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Strategies to fight poverty in Italy: Professional social work and Third Sector

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to represent, from a series of plural and scientifically integrated perspectives, the multidimensional phenomenon of poverty, understood in its different meanings and nuances as well as in its dynamics of evolutionary complexity. For this reason, the paper will be introduced by an in depth statistical analysis, capable of explaining its dimensions in terms of breadth, intensity, diffusion and definition (in terms of absolute and relative poverty) in the national framework, and then open the topic to its further theoretical, epistemological and operational expressions, in specific relation to the values, actions and interventions implemented by the professional social service system, with its welfarist response strategies to the challenges produced by social change and its ramifications of the different forms of poverty that are part of the dynamics of enforceability of rights and the recognition of the new social risks of complex society. Finally, the work articulates and deepens the increasingly close and consistent relationship between professional social services and the Third Sector, also in light of recent regulatory and legislative adjustments which have promoted a new protagonism of the social private sector in the sphere of planning, planning and provision of interventions and services to the person, under the aegis of the welfare partnership.

Keywords – Poverty; Social Service; Social Work; Third Sector; Social Epistemology; Multidimensional Analysis; Social Statistics.

Paper type – Academic Research Paper

Sommario

Strategie per combattere la povertà in Italia: servizio sociale professionale e Terzo Settore. – L’obiettivo del presente lavoro è quello di rappresentare, da una serie di prospettive plurali e scientificamente integrate, il fenomeno multidimensionale della povertà, intesa nelle sue diverse accezioni e sfumature nonché nelle sue dinamiche di complessità evolutiva. Per tale ragione, l’articolo verrà introdotto da una approfondita analisi di tipo statistico, capace di esplicitarne le dimensioni in termini di ampiezza, intensità, diffusione e definizione (in termini di povertà assoluta e relativa) nel quadro nazionale, per poi aprire il tema alle sue ulteriori estrinsecazioni teoriche, epistemologiche ed operative, in relazione specifica ai valori, azioni e interventi attuati dal sistema del servizio sociale professionale, con le sue strategie di risposta alle sfide prodotte dal mutamento sociale e dalle ramificazioni delle diverse forme di povertà che si inscrivono nella dinamica di esigibilità dei diritti e di riconoscimento dei nuovi rischi sociali della società complessa. Infine, il lavoro articola ed approfondisce il rapporto sempre più stretto e consistente tra servizio sociale professionale e Terzo Settore, anche alla luce di recenti adeguamenti normativi e legislativi che hanno promosso un nuovo protagonismo del privato sociale nell’ambito della programmazione, progettazione ed erogazione di interventi e servizi alla persona, sotto l’egida del *welfare partnership*.

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1 The dimensions of poverty

Poverty in Italy is growing. The inadequate availability of an income sufficient for the needs of daily life is only one aspect, albeit an important one of poverty; the concept must be expressed in terms of access to opportunities for people's social, cultural and educational development. The economic dimension defines an area of poverty, but does not circumscribe its boundaries, the situations of need and social hardship it gives rise to, the forms of inequalities it produces (Negri & Saraceno, 1996; Esping-Andersen, 2005; Sen, 1992; Gregori & Gui, 2012).

Among the causes of poverty, we find the absence or inadequate amount of income, commensurate with the life needs of individuals and families; to this aspect are added the regulation of the distribution of resources and opportunities offered by welfare systems and the labor market (Saraceno, 2014). Tax collection, monetary transfers, the redistribution of national income and welfare services contribute to defining the spread and incidence of poverty in society: the phenomenon is multidimensional. The precariousness of work, the fragmentation of welfare systems, the heterogeneity of the offer of services and social interventions, the territorial differences in the production and distribution of income, are just some aspects that characterize the presence and diffusion, quantitative and qualitative, of poverty in Italy (Saraceno, Morlicchio, & Benassi, 2022). The different incidence among the population is historically and socially defined; the variables underlying the phenomenon are multiple and are specified in their concrete dynamic correlation.

The development and necessary revision of the methodologies and analysis techniques contribute to making the study of the phenomenon complex (Istat, 2009). These techniques follow two logics of method and temporal interpretation: a dynamic and procedural one and a static one of marginality and social exclusion.

The dynamic and procedural perspective reveals that in life one is not poor forever, but one can be poor at different times as the condition of poverty can change several times during one's life. From this perspective, poverty emerges because of one or more episodes that can determine insufficiency of income and inadequacy of economic and social resources to meet the needs of everyday life (Siza, 2009, p.19): poverty takes on a temporary character, it can last even a short time and can concern people and families involved in processes of temporary precariousness of life.

Poverty in the static analysis describes a permanent condition relating to specific social groups, identifiable based on structural variables that affect the well-being of families and individuals. In terms of method, poverty is examined in its structural aspects; this allows us to identify specific social categories at risk.

On the other side, poverty as a dynamic, procedural, and temporary condition is increasingly apt to describe the current situation of economic difficulty of families and people in contemporary society.

Economic poverty – identified as a social condition marked by destitution due to a level of income that is too low to satisfy the fundamental needs of life – is expressed by the lack of material resources, by the deprivation of goods and services necessary for a functional adaptation to the lifestyle and consumption of society; from this perspective, the condition of poverty is contextualised within the society to which one belongs, the historical-cultural period of reference and social expectations: the category of poverty and the identification of the relevant social groups affected by the phenomenon vary based on living conditions expressed by society at a given historical moment.

In the sociological study we identify concepts and measures capable of formalizing the changes and incidence of the phenomenon (Maroncelli, 2017). The introduction of the concepts of absolute poverty and relative poverty is of extreme interest for the purposes of planning and designing of social intervention. The first defines people and families who have a lack of minimal resources for the material requirements of daily life such as food, money, housing; the second refers to situations in which the insufficiency of goods and services is given in relation to the average standard of living of the population of a given society in each historical period (Ranci & Pavolini, 2015, p.113).

Unlike absolute poverty, relative poverty is a less serious condition even if the people and families involved lack goods for economic-social and cultural requirements, to an extent that could compromise the full realization of their personality and individual aspirations.

2 Absolute and relative poverty in Italy

The variables that affect the spread of poverty in Italy are different and range from the structure and demographic dynamics to the composition of the family unit, from the labor market to its regulation; the welfare structure and services contribute to defining the nature, dimension, and diffusion of the phenomenon. The forms of income support and economic transfers to individuals and families, the presence of an effective territorial welfare system that is attentive to the poverty conditions of the population, the forms, and methods of access to social welfare and health services contribute to the potential strategies and actions to protect families and socially and economically vulnerable people.

Italy, faced with this phenomenon, finds itself more exposed than other European countries. This is a result of a segmented labor market (Barbieri & Fullin, 2014; Carrieri, 2012) with strong territorial differences in employment, unemployment and activity indicators (Reyneri, 2017), a welfare system that often resorts to forms of compensation identified in assistance, in family solidarity, a significant

presence of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) with consequences on the social destiny of the new generations (Rosina, 2015; Agnoli, 2015; Lazzarini, Bollani, Rota, & Santagati, 2020), a considerable demographic aging of the population with effects in the context of the increase in social-welfare needs.

In calculating poverty and estimating its spread in Italy, Istat takes into account the combination of family types, geographical distribution and municipalities of residence; distinguishes between absolute and relative poverty, defines method and forms of empirical survey. Istat writes:

If absolute poverty classifies families based on the ability to acquire certain goods and services, the measure of relative poverty, defined with respect to the average standard of the population, is linked to the inequality in the distribution of consumption expenditure and identifies poor families among those who are at a disadvantage compared to others. In fact, a family of two with a consumption expenditure lower than or equal to the average per capita consumption expenditure is defined as poor. For families of different sizes, an equivalence scale is used, which takes into account the different needs and the economies/diseconomies of scale that can be achieved in families of greater or lesser size. The equivalence scale used in estimating relative poverty, known as the Carbonaro equivalence scale, is based on a double logarithmic function between consumption expenditure and family size (Istat, 2022, p. 11).

The poverty thresholds defined by Istat (2022) allow us to identify on the one hand the proportion of families who, although not relatively poor, are more exposed to the risk of becoming so, on the other the proportion, among poor families, of those with levels of consumption expenditure well below the poverty line.

To understand the extent of the spread of poverty in a given society, the development of the calculation method and the availability of data are fundamental moments for understanding how many people and families live in such conditions, for monitoring the change in the situation over time and for planning intervention plans and services.

Based on Istat estimates, for the year 2023, families in absolute poverty in Italy are 2.235 million, with an incidence of 8.5%. There were 5.752 million people in this condition, with an incidence of 9.8% of the total population. The values are high although stable compared to 2022, the year in which families in absolute poverty were 8.3% and the people involved were 9.7%. Compared with 2021, the situation worsened: there were 2.021 million families in absolute poverty, with an incidence of 7.7%, and the people involved were 5.317 million, with an incidence of 9.0%. The data, although distributed

differently in the areas of the country, describes a situation of increasing absolute poverty; families in the municipalities of Southern Italy are most affected (Istat, 2024).

Relative poverty, defined as the condition of absence of the primary goods necessary to ensure the social reproduction of individuals, measured in relation to the average standard of living of the reference population, presents a problematic situation for Italy. While absolute poverty is determined by a lack of essential goods and services, relative poverty has an average value as a reference and is connected to the identification of an average standard of consumption expenditure: it expresses the impossibility of a family to reach a specific spending threshold that is conventionally considered adequate to social expectations.

In measuring relative poverty, the introduction of corrective measures is envisaged based on the size of the family unit and the different needs of the members. Families with the same number of members can express different needs in relation to the age of the people who are part of it, and the specificity of the economic, social, educational and health needs of its members. Among the variables that affect the condition of poverty, those relating to the regional area of reference, the demographic size and geographical location of the municipalities, the presence of foreigners, elderly people, minors, the level of education of the family members must be identified.

Istat, on the basis of the monthly expenditure in euros of Italian families, has identified different relative poverty thresholds in relation to the members of the family and has defined four typologies:

- definitely not poor families with spending 120% higher than the poverty line;
- almost poor families with spending between the poverty line and 120% of it;
- barely poor families with a monthly expenditure between 80% of the poverty line and the poverty line;
- definitely poor families with spending up to 80% of the poverty line.

In 2022 in Italy, there will be approximately 2.6 million families in conditions of relative poverty for a total of approximately 8.2 million people (Istat, 2023). The families in greatest suffering are above all those with three or more minor children. The set of these situations confirms the dimensions and development of poverty in Italy on which sociological analysis insists and on which it is necessary to intervene with structural programs and relational processes as part of preventive and reparative actions carried out by the welfare system as a whole and of the social service in its operational specificity.

3 Poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon and issue

Identifying difficult situations; analyzing the conditions of opportunity and criticality; planning and evaluating targeted interventions and actions, in the perspective and offer of integrated personal services: all this undoubtedly represents the operational task of an “intersystemic translation” (Abbott, 1995) carried out by the Social Service in the implementation of various socio-health policies (Ferrario, 2014; Ranci & Pavolini, 2015), for the protection of citizens and users with respect to emerging needs and risks adequately contextualized in the territories (Bertotti, Fazzi, & Rosignoli, 2021; Campanini, 2020) thanks to the now complete approach to local welfare (or community welfare), with respect to which a further recent trend of partnership integration is clearly evident, due to the convergence between public and private social institutions in the integrated co-planning of services and interventions (De Ambrogio & Guidetti, 2016), overcoming the previous forms of asymmetric relationship represented by the logic of contracting and outsourcing and therefore inaugurating the entry of social services into the new era of partnership welfare. Thanks to these characteristics and developments, today it appears capable of proposing to the community (Scardigno, 2020), different collaborative, experimental and institutional strategies (Tarsia, 2019), intended as effective solutions to combat the phenomenon of poverty (Cervia, 2015; Gregori & Gui, 2012; Salmieri, 2021 and 2022; Curti & Fornari, 2022, Giancola & Salmieri, 2023).

The latter involves, in its main sociological and social welfare developments and correlates, a continuous change in the qualitative and quantitative dynamics of social phenomena, with a direct impact on the effectiveness and incisiveness of the interventions designed and implemented by aid professionals (Gori, 2020; Mantovani, 2021; Salmieri, 2021; Siza, 2009). It is no coincidence that the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has used, as an essential reference for its articulation, the multidimensional poverty index (MPI), created with the aim of representing the overlap and contemporaneity of the deprivations experienced by individuals, both as the co-presence of different causal factors, both as a degree of intensity of the phenomenon (United Nations Development Programme & Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2019).

Due to its complex nature, defined as “multidimensional”, poverty involves not only economic or material deprivation – essentially linked to the lack or insufficiency of income – but also causes various forms of marginalization and social exclusion, especially in relation to the impossibility for people and families to access services and housing and protect their health adequately, or provide for their own education (as in the case of educational poverty), both in the form of opportunities and in self-awareness at a personal level (relational poverty) (Pasotti, 2020; Duflo, 2021). For such reason, measures to combat poverty represent one of the most important and important actions for the effectiveness of social and socio-welfare policies, in their preventive and ameliorative purposes with respect to situations of

difficulty and socio-economic hardship of people and families (Bramanti & Carrà, 2021; Saraceno, Morlicchio, & Benassi, 2022), thanks to the identification and provision of community and territorial resources, as well as the tendency towards optimization of services with a view to the structurality of interventions with respect to the plurality and non-homogeneity of resources and social spending (Ferraresi, 2018; Ranci Ortigosa, 2018), as appropriately recalled in the National Plan for Interventions and Social Services 2021-2023 (see paragraph 5 in this paper).

At the same time, these measures involve specific aspects and competence profiles of planning and intervention by social workers, called to respond to the challenges of multidimensional poverty in formal and informal terms of coping and direct relationship with the users, made up of people in different age groups and life cycles: they manifest themselves appropriately in the microsocial dynamics of the planning conducted by the professional, as well as in the macrosocial dynamics of the planning of services for areas of user and social and socio-health intervention legitimized and verified in the institutional documentation of the planned services and offered at a local level.

4 Epistemological issues of poverty and operational aspects of its fight

It is appropriate, in such a defined context, to highlight and explore, wherever possible, the issue of the complexity and multidimensionality of poverty, analyzed in terms of specific methods of recognition and identification of its causal characteristics suitable for measuring the phenomenon, such as for example: the type of information collected: objective or subjective etc.; the positionality of the phenomenon, made possible by the poverty threshold: absolute or relative; the duration and/or temporal consistency of the investigation: longitudinal or transversal etc.; the analysis of the dimensions of poverty: material/immaterial etc.

At an international level, one of the recently developed theoretical and professional approaches in the field of social work with people in poverty is the one based on the PA-P (Poverty-Aware Paradigm) model, proposed by Michal Krumer-Nevo, professional, academic and social service expert, who proposed this paradigm based on four fundamental dimensions: a) transformation, b) recognition, c) rights, d) solidarity, in turn capable of restoring, in their interweaving and composition, an integrated vision of poverty, seen as a situation of material deprivation and also as a relational and emotional experience (Krumer-Nevo, 2021).

This innovative approach makes possible to identify the dynamics of poverty as originating from a situation – indirect or collateral – of violation of human rights, given the inequity and distributional imbalance of socio-political and economic structures as causes of the asymmetries and lack of

opportunities of which poor people are victims, who however possess an essential capacity for resilience towards their condition of poverty, resilience on which the PA-P paradigm leverages to set up a professional practice in working with poor people, based on six reference principles. They are identified in the following characteristics:

- recognition of the social and cultural perception of people in poverty;
- understanding the feeling of difficulty and pain of people in poverty;
- interconnection of the material component with the relational/emotional one;
- role of poverty in reducing opportunities and choice alternatives;
- creation of a professional practice capable of overcoming the acceptance of poverty;
- recognition of people's resilience to poverty.

Returning comparatively to the Italian situation on the issue of poverty, we can take into consideration the analysis described in the INAPP (Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche) 2021 Report, in chapter 7, about inclusion policies, where it tells us about a story of poor effectiveness of the Italian protection system in the fight against poverty, at least until the introduction of national measures, namely the SIA Support for Active Inclusion (financed through the 2018-2020 National Poverty Fund established with the 2016 Stability Law), subsequently falling within the REI (Reddito di Inclusione/Inclusion Income) and then again, through the Legislative Decree 4/2018, in the RdC (Reddito di Cittadinanza/Citizenship Income), understood as a double innovation strategy: an active policy provision and, at the same time, an institutionally guaranteed measure to combat poverty.

In relation to the latter, the Report specifies how the beneficiaries are selected and sent directly either to the Employment Centers or to municipal social services. Then they evaluate the complex needs through a multidimensional analysis (definition of a personalized project and creation of a multidisciplinary team).

As noted in the Report, a strong integration is taking place between public and private social services, understood as a challenge for social policies at a national level. Compared to the REI, the RdC has allowed, also thanks to the progressive integration of the Poverty Fund (established in 2016), with European Union resources for the 2014-2020 programming of the PON Inclusion, to enhance and expand the audience of beneficiaries with greater amounts of the subsidy paid, even doubling the number in the year of Covid-19, reaching more than 2.8 million people and over 1.2 million families in December 2020, with a significantly higher inclusion rate than the REI, equal to 47 people per 1000 inhabitants (Istituto Nazionale per l'Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche, 2021, p. 233). According to the researchers,

the resources allocated have led to a growth in the number of beneficiaries, the work carried out by the services (Employment Centers and Social Services) has increased and has also changed in the organizational methods. The infrastructure put in place needs not only to be strengthened but above all to work in a network, if it wants to guarantee real paths of work and social inclusion. Even more so in a scenario in which situations of poverty, exclusion, even ‘social invisibility’, risk worsening due to the crisis (p. 235).

From the perspective of Law 328/2000 – still very relevant today, especially in relation to the strategy of implementation and realization of local welfare through area planning – it can be observed how it is in some way reiterated or even strengthened (despite the evident asymmetry and imbalance between the levels of integration that have occurred in the different regions and in the local territorial contexts), thanks precisely to the renewed attention of policies towards poverty, giving greater visibility to the integrated system of services and interventions, but in particular to the territorial social sphere, where the participatory strategy of planning, management, provision and organization of social welfare services is implemented.

In fact, the implementation and provision of the RdC measure involves the challenge of a high participation and integration of many different institutional actors, starting from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, to INPS, to the Regions, to the areas and services municipal social networks; from Employment Centers to social enterprises and the Third Sector, also including the Italian Post Office and the charitable organizations and CAFs in this participatory procedure. For these reasons, always following the INAPP Report,

the effective governance of a measure like the RdC represents a challenge in itself, especially if we consider a series of factors: the levels of government involved (from local to national), the number of actors (institutional and non-institutional), the (tight) preparation and implementation times, the starting human and instrumental resources, the financial resources of different origins (institutional resources and community resources). Each actor involved is responsible for a series of more or less complex activities. In this context, the social services system therefore takes on an increasingly important role (Istituto Nazionale per l’Analisi delle Politiche Pubbliche, 2021, p. 237).

In the Italian panorama of professional social service, the network methodology and that of multidisciplinary team work, precisely because of their importance as strategic elements of action and integrated intervention with respect to the multidimensional dynamics of the phenomenon of poverty,

have gradually obtained an increasingly broad recognition and affirmation as adequate operational tools to combat this phenomenon: in fact, the network of services and interventions represents, on a theoretical-conceptual as well as on a methodological-pragmatic level, the original and productive dimension of every complex vision of participatory and partnership procedures planning of interventions and services at an individual, territorial and institutional level (Franzoni & Anconelli, 2021); similarly, we can affirm that social work in multidisciplinary teams is the most suitable model (and practice) to respond to the same multidimensional characteristic of poverty, in relation to which the plural aspect of services and interventions made possible by networks and teams finds at least hopefully its full potential of effectiveness and expression: as Salmieri states, the integration at an institutional, organizational and professional level of the various processes referred to by measures to combat poverty is a central aspect for the implementation of social policies (Salmieri, 2021, p. 14).

These considerations show, definitively, the centrality and protagonism – not always adequately expressed at the level of public perception – of the social workers involved in the demanding work of social planning, which manifests itself in the active dimensions of the professional, such as: the relationship between help, the professional interview, the methodological procedure, the taking charge of individuals, groups and communities, albeit in the unavoidable individuality of the interventions, legitimized to start and in line with the institutional, legal and ethical procedures, or the ethical-professional principles, as also reiterated in the recently (2020) updated Code of Ethics. In fact, the training and profession of the social worker appears, more than ever today, implicit in the processes of development of knowledge and skills of coping and resilience, in order to address, in a planned and synergistic mode with the actors and territorial and community networks, the issue of poverty with respect to its socio-economic and socio-political phenomenologies, in the overall framework of the centrality of social planning and intervention.

5 Strategies of integration of social services with the Third Sector in the fight against poverty

The 2021 Budget Law has provided for the allocation of resources from the Fund for the Fight against Poverty and Social Exclusion, for the permanent hiring of social workers by public areas and territorial bodies, to be employed both in the context of measures to combat poverty, and in that of strategies, actions and professional interventions for the translation of the social policies adopted. Finally, the National Plan for Interventions and Social Services 2021-2023 is adopted with the

Interministerial Decree of 22 October 2021, a general regulatory framework for programming which includes the National Social Plan, the Poverty Fund and for Long-Term Care.

In the last 10 years, according to research by CNEL with the Astrid Foundation and the Foundation for Subsidiarity, it has grown by 25%, even during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, with 375,000 entities including associations, social cooperatives, foundations and an involvement of 10.5 million people who participate in the various association activities; in detail, there are 900,000 people directly involved as employees, operators and various managers, while volunteers reach 4 million people. In detail, the research reveals a very vital subsidiary fabric, with the presence of bodies active in different areas (culture, sport and recreation; social assistance and civil protection; trade union and business relations; religion; education and research; healthcare). According to Vittadini, President of the Foundation for Subsidiarity, the pandemic has even highlighted even better the central role of the Third Sector in Italy, since it has supported public intervention with participatory and partnership strategies and actions, especially in particularly sensitive areas, such as social assistance and healthcare, despite the inevitable penalization of other areas such as day centers for disabled people, kindergartens, sports and recreational activities (Bassanini, Treu, & Vittadini, 2021).

Following these perspectives and levels of discussion, it is definitely plausible to define the role of the professional social worker in the context of the institutional structures of public-private welfare and territorial social service, due to the expectation towards the creation of resolute forms of intervention to be implemented in comparisons of the different and multiple manifestations of socio-health problems – essentially assessable in terms of local services between public institutional actors and the Third Sector – aimed at enhancing the figure of the social worker in his work of integrated construction of networks and actions effective in responding to the challenges of individual and collective poverty.

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