Approaches and Perspectives on Policies and Social Dynamics Related to Vulnerability and Homelessness

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Abstract: The analysis of policies and interventions is deeply related to the territory analysed. A focus on a specific area must consider the social, cultural and political settings that intersect within socioeconomic dynamics. This analysis of the literature considers the changes brought throughout the years within welfare systems by neoliberalism and other streams of policy making processes and political realms. The review aims to present different definitions and nuances of vulnerability and marginalisation, with a special focus on people experiencing homelessness, by studying not only measures 'tailored' to these groups' needs, but also other marginalising processes within society. The dynamics operating in the contexts defined by these characteristics are multifaceted and dense with sociocultural significance. This analysis poses questions related to the social definitions of the beneficiaries of such measures, which are produced by themselves, experts, the political discourse and citizens. Italy is used here as an example because of its history of profound differentiation between Regions regarding the levels of assistance and attention to specific issues. This heterogeneity poses questions about administrative, bureaucratic and social barriers, which are telling of the priorities underlined by the social and political contexts. The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated some of these dynamics while creating new ones and redefining individualities. The realisation of the right to health of vulnerable groups became a topic of discussion confronted with different means, depending on the contextual forces in question.

Key-words: Policy, Homelessness, Vulnerability, Italy, Health

Introduction

This literature review is linked to a research project that is divided in two main conceptual frameworks studying the Italian territory. The first is related to the macro level analysis of the context of institutions and policies related to healthcare and homelessness, analysing eventual changes in their narrative during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The second is focused on the micro level analysis that observes which resources were activated during the years of the pandemic by the providers of health and social services as well as from institutions, while observing how measures and provisions were received and implemented. The main goal in this case is also related to the perception of the right to health and if it is felt realisable in its entirety. This perception is related both to the perceived efficacy of services and programmes within the context of emergency and control of the contagion and to the subsequent period of readjustment of activities and provision of services. In this paper, the material analysed is a basis to construct an observation to see how policies influenced the reaction to the pandemic and vice versa, especially when related to people experiencing homelessness in Italy.

This review is divided as follows: the first part will focus on the definition of vulnerability and its social implication for people experiencing homelessness. The analysis will continue with an overview of some of the literature regarding poverty and the social pressure generated by its dynamics. This part will also focus on rights related to health and socioeconomic assistance, discussing the constraints linked to the problems that arise from trying to define these complex societal matters. The overall discourse is accompanied by an analysis of the influence of neoliberalism on policies and development, linking this dynamic to the general understanding of vulnerabilities. The following section will be related to the issues that arise within the policy making process and how they interact with the process of 'othering' a part of the population (Lister 2016). The risk of this dynamic consists in overlooking individuals' agency and the influence that services and policy directions have on the perception and elaboration of the phenomenon by citizens themselves. The concluding remarks give an overview of the context analysed, underlining the difficulties that welfare systems are facing while illustrating challenges and possibilities ahead.

1 Experiencing Vulnerability

The concept of vulnerability is dense and intersects with a vast number of social, economic and historical dynamics. It is the product of several factors, culminating in the exposure to the risk of losing real and perceived 'social protection'. Over time, those citizens who once felt 'included' have become at risk of 'falling out' from their – social, cultural, economic – safety nets, generating further crises within the overall crisis, which increased inequality among citizens (Meo and Negri 2013). Furthermore, vulnerability, as a set of characteristics, often affects people experiencing homelessness, representing the product of a journey that culminates in the loss of home. This discourse can illustrate how 'new' types of individuals find themselves in this situation, which is not the starting point, but an element of a long path. Therefore, this relatively 'new homelessness' does not come from a stereotyped experience of marginalisation or distress. It is important to analyse the effects of these changes on social and cultural constructs (e.g., in Italy losing home can produce a cultural shock, being the house itself a valuable and widely owned resource across the country). The concept of home in Italy (*dimora* in Italian) must be understood within the cultural discourse of living (*abitare*) itself. Home can be thought of as a place that is not only physical, but it can be also an environment where identities (social and personal) and relationships are constructed. The heterogeneity of the homelessness phenomenon resides in its incorporation of different social profiles. Necessities change together with society, with the risk of producing a decrease in the capacity and in the will to initiate or continue processes like social integration and other endeavours (Meo and Capponi 2010).

The resulting diversity in the outcomes is influenced not solely by external factors, but it operates in a continuum with the responses elaborated by individuals. These processes are explained as 'coping' (Meo 2009). This dynamic is characterised by the activation of personal resources that are used to overcome obstacles. These resources can be also understood as the capacity of activating them, which depends on different factors (personal and contextual), especially on the social level. These aspects of the phenomenon become central if connected to the progressive weakening of social networks (particularly the ones with relatives, since the importance of the impacts that networks generate on the macro, meso and micro levels throughout the individual's life (Lubbers et al. 2020)). People experiencing homelessness often depict superficial relationships with their peers, which are sometimes affected by the competition for the appropriation of resources, while the ones with their relatives are weak or interrupt-

ed[1]. The relationship with institutions and other services is usually structured to construct the daily life of individuals experiencing homelessness, while obtaining resources for their necessities. In these cases, 'coping' can be understood as a concept that helps to realise a sense of predictability within their vulnerable situation. The time that individuals spend within the homeless experience changes their behaviour towards the different happenings in their lives. There are different adapting phases within these dynamics starting from rejection, continuing towards adaptation while often developing chronic aspects of homelessness (Meo 2009). These distinctions are not fixed and an experience like this one cannot be easily divided into stages, since they intersect with many changes surrounding them. However, a certain degree of systematisation can be useful to describe different phenomena. As a matter of fact, studies show how the experience of chronic homelessness is often overrepresented in some cases, since a lot of individuals are in a situation of temporary homelessness for many different causes. This characteristic shows how mutable and dynamic the experience and the phenomenon can be. The continuum in which this population interacts, consists in shortfalls linked to hardships brought by health and other spheres of life that can be either precursors or results of the homelessness experience. The heterogeneity is not limited to these aspects, it can be observed as well within the shelter experiences, during which different roles are interpreted in a cycle that can make them result in facilitators for coping mechanisms that reduce the possibility to exit the homeless status. Furthermore, the literature confirms how homelessness is in fact a structural issue, intersecting with individuals' reactions and agencies (Lee et al. 2010). To elaborate this statement, data from the Italian territory can be used to visualise these factors. Studies conducted within the city of Padua showed that most respondents experiencing homelessness had some form of economic support (Citizen Income, *Reddito di Cittadinanza* in Italian, or even different types of support), while still being 'outside' the labour market (despite having different competences and specialised skills). The vast majority of the people interviewed for this study declared that they received benefits and economic help by services alone and almost never by relatives, friends or acquaintances. Furthermore, the results showed that citizens who did have weak or absent social networks consequently had fewer economic resources available. Therefore services,

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[1] Data from a study carried out in Rome in 2014 during the 'RacContami Project'. Nevertheless, the respondents strongly valued family relationships and friendships, while they seemed to have less trust towards institutions (Fondazione Rodolfo Debenedetti and Università Bocconi 2014).

public and private, seemed to represent the crucial point where vulnerable groups searched and found the benefits needed to construct their own outlooks for the future, while influencing their life in a significant way. The authors of the study suggest that local administration, healthcare services and other organisations within the territory must work jointly, especially to overcome the logic of the 'emergency', which is a preponderant characteristic of this type of assistance. The characteristics of an emergency cannot exist anymore within these dynamics because they come back cyclically, while bringing new types of individuals in vulnerable positions both socially and economically. Hence, the coordination between services, since the often-remarked absence of specific ones for people experiencing homelessness, becomes a strong point that must be valued in a new possible view for social policies. Recurrent meetings between organisations and simpler, while generally shared and agreed, protocols to follow can benefit both parties (users and organisations/institutions). This last point becomes important when pondering about the necessity of operative protocols to face a phenomenon like the pandemic. Accessibility and integration must become the starting point for organisations to improve and implement systems for reintegration that are dynamic and do overcome the 'shelter logic'. Supporting the users of services in their tasks whenever they find bureaucratic, linguistic and cultural barriers (to name a few), while educating workers and the general 'housed' population on the territory, are all activities and objectives indicated as beneficial to the reconstruction of a network that can protect individuals from 'falling out' again (Gaboardi et al. 2021).

2 Pathways to Marginalisation

Noting the importance of organisations and groups within the results of different studies in literature, a meso-level concept that did not receive the same attention in literature is that of social networks, specifically for its role in poverty, as it is explained in the work of Lubbers, Small, and García (2020) 'Do Networks Help People to Manage Poverty? Perspectives from the Field'. This characteristic might seem surprising because poverty is a relational concept, lived, managed, negotiated, and reproduced within relationships with others. It appears clear that networks have a role in escaping and coping with poverty itself. Scholars have different positions regarding this matter, some underline the characteristics that make networks essential to activate a survival mechanism, others affirm that they

can increase the risk of social exclusion. Effects deriving from networks can be beneficial as well as damaging for individuals. This can happen because social relationships conduct social support together with norms and social pressure. Scholars have called for attention to the consequences of policies based on assumptions related to the existence of networks for every individual and their capabilities. Another result of these dynamics can be represented by the general distrust, where some relationships are characterised by conflicting interest and differences in power dynamics. These relationships can increase vulnerabilities, further limiting access to resources because of the lack of trust within and between groups. In these cases, ties created between peers fade away in a short period of time, mostly because of the increase of requests to satisfy necessities. For what concerns policies, they can be developed from the perspective of social support networks for people experiencing poverty – thus reducing the risk of exclusion – while empowering welfare systems. In this sense, organisations can help to build the infrastructure to create social networks (Lubbers et al. 2020).

Since services speak through their protocols and their providers, how they are perceived and perceive their work influences incisively the development of activities and programmes. Studies conducted within photovoice projects in Europe, show that workers from social services are more vulnerable to burnouts and higher stress levels because of their work with people with different multifaceted issues (with the additional risk of a repeated exposure to trauma), more than other emergency services providers. In these types of working environments, the expectations towards the clients' goals greatly influence workers themselves. Service workers often manifest the need for institutional agreements to have disposable economic resources for their service. Furthermore, they also manifest the need to perceive that their activity is influencing policies. The participation and communication with the community to overcome stigmatisation is noted as an important part in this process. Regulations' clarity is a feature that helps to overcome obstacles that might multiply the workload while helping people with their needs. In the field of social services, the characteristics of users accompanied by their multifactorial and chronic problems, may generate frustration for the service providers (Gaboardi et al. 2022). Moreover, research showed that the type of aid and support that institutions and organisations provide can go beyond their formal intention. There is a need to underline informal support: how it flows and thanks to which factors. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to institutional practices of organisations, to see their presence and actions in practice.

Small and Gose study the conditions that allow organisations to support social capital formation within vulnerable groups. They underline the importance of the boost that institutional norms give to social interactions among members, with a focus on joint tasks and long-lasting activities. This process might activate reciprocity and more access to other organisations (Small and Gose 2020). An example of the importance of the role that support plays during these processes can be found in the paper 'Homeless Women's Personal Networks: Implications for Understanding Risk Behavior' (Tucker et al. 2009), which contains an analysis focused on women with children. In comparison with housed mothers in poverty, people experiencing homelessness live with minor support from their networks, with a lack of trust in their relationships. Even if these groups have other relatives, contact with them is scarce. In general, close relationships do not provide the support they need. Literature explains how these groups are usually interfacing with networks that are small and do not have strong ties with a significant level of assistance. The results of this study, conducted with purposive sampling, show that the subjects follow in part the stereotypical vision of women experiencing homelessness as isolated individuals with small networks paired with minor support. Relatives came into the discussion more often than other types of relationships. The emotional closeness registered with relatives is not supported by frequent contact (geographical distance might play a major role in this case). For what concerns service providers, when accessing the services women were provided with food and other means to satisfy their necessities (as planned from the services used to examine the sample). Nonetheless, these actions might be perceived as coming from organisations and not from service providers specifically. It is possible that the limited resources of the providers represent a barrier to the satisfaction of their needs. However, the authors argue that there is a possibility to improve the quality of these relationships, which may constitute positive role models. Previous research on mothers that were single and with low-income, argues that a larger network could lower the risk of homelessness. In general, people with a diversified network tend to lead a healthier lifestyle (the hypothesis to explain this behaviour is related to the assumption that they might feel the responsibility and a certain degree of social pressure to do so) (Tucker et al. 2009).

Elaborating on the considerations prosed, the importance of organisations on the territory that constitute a bridge between vulnerable groups and institutions and other services is crucial. However, the macro level analysis of policies must confront with other levels where individuals construct their relationships and their individualities. They encounter different

barriers when it comes to constructing relationships outside their environment, as it is hard to keep the previous ones (this could be another example that underlines the importance of raising awareness among citizens and the general public about homelessness). Social and cultural marginalisation goes hand in hand with economic deprivation, which can create obstacles to the fulfilment of the rights of these groups. To avoid the risk of becoming 'hard to reach' and 'invisible' (Flanagan and Hancock 2010), these groups must elaborate strategies together with organisations, keeping in mind that overlooking specific difficulties in these cases might construct a wall when communicating with institutions. This aspect of vulnerability is more remarkable when it is related to the right to health. In this case, the conditions are not only linked to individual choices but also to social conditions that limit personal agency and influence the decisions of the individual. Therefore, marginalisation, as a concept, is constructed with the help of various factors, including networks, the ability to react and adapt, political exclusion and socio-economic status. It affects the ability to interact with institutions which is mutually determined by the perception of oneself (Vargas 2015). This type of dynamics can be also related to forms of exercising power and expectations. For example, within the studies of what is called the 'sociology of waiting', there is a definition of a different universe that gives to the concept of time different meanings according to perceptions and power relations. Temporality can be manipulated within these dynamics, generating conflict and bargaining of time itself. Social time becomes a different value, depending on the situation. The meaning given to waiting for services or other types of benefits produces effects on the individual, changing not only the perception of a right, but also that of a need, creating and recreating subordination through expectations (Auyero 2011).

3 Defining a 'Problem'

As some of the works cited in this paper demonstrate, there have been numerous studies regarding homelessness with different perspectives and methods. Therefore, it is not a matter of a lack of knowledge and insights related to the 'problem': it is rather an issue related to values and political moves. Consequently, the definition of a wicked problem could be useful to understand this complex landscape. Head and Alford describe how a wicked problem is centred around the debate of its nature and eventual solutions, while being linked and mutually affected by other problems.

These problems are not symptomatic of the lack of possible solutions, but they are rather built by political (and consequently policy-related) directions (Head and Alford 2015). Homelessness as a social and political phenomenon fits this scheme, being a multifactorial issue built not only on personal and family dysfunctions, but also by the different degrees of State regulations and organisations' management.

Within different countries characterised by diverse welfare states, markets, social and political contexts, Housing First (HF)[2] is an approach adopted in different regions as a solution to homelessness. The turning point is in the paradigm shift that this approach brought, changing the responses towards people experiencing homelessness. One of the main pillars of this approach is the centrality of the tenants' choice related to the level of relationship with social and health services tied to HF (this aspect is consistent with the normative framework related to housing as a human right). HF is an approach highly dependent on the policies and structural systems of countries. Outside the US, this system has to contend with different social services, cultural contexts and consequent reactions (e.g., the public opinion's positions and responses towards the program's interaction with the housing market rather than with social housing). Therefore, while HF remains an approach that brought new methods and results to the table, it may not be a real shift in every country because it is context-dependent. In some territories there are already social housing services and authorities that provide direct access to housing, all without an apparent change in the social or health behaviours (however, it is noted that some illnesses and conditions may still exclude a part of the population). Mental illnesses and addiction are often requirements to access HF, linking the approach to healthcare systems, while in other countries these characteristics are not usually considered in the eligibility criteria. For what concerns the eligibility criteria and management of the different cases, there might be an imposition of a homeless identity. The homeless identity can often result in a limitation in the set of people's abilities, aspirations and values. In this case, when categorised, people appear for their material deprivation (Parsell 2017).

Together with other outcomes that affected different spheres of societies, the pandemic generated deep and dramatic consequences on homelessness. Since the phenomenon has been identified as a public health

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[2] Sam Tsemberis developed the approach during the early 90s, within New York City's Pathways to Housing program. The original concept orbited around three main priorities linked to: the choice of the consumer, the role of the community and support services that are mobile (Parsell 2017).

emergency, governments funded numerous programmes in addition to previous ones. To understand the reasons behind certain responses, we can observe how motives before the pandemic were related to a *poverty of ambition*[3], which resulted in a lack of actions by governments while data and evidence demonstrated the health consequences of homelessness and what was necessary to solve, or in some cases to ease, these issues. Therefore, Parsell, Clarke and Kuskoff (2020) suggest that the effects of this rather novel virus on the health of people experiencing homelessness is not the only factor that justifies these measures: it is rather the possibility related to their vulnerability to contract and spread the virus to the rest of the population. Policies and programmes need to be tailored to local contexts and existing policies, adapting them to different environments within vulnerable groups, while being guided by empirical evidence. Following Bacchi's (2009) argument, the authors explain how policies and programmes are never a response to clear unbiased social problems: they are the result of problems' representation. The latter are the product of 'political rationalities' which logics permit the exercise of political power in certain contexts. In the context of 'neoliberal rationalities', homelessness appears as an issue of not socially functioning individuals that are in need of support for their behaviours and illnesses. In the neoliberal process of problematization, the health and medical frameworks have been crucial. Furthermore, it appears that certain policy measures have been oriented towards adjusting individuals by fixing them, rather than addressing their status as people experiencing homelessness. These discourses are also linked to the more moralising ones, blaming individuals for their 'bad choices and behaviour', with provisions aiming to punish them. A less common discourse is the one describing homelessness as the product of structural processes (markets dynamics, welfare, etc.) while promoting collective solutions (e.g., social housing) (Parsell et al. 2020).

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[3] 'Homelessness arises from our poverty of ambition. Cameron was clear that it's a societal problem, not just a government issue. "Most of my work has been with adults and they've been homeless and marginalised most of their life from birth – poverty, trauma, out of home care and so on. We need to think about the social conditions and seeds early on in life that contribute to homelessness. Housing first is a philosophy. We need to work from the premise people can choose. People don't want service providers in their life. What is our exit strategy? We need to think of normality and what comes out of the service system"' (PeakCare 2019).

4 Dynamic Frameworks, Ideologies and Definitions

The discourses and frameworks mentioned, which surround rationalities and political orientations, are layered in historical, social, cultural and economic dynamics. To understand certain policy directions, it is important to investigate the ideologies and social changes that prompted them. In this paragraph the focus will be the neoliberal discourse and its mutual influences on institutional and social movements, redefining and sometimes adapting to the foundations underpinning welfare states. The pathways formed by these processes are far from static: in literature there are debates and works on the evolution of neoliberalism throughout the years, resulting in what can be called 'liberal neo welfarism', as Ferrera (2013) proposes. This ideology combines liberalism and social democracy foundations to modify and structure the role of the State. Its adapting and transformative nature still has to come to terms with internal and external constraints brought by political directions and contexts, which vary from one nation to the other. In this framework, equality becomes dynamic and multidimensional, prioritising the ones in need for benefits and socioeconomic assistance[4]. Furthermore, this focus on neoliberal ideologies, rationalities, and their evolution, is interesting to analyse because it poses questions on the realisation and resilience of certain frameworks. The success of a set of ideas, even when related to policies tackling a specific issue, is related to their compatibility, and thus adaptability, with the institutions already present[5]. This statement means that the implementation of policies needs to be linked to institutions, actors, and their interests in practice. Therefore, these considerations can be used as instruments to understand why and how neoliberalism acts and adapts in different ways depending on the

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[4] Other concepts within this framework are: 'productivist solidarity' (social benefits viewed within their productive characteristics, relying on reciprocity understood as the will and the capacity to participate and work within society), 'active inclusion' (benefits receivers are expected to participate to the activities viewed as necessary to reinclude and reintegrate them, with the ultimate goal being autonomy and self-sufficiency) and 'social promotion' (as in the processes linked to the preparedness of the population to counter risks with instruments like social investments, rather than having to invest in reparative measures), which function as a linkage to include and come to terms with some discrepancies coming from the liberty and equality concepts. The underlying discourse within these characteristics is the 'access to subjective rights', which relies on the foundations of the welfare model in Europe (implying the access to civil and political rights without influences that can rise from the personal or familial status of the citizen) (Ferrera 2013, 19-20)

[5] 'Historical institutionalism, moreover, suggests that once ideas are institutionalised, they represent powerful forces for continuity. This may occur through the 'path dependence' of existing ideas, the constraints on innovation, and on alternatives' (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013, 37)

national specific context (Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). In this paragraph, the excursus on these matters will consist in a brief general overview of the evolution and implementation of certain rationalities in order to connect them to approaches and perceptions of issues related to vulnerability and marginalisation.

Neoliberalism is defined as policy orientations, conceptual perspectives and regulatory provisions that aim to expand market characteristics and dynamics to an increasingly larger spectrum of social activities, while counting on a strong State involvement. These considerations do not mean that the set is fixed and coherent. Therefore, neoliberalism can be used to illustrate processes of change guided by neoliberal ideas in constant mutation, path dependent and with blurred lines. There is evidence that descriptive limits can be related to the lack of a systematic reorganisation of policies with competitive frameworks. Neoliberalization is a strong paradigm and in its analysis tends to absorb other elements that challenge or modify it, such as social changes and institutional frameworks. It is difficult to explain a change in policies only with a particular ideology as a framework of reference, because ideas do not replicate their influence in a unique ideological sphere. Hence, ideologies are never the only causes for ideas and changes: they need to be understood in a wider framework of forces. In neoliberalization theses, there is a tendency to underestimate the nature of social change. Changes in the political, economic and social spheres do not happen only because of long-term planning and pondering: they are also the product of the adaptation to new issues that social and political environments create, mobilising policy instruments. It is not only a product of top-down reforms, since there is an active role of sociocultural processes that model governance and normative frameworks (Pilson and Morel Journel 2016).

To design a timeline for the process of neoliberalization, May, Cloke and Johnsen (2005) in their analysis of New Labour and Britain's crisis of street homelessness – while discussing Peck and Tickell's analysis[6] – underline the 'roll-back' (referred to as one of the welfare safety nets after an economic restructuring) and the 'roll-out' (a welfare reform discourse to rule the ones marginalised by the roll-back within neoliberalism during the 80s) processes. Different scholars highlighted the importance of decentralisation and recentralisation (during a time defined as the States 'hollowing out' welfare regimes). The authors then follow works such as

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[6] See: Peck, J. and Tickell, A. (2002) 'Neoliberalizing Space', *Antipode*, 34(3), 380-404.

Ling's[7], defining the shift from governance, as in welfare pluralism with labile regulatory structures with a certain level of independence for private welfare providers, to governmentality, characterised by stronger regulatory controls to improve self-regulation of private welfare providers and beneficiaries, along with the emergency dynamics of the post-welfare regime. These modifications resulted in complex relations between central and local governments, as well as between public and private actors. The authors propose some perspectives on the delivery of services, focusing more on the advantages of offering different forms of services, instead of focusing on their amount in terms of quantity. This reasoning serves as a base to construct a coherent 'landscape of care' (May et al. 2005, 728) that is even and useful to providers and beneficiaries of services. The focus on the quality of care services offered by non-statutory sectors could be the key to build this landscape, without deciding a priori who is deserving of certain benefits and support. To give a more comprehensive outlook on the general topics covered in this paper, the work of Head and Alford (2015) can be useful to discuss some considerations regarding governmental organisations, represented as good at implementing policies and providing services that are defined as standardised, routinary and characterised by a higher volume. Following the work of scholars like Kettl[8], these organisations are defined as delivering services like caring for patients, responding to citizens' needs and the like. However, they seem to be less responsive towards tasks that do not fall into routine or standards. Debates and critical points of view regarding complex policy problems and their effects emerged during the 70s, continuing throughout the 80s. The general malcontent with approaches that were rational and technical was present, especially when it came to the decision-making processes and their implementation. From the critics' perspective, these approaches were expecting efficient and effective achievements of goals because of defined information, objectives and methods. During the 70s and the 80s, leaders tried to minimise the scope and role of the State, reducing community expectations regarding the responsibility of governments when addressing issues, enhancing the matter – while pairing this approach with markets' logic – as if individuals were responsible for them. An analysis of the literature suggests that a big part of issues is defined by strong disagreement on the nature and significance of both problems and solutions themselves.

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[7] See: Ling, T. (2000) 'Unpacking partnership: The case of health care' in Clarke, D., Gewirtz S. and McLaughlin E. (eds.) *New Managerialism, New Welfare?*, London: Sage, 82–101.
[8] See: Kettl, D. (2009) *The next government of the United States: Why our institutions fail us and how to fix them*, New York: W.W. Norton

Therefore, there is not a single origin or single road towards a solution to undertake since, as the authors argue, a definition of a problem implies a designated solution (Head and Alford 2015).

In delicate and multifaceted social phenomena like poverty and, more specifically, homelessness, statistics can help visualise a situation and orient research on different levels. Analysing the macro levels and overall pictures must not overshadow what has been discussed on agency, groups' influences, and the role of perceptions. Lister (2016) offers an interesting perspective on this matter, pushing the discourse towards a critical view of quantitative analysis on specific social issues. The author argues that the focus on statistics has led towards misunderstandings regarding 'measures and definition' (Lister 2016, 140). The process focusing on how individuals are perceived and experienced by others, underlines the problems related to diversity. 'Othering' is the way a group that is identified as 'not poor' defines and socially distances themselves from 'the poor'. This process is based on the justification provided and established by social distance (both on the interpersonal and institutional level), closely related to stigmatisation and stereotypes. This is another example of how agency has to be linked to structural contexts that involve people's lives. Inequalities and divisions produce different types of poverty experiences. However, the author argues that not all agencies are purposefully beneficial, since they can be related to violent responses to humiliation, and the ones who do not activate them might feel even more ashamed (since agency is related to the relationship with the group). Another concept explained is 'getting by', which can be used as a tool to understand the dynamic nature of these social phenomena. It is described as an active setting involving agency. Its characteristics are time-related when managing low-income households, paired with the skills and the emotional resources needed. 'Getting by' is often exhibited as a proof of distance from poverty while protecting social identity. People paths formed by agency and structures have been studied with datasets that analyse the longitudinal trajectory of the same individuals over the years. These analyses show that poverty is not always a permanent state, but it can be short-term or recurrent. Quantitative studies can provide an overall picture that cannot fully illustrate the dynamics influenced by individuals' agency or the difficulties that households encounter to 'get out' of poverty. In these cases, qualitative analysis constitutes a valuable contribution. Furthermore, the author argues that macro level studies declare that poverty is characterised by low levels of collective initiative, underlining the conceptualisation of 'poor people' as the ones without political agency. There are numerous factors that fight against the

creation of categorical identities that limit individuals in a defined set of capabilities. Poverty is a socioeconomic definition, rather than a factor that defines the individual on a personal level. The categorisation of the 'poor' does not automatically lead to a collective categorical identity: the distance from homogeneity in this case is clear. The empowerment of political agency while reacting to shaming related to poverty has been highlighted by the language of human rights, making it easier to construct collective identities, underlining what we have in common as human beings rather than what makes us different. Lister continues arguing that the analysis of policies needs to concentrate and tackle measures that have the potential to increase shame. Claiming benefits and services is often defined as 'dehumanising', representing an obstacle towards the effectiveness of services while damaging individuals' feeling of being heard by them. The result consists in a failure to realise validation and perceived respect. In these cases, the human rights framework can be helpful towards an increased attention to the protection and promotion of users' human dignity (Lister 2016).

5 Territories: an Italian Perspective

To investigate the specificity, density and importance of field studies related to policies, a focus on the Italian territory can be useful to understand the general discourse. With the 2001 reform of Title V of the Italian Constitution (Constitutional Law 18 October 2001, n. 3), social policies have become residual competence (*competenza residuale*) of the Regions. Therefore, Regions are the principal pole for the legislation and programming of services, such as those concerning extreme poverty. The State plays a role by defining the essential levels of benefits and assistance while overseeing and defining the rights that must be guaranteed. Concerning services and programmes for people experiencing homelessness, the main role in this case is the one attributed to Municipalities, pursuant to law 328/2000 (Article 8), that are responsible for their design, management and provision. In these cases, non-profit organisations come into play as they often collaborate with public institutions for the delivery of services. The non-profit and general social assistance providers from private sectors (in Italy also known as: *Terzo Settore*), read the needs of the territory in a specific way since they are deeply rooted in the community system – also thanks to volunteers – resulting as a greater value in these contexts. Additionally, their involvement within the territory benefits from the minor

administrative obstacles in accessing services encountered by users. The concept of taking care of marginalised groups must be understood with the connection between the population and the territory, while mediating personal, social and cultural conflicts. This process is realised with the development of good practices, the sensibilisation of civil society, and the definition of the concept of 'care' within organisational, emotional, and resource dimensions (fio.PSD 2015). As experts of the field reminded during the pandemic, the necessities lie in the need of a communal view of public healthcare, while protecting the right to health for vulnerable groups. As previously stated, the placing among the top priorities of the political agenda of these matters also comes from the perception and attention towards them, specially within the political discourse during the pandemic. As a matter of fact, these groups face higher risks when it comes to Covid-19 and their right to health, whose status is aggravated by their living condition often accompanied by difficulties related to chronic diseases, addiction and other adversities (fio.PSD 2020). For what concerns the additional risks for the right to health, it is interesting to note how chronic diseases and therapies are already national issues that differ among Regions. In these cases, chronic diseases are strictly linked to implicit determinants, which are defined as primary causes. These factors are related to dynamics implemented and exacerbated by social, cultural and economic changes (namely: globalisation, urbanisation, ageing, poverty, environmental issues, etc.). Data shows how chronic diseases affect 40% of the Italian population, a percentage that the experts define as increasing. An action towards defining new Essential Levels of Assistance (LEA, in Italian: *Livelli Essenziali di Assistenza*) where ideally Regions will agree uniformly on, will be on track with the drastic changes brought by the pandemic (adding them to the ones already in action). These modifications would bring a change within the system and an increase for the uniformity of the distribution of services all over the national territory, since the disparities between Regions are evident due to the different social, political and economic landscapes of these territories (Nicoletti 2022).

Concluding Remarks

The landscape for policy measures and programmes related to healthcare and social issues is already very heterogeneous and differentiated. The situation becomes increasingly difficult to analyse and understand while considering the multifactorial and multidimensional aspects of vulnerabili-

ties, especially for people experiencing homelessness. The need for a clear direction and information on the matter is useful not only for social studies and policy making, but also for a real, informed and culturally shared attention towards poverty and marginalisation. A phenomenon like the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the fragilities of welfare systems already experiencing a multitude of crises. These difficulties are multifaceted and concern individual identities. Therefore analyses, and their results, must address the different scopes with dedicated tools that change according to the context in question. As Farrugia and Gerrad (2016) explain, research on homelessness has been focused and led by the political direction of policy measures. The attention in this specific field of research is directed towards the assistance and mitigation of distress for people experiencing homelessness, as well as advocating for their rights and increasing their public presence. Homelessness, as a social phenomenon, is linked to power relations, displaying structural inequalities and its problematization within the public discourse (as Bacchi, 2009 argues) influences its consequences for both people experiencing homelessness and the political discourse. To link this argument with the shift towards preventing risks with policies and measures, which has been discussed in this paper, a study on disaster preparedness, response and recovery in Nova Scotia by Karabanow et al. (2021) can be used as a tool for different subsequent considerations. The study explains how there is a need to consider how homelessness is a dynamic phenomenon that intersects with other given identities linked to marginalisation (e.g. ethnicity, sexuality, gender, etc.). This discourse might be also connected with the aforementioned essence of the phenomenon as a 'wicked problem' (Head and Alford 2015). The authors of the report affirm how, while the future for people in these conditions is uncertain, the past was already clear before, defining homelessness as a 'disaster even before the pandemic. The pandemic magnified existing inequalities and surfaced more' (Karabanow et al. 2021, 31).

The difficulties encountered by people experiencing homelessness are multiplied by a deficiency when it comes to political consideration. Therefore, the barriers in front of these groups can be defined as structural, which often tend to overwhelm the ones trying to engage into the different realms of society with severe disadvantage towards the realisation and enjoyment of their rights, the satisfaction of their needs, and the development of their capabilities and aspirations (Parsell 2017). A debate on policies and measures cannot overlook how people experiencing homelessness interact within the system or, as for example Parsell and Plage argue:

how these individuals 'actually *do*[9] health' (Parsell and Plage 2022, 41). Undermining and overlooking the agency owned and exercised by people experiencing homelessness reinforces the overwhelming power of the barriers they encounter. Their 'choices' are not uniquely connected to a personal lifestyle since they are manufactured within social relations, as well as within contextual consequences. The authors propose a movement towards a conception of care that pays attention to 'the situations of choice', which are hugely influenced by cultural contexts not fixed in a period of time but characterised by dynamic changes. Therefore, novel organisations of good practices are not the only ones needed in these cases: questioning must go through narratives and thus through representations. Research and analysis on experiences and discourses are collective tools to develop evidence for policies related to the social and health spheres, with the aim of a better framework for inequalities (Parsell and Plage 2022). Furthermore, research on healthcare policies in light of the pandemic, within the different contexts in which policies, measures, institutions and people experiencing homelessness interact, is necessary not only to enrich the intellectual discourse and to advocate for the difficulties encountered by these groups: as demonstrated by the literature cited in this work, issues that seemed already understood and dealt with are now emerging and adapting to the new (or reframed) challenges ahead. Preparedness and recovery are words that must be incorporated and elaborated not solely by the people that experience marginalisation, they need to enter all the discourses surrounding these phenomena.

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