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Welfare transformation and social work: a learning-by-doing process looking for new balances

Tatiana Saruis and Stella Volturo*¹

Abstract

This chapter studies the effects of the welfare crisis and the transformations that have occurred in social work, applying a street-level perspective. The decision-making process of caseworkers is analysed by examining field research conducted in a north-eastern region of Italy on the recent implementation of the minimum income measure. The research involved around 200 social service caseworkers. It highlights how they are dealing with the changes, interpreting and reinterpreting the *space* they have for discretion. Specifically, they are providing their own interpretations of some new and rather undefined key concepts, such as personalisation, activation, social support and *pacts* with beneficiaries, introducing needed flexibility and learning by doing to *absorb* the change.

Keywords

Street-level bureaucracy, social work, welfare transformation, implementation, minimum income

1. Introduction

Starting from the 1970s, European welfare systems have been in crisis and have experienced deep transformation. This is due to the transformation of social risks, and the implementation of new policy aims and institutional configurations. Frontline social services must deal with the practical effects of these changes that alter the context that they work within, and consequently their role and tasks.

The present chapter studies this topic through a street-level perspective applied to a literature review about welfare transformation, and field research conducted on the implementation of minimum income in a region of Italy, to observe some of these effects more objectively.

The first paragraph analyses the potential effects of welfare transformation on social work. It focuses on how it is putting top-down and bottom-up pressures on street-level bureaucrats (hereafter SLBs), tasking them, at least partially, with finding an adequate balance between new demands for intervention, policy aims, resources and organisation assets.

In order to concretely analyse some of the effects of welfare transformation, the second paragraph presents a study on the implementation of the minimum income measure, which has recently been established in Italy. It focuses on how caseworkers are using their own discretion during the implementation process to achieve a new balance between activation, economic and social support, collectability and personalisation of social intervention, coping with a changing context.

The final paragraph sums up the results of the field research, proposing some reflections on how the role of caseworkers and their relationship with welfare beneficiaries is changing within the transformation of welfare.

2. Welfare transformation and social work

The European welfare crisis began in the middle of the 1970s. The economic slowdown linked to the oil crisis interrupted the positive virtuous circle between economic growth and increasing public expenditure that had ensured stability and growing resources for 30 years after the Second World

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War. An intense debate started about the sustainability and the improvement of efficiency and effectiveness of welfare systems and policies. It inspired a complex and silent process of structural reconfiguration of welfare systems (Gilbert 2004; Jenson 2004). The reforms have followed similar trends in all European countries, though with variations in timescales, national models and local specifics (Armingeon and Bonoli 2006; Barbier 2008). They began as a reaction to the crisis, but were implemented gradually and differently in the different contexts, interacting with local assets and pre-existing welfare configurations.

As street-level theory has highlighted from Lipsky (1980) onwards, the conditions that services' frontline workers find themselves in influence the amount of discretion they have, and how much they use it. The transformations in welfare challenge the practices of consolidated services and cause uncertainties, gaps and issues to emerge. This means SLBs must deal with new pressures and dilemmas, and adapt to changing assets and demands for intervention.

On the one hand, the conditions of high employment stability, strong and stable family relationships and gendered division of labour (Esping-Andersen 1994; Esping-Andersen et al. 2002) have been gradually destabilised by significant socio-demographic, socio-cultural and socio-economic changes (Ranci 2010). The increasing complexity of post-industrial societies has challenged welfare policies, due to the increasing individualisation of biographies and flexibility of careers, and consequently a growing demand for tailored (personalised) intervention. A misalignment between welfare policies and new risk profiles in European societies has begun to rise (Ranci 2010). The population of vulnerable people is growing. The *profiles* of welfare applicants are becoming more specific, complex and unpredictable, requiring more adaptable, integrated and personalised welfare measures to cope with social diversification (Ranci 2010; Saraceno and Negri 2003). This bottom-up pressure for personalised interventions could increase SLBs' discretion when assessing cases and allocating benefits.

On the other hand, the welfare systems have been transformed in order to respond to the crisis and now include new aims, organisation assets and measures.

A first policy trend relates to the introduction of managerial logics in public institutions, particularly inspired by the philosophy of *New Public Management* (NPM). It aims to control public expenditure and increase services' efficiency and effectiveness through de-bureaucratisation. It started in the 1980s and has had various timescales and local effects. The strategy is to control the distribution of benefits, reduce the timescales for procedures, and make it possible for them to be managed by less skilled, lower cost workers, with discretion moved to their supervisors. These reforms have achieved mixed results (Evans and Harris 2004; Brodtkin 2008, 2011; Guidi 2012; Hupe, Hill and Buffat 2015a). Some basic contradictions affect discretion: first, the definition of rigid standards contradicts the (already highlighted) demand for the personalisation of social interventions; second, low professional skills make SLBs' decisions more likely to be affected by their own perceptions and personal convictions (Thorén 2008; Carrington 2005).

A second policy trend concerns the transition from government to governance logics (Kazepov 2010). Through outsourcing processes, private for-profit and non-profit organisations are involved in designing, planning and implementing welfare policies. Furthermore, different organisations and public service sectors are asked to coordinate with one another. The aim is to offer more effective, efficient, varied and personalised interventions. This means that the crucial relationship and interaction between services and citizens are shared among different organisations and partially moved away from the public institutions and workers. This builds on the idea of caseworkers as public bureaucrats and fragments the responsibility for policy implementation and outcomes.

A third policy trend aims to include or reinforce activation in the labour market in welfare reforms. Job activation has become increasingly important in the last few decades, but it is still interpreted and described differently through multiple policy labels: workfare, welfare to work, labour market activation, which depend on how the boundary between work and social support is shaped (Brodtkin and Martson 2013). Since the 1990s, European welfare systems have been committed to this aim, without abandoning their traditional social vocation, especially for the most vulnerable beneficiaries.

These aims should be combined and support each other in specific combinations of active and passive measures, cash and in-kind benefits, as found in the different versions of the minimum income measure. Managing these complex and sometimes contradictory aims requires services to be flexible, allowing SLBs to have space for discretion.

To sum up, welfare systems are transforming due to changes that are both bottom-up (from demand for intervention) and top-down (from policy aims and organisation). These changes have been underway for several decades and have led to pressures both to increase SLBs' space for discretion (demand for personalisation, integration of social support and activation) and to limit and control it (de-professionalisation of SLBs, standardisation of measures and managerialisation of public services). These incoherent pressures have potential consequences both for welfare beneficiaries, reducing their access to social rights, and for SLBs that have to adapt and redefine their role to cope with new tasks and conditions, heavy responsibilities and the risk of blame.

3. A study on minimum income: research context and method

Considering the trends and reforms described above, this chapter aims to analyse the implementation of minimum income to understand how social services are affected, and caseworkers' activities in particular.

Minimum income measures were initially introduced in Europe as residual social protection for citizens not covered by the (varied but generally extensive) public and private insurance and pension systems (Bahle, Hubl and Pfeifer 2011). They were gradually implemented in most European Countries. While differently regulated, they basically all identified income thresholds to access a monetary benefit and provided personalised support for active social inclusion.

However, the aforementioned emergence of new social risks and retrenchment of the welfare state have, on the one hand, expanded the number of potential beneficiaries (overcoming the residual dimension and increasing public expenditure) and, on the other hand, given prominence (including through stricter conditionalities and sanctions) to activation in the labour market. The result has been lower protection and stricter requirements (Bahle, Hubl and Pfeifer 2011).

Studying the implementation of this measure through a case study, conducted in Italy, helps to highlight how SLBs may interpret and use their discretion while coping with the effects of a changing welfare system. In particular, this study focuses on how caseworkers are interpreting and balancing the mandates of activation and social support, personalisation and eligibility conditions of the measure, dealing with limited resources and coordinating with external organisations.

The following paragraphs introduce the field research, providing background information and a presentation of the research strategy. There are two sections: first it briefly describes the implementation process of the minimum income in Italy; then it explains the method and technique applied in the field research.

3.1 Minimum income in Italy: a short summary of a long debate and a complicated reform

Italy was one of the last European countries to introduce a national minimum income. This has been a topic in economic and political debate at least since the 1990s, when it was gradually implemented in the EU and included in the European policy agenda.

Beyond the national and subnational differences, minimum income is generally a measure aimed at combatting poverty, providing both an economic benefit and a personalised plan for social inclusion and job activation. The target population, the criteria for access, the amount of economic benefits, the foreseen in-kind interventions and the stress on social or work aims can vary (Marx and Nelson 2013; ICF and ECSWPR 2019).

In Italy, an initial national trial of the measure was conducted between 1998 and 2001, involving a sample of municipalities and a group of regions that decided to co-finance it together with the central state. Despite the trial's positive results (IRS, CLES and Fondazione Zancan 2001; IRS, CLES and

Fondazione Labos 2005), in the following years the introduction of a minimum income became a local issue: some municipalities and regions (particularly the largest and richest) established their own specific measures, with different amounts, beneficiaries, conditionalities, aims and provisions.

Only after several calls for alignment by the European Commission, Italy has finally implemented a national policy for minimum income: the *Support for Active Inclusion – SIA* (National Law 208/2015) was implemented starting from 2016 (after two years of experimentation). It immediately sparked several controversies due to the limited funding allocated and the narrow coverage of the population in poverty.

Less than two years later, a new measure was approved, the *Income for Inclusion – REI* (Legislative Decree 147/2017; National Law 33/2017), with the intent of addressing the previous one's weaknesses: in particular, it widened the target population and increased the benefit amounts (Alleanza contro la povertà 2017). This was implemented in 2018. Meanwhile, some regions (such as the one studied here) have instigated their own measures when implementing the national policy, with the aim of extending the targets and amount of available resources for the poorest population. Thanks to European funds, municipalities could hire new caseworkers to increase the number of social services staff dedicated to the implementation.

However, the *REI* was also short-lived: in 2019, it was replaced by the *Citizenship Income - RdC* (National Law 4/2019) which is gradually being implemented. It further broadens the target population, increases the resources available, and reinforces the aim of job activation for the beneficiaries.

The rapid introduction and partial overlapping of the various reforms have complicated the implementation process. The three measures all assign a key role during implementation to the municipal social services, which (in consultation with other agencies such as job centres and health services) have the main responsibility for assessing applicants' needs and developing a personalised project focused on social and work inclusion for the most vulnerable beneficiaries. A pact signed by the caseworker and beneficiary contains a personalised project and establishes each party's commitment in order for the benefit to be allocated.

The street-level perspective appears to be the most useful approach to support the analysis of such a complicated framework that involves multiple institutional levels, agencies and professionals. It allows us to focus on the point where the consequences of all macro and micro changes and a long chain of decisions tend to converge: at the street-level, all the incoherent issues and unresolved problems must finally be resolved as practical solutions.

3.2. Research strategy and methods

The research reported here has included, in the first instance, a desk analysis aimed at defining the legal and organisational framework in which the reform is implemented² and highlights the relevant aspects for conducting the field research. Secondly, research was conducted based on a case study in a region of north-eastern Italy. It was mainly performed through observing 24 workshops where representatives of social service caseworkers from all the municipalities were called upon by the regional institution to discuss and share information about how they implement minimum income in practice. These meetings were carried out under the supervision of social policy experts and the support of facilitators. Their aim was to bring about peer-to-peer training where the sharing of interpretations, problems and local solutions would result in dialogic learning to improve local practices and increase their homogenisation at the regional level.

About 200 social service caseworkers were involved in 24 workshops. Each of them participated in three of these meetings³, dedicated to a specific topic: 1) the criteria and procedures to access the minimum income, 2) the assignment and development of specific projects for social and work inclusion, and 3) the application of sanctions in cases of non-compliance or unadmitted behaviour.

² It is not possible to present the results of this rich analysis in detail in this chapter, but the collected information is used to explain and interpret the field research data.

³ Other meetings were dedicated to topics that are less consistent with the aims of this chapter.

The workshops were conducted using the *vignettes* technique (Brondani et al. 2008; Saruis 2015), applied in other studies of social policies (Trifiletti 2004; Kazepov 2010) and street-level practices (Saruis 2015): a typology of (fictitious but based on previous research) cases was put together by social policy experts. The cases were about people with multi-dimensional needs and limited resources, who asked the services for the minimum income. The participants (social workers, educators, psychologists) had to discuss the cases and: 1) decide whether they could access the minimum income based on the formal criteria and then describe the realistic procedures for accessing it; 2) design a social support and (if possible) a job activation plan, indicating what benefits and interventions could realistically be provided; 3) describe the sanctions that could be assigned in relation to unadmitted behaviours and the conditions in which these could be realistically applied or ignored. This method aimed to provoke a discussion focused on concrete aspects and problems in implementing the minimum income. During the workshops, the *vignettes* were first discussed in sub-groups, then compared in plenaries, to share the differences and similarities in the cases' interpretations, difficulties, and local solutions. The facilitators had to explain the groups' tasks and steps and encourage the discussion.

The field research is mainly based on observing the conversations among the caseworkers. This strategy does not allow for direct contact with the actual practices, but information can be collected from caseworkers' opinions about their daily difficulties and dilemmas, the solutions they have identified and concrete examples.

This kind of observation has strengths and limitations. First, it allows the caseworkers' dialogues to be listened to, which prevents the researchers' from influencing the context, as they participated in the workshops as facilitators and experts of social policies. In this sense, the approach is similar to covert observation, where the studied population is not aware that it is being observed. Even if the researchers' identity was known, the research aim and subject were not explicit. Secondly, this sort of indirect observation does not allow the beneficiaries' points of views to be collected, which were only represented by the caseworkers in their discussions. Thirdly, the observed sample was not selected at random, but chosen by the local social services with their own criteria. However, their high number and their distribution within the entire region make their points of view meaningful in this context.

This strategy for collecting information is defined by Riemer (1977) as *opportunistic research*. It allows for enhanced opportunities provided by specific circumstances and by familiarity with a context in order to obtain information and pursue research aims.

Participating in the meetings as facilitators allowed the researchers to collect formal and informal documents and field notes containing: descriptions of concrete procedures, interpretations of the law, organisational limitations, local opportunities and problems for social and work inclusion, difficulties posed by complex cases, information on the relationships with beneficiaries, and opinions about the effectiveness of the measure. A portion of this wealth of information is reported in the following paragraph.

4. The field research

In order to conduct the analysis, the implementation process has been unpacked into three steps: 1) the management of the access phase; 2) the pact between the caseworkers and beneficiaries of the measure, which includes a personalised project focused on social inclusion and activation; and 3) the interpretation and use of sanctions in cases of non-compliance or unadmitted behaviours on the part of the beneficiaries. In the next paragraphs, the three steps are analysed from the caseworkers' perspective on the implementation practices.

4.1. Access

Firstly, access to the minimum income in Italy is subject to an assessment of the applicants' economic and family conditions. This verification and the calculation of the cash transfer amount is

managed by the National Institute of Social Security (INPS). Eligibility is also subject to acceptance of a pact for activation and social inclusion that is managed by different public agencies, depending on an evaluation of the beneficiaries' conditions (see par. 4.2.).

This standardised procedure gives caseworkers less space for discretion in comparison with traditional social intervention which allows more space in the professional assessment. The impact of this change on caseworkers is significant: they lose power when deciding whether to grant or refuse support to people and families, and what kind of support it should be.

The policy design of the measure envisages three specific situations which are directed to different public services: 1) *Complex* cases, which concern families who – in addition to material deprivation – present several needs, such as low education, fragile mental condition, relational isolation, negligence of child care, family conflict and so on. They require support from social services and probably a multidimensional intervention; 2) Cases with prevalent health problems (for example, drug addiction or psychiatric fragility), which require the prior intervention of health services; 3) Cases with only labour problems, which are directed to job centres for activation and placement.

Once economic eligibility for the measure has been verified, the applicants are passed through a *pre-assessment* interview, managed within the social help desks of social services or the job centres, to establish the typology they belong to. The central government has developed a standardised tool to guide this evaluation, however this tool only became ready many months after the beginning of the implementation. For this reason, especially during this phase, the caseworkers had to manage the assessment through their own professional experience and knowledge.

The professionals dedicated to managing access to the measure were, in some cases, administrative professionals moved to the task (*ad hoc* training was not always provided) or newly hired social workers or educators, who did not have experience of social work, and they therefore experienced difficulties carrying out the task. In other cases, they were experienced social workers who already worked in the services and were tasked with supporting new colleagues during this difficult phase. This choice has been a consequence of the scarce resources available. In contrast, municipalities with enough funds and favourable organisation assets hired new social workers or educators directly or through outsourcing; other municipalities drew professionals from their organisation to dedicate to the tasks needed to implement the new measure. The interviews in the pre-assessment phase were conducted by caseworkers belonging to mixed teams including the public and private sector, new and experienced professionals, administrators, social workers and educators.

Two considerations can be made about this phase. First, street-level literature reports that the less experienced the caseworkers are as social professionals, the more their decision tends to be guided by personal perceptions, judgements and values (Thorén 2008). In fact, professional knowledge influences the practices providing caseworkers with principles, models and tools for social work (Carrington 2005). Secondly, the caseworkers considered here not only had to learn how to manage the new tasks relating to minimum income, but they also had to adapt to new colleagues and support the less experienced through daily peer-to-peer training.

However, these caseworkers' ability to interview and analyse the case defined the applicants' pathways in the subsequent phases, directing them to the assigned service.

If they were directed to social services, they had a professional interview with a social worker who conducted a professional case analysis and defined a personalised project with them, with the emphasis on activation and social inclusion.

4.2. The pact and the personalised project

As stated by the caseworkers involved in our field research, the relationship between social professionals and citizens was often mediated through a pact settling tasks and duties for both parties⁴. However, in the minimum income measure the pact is compulsory, regardless of the conditions of the beneficiary. Furthermore, the pact should be geared towards occupational activation rather than

⁴ Its practical expression is the so-called 'personalised project', which will be presented later.

broader social inclusion aims. Indeed, according to the law (Legislative Decree 147/2017 – Art. 6 – subs.2), the personalised project identifies: 1) the general goals and the specific results that are intended to be reached in the *pathway* to overcome the condition of poverty, in labour market activation and – more globally – in social inclusion; 2) the necessary resources in terms of interventions (which could also involve the beneficiary's family and community network) and services, beyond the monetary transfer provided by the measure; 3) the tasks that must be accomplished by the beneficiary, as condition to maintain the right to the monetary support.

All the adult members of the families who have access to the measure must be submitted to needs assessment, take part in the project's definition and sign a pact to engage in its fulfilment. The needs assessment should analyse the following areas: a) personal and social conditions and functioning; b) economic situation; c) working status and employability profile; d) level and type of education; e) housing conditions; f) family and social relationships.

The law highlights that the project's goals and results must be defined through negotiation with the beneficiaries. In order to fully involve them and avoid the risk of misunderstanding, it should not contain technical, generic or abstract language.

Three relevant aspects emerge in relation to space for discretion in this phase: 1) the *personalisation* of the interventions composing the project, which should be *tailored* to the needs and resources of the beneficiaries and their families; 2) the *relationship* between the beneficiary and the social service, that should be based on reciprocal trust; 3) the idea of activation devised by the caseworkers dealing with complex cases of vulnerability.

Due to lack of time for case assessment, the risk is not only a superficial analysis of beneficiaries' needs, problems, desires and resources, but also an overlap with the planning phase. In this sense, the personalised project is based more on the resources available than the needs and preferences of the beneficiary. For instance: if the municipality has a prior agreement with a gym that is willing to welcome poor children for free, this opportunity will probably be inserted into the project as an action to improve social inclusion, even if the family, and especially the children, do not desire this kind of activity.

Fulfilling a personalised project would require a coordinated system of private and public organisation providing opportunities for job and social inclusion for minimum income beneficiaries. Solid contacts and partnerships between social services and job centres, health services, for-profit and non-profit organisations could support them in becoming independent. In many contexts, this infrastructural system still needs to be created or strengthened to be effective. Specific political attention and investments are needed to reach this aim. For the moment, caseworkers try to adapt the compulsory personalised projects to the limited resources and organisations available to them.

Another critical aspect relates to caseworkers' difficulty in emphasising the resources that beneficiaries have at their disposal. They rarely highlight that beneficiaries may have resources that can be developed within the project. They have a tendency to view them as people who are in need, and underline their vulnerability more than their potential.

Furthermore, caseworkers tend to have their own interpretation of the usefulness of the personalised project depending on the case's assessment and their concept of *activation*.

When the beneficiaries are in a very fragile psycho-social state, the caseworkers tend to interpret this concept in a broad sense, due to their social mandate and in relation to beneficiaries' concrete ability for activation. They may envisage only limited or *protected* participation in the labour market, such as proposing that the beneficiaries' engage in the community or in public service, participate in peer-support groups, or simply take care of their own children or assist elderly or disabled members of the family. It is a sort of social activation aimed at overcoming the concept of pure assistance, based on the premise that access to the labour market (or preparation for it) can be a very *distant* goal for some beneficiaries. Regarding this concern, the minimum income demonstrates the weakness of the concept of social inclusion which is actually only geared towards job activation, lacking coordination between social services and job centres and within a labour market still (partially) affected by the financial crises that began in 2008.

In addition, the aim of job activation is not always considered appropriate for all beneficiaries. In these situations, caseworkers use the aim of personalisation to overcome it. For example, they do not consider it appropriate to burden a lonely mother who is working for a low wage, pays her rent and bills and takes care of her children. In cases like this, they simply write in the pact the commitments that the woman already has, as if they were aims. In other words, they do not consider it fair to ask her to do more than what she already does, and they find a way to adhere to the formal requirements established by the law.

In other situations, the economic benefit is so limited that they do not deem it fair to assign the applicants specific tasks: for example, if the monetary transfer is only 40-60 euros, they see the personalised project as uneconomic considering the organisation and resources required for it to be planned. Therefore, in these cases the project is only a formality where they simply write what the beneficiaries already do on their own to be included in society and in labour market. This happens especially for new cases (not known to the social services before the requirements for the minimum income) and for those which are not so complex: for them the caseworkers would have to spend a lot of time on needs assessment and defining a project that they do not consider fair.

A further problematic aspect of the personalised project is linked to the difficulty monitoring the outputs and the actual compliance of the beneficiaries (and their family) to the aims and tasks defined in the project. This aspect is crucial because it can lead to the application of sanctions if the *pact* is neglected. The ample discretion left to the caseworkers in this phase has led to them feeling they have too much responsibility which has been highly problematic to manage. For example, to overcome this situation, one municipal social service devised an evaluation ladder for the project outputs.

At the end of the planning stage, the personalised project becomes part of a pact to be signed by the beneficiaries and all adult members of their family and the caseworker⁵. This stage is particularly appreciated by the caseworkers as a good innovative action, which clarifies the rules and reciprocal commitment and implies a shared responsibility for the success of the project. In fact, caseworkers consider a project *successful* if it brings about concrete joint responsibility, commitment and motivation among the beneficiaries. They believe that a project *works* when it allows beneficiaries to (re)discover new, even residual, abilities, which were previously overwhelmed by economic and material deprivation.

4.3. Sanctions

Sanctions are one of the most controversial aspects which impacts on the meaning caseworkers' give to their own work. In fact, even though conditionality has a tradition in social work, the idea of sanctioning introduced by the minimum income calls for *automatism* which caseworkers tend to avoid. In fact, in their opinion, this is in deep contrast with their *good* professional relationship with beneficiaries, which should be based on mutual trust and reciprocal adaptation.

According to the law, the beneficiaries of minimum income will see a reduction in the amount of monetary support in the event of unadmitted behaviour and, if they persist, suspension of the measure. Specifically, the sanctions are applied in case of: refusal to sign the pact containing the personalised project, break of the pact or practising of other behaviours that are incompatible with the personalised project.

According to the field research, the caseworkers do not tend to adopt a punitive approach towards the violations. They consider that their mandate is to support the beneficiaries, therefore they hardly ever report unadmitted behaviours.

They tend to avoid sanctions, especially full suspension of the measure, through a variety of *preventive* actions. For example, if a beneficiary starts engaging in unadmitted behaviour that the caseworkers consider to be very serious, they tend to renegotiate the pact and reshape the personalised

⁵ Depending on the different local procedures, in some municipalities, the pact should also be signed by the other organisations involved (for example health services, third sector organisations, the job centre and so on) that take part in the fulfilment of the personalised project as supporters of the beneficiaries in the planned interventions.

project to better meet the emerging problems. Another example is to incentivise beneficiaries' sense of responsibility, referring to their reputation/sense of honour in the community they belong to.

They mainly use the sanctions as *threats* in order to direct and control their behaviour. Usually only formal problems are reported, for instance, if the beneficiaries do not sign the pact despite many insistent reminders. An important deterrent to the application of the sanctions, especially the suspension of the economic support, is the fact that the minimum income is financed by the central government while, if people lose this support, their problems could fall within the local administration's budget. Municipal managers and politicians could therefore criticise the caseworkers for the application of sanctions.

Another interesting issue about sanctioning concerns caseworkers' decisions about beneficiaries' irregular work. When they discover these situations, they usually do not report them to the police as they should do according to law. Instead, they evaluate case by case how fair it is to allow it. If they decide to oppose it, a demanding commitment to the beneficiary will be required in the personalised project to prevent him from performing other work activities. Otherwise, if they think that the resources earned from the irregular work are too important for the beneficiaries and their families (as they do not have other options), they simply decide to ignore the information. Some cases were reported where applicants renounced the minimum income when they were informed they had to sign a pact and be involved in a personalised project.

5. Conclusions

The implementation of the minimum income in Italy has been analysed with the aim of surfacing the effects of the reform trends of European welfare systems at the street-level.

This measure includes multiple and sometimes conflicting aims: reinforcing personalisation to respond to varying requirements, introducing automatization to guarantee access and overcome professional caseworkers' evaluation (and their discretion), combining social and economic support and job activation, encouraging partnership between social services and other organisations, predicting pact logics and breaking the *vertical* relationship with beneficiaries and assistance logics traditionally ascribed to social services.

The field work shows that the implementation process is conducted in a context which basically has limited resources in terms of professional skills of new caseworkers – trained *on the job* – and scarce availability of opportunities for beneficiaries' activation, mainly due to weak contacts and coordination between social services and job centres and with private for-profit and non-profit organisations.

The caseworkers use their discretion to deal with these conditions, but what emerges is that they also play an important role in determining the concrete nature of the minimum income measure, influencing its application with their ideas. They have room to deeply reinterpret the minimum income measure's aims and practices. They devise their own concepts and designs in terms of activation, pacts and sanctions, and they try to reconcile the new measure's approach with more traditional professional orientations and considerations in terms of concrete feasibility. Their decisions combine different concepts of minimum income, partly accepting and partly rejecting the change.

Four main strategies can be identified:

1) *Active subversion*. They could try to actively reconcile the innovative aspects of the new measures and the traditional idea of social assistance as support and guidance for the beneficiaries. They aim to personalise the interventions on the basis of beneficiaries' needs and resources, but usually they are perceived as people who are vulnerable or unable or unwilling to be activated.

2) *Passive subversion*. The innovative aspects of the measure are ignored or rejected. This is considered only as a bureaucratic accomplishment introducing automatisms and legal constraints that mainly produce ineffective or unfair effects. Activation and horizontal pacts are considered to be

impossible aims in the actual conditions. Caseworkers try to preserve the vertical asset of the relationship with the beneficiaries.

3) *Passive adaptation*. Caseworkers interpret the measure as an *investment* to provide new opportunities for beneficiaries and promote their independence and potential. They try to preserve the vertical relationship with the beneficiary to reach the new aims. For example, they may use or threaten sanctions, control or manipulate the beneficiaries to increase motivation to activation.

4) *Active adaptation*. They work on both innovating social work aims and the relationship with beneficiaries. The measure proposes a pact as an *exchange* aimed at recognising reciprocal trust and co-responsibility of both parties on common goals and promoting horizontal relationships involving rights and duties. The measure can be personalised balancing the new aims and beneficiaries' needs and resources.

These strategies are combined in the practices reported by the caseworkers. It is important to underline that all of them aim to produce fair interventions even through applying different strategies.

The most relevant innovations introduced by the reforms often look at *ideal* aims rather than concrete practices, mainly limited by the scarce resources available for their implementation. As change is in the making, what emerges is a mixture of path dependence and path discontinuity mechanisms. In this process, the caseworkers manage their everyday tasks and, at the same time, 'absorb' the innovative aspects of the new measure, in a process that combines learning and practice.

In this phase, caseworkers' discretion proves to be crucial as *professional tool* to adapt the measure to the conditions in which it is implemented. It also guarantees them flexible 'space' for learning how to interpret and apply new and complex key concepts, aims, tools and organisation assets. However, there is also room for their personal and professional strategies.

Nevertheless, it must be said that too much discretion affects not only policy outcomes but also caseworkers' roles and workloads, and tends to result in *heavy* responsibilities. They could feel overloaded and develop self-protection strategies on unsupported decisions.

Training provisions, experts' support and/or peer-to-peer exchange could increase their awareness of discretion, and reflections on its potential (positive and negative) effects on their work, role and tasks.

Finally, since discretion can have uncontrolled effects on the implementation process and outcomes, all figures involved in the decision-making process on welfare policies, such as managers or policy makers, should be aware of caseworkers' discretion and its potential effects on policy implementation and outcomes.

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