been based on local studies and the opinions of social workers and service providers. At the end of the 1990s estimates cited by the Ministry of Social Solidarity put the number of no abode at between 70 and 80 thousand, calculated on the basis of persons making use of voluntary association and state services. There were another 40,000 'invisible' homeless, who have no contact with associations.

The local studies on which these attempts to quantify and assess the problem of homelessness are based have added geographical detail and improved our interpretation of the picture provided by the 1993 survey (Pellegrino, Verzieri 1991; Pollo 1995). These studies have improved our knowledge of the profiles and of the dynamics of homelessness, but it is nevertheless very difficult to paint an (empirically sound) overall picture from them and more particularly to make a quantitative estimate of the phenomenon and to identify trends. This is due to methodological reasons. An important reason however is the conceptual uncertainty surrounding the definition of the problem that makes it difficult to compare the available data and evaluations given by workers in the field and researchers. The focus moves in an uncontrolled manner from the 'homeless' to the 'no abode' with a tendency to underestimate housing exclusion when not accompanied by accentuated traits of marginalisation.

The different approaches raise different questions and have different policy implications (the different definitions broaden or restrict the categories benefiting from funding and measures, conferring different physiognomy on policies) and obviously involve different directions in the description and estimate of the phenomenon. To give an idea of the consequences of the different definitions, in 1992 the no abode were estimated at about 50,000 persons, while

those corresponding to the definition of homeless proposed by FEANTSA, could be estimated at between 150,000 and 200,000 persons.

6. A step forward in the direction of systematic knowledge of the problem of the no abode was taken with the studies promoted in 2000 by the *Commissione di indagine sull'esclusione sociale*. The study, entitled *Indagine sulle persone senza dimora* (research project on persons of no abode), was performed by the Zancan Foundation of Padua and had two objectives: (a) to identify the characteristics of persons of no abode in Italy and also to attempt a quantitative estimate; (b) to focus on the conditions of the no abode by means of 75 in-depth interviews (Fondazione Zancan 2000). The results of the two studies have not been published yet. A summary was circulated by the *Commission* (Commissione 2001 and 2002). Ample extracts from this report are given below.

A 'strict definition' of the phenomenon was adopted for the study. "Only those who at the time did not have a permanent roof over their heads, even in the form of a hostel or protected accommodation were included among the no abode. Consequently the only persons included are those who spent the night of the survey (14 March 2000) on the streets or in parks or in the so-called low threshold accommodation, which is to say in dormitories that offer a bed to sleep in and a shower for short periods of time but which do not require and do not allow any participation in daily routine". According to the authors, "if this definition may appear, and is in effect, controversial, since it takes no account of the complexity of the phenomenon even in its limits and its dynamics, it does nevertheless have the advantage of being sufficiently precise to allow quantitative estimates and also cannot be suspected of overestimating the phenomenon. On the contrary, any estimate based on this definition is almost by definition an underestimate of the phenomenon since it excludes those who have been given temporary accommodation - by local authorities or voluntary associations - in board and lodging community hostels or those who are staying temporarily with relatives and friends".

It was decided to use the s-night approach to find persons of no abode (a count of persons on the street on one night and of persons spending the same night in a 'first level' dormitory). The count was taken in a representative sample of municipalities. Using information supplied by local informants, places were selected in the areas where the survey could be taken and 2,668 of the 5,000 persons counted were interviewed.

On the basis of this data the researchers proposed an estimate of approximately 17,000 persons of no abode (according to the strict definition adopted) present in Italy, heavily concentrated in the

largest local authorities. The estimate was reached on the basis of “a complex calculation of weightings of the different areas and of the probabilities of underestimating due to difficulties in the count”.

The estimate that was obtained is much lower than those that had been proposed and which we have reported. It is difficult to give a judgement on this gap which seems considerable even if account is taken of the strict definition that was adopted and that the s-night methodology tends to underestimate the size of the phenomenon. In any case a quantitative estimate of the homeless was not a primary objective of this research project, which was rather focused on identifying the characteristics of persons of no abode and the paths to homelessness.

Apart from the question of methods, the point raises - once again - the problem of the conceptual uncertainty that surrounds the definition of homelessness. In this case too the description of the no abode show traces of the typical oscillation between the lack of a home and “serious marginalisation” (the definition adopted is a typical additive, ‘and/also type’, definition: “persons with no fixed dwelling, in precarious material conditions, with no formal/informal net of support”: Fondazione Zancan 2000). On the other hand, the authors of the *Commissione* study acknowledge that any estimate based on the ‘strict definition’ they adopted is almost by definition an underestimate of the phenomenon. Generally speaking, however, the definitions used by previous estimates should not be very different. They all use the prevailing concept of the homeless in Italy, that of the ‘person of no abode’. The fact is that estimates suffer from conceptual uncertainty surrounding the definition of the problem of homelessness even within the narrow definitions.

7. In general the NGOs and associations working with homeless do not make research themselves. However their good relations with some universities and public administrations may involve participation in research projects. In a few cases they have been responsible for important projects (for instance: a national survey of organisations working with homeless persons carried out by FIOpsd for the Government in 2000, a ‘white book’ on housing poverty produced by Caritas in 1994: Irs, Caritas 1994). As important producers of data on users of services they are involved in various activities of research institutes. In some cases they are partners of EU funded projects regarding problems in service provision and policy.

Collaboration with the voluntary sector is somehow obvious for researchers working on poverty and social policy in Italy: it reflects (beyond and besides personal options) the nature

of the welfare system in this country. Some university departments maintain stable relations with NGOs working with the homeless.

FIOPsd (the federation of local administrations and NGOs working with homeless) has been supported by Diap in some recent research projects: a survey on users of services provided by members of FIOPsd to analyse the female component of homelessness in the country (1998); a survey on users of services provided by members of FIOPsd, to analyse the foreign immigrant component of homelessness in the country (FIOPsd 2002).

The link between immigration and homelessness is strong. There is probably an increase in marginalized immigrants behind the increase in the homeless in big cities, mostly without stay permit.

The survey by FIOPsd, performed in 7 cities, found massive growth in the numbers of immigrants among the users of services for the street homeless. According to 43% of those surveyed immigrants accounted for more than 50% of users. Both the perception of workers and the data collected confirmed that the flow of immigrants using services had generally increased over the years. 62% of those surveyed reported an increase in service use by immigrants. This increase in immigrants was verified for all the different types of services, except for transition housing. Dormitories were the type of service used by immigrants most.

The results should have consequences for reconsidering the role of those services who work with homeless and of services who work with immigrants.

In Italy, traditionally, the shelters/hostels provision for immigrant homeless people are separated institutionally from the provision for the non-immigrant community. The mixing revealed by the survey should bring to reconsider this question of the separation between immigrants and non-immigrants homeless.

Moreover, the relationship of immigrants with these services reveals specific problems, which in many cases do not correspond to the 'no abode' profile - extreme marginalisation, desocialisation, multiple handicaps and great problems of reinsertion. The survey shows that most immigrant homeless do not have this kind of problems. The immigrants do not use reinsertion services, and do not need reintegration services. They are in an urgent situation but their problem is not the social insertion but the job, the housing and the documents. (The same is true for many Italian homeless persons).

These results converge with points at issue in the recent research on the integration of immigrants. The realisation that immigrant homelessness is on the rise has increased worries over the adequacy of integration policies and to a greater extent over general housing and welfare policies. It also led to greater consideration of the meaning of homelessness for these groups and to a sharper focus on the interaction between housing exclusion and social marginalisation.

Homeless immigrants provide a clear example of a type of homeless that contradicts the prevailing construction of the phenomenon centred on the figure of the no abode. In most cases homelessness among immigrants, often of the street variety, results from difficulties arising from being without documents, from difficulty in gaining access to housing markets and from insecure employment. There is a high probability of immigrants suffering housing exclusion without serious elements of marginalisation occurring and an even higher probability of them suffering housing exclusion without those features of personality destructuring that characterises many no abode. They are simply poor people without a home. For them the lack of housing may be nothing more than a stage on the road to integration in a new society. Immigrants also provide an example of a type of homelessness where the housing dimension is often decisive. While for Italians, only a minority of the paths to marginalisation start today with the loss of a home, for immigrants these paths often start with housing exclusion. A continued lack of accommodation can accelerate the drift into social exclusion.

Policy

8. Homelessness is a local responsibility in Italy and it is a problem dealt with by the voluntary sector to a large extent. The important role played by civil society and its agencies (associations, NGO's, etc.) is a key feature of the Italian welfare regime. There is a different way of combining intervention and voluntary sector at the local level according to each region and municipalities within the same region.

There are no programmes for the homeless provided by central government. In the late '90s some interest from the central government appeared, for instance in defining priorities in the new welfare law and in some funding for emergency action in cities.

The 2000 Law on welfare provided for urgent action for situations of extreme poverty and expanded services for "persons in extreme poverty and persons of no fixed abode". The same law increased the relative fund for the homeless (planned for the first time in January 2000).

The action provided for (to be implemented by municipalities and private welfare organisations) ranged from immediate shelter to health and welfare services, social work support and social reintegration. Entitlement to a minimum integration income as an anti-poverty measure also involved a “particular reference to persons of no abode”. This orientation was then reaffirmed in the first implementation of the law which set out the guidelines (December 2000) and again in the National Plan for social policy and services 2001-2003: “as far as the ‘no abode’ are concerned, the specific objective of this plan is to provide general services and action throughout the country designed to make contact with the no abode and to provide them with conditions for damage reduction and to offer them roads to recovery” (Mozzanica 2001).

In areas that have taken the service modernisation path, the supply available to the no abode today includes the entire range of services: preventative services, emergency and crisis services, reintegration services (see § 13). In addition to specific services targeted at the no abode, an important role is played by general context services, which provide access to the system of community resources. No integration process would be possible without the range of facilities and services provided in the community, and services for the homeless count on this provision to perform their work. There are problems here with both access to and proper use of these services by the homeless.

9. As elsewhere, or more than elsewhere, the policies for the homeless are a combination, a hotch potch, of different measures, most of which are not specifically targeted at the homeless. This makes the problem of access fundamental. In the absence of official definitions of homelessness, access to benefits or housing occurs on the basis of varied and different criteria depending on the type of benefit and in any case extremely little on the explicit identification of potential beneficiaries because they are homeless.

The situation is clearer for access to housing. For example the criteria for access to public sector housing specifically includes some situations of housing exclusion/without housing as conditions that increase the points for access to public sector accommodation. The problems here (apart from the shortage of housing supply) arise from the fact that this is not the sole criterion and from the definition of exclusion (defined differently in different regions, e.g. accommodation in the ‘informal’ sector is treated differently).

In terms of rights, the homeless can count on three types of housing resources: social housing supplied by the voluntary/charity association sector, normal public sector housing (also used by the voluntary sector for its reintegration projects), special forms of public housing.

Two traits weaken the effectiveness of public sector housing in protecting vulnerable groups: the large gap between the demand for and the supply of public sector housing; and a certain lack of rationality in the assignment and management of accommodation. The access criteria do not ensure a good system of priorities among those with a right to access or at least do not ensure that there is adequate control over priorities.

Nor does the creation of 'special categories' improve the result. The division into categories fragments consideration of need situations and introduces something of a random element into the system which on the one hand reflects local political options and on the other hand expresses opinions on the hierarchy of needs that is not always based on objective analysis of the incidence of hardship found in the different groups.

As regards social welfare benefits, however, in general there are no specific criteria for access, and the reference is usually to broad classifications of the 'social hardship' or 'exclusion' type.

10. On the whole access and the degree of protection reflects the nature of a system defined as 'corporatist conservative' (Esping-Andersen), 'conservative familistic' (Mingione), 'particularistic' (Paci) etc. Taken together, these characterisations underline two principal traits of the welfare system: its contributory, or insurance, and its family based nature (massive assignment of responsibility for welfare services on families).

As is well known, this means that access to welfare depends mainly on a person's position in the labour market, the system offers no comprehensive protection defined on a national/universalistic basis. If exception is made for the health service, no system of social welfare protection has developed in Italy that is capable of providing cover to all citizens for risks connected with insecure or irregular work. While relatively broad protection has been afforded to "workers" and to categories such as minors, the elderly, the handicapped and the disabled, protection has been scarce and uncertain for other adults: for adults without dependent children, at risk or marginalized adults, etc. 'Unprotected' adults have been entrusted to the social assistance system, a system which as a rule has been separate from the main body of social protection policies and has been heavily characterised by its discretionary nature and measures largely aimed at emergency situations. This means scarce protection to

groups in society that are particularly hit by new forms of vulnerability. Furthermore, financial benefits have been usually small and temporary, awarded on discretion and limited by budget constraints. Persons suffering exclusion and poverty have been heavily dependent on the initiatives of local authorities and voluntary organisations (they play an essential role especially in the area of poverty and social exclusion). As a consequence, coverage vary considerably from area to area.

The type of housing regime reflects the characteristics of this welfare model fairly closely. It may be characterised by the scarce coverage by policies and the low percentage of social housing compared to massive policy intervention in favour of owner occupied housing.

Social rented housing has provided 5-6 per cent of accommodation over the last decade. This situation is the result of the historical effects of a policy system characterised by a constant orientation towards increasing home ownership, weak social intervention, public action on the rented market of a constraint type (fair rents, etc.) and aimed above all at providing guarantees for people already in rented accommodation.

The (percentage of) spending on housing has varied greatly at different times over recent decades, but nevertheless it is now (in the national budget) close to zero percent (of total spending).

For housing too, however, the great regional/local differences, recently favoured by decentralisation processes, must be considered.

The discrepancies between regions and between local authorities in the same region are a basic trait of the system in both housing and social welfare policy (Benassi 2001).

While good quality welfare systems have developed in most areas in northern and central regions for both the populations as a whole and for those suffering hardship, in southern regions many local areas are still characterised by scarce supply of services, often of poor quality. This diversification not only reflect geographical differences in the problems, but also a variety of local models which reflect the large margins of discretion enjoyed by local authorities. The 'packets of rights' enjoyed by people in needs do not depend only on the condition of need, but the place in which the need arises and the particular structure of the social welfare systems in that particular place.

This has been favoured by the progressive transfer of responsibility from central government to the Regions and local authorities. In 2000 the new general welfare law (L. 328) introduced a more universalistic approach and made a more uniform

approach in various areas possible. On the other hand - as the decentralisation of government has continued - a further increase in the differences between regions and local areas is probable.

(This all goes to indicate that the image of the Italian welfare system that emerges from the international literature is inadequate. The differences are so great as to make any overall definition of the system in terms of conventional labels impossible. Definitions such as 'conservative', 'familistic', 'particularistic' and so on hardly correspond to much of the country).

11. In the last two decades important developments on the policy and legislative scene have changed the framework of the policies and made it even more distant from the traditional image. In the housing field, two large changes have modified policy construction: the process of devolution of housing responsibilities to the regions - which has had considerable effects on the fate of social housing; and a process of liberalisation/deregulation (in reality more moderate than what has occurred in most European countries) that has manifested in both the reduction of state commitment to social housing and the 'controlled liberalisation' of the rented market.

Specific policy trends are generally in line with those common to most European countries: more targeting of measures in favour of specific populations; a relative substituting of aid to housing with aid to persons; increased efforts in favour of existing stock through rehabilitation programmes; the concurrence of the measures adopted: simultaneous help to the home ownership sector, to the social rented sector, and to the private rented sector; a transfer of responsibilities from the government to decentralised levels and local authorities.

With housing there has been a progressive transfer of responsibility from central government to the regions and communes. Now the whole game is determined by the central role taken by the regions who have fundamental responsibilities for social housing. At the same time, the role of the local authorities has increased. The Regions are now responsible for public sector housing and control most of the institutional resources for housing and the community. Local authorities have concrete responsibility for local housing. They have significant resources of their own and they have potentially important duties concerning planning and co-ordination of local initiatives, the setting up of housing agencies and local networks, etc. Central

government has maintained wide powers over general regulations and planning, particularly in the field of the of private rental housing.

In the social welfare area, the situation is a little more complex. Those changes typical of the new social welfare in Europe occurred in Italy for the whole of the 1990's. The transfer of responsibility to private welfare organisations became more important. New measures were introduced along side services – vouchers, care cheques, etc. – which mean new types of relationship with society and the market and new ways of seeking care for weak groups.

While the general process has also seen an increase in the responsibilities of regions and municipalities, nevertheless, at the end of the 1990's various measures created the conditions for a certain standardisation of criteria throughout the country as far as minimum criteria for welfare assistance are concerned, e.g. the new general law on social welfare. In the meantime, however, as has already been said, decentralisation and devolution processes have continued encouraging differentiation of regional and local policies.

12. This legislation made important changes to the context of social welfare policies. The main measures have been the new national law on welfare (L. 382, 2000, “measures for the creation of an integrated system of social welfare action and social services”); reform of the Law on rents (1998) (it provides for support for those suffering most hardship by means of a ‘National Fund for the support of access to rented accommodation’); law to introduce experimentally a minimum integration income.

But on the whole, the system is still affected by big welfare limitations, traditional limitations and those resulting from the big changes that occurred in the 80's and 90's. Social housing is a fundamental critical point due on the one hand to the limits of the traditional system and on the other to the uncertainties over the change to new forms of social housing. A system designed to meet a relatively simple and homogeneous demand, like that of the 1950's and 60's has been unable to keep up with the succession of developments that the demand has undergone - its growing variety, the appearance of new groups in need with requirements that are radically different from those traditionally found (e.g. immigrants).

The main limit to policies today is the capacity to come to terms with the meaning of the new interconnections between impoverishment and housing hardship/poverty processes. Poverty overdetermines the policy requirement resulting in two complementary demands: to address housing risk (the typically ‘widespread’ character of the new hardship which now covers not only the poor segments of the population) and to construct markedly social housing policies. According to what is indicated by the development undertaken in other countries, this means

making a *very* affordable supply available, trying to make the supply appropriate by providing social support services, and a closer relationship between housing and 'social', between housing measures and measures to fight poverty.

Things went differently for social welfare policies. At the end of the 1990's the new welfare law – which crowned a process that had lasted 50 years - made substantial changes to the context of social welfare policies: introducing more active policies in the fight against poverty; making the system develop towards more universalistic mechanisms and oriented to a social rights approach. While on the one hand the law confirmed a tendency to favour various aspects typical of new welfare, the overall philosophy was that of 'modern selective universalism' (to cite the report accompanying the law) which represented an alternative to free-market ideology.

The intention of the law was to create a system of active protection with the accent on prevention of hardship, by integrating social services with health, educational and work integration services and involving public and private sector social welfare agencies. The result was to be the creation of the 'social protection net' that has been called for so often in proposals for welfare reform, a network that would provide an effective context for measures like that of the RMI. The objective of the law was to eliminate geographical disparities and the discretionary powers of local authorities, and to equip the all country with this integrated network of services.

During the same period a law was enacted which introduced a minimum insertion income experimentally (in 40 municipalities).

The minimum (re)insertion income was presented as "a measure against poverty and social exclusion employing economic and social welfare support to persons exposed to social marginalisation and who are unable, due to psychological, physical and social reasons, to maintain themselves and their children". It consisted of "action aimed at pursuing the social integration and economic independence of the persons and families that receive it, by means of personalised plans and monetary transfers to supplement income". It was to be implemented by local authorities. The condition for access to minimum insertion income was an income below the poverty threshold set at 500,000 Lire (258 Euro) per month for a single person. Non European immigrant were eligible if they had been resident in a local authority for at least three years. The "action aimed at social integration" was designed to help

overcome marginalisation by encouraging the individual capacities and economic independence of individuals.

The result of this situation is very uncertain as we don't know about the final outcomes of devolution and because of the change of government in these two years. With the new government, various signs indicate a different philosophy from that embodied in Law 328 - in favour of a more markedly 'neo-lib' view on how to go "beyond the welfare state". There are a number of clues that suggest we are in the presence of a new look. The introduction of substantial elements of privatisation has already occurred in many regions, especially for health services, and central government has supported these moves. Particularly restrictive legislation has been enacted in the immigration field, with severe consequences for social integration policies. There have been signs of a reversal of tendencies with respect to the de-institutionalisation processes in progress since the 1970's etc. Some cut in social expenditures puts regions and municipalities in difficulty and means they have to make a great compensatory effort if they want to maintain reasonable levels of services and subsidies. Policies that address poverty constitute a particularly critical point of the measures adopted and planned by the new government. They are centred mostly on monetary payments and on a set of tax concessions (allowances and deductions, whose role as anti-poverty measures is necessarily extremely limited).

13. The discrepancies between regions and between local authorities are extremely large in the field of homelessness as seen in the recent report of the *Commissione di indagine sull'esclusione sociale* (Commission for the investigation of social exclusion) on policies and initiatives operated by local authorities to assist persons of no abode (Commissione 2001 and 2002 and Fondazione Bignaschi 2000).

The picture that emerges from the cities analysed shows the co-existence in Italy of very heterogeneous models of intervention at local level. There is a high level of differentiation both with regard to public and voluntary/private welfare action. The absence up until the passing of the new law on welfare, of guidelines in the legislation establishing minimum standards of support across the country resulted in persons suffering serious marginalisation and extreme poverty receiving very unequal treatment in different areas. The picture that therefore emerges from the twenty cities analysed shows the fragmentation of social policies and the extreme variations in local voluntary initiatives. The differences regard the degree to which needs are covered, the criteria of access to services and to accommodation offered.

A large gap between the north and south of the country emerges in this respect. In the towns and cities of northern and central Italy attempts to go beyond the traditional old fashioned welfare approach based on emergency measures are more frequent and are often up to the same standards as the best European practices. In the more innovative areas the no abode now enjoy a full range of services: preventative services, emergency and crisis services and rehabilitation reintegration services. The service provision of shelters is combined with rehabilitation and promotional work and low threshold action of satisfying primary needs, reducing damage and establishing initial relationships with persons. Different types of shelter and accommodation services are provided to meet the differing needs of a very heterogeneous user base. Multidimensional, integrated action (action that integrates different types of resource such as health, psychological and personal relations resources, financial, training and housing resources) is offered to help individuals to develop their own capacities for reintegration into society. Co-operation between local actors and integration of services (public, voluntary and private welfare) are standard practice. Municipal administrations play a more active role here in formulating policies and promoting forms of co-ordination with welfare co-operatives and voluntary organisations.

Even where substantial progress has taken place, this new innovative culture has not translated systematically into concrete practices and the new services it has produced are insufficient quantitatively. Deficits, some of which are acute, remain. They highlight the insufficiency of public sector responses and the limitations of emergency oriented policies, which are still the rule rather than the exception at local level.

14. Differences between areas is also found in the size and quality of innovative housing initiatives that characterized public and private sector local action/housing in the 1990's.

The housing problems of the weakest bands of the population were the object of significant action during the 1990's by voluntary associations, co-operatives and trade unions. The initiatives - motivated above all by a desire to respond to the problems of foreign immigrants - were developed on different levels, by trying an innovative use of institutional resources and by combining together institutional resources and those supplied by civil society. They attempted to exploit the space offered by the public sector housing system and the legislation on immigration, but at the same time introducing - on the basis of experiences in other countries - new formulas and types of organisation, not provided for by our institutions.

Most of these initiatives consist of ‘social property’ activity along two main lines (a) making the private rented market accessible by mobilising the supply and taking intermediation action to provide landlords with guarantees, subsidise costs and overcome the economic, information and market rejection problems encountered by immigrants; (b) acquire and manage property assets with which to provide rented accommodation (as permanent, temporary or medium term accommodation) at reduced prices by drawing on public (assets and funding) and private sector, voluntary association and ‘solidarity’ resources.

Conceptualisation problems

15. The almost exclusive focus on the figure of the no abode places a question-mark over the social construction of the problem in Italy. There is a risk with this concentration on extreme situations of conveying the idea that the field of homelessness can be ‘cut out’ and separated from the broader processes that produce social and housing exclusion. There is also a related risk that the broader range of different types of housing exclusion are excluded from the debate and the research on homelessness.

This view has important consequences on both research and policy. It may involve scarce recognition of the variety of profiles and histories of homelessness. Emphasis on homelessness as a problem of capabilities may undermine recognition of its ‘structural’ factors. Moreover reference to extreme situations means that the problem of homelessness is scarcely conceptualized as one of housing, or that social marginalisation and housing exclusion are considered as different questions.

The policy approach that correlates with this construction is characterised by two factors: a tendency to underestimate the importance of housing policies for the marginalized homeless/ the no abode themselves; the scarce recognition that persons excluded from housing but not characterised by accentuated traits of social marginalisation enjoy in the policy system. In Italy the probability of being excluded from housing, in some way ‘homeless’, without being marginalized, is maybe higher than in other places. But this is not an open issue in the construction of policies. On the other side there is the risk that – in a country where there is much latent, ‘hidden homelessness’ - policies are focussed on the most visible.

16. This narrow approach has a particularly distorting effect on policies in a country like Italy where ‘integrated poverty’ is widespread in many areas and where cases of housing exclusion

without social marginalisation are particularly frequent and the phenomenon of homelessness is to a large extent latent in character. However, the attention to extreme situations and the biases mentioned above also occur in other countries. Italy provides examples of social construction problems that are to be found almost everywhere.

(a) Homelessness can only become the subject of appropriate research studies - and important in policy terms - if they are set in a broader conceptual field. On the one hand, it is not useful to reduce the question of the homeless to extreme situations only. The question should be extended to include the analysis of the much broader processes that lie around the production of explicit or literal homelessness. This is even more important in Italy if one considers the accentuated latency of the phenomenon in the country. On the other hand the question must be examined in relation to both the types of problem that cross paths in the concept of homelessness - poverty and social exclusion as against housing exclusion (understood in the wider meaning of the term rather than just the literal sense of 'lack of a home').

Uncertainty also derives from the difficulty - once it has been established that these two lines of research are appropriate - in defining the specific nature of homelessness with respect to the broader processes of poverty and housing hardship, or the relationships between homelessness and these broader processes. The relationships between homelessness on one side and poverty, social exclusion and housing deprivation on the other side are of both continuity and discontinuity. Homelessness involves risk factors and chains of cause and effects with specific characteristics, which do not necessarily coincide with those of poverty. The same kind of assumption may be made as regards the housing factors and housing policies. In fact, the debate on the homeless abounds with reference to housing variables that have dubious relationships to homelessness. For housing factors too, the concepts of 'risk' and of 'context factors' are often used as a substitute for facing the difficulty of defining the relationships, for suggesting 'possible' (causal) relationships in conditions of uncertainty, and in absence of empirical validation (Tosi 1999, 115).

(b) Homelessness in any case is a double problem, a two-fold question in the debate – it refers to housing exclusion and to social marginalisation or social exclusion. This duplicity means that research must run along two lines: the problems of housing (exclusion) and those of poverty/social exclusion. It is impossible to exclude one of the two dimensions. To separate the two fields, as has occurred in Italy, is not a good way of treating this duplicity, the resort to additive or disjunctive definitions of the type 'and', 'or', 'also' is elusion of the question.

This duplicity must be faced with all its problems, which means looking at it through two lenses and proceeding to two types of identification, one based on social figures and the other on housing accommodation. It means tackling the problem of the difficult relationships between the two types of problem and in principle maintaining the independence of the two areas.

(c) To find a definition useful for policy one must think in terms of the relationships between the definitions and the types of welfare regimes, link the definition to a specific welfare system - how a certain welfare causes certain definitions and how certain definitions have practical consequences of the way of dealing with homelessness: what it excludes, what it does include; why are certain systems more or less inclusive; what are the reasons for the definition you find in the welfare system, what are the welfare consequences of the definitions; how local or national definitions manage the links between the two aspects, what kind of consequences a certain definition does it have excluding or including in the problem the other kinds of dimensions.

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