

Friday April 22nd 2005

Friday Afternoon 14:00-17:50

Presentation of the Italian NGOs and their views on research

Attended by:

FIOpsd

Nuovo Albergo Popolare (Bergamo)

Associazione Amici di Piazza Grande (Bologna)

Associazione San Marcellino (Genova)

Antonio Tosi, It:

I want to introduce the Italian Associations who accepted to attend our workshop. The NGOs we have here today I would say are representative of the organisations in Italy. They are responsible for different types of action, different philosophies, ideological attitudes and different methodologies, There is geographical variety – no one from Milan - they come from Genoa, Bologna and a representative from FIOpsd who is the general organisation of organisations working in the field of homelessness.

The first point of their intervention is about what they do – a short introduction to their work and type of services they provide. Then they are asked to say something about the role that NGOs play in the public debate about poverty and homelessness in Italy and the role of experts in the Italian debate. And also the role they have as a pressure group, and advocacy work, with outcomes that are always uncertain. The role they have in the definition of homelessness in Italy. Because they are responsible for the popularising and translation in some way of the term 'homelessness', particularly FIOpsd, into the term 'senza dimora'. But as I have said, time and time again in my papers to this network, 'senza dimora' is near to the term 'no abode' so it implies a more restricted use of this term, this definition. It is small with respect to the current use of 'homelessness' in the international debate.

Then there is the relationship to research: some have made their own research, some have requested an institute or university to make research for them. But what are the urgent research questions in this debate. We would prefer short presentations on one or more of these points, and then time for discussion which some points may be taken again and deepened. We will make the translation though some can do it.

Maryse Marpsat, Fr: Welcomed Italian NGOs to the network

Stefano Galliani (FIOpsd)

(Speaking in English) In this meeting I represent Fiopsd, the national umbrella organisation that brings together 65 organisations in Italy, that belong both to the third sector, the private sector and also a small number of public administrations like Rome, Florence, Bologna, Venice and some other small cities. It is very rare in Italy to have a formal organisation that brings together both the private and public focussing on a specific area. FIOpsd is the only organisation that is focussing on 'senza dimora'.

The issue about definition is one of the crucial issues and this has to be debated in Europe and Italy.

What are the aims of FIOpsd?

- i. It is a focus for lobbying
- ii. One of the aims of FIOpsd is to make public awareness about homelessness and a better understanding of homelessness.
- iii. FIOpsd also provides training for all the organisations, including the municipalities that are members of FIOpsd.

We have a small budget – 20% come from the membership fees, but the most part comes from contracts and agreements with regional or local administrations, to develop projects or support network of services, or some few researches in co-operation with universities or private research institution. So the link between FIOpsd and research is quite developed but we need more, and we are now setting up a network like an observatory but only just developing.

We have produced some reports that try to understand the situation better with the help of the service providers and the university researchers. I would like to give you two different examples of the link between research and FIOpsd.

The first one is in Genoa, FIOpsd took a contract to support the local network of private and public organisations for the homeless, to enable a better work together in the city. One of the actions of this project was to have a small survey and after this we had a more clear idea about the link between research and the daily work of the services and an interesting result from the survey that covered the first three months in 2004, that uncovered the new users of the services in Genoa. We had quantitative data about age and where people came from and also qualitative data from 12 people to have an idea. We discovered that the homeless people had a lot of hope, networks, projects in their mind. This means that we cannot set up a network to maintain their condition but have to improve their condition, and we can work to change the life condition of these people. But this is not a normal idea of the public who think that homeless people will not change their lives.

The second example is the region of Veneto (Venice area and so on), who asked FIOpsd to prepare a project so that they had a better idea of the homeless in their area. FIOpsd prepared an interesting project for the civil servants, that was action research in order to involve different actors and to support these actors in work, options and training. This would be similar to the big debate in order to find out what we had to discover for the research. But for political reasons this research was given to Statistics Department of Padua University and they are just collecting the number of people sleeping under bridges, on streets. And I don't think this is very important for us.

Maryse Marpsat, Fr:

What would you say are the main issues you would like covered by research in your country?

Stefano Galliani (FIOpsd):

It is not a small question.

- a) research for social workers to have a better understanding.

- b) We need to have more qualitative data and longitudinal research to understand what happens before people become homeless and what is the right intervention, the pathway, to improve the life of these people.
- c) Third we also need different categories, a different frame to understand the profile of homeless people. We can say that they are poor people but not all the poor people became homeless; they are addicted people but not all the addicted people became homeless, they are without social ties, yes that is very important, but why does the breakdown of social ties, the breakdown of the family produce homeless. We can say they are without economic resources, and they are unemployed but, yes, not all the unemployed became homeless. We really need new categories to read these phenomena, the difficulties in the lives of these people. We need these categories to set up different services and to speak in a different way to the policy maker and to say that probably that some kinds of trouble that affect these people, speak to (come from) the different policies, different welfare policies that we have.

Giacomo Invernizzi (Nuovo Albergo Popolare, Bergamo)

I am responsible for the social service in Bergamo for the reception of homeless. The name of the service is 'New Popular Hotel', it was started fifty years ago like a classical shelter. They were started to solve a specific problem but in time they became part of a web of services designed to solve the problem of marginality. They are in a local web because it is important to solve the question locally. It is a territorial strategy that can help people with social resources in wages and housing and help people to regain control of their social context.

As well as the local approach to marginality, we have a specific aim to work with people to enhance their personal abilities to gain control over their lives.

Our strategy is based on three different consecutive phases: reception phase, directing clients to one of four specific services - alcohol addiction, mental illness, drug addiction and generic - based on the classical definition that government recognises and to be identified within one of these groups helps funding their service. 3rd phase: we help people with social integration, we help people to redefine which is the best housing solution for them and which is the best model of social integration for a specific person and helping them to get a wage to support this integration. We have an agreement with Bergamo municipality and regional support and also private support.

Instead of the 4 definitions we have arrived at a definition that we call – Severe Adult Hardship. The term 'Adult Hardship' defines the social/cultural frame. I think that research can help in filling the void that exists in sociological literature about the biographical aspect of the phenomenon. Theorists can also help in the evolution of the social network.

We also wish that theory could solve the problem of definition in the micro category. The problem of immigration and homelessness in Bergamo has not found a clear definition. After ten years we realised that there was a problem of immigrant homelessness but, nevertheless, the response to this problem was the same offered to local homeless, without any kind of problematisation.

Stefano Galliani (FIOpsd)

(Speaking in English)

To give an example - we have a big problem about the legal status of a number of immigrants. Many of the immigrants are illegal and they go to the service for the homeless but they just have a legal problem. When you solve the legal problem then the most of them that is enough – they are able to have work, a wage, a house, and so on. They are inside the homeless context but it is not the right answer for them.

Federico Ribotti (Associazione San Marcellino, Genoa)

(Speaker in English)

The Associazione San Marcellino is situated in the heart of Genoa and has continued the good work of “la Messa del Povero” (the Poor Mass) that was a religious organisation, in caring for those in need in the post-war years and the 60s, of those arriving from the South of Italy who came in search of employment and moved into the Old Town District because of low housing costs. Most of our intervention are in the Old Town Centre but also now in the better off areas in the Town in the direction of ‘cultural contamination’ to make awareness amongst people who wouldn’t otherwise come in contact with the poorest social class of society.

San Marcellino is a registered voluntary association with about 20 regular staff and 450 volunteer workers – all professionally qualified and well motivated. Lots of these volunteers come from these better off areas and this is good from a cultural point of view. We welcome all Italian homeless people who are expressly or explicitly in need with the aim of helping them discover their own interior (i.e. personal) resources that will lead to change and improvement. The basic areas covered by the Association are accommodation, employment, free time and socialisation, health and well-being and drug and alcohol addiction.

The core of the system is what we call the “Centro di ascolto”, i.e. the care centre. The activities of the care centre are fundamental and are carried out on two fronts. We have an initial reception and the social care supporting the progress of people within the five areas by means of co-ordination with workers of the other sectors. Each contact with the Care Centre or other sectors of the associations is registered in the database as well as the kind of requests from the person, if he or she asks for an interview, a shower, money, a train ticket. This registration keeps us constantly updated about the changes in the homeless population of the town and moreover keeps the memory of the story of the person with us thus giving us and them the possibility of not repeating non-constructive behaviours in the future relationship between the person and the Association workers. Contacts with the Care Centre which is the only direct contact with the street, keep on growing for 10% every year for the last 5 or 6 years.

The work we try to do in San Marcellino has a central point. The attention kept on the time and on the graduality in intervention is strongly connected with the convention of keeping the person in the middle, with his or her features and differences from us and from the others. This means agreed opening towards personalisation of the projects and great flexibility in methods of working tools such as dormitories or others.

Concerning the short-term changes we are expecting to grow in the area of accommodation with the creation of about ten new single apartments and the creation of a new 24 bed night shelters in place of the two 12 bed shelters.

Associazione San Marcellino collaborates since 1998 with the Department of Sociology at the University of Bologna. This collaboration has produced two European projects with the realisation of research into alcoholism and good working practices. This project, and one on work policy, produced strong collaborations with some associations

To finish I will say that in the last few years we have seen the widening of the tendency of defining the homeless people in Genoa in Italy starting from its psycho-social aspects. This has not been followed by the traditional welfare system which is, therefore, not able to provide answers to the problem if not in essential terms, with first level dormitories, canteens and a few other tools. On the contrary this social and psychological attitude towards the problem has produced in the Association action for the construction, first of all, for relational and effectiveness and then for the construction of personal identities through the working, housing and associational tools.

I would like to conclude with the main objects of the research we have found these days:

- First I would mention the problem of the female homeless population. The difficulties of getting in touch and working with them. The difficulties of understanding the best possible intervention with them proved that it seems not to work if we simply translating the intervention for men.
- Second I would like to keep a light on the direct consequences this individualistic society seems to have on the lack of sense of belonging. There is a denial of paternity with regard to the social system - a concept that Robert Castel defines as 'disaffiliation'. For us this is the basis of the homeless people present in our streets.

Alberto Benchimol (Associazione Amici di Piazza Grande, Bologna)

The name of this Association can be translated as Friend of the Main Square in Bologna. It was founded in Italy in 1993 directly by a group of homeless people. This is the main feature that is specific to this association – it is made directly and founded by homeless people. Most of the people who are homeless and who are part of the Association take part in the Managing Board take decisions and the every day part of what goes on in the Association. So we can say that the social approach to the problem of social exclusion is based on self-help policies and all empowerment projects made by the Association.

It all started in 1993 with the street newspaper that some of you may have seen called 'Piazza Grande' that is written, published and distributed by homeless people on the street. It is not the only newspaper like this in Italy but I think Paolo Klun (also from Piazza Grande) can confirm that it is the main one in Italy.

To give you some numbers. The newspaper had a very big success immediately – the topic was the problem related to poverty in the city and in the whole country of Italy. The paper has a circulation of six thousand copies

and more than 700 people involved in the distribution. The Association is not just the newspaper which was founded in 1993 - the Association itself was founded in 1994, and it can rely on 150 volunteers, 450 members and several people who have a collaboration with the Association.

The Association has other activities involving the homeless in the:

- The factories for collecting and recycling second-hand materials,
- The mobile street service, the co-ordinator is here, Leonardo Tancredi, who goes out with 4 or 5 homeless people. They meet with 60 or 70 people every night. They see a lot of turnover of homeless people, but mostly what they see is this turnover is made by young people 18-25 years who have left the home of their parents.
- 35 lawyers in Bologna that given free legal assistance to the homeless. We provide a range of services including advocacy with the authorities, free legal advice in litigation. The goal is to solve the issues for the person – either traditional legal representation or a simple form, or a telephone call to a qualified representative. In our experience we have, since 2001, taken 550 cases, not all become litigation. But there was a big legal case against the City of Bologna that didn't want to give the people residence. This was a very big step. We have, two days a week, someone to listen to the cases and also a lawyer goes to the shelter two days a week because we believe that sometimes just taking care of a legal case may be a way to solve the case. For example some people have cases with the public transport system, this can consolidate the problem of homeless people.

So the core feature of our association over the past 11 years has been to be an organisation of homeless people and to be a self-help organisation. Social operators and the end-users are the same person and this is the specific feature of the association.

The mission of the Association is to give visibility to people who are often not considered (this is the word 'invisible') and also we want to read and understand the needs or to give pressure on the local welfare system to give answers and services.

Some of our tools are the newspaper and we try, whenever we make a new service, we make a new publication. Our financial contribution comes:

25% from private contribution,

50% self-financing activities – 2 enterprises:

“BiciCentro”, first repair and sell second hand bikes (connected to the problem of stolen bikes in the city – alcohol/drug users stealing – our effort to stop this market) make one bike out of two or three, ‘

“Sartoria”, the repair and refurbishment of used clothes for all the people. We also have a theatre that puts on shows and laboratories for the homeless people.

The message is that the homeless people is strongly involved in all of these things. Only the position of the Co-ordinator is taken by a person outside the homeless, not from the street, and this is myself at the present time.

So the research that we would like to see, to take from outside, and also to carry on ourselves, only makes sense for us if it involves the person who are the object of the investigation. It is always finalised to understand the needs of the people and not to be a theoretical exercise by itself. Also it should sensitise the local territory and the local community and is important in develop empowerment policies.

Maybe it is the definition of the homeless themselves that is a problem; there is a risk that the definition of the homeless person does not capture the complex reality of homelessness. At the moment there is not an active response on the part of the welfare system, it has the risk itself of encapsulating a complex reality, the reality of the homeless person themselves, in categories that are too narrow, categories that, anyway, the welfare system, is not able to give a positive answer. Paolo do you want to add something?

Joan Smith, UK:

You said that you are just seeing homeless young people on the street. This is what we saw in the UK twenty-five years. What is the proportion of young people from other Northern Cities and from the South? I am wondering whether there might be young people from other Northern Cities, because they are embarrassed with their families, and young people from the South.

Leonardo Tancredi (Associazione Amici di Piazza Grande, Bologna)

The phenomenon is not only concerning the young people. What we can observe in the field, from the mobile services, is that people leave their house from the South because Bologna gives a free situation for them. This call is connected with the search for a new job, or a different job. This is only a part of the problem, another important part concerns the immigration problem in Bologna. The problem is strongly connected with the actual law that we have in Italy on Immigration, the law is directly responsible for illegal immigration. Illegal immigration means that men and women are invisible and not reached by the institutional services that we have. Another part of the people that we see on the streets are people who come from normal life style but people who may have experienced the loss of their job, or a family problem, or both together, and this drove them on the road and they then encountered an alcohol or drug problem. In these cases the situation of homeless people is strictly connected with the homeless policies we have in Italy.

Paolo Klun (Associazione Amici di Piazza Grande, Bologna):

We have to start from a concept of 'vulnerability'. This is connected to the problems of precariousness, life style in general (family, work, house). It is difficult to find differences from the young person who comes from the South of Italy, and the immigrant from Romania, for example. They live and work in the same place. This means it is very difficult to find a single and simple definition of the homeless person.

Stefano Galliani (FIOpsd):

Just to say how complicated is a difficult. Recently I listened to Federico Bonadonna, the chief Co-ordinator of the Municipality of Rome Research and he published a book on this. He told that on the streets of Rome, sleeping in cars, there are a meaningful number of men who have regular and permanent contract of employment, but after a breakdown in the family they are sleeping in the car. This raises many different issues – policy issues, there are not enough houses or homes for those people not a big salary because they have to pay for themselves, and the life of their wife and son, after family breakdown. On the other side there is not sufficient prevention services because after a short period you go straight to the street. There is also the problem of the cultural side - Why don't they find any links to their family or their parents or friends? This is the paradox of autonomy – you have such a big autonomy so that the result is to sleep in the car. Maybe the culture said it is not important to have strong links, it is important to have autonomy, to have money and a car.

Contributor

The Italian welfare system is very weak from this point of view. It still works like 20 or 30 years ago when the Italian family was much stronger than it is now and the destruction of the family has not been recognised by the Italian welfare system.

Antonio Tosi

One that is surprising is internal migration. We know that foreign immigrants are ones likely to follow routes that take them into marginalisation and into homelessness.

This is not new in Italy. Migration from the South has traditionally been one of the complements of homelessness. If you look to shelters in Milan, I mean nights shelters for the extreme edge of homelessness the proportion of persons from Southern origin is surprisingly high. Migration was a typical way of escaping poverty in the south – an adventure that in most cases can lead to success but in some cases it is a repetition of failures and can lead to homelessness. So this is traditional but it has increased.

Alberto Benchimol (Associazione Amici di piazza Grande, progetto "Avvocato di Strada")

I am responsible for the street lawyers and we need a legal word for homeless people. In our experience we cannot assist people who are simply the poor, lawyers have to respect the direction from their main board that they cannot make anything for free and this is a problem. We can assist people who live on the street i.e. 'a factual definition of homelessness', they can have a home somewhere else, we don't care. If it was a condition of poorness then we would be assisting thousands of people in Italy – to be poor doesn't mean anything, I am much more poor than 4-5 years ago for my own economic situation for example. But we need a legal definition some how – having a residence gets you health benefits, social benefits. But if you don't have a written residence somewhere you can't subscribe to these written benefits.

Joan Smith (UK)

That used to be the case. But now there is a situation in the UK where if you are 'No Fixed Abode' you can sign on as 'No Fixed Abode'. You then know where the rough sleepers are because you have a lot of them NFA signing on at certain benefits.

May I ask another question? Some of us are interested that you think your methods of intervention should be different for the women you work with than the men. In the UK there are different methods of intervention in terms of age of the person and in terms of whether they have children or not but if you had a man and a woman on the street then you would not necessarily have a different method of intervention. So this may be where we are lacking thought so if you could say something.

Paolo Klun (Associazione Amici di Piazza Grande, Bologna)

The problem with working with the female population on the streets is about 10-15% of the population. The resources the welfare system brings to this are different than for men. Women are seen first of all as mothers, the girls and women we met in the street usually have 6,5,7 children. So usually the method we have used for men, is not good for women because it doesn't give any results, because usually the welfare system takes care differently of the women situation. The welfare system enters our project for women, whereas usually it leaves the men alone, there are no resources for men. But for women, anytime they say they have children somewhere, or they are married, or when they are alone and on the street, it is more simple to find places. We have a night shelter for six places for women but the time we stay in contact with these women is very short because they get pregnant. Every time they get pregnant they get two or three years of assistance from the social system, so they disappear for three to four years, and then we see them again. So using the night shelter and the same methods for women is not so useful.

Giacomo Invernizzi

(Clara Antonucci is translating)

I could tell you the many years of tentative definition of people in our work. But defining an adequate terminology it is important to tie strongly both work and practice. Terminology is extremely important because it introduces (brings in) the services in some way. Legal terminology must move from culturally definitions. The three main concepts that help to bring in services, to give assistance to people are:

Senza Dimora – means something very specific, and is different

Chronic persons – normally gives right to medical assistance

Poor people– which is more related to religious interventions

There is no focussing on subjectivity

Filipa Menezes (FR)

Would you call the critical factors, the same as risk factors? Would you call them risks?

Giacomo Invernizzi (Clara Antonucci interprets)

They correspond to risk factors. When I talked about vulnerability I meant risk factors.

Paolo Klun (interpreted)

I will make just some points from this discussion.

It is very important that we come out with a name for these phenomena because actually the status of this condition is meant as a part of a more general problem of poverty but it is a true and different thing of which of course the economical and material situation is very important. But if I think of the phenomenon as a condition then I think it is a condition that becomes serious time after time, of losing the ability of relationships with the social context, with our own personal history, and with the ability to keep the skill to work and have a job, and taking care of ourselves.

So it is very difficult to fix it as a socio-economical category. It is a true condition of each person which can become more serious if you add to it a drug condition, an alcohol conditional, or losing a job.

Of course I can understand the point of view of the Albergo Popolare (Bergamo) that they have to find a category where they can address the homeless persons because this is the way the welfare system works. But on the practical point of view it is very difficult to divide every single aspect in one single person. This lacks the understanding of the problem in the global vision (holistic view). There is a lack in the way the local welfare system is organised and there is a lack of financial resources, nationally, to address specific problems. More in general, in Europe, there is a lack of organisation that intervenes.

So in my opinion there are two needs: the first is to describe the needs and build on this description, and this can be more than a national way of thinking because it is a problem that involves the whole of Europe; second, an approach that can also connect the different knowledge systems of all the organisations, it is always difficult to compare data between different public agencies even if they speak of the same people and the same reality, sometime the same person is under different services and every social actor has a different image of this person.

There is a need to find a global and unique way to approach the problem that takes into consideration the local, national and supra-national problem.

Antonio Tosi

I have a short comment before closing. If you put together what has been said about the Italian welfare system, the narrow definition of homelessness, and the kind of actors that have been working in this field at the local level, it could be expected that the prevailing attitude is between a social assistance logic and compassion and it is marginal an approach in relation to rights, or citizenship rights, or social rights. I mean individual rights because rights should be individual from this point of view and on this basis and it would be expected that self-organisation is an exceptional event, and Associazione Amici di Piazza Grande (Bologna) is an interesting case from this point of view – it is a self-help organisation, it has a certain amount of self-organisation on the part of homeless persons and I don't know any other

organisation that does this in Italy. This is interesting because you can link to what has been said about the past and to the future of the general law of welfare that was passed by Parliament a few years ago, but has not been implemented so far.

It was a law with explicit reference to homelessness among the various types of poverty, and it also had the idea of obtaining homogeneity at local level by obliging local administrations, or regions, to adopt a sufficiently reasonable legislation and policy in the field of poverty. This has not happened so far and one of the points on which *FIOpsd* insists is to give realisation to this law and to provide financial support for the range of forms of provision that were planned by this law. But only a few regions have followed the direction of the framework in the legislation.

Close of session.