

The Letter of the Law

Insights from Italy's Anti-Poverty Measures About Managing in Social Services

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Abstract

This study aims to reconstruct the organizational processes involved in managing the uncertainty surrounding the implementation of a new anti-poverty measure in Italy. In 2024, a reform of the minimum income scheme significantly redefined the role of social services in assessing and supporting the social inclusion of beneficiaries. Using an Activity Theory framework, this paper analyses a case study from a suburban area in Milan, focusing on the turbulence encountered during the transition, the development of the care script, and the disturbances that occurred. The analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with public and private social workers engaged in implementing the reform. This study underscores the critical role of organizational cultures in fostering the effective application of horizontal subsidiarity principles in contexts characterized by structural uncertainty.

Keywords: inter-organizational dynamics, activity theory, disturbances, anti-poverty measures, social policy

Background and local context

In Italy, the implementation of minimum income policies is relatively recent compared to other European countries. The introduction of the Inclusion Income (*Reddito di Inclusione*, REI) in 2017 marked the first nationwide scheme aimed at combating poverty. This measure assigned a pivotal role to social services, which were responsible for collecting applications and assessing applicants' needs (Gori 2016). To facilitate this process, new resources were allocated to local authorities, allowing them to expand and organize their staff in line with the increased workload.

In 2019, the Citizenship Income (*Reddito di Cittadinanza*, RDC) replaced the REI, offering even greater resources to social services. However, the RDC modified access procedures, shifting away from social services as entry points. Instead, applications were submitted directly to the Italian Social Security Institute (INPS), either independently by citizens or through workers' welfare associations and tax assistance centres.

In 2024, the minimum income scheme underwent another reform with the introduction of the Inclusion Allowance (*Assegno di Inclusione*, ADI). Under this new framework, social services continue to promote inclusion pathways for approved applicants, as was the case with the RDC. However, their role has expanded to include the assessment of cases requiring intervention, particularly for individuals in vulnerable conditions. Unlike previous schemes, the ADI includes vulnerable individuals as beneficiaries, even if they lack family characteristics initially required for eligibility, such as minors, individuals with disabilities, or seniors in the household. Vulnerability must be certified by public authorities, involving collaboration between various social and health services.

The frequent reforms to minimum income policies over a relatively short period have placed sustained pressure on the reorganization of social services. This has affected not only the responsibilities and workload of social service workers but also the governance dynamics between social services and other sectors involved in implementing these measures.

In Lombardy, public services and private social and health organizations work together through local networks in the implementation of anti-poverty policies, in line with the regional governance model that assigns a central role to private entities in the provision of welfare services (Sabatinelli, De Gregorio, and Perneti 2023). This study focuses on Pioltello, an area in Milan's hinterland, where such collaborations operate within an inter-territorial structure known as the Ambito Territoriale Sociale (ATS). The ATS serves as a geographical and administrative framework for organizing and managing local social services. In Pioltello, public and private entities collaborate through regular meetings facilitated by the ATS. These meetings particularly discuss access to minimum income measures for vulnerable beneficiaries and organize the subsequent phases after access, such as interviews with beneficiaries, the stipulation of inclusion pacts, and case monitoring.

Theoretical positioning

Contemporary policy studies acknowledge a gap between regulatory frameworks, as defined and published by central governments, and their implementation at the local level. This perspective moves beyond the rationalistic assumption of complete adherence between regulations and actions, recognizing the implementation phase as a complex, situated, and social process.

In addressing the challenge of translating a regulation into courses of action, the tension between *organization* and *organizing* becomes evident (Czarniawska 2013). Organizing is at the core of a network of co-evolving actions that do not necessarily adhere to organizational boundaries. During implementation, decisions are made, and forms and levels of interdependence are negotiated, while strains arising from different organizations' missions, distributed agencies, and pressures from external actors converge (Altenstetter and Björkman 1981).

This article adopts a perspective based on the Activity Theory model, as redefined by Engeström (1999, 2000). In particular, we base our approach on Engeström's *third-generation activity theory*, which orients the analysis of complex phenomena from a single activity system towards multiple ones (Engeström and Glăveanu 2012). According to this theory, actions unfold across three levels of complexity, which are defined in relation to the intentionality of

social actors/agents: activities, guided by goals; actions, guided by objectives; and operations, which contend with situational constraints. Each action, in turn, reconstitutes a structure that integrates both macro and micro levels of social and cultural complexity, which can be traced following the structure of the activity system itself (Engeström and Sannino 2021). In this structure, the core element is the relationship between the subject and the object (understood as a constructed object or artefact), mediated by instruments. The subject has a relationship with a system of rules and a reference community, while the object reveals how the same community that created it organizes itself in terms of the division of labour.

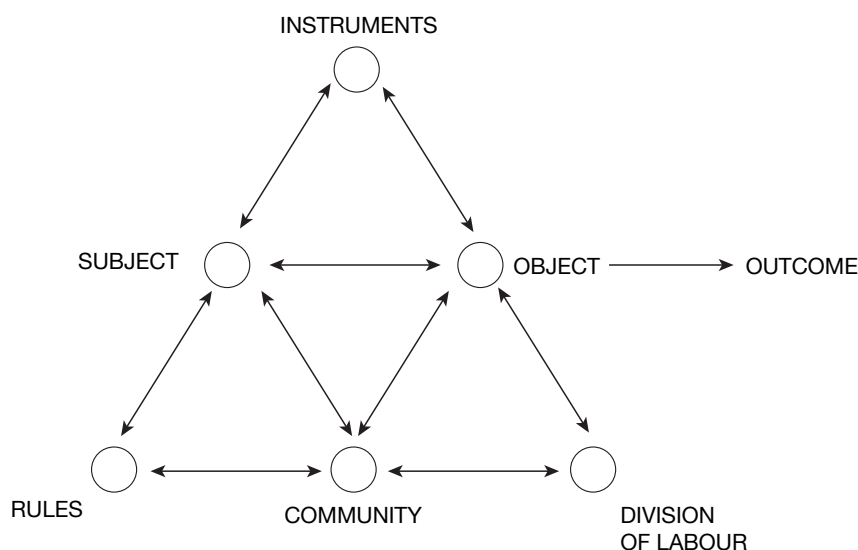


Figure 1. Model of the human activity system by Engeström (2000).

Within local dynamic fields, decision-making processes tend to produce scripts defined within the activity system itself (Daniels et al. 2013). In our case, the most interesting aspect concerns the scripts produced during the assessment of the beneficiaries and the access to the social services, with particular attention to the role of health and social organizations in service management and how shared case management is carried out.

However, the system of relationships between various parts of the system can undergo changes. Deviations from standard scripts can be defined as *disturbances* (Engeström 2000); these indicate sig-

nificant systemic contradictions within the activity and express, among other things, the potential for change within the activity itself (Engeström 2014). Therefore, studying the configuration of activity systems and the disturbances among different actors when introducing a new policy can help understand the complexity of the implementation process. Moreover, it highlights that disturbances can reveal moments when the process stalls and preludes to change, thus serving as a crucial tool in identifying the process of service improvement.

Methods

The objective of this exploratory research is to study an implementation case within the ATS of Pioltello, considering the quality of collaboration between social services and other health and social entities, as well as among different professional roles, in the alternation between two minimum income policies (RDC and ADI). To achieve this, an ethnographic research design was constructed.

This study is part of a larger action research project designed to better understand the dynamics of inter-organizational collaboration in the field of anti-poverty policies, with the general aim of improving the level of collaboration between organizations. In particular, one of the researchers serves as an organizational supervisor within the social services of the ATS. Based on critical reflections from the ethnographic study, the researcher will collaborate with stakeholders to develop new discursive spaces and professional perspectives.

In the considered territory, meetings within the social service (*Riunioni di Servizio*) were chosen as the privileged observation point. In these meetings, social services and other social entities come together to define the implementation of anti-poverty policies. This occurs both at the level of individual cases, through the definition of support provision, and at the general level of the overall collaboration framework between services. The investigation took place from September 2023 to May 2024, coinciding with the implementation of the new ADI scheme.

The research techniques employed included participant observation in 11 service meetings and 28 interviews with all the informants who are part of the ATS, specifically aiming to explore the implementation of the ADI scheme. During the participant observation,

field notes were taken both during and after the meetings. Furthermore, five meetings were video-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Five additional interviews were also recorded and transcribed. All available material was then analysed through thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019), with the primary goals of reconstructing the activity system within the meetings, particularly focusing on the assessment and support provision phase, and identifying the possible disturbances. Following the reflexive thematic analysis methodology, the research began with familiarization with the dataset, proceeded to coding, and generated initial themes through grouping. These themes were subsequently developed, reviewed, refined, and named, as described in the following section.

Results

The analysis of the collected material led to the identification of several general themes concerning the challenges faced during the transition from the old to the new measure. Moreover, it allowed for the reconstruction of the process of accessing the social service from the operators' perspective. Lastly, the main disturbances encountered during the fieldwork were identified. The following is an analysis of these three elements.

First theme: Challenges faced during the transition

The first element to emphasize is the substantial destabilization within services caused by the transition from RDC to ADI. The new legislation was not immediately accompanied by the necessary implementation regulations, and when they were published, they proved to be fragmented. Citizens, who initially learned about the change through media and social media, received an official notification via a text message sent by INPS, informing them of the RDC suspension. In this context, a series of phenomena associated with turbulence became quite evident. Metcalfe (1978) described this turbulence in terms of the interaction between regulatory frameworks and territorial contexts. These turbulences have affected the inter-organizational network on multiple levels: beneficiaries have experienced emotionally charged subjective states, such as fear, confusion, and frustration; the operators, on the other hand, faced with uncertainty, have recognized the need to build new knowledge, both in cognitive terms (acquisition of information useful for

configuring their operations) and relational terms (sharing the emotions associated with the uncertainty itself).

They thus took action to collectively study the legislation, the implementing decrees, the guidelines, and the interactive webinars organized by the Italian Ministry of Labor and Social Policies. In addition, they engaged in team discussions, sent inquiries to the Ministry, and sought consultations with experts. The discussions took place not only with colleagues from the poverty alleviation service but also with other services involved in the measure, primarily the territorial mental health clinics, which contributed to the drafting of the vulnerability certification. These interactions aimed to define their respective roles within the inter-organizational network.

As the operators reflect on the implementation of the new policy, their discourse highlights the differences between what is defined at the central government level and what becomes feasible and sensible in the territorial context.

The greatest turbulence perceived by the operators during the transition from the old to the new scheme is the exclusion of certain previous beneficiaries who are no longer eligible under the new policy design. However, the operators also report that some citizens refuse to become beneficiaries of the new measure due to its stricter requirements for certificates, participation in projects, and the associated monitoring process. This indicates an increase in non-take-up of the measure, which deserves further investigation.

Second theme: The script of access to social services

The collective effort of the operators, demonstrated through their participation in webinars, shared study sessions, training sessions, consultations, and numerous meetings, was evident. In the language of Activity Theory, this effort can be attributed to the *construction of a script* that assembles all the knowledge built during the widespread process of coping with uncertainty. The access script, as described in the interviews, can be outlined as follows. As required by the legislation, a citizen whose application is accepted by INPS is summoned by the social service within 120 days. A preliminary analysis of the situation is then conducted through a semi-structured interview. This interview delves into the reasons for applying for ADI, the social and economic conditions of the household, any

existing debt situations, the individual's health status, housing and employment conditions, and motivational aspects and competencies necessary to build a path with the services. Based on the findings of this interview, priorities are identified, and an inclusion project is designed collaboratively with the beneficiary. This project is binding for the beneficiary if they wish to receive the measure. Adherence is required through the signing of a pact, which constitutes the main tool for promoting change and overcoming the contingent factors contributing to the poverty situation. The law mandates that beneficiaries, after the initial interview, must attend a follow-up meeting every 90 days to monitor their inclusion process. However, the interviewed operators emphasize that they may conduct more frequent monitoring based on individual needs.

Third theme: Disturbances

By reconstructing the script related to the assessment process and follow-up meetings, specific relationships can be identified where tension accumulates, highlighting disturbances within the described framework.

The first disturbance arises from the assessment process, particularly between *subject* and *instrument*. When the social worker attempts to understand the main issues concerning a specific situation, recipients can exhibit voluntary reticence (when they fear punitive consequences from social services) or involuntary reticence (when they do not recognize the importance of an issue relevant at this stage). This is often the case with debt situations, which require the involvement of multiple community members (e.g. landlords, bank operators, financial educators). Consequently, the disturbance shifts to the relationship between the individual and the community.

The second disturbance examined pertains to the timing of social service support and arises between *rule* and *subject*. The 90-day interval between scheduled appointments is sometimes too long. Individuals' initial distrust of social workers can prolong the engagement phase and necessitate a greater number of meetings. Furthermore, there is a significant possibility that recipients may be unable to achieve the goals outlined in the inclusion pact, especially in complex and multi-problematic situations.

However, certain disturbances produce innovative effects, as they mobilize the search for new solutions by involving previously inactive actors in new collaborations. For instance, in some cases, general practitioners and health services play an active role in discussions about inclusion projects, particularly in certifying individuals' vulnerabilities. This development is particularly noteworthy, as it may signify substantial progress in overcoming the longstanding challenges of integrating social work and healthcare, which have been only partially addressed within the Italian welfare system (Perino and Pesaresi 2022).

Another example involves the beneficiaries themselves, who sometimes feel engaged in collectively addressing the challenges related to the transition from RDC to ADI. Additionally, the new collaborative spaces that spontaneously arise among colleagues, as previously mentioned, are important. These collaborations emerge from the necessity of developing common scripts.

Discussion and conclusions

The analysis highlights the significant local repercussions experienced during the transition between successive minimum income measures. It highlights how the general turbulence inherent in policy implementation processes impacts specific contexts. Despite central government guidelines and instructions, the study reveals that implementing policies at the local level often necessitates moments of reassessment and redefinition by local actors. These processes aim to align beneficiary assessments and care strategies with the objectives of the new policies while accommodating the organizational structures of the services and actors involved. Using the Activity Theory framework, the analysis identifies several disturbances, which expose both critical issues and innovative aspects compared to previous measures. These findings echo Morin's (1986) conceptualization of knowledge as an *uncertain adventure*, emphasizing the dynamic and evolving nature of understanding in complex systems.

The organizational practices examined in this study should be viewed as evolving, due to the rapid succession of various minimum income measures within a relatively short time frame and the presence of incomplete guidelines. Importantly, the implementation process requires that the transition from a general regulatory

framework to specific local contexts must always involve local interpretation and adaptation. This implies that a certain degree of uncertainty will always exist as an intrinsic aspect of the process.

Addressing the uncertainty arising from the lack of a defined script for local-level implementation, coupled with the level of engagement observed in our study, aligns with the concept of *managerialism* as defined by Jaques (1970). This concept highlights a combination of efficiency, accountability, and imaginative development rather than a specific hierarchical position. In our case study, the final stage of implementation has been delegated to grassroots organizational practices developed through collaboration among local services. This collaboration takes place within specific organizational configurations that may be specially created for this purpose, operating outside established practices, negotiating the nature of their tasks, and coordinating their responses (Edwards and Kinti 2009).

In the case of local welfare, it is crucial to emphasize that the presence of strong organizational cultures is fundamental for fostering innovation and overcoming emerging critical issues. Only in this context can horizontal subsidiarity effectively address the challenges that arise from public policy reforms. The inclusion of local social actors in decision-making processes can lead to more appropriate responses, as the best calibration of policies often occurs at the local welfare level (Burgalassi 2012). Conversely, if organizations are not prepared and supported for this change, there is a risk that the identified disturbances will persist without generating innovation and ultimately without meeting citizens' needs.

In summary, the actors involved in policy implementation processes operate within a socially and culturally rich environment that shapes the boundaries of feasible solutions and legitimate strategies (Campbell 2002). This highlights the importance of an approach to public sector management that promotes genuine subsidiarity and managerialism. As Mintzberg (2020) puts it, "It's not just the letter of the law. The letter of the law is too low a standard" (p. 81).

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