
The Italian Network for Implementing the 'Housing First' Approach

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➤ **Abstract** *In the last year, Italy has been experimenting with the 'Housing First' (HF) approach, with 28 projects scattered across 10 regions all over the country, from Turin to Agrigento in the far south of Sicily. It is still an experimental phase, but within the traditional model of policies tackling poverty and severe marginalization in Italy, HF represents a breath of fresh air and a way for opening policy to change. The key point lies in driving the spontaneous process of change that is already moving bottom-up from public and private Italian social providers in the fields of housing, poverty and homelessness. The aim is to promote a paradigm shift to renew the means, tools and methods of intervention to deal more effectively with the complex phenomenon of 'homelessness' in Italy. This paper aims to discuss the changes and initial results of the first year of experimentation of the Housing First approach in Italy. The authors explain the reasons that moved Italy to embrace this policy, and describe the efforts carried out by fio.PSD (the Italian Federation of Organizations for Homeless People) to build the Italian Network for implementing the Housing First approach (NHF).*

➤ **Keywords** *Housing First in Italy, evaluation, fio.PSD, homelessness*

Introduction: Why Housing First? Revolutionizing Services for Homeless People in Italy

The Housing First (HF) approach originated in the United States during the 1990s within mental health services, inspired by the model for discharging patients from psychiatric hospitals called 'Supported Housing'. Based on gaining immediate access to independent apartments with support from a team of health workers for chronically homeless people and groups assessed as at risk of homelessness, it spread from the *Pathways to Housing* model founded by psychologist Sam Tsemberis in New York in 1992. HF introduces some changes compared to other models. It reverses the institutional-clinical approach from both a health and a welfare perspective. The key element is the direct transition from the street to a home. Very quickly, therefore, HF has also proven an effective and potentially revolutionary intervention to address homelessness in different contexts, including in England, France, Finland, Portugal, Spain and other countries. In Italy, as we argue in the following pages, it has the potential to provide a new direction for homelessness policies in a context in which chronic homelessness has increased: the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) reveals that there are 50,724 homeless people (roofless and houseless people) in Italy (up 3,071 from 2011), and that 21.4 percent of those have lived on the street from more than four years (ISTAT, 2014). Since 2011, supply – the number of beds and meals provided by 768 organisations – has increased by 15 percent despite a more or less stable number of homeless people. This means that the same person is using the same services more and more times in the same week (three times more for beds and five times more for meals in one week), with severe consequences for the welfare system and local authority costs, as well as for living conditions.

In the homelessness sector, the traditional model known as the 'staircase approach' involves a rigid pathway that aims to make people housing-ready step by step, through counselling, treatment, abstinence, training, employability and autonomy. Achieving the goal of being housing-ready can take many years and cost a significant amount in terms of services, social workers, maintenance of alternative housing solutions, etc. Although this system of local services – including shelters, public showers, counselling points and outreach – is able to intercept and partially deal with many social needs, there are various limits: many services address only very particular gaps or emergency situations. Numerous local innovative projects that seek to ensure social inclusion, health and participation in the labour market already work well in Italian cities. Nevertheless, the process for scaling up such strategies and the long-term vision for effective policy design in dealing with severe poverty and housing exclusion areas are still missing in Italy. As a matter of fact, the Italian welfare system is fragmented and highly differentiated as, during the 1990s, the management of social services was delegated to regional governments

and local authorities without any common definition of the essential levels of services and basic incomes for poor people, therefore leaving access to social services dependent on the availability of resources at the local level. Recent attempts (Law 328/2000) to define social services and planning thereof at national level have paradoxically increased the differentiation and localization of services. The lack of coordination between the political and administrative levels, discretionary decision-making on crucial issues of access and social housing services, the absence of an homogeneous normative framework and a weak preventive approach are obstacles to providing adequate solutions for the severe and growing marginalization of adults.

Only recently, the Minister of Labour and Social Policy approved the *Guidelines for Tackling Severe Adult Marginality in Italy*,¹ thanks in part to advocacy activities carried out by the National Federation of Organizations working with Homeless people (fio.PSD)² and the local authorities of bigger Italian cities. An agreement with regional governments to favour a *sustainable approach* through adequate funding at all levels (national, regional and local) as well as through the involvement of the public, private and not-for-profit sectors (i.e., a bottom-up approach) is attached to the Guidelines. Furthermore, the Ministry is going to approve the *National Plan against Poverty*, which will include a minimum income scheme for severely deprived people from 2016. The Guidelines aim to clarify and harmonize all services, measures and social worker profiles related to and working within this sector. They suggest using the European Typology of Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) as a common definition of homelessness; they set out essential or basic levels of services for homeless people through standardized and homogeneous key features for public services; and they furnish recommendations for implementing measures, practices and management, including Housing First as a preventive measure against homelessness in Italy.

In this framework, HF, while not a panacea for all forms of homelessness, appears as an important and progressive social policy response and it has the potential to enhance Italian policy responses to homeless people and people with high housing support needs. HF starts from a simple principle – but one that is a strike for Italy:

¹ This work, using the coordination and writing activities of fio.PSD, has involved metropolitan cities and the regional Department of Social Affairs with the aim of providing local governments with a set of conceptual and practical-applicative directions to structure housing solutions in response to the primary need of housing for individuals and nuclear groups of people. For details, see <http://www.fiopsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Linee-di-Indirizzo.pdf>

² fio.PSD represents public, private and third sector organisations working with homelessness and severe housing deprivation in Italy. It is recognized by the Italian Government as an institution of public utility for its advocacy, studying and support activities in relation to the homelessness strategy. For details, see www.fiopsd.org.

a home is a basic human right for everyone. Re-evaluating the concept of home, enforcing the capacity of vulnerable people to sustain housing, recognizing the benefit of the support and visits of social workers at home and investing social expenditure in a long-term vision are the revolutionary challenges within the cultural and political Italian context. Last but not least, HF should be a useful way of preventing homelessness. Recent data from the Italian Government reveal that the number of executive evictions increased in Italy from 31,393 in 2013 to 36,083 in 2104³. According to ISTAT's last census (ISTAT, 2011), there are almost 120,000 people living in inadequate housing – e.g., in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing or in situations of extreme overcrowding. National and local policies to deal with these issues vary and are not always effective. Social housing policies, for example, have a specific meaning in Italy and refer mainly to building new residential areas (or renovating existing housing stock) based on green, smart and energy efficient criteria. Its objectives are to favour lower housing costs for families (though this is not always the case), to offer innovative housing solutions (such as co-housing or congregate housing) and to favour integration and communitarian activities (green spaces, playgrounds, kindergartens). On the other hand, waiting lists for free or subsidised housing are blocked in many Italian cities, with severe consequences for poor families. Promoting a comprehensive approach to homelessness in Italy based on immediate responses but also on the prevention of housing exclusion and on projects that integrate social and labour aspects would mean dealing with the growth in severe poverty and housing exclusion.

The Emergence of Housing First in Italy

A number of essential 'ingredients' distinguish HF (the *Pathway to Housing* version) from other approaches (Stefancic *et al.*, 2013), and they are:

1. the opportunity for participants to choose the house they live in (houses may be scattered across all areas of the city according to the 'Scattered Site Apartments' system);
2. the separation of housing (meant as the right to housing) and therapeutic treatment;
3. self-determination and the freedom of choice for participants in terms of mental health treatment or detoxification, with the exception of the mandatory weekly visit by the staff;

³ Minister of Interior, 2015 <http://www.interno.gov.it/it/notizie/sfratti-disponibile-line-pubblicazione-i-dati-nazionali-2014>.

4. orientation towards 'recovery': a mixed set of services for recovery and regaining resilience is offered to the person;
5. two main methods of intervention: Assertive Community Treatment and Intensive Community Management.

These core ingredients did not prevent the model from being imported into other contexts and, as Pleace and Bretherton (2013) argue, models of HF developed outside the United States can hardly be considered as perfect copies of the *Pathway to Housing* model. Different social contexts, user profiles, welfare models and health systems, the organisational culture of social services and the political-institutional framework will mean certain adaptations from the original model. This adaptation has also happened in Italy.

Two processes have acted as inputs for the implementation of HF in Italy:

1. Bottom up: since 2012, single social providers in different Italian cities (Bergamo, Bologna, Trento, Ragusa) have tried to apply the HF approach through pilot projects, without any attempt at coordination;
2. Top down: since 2014, one of the most established not-for-profit organisations in the country in terms of severe marginalization, fio.PSD,⁴ launched the *Italian Programme for Implementing Housing First in Italy* with the aim of promoting the HF approach, coordinating the pilot projects of members (cities quoted above), and driving policy change in the homelessness sector.

The launch of the national programme on 1 March of 2014 (Turin) obtained large consensus across fio.PSD's members and beyond: mobilization of more than 100 social workers, managers, directors, public servants, scholars, researchers and students in the poverty sector was registered.⁵ Many organisations have said that they believe in the philosophy and methodology of HF but that the main challenge is applying HF according to context and a needs-based approach. Some cities are dealing with chronically homeless people; some others are seeing new homeless migrants every day; many are dealing with the new poor that have lost jobs and homes due to the economic crisis; and others are dealing with families at risk of housing exclusion or families living in severe housing deprivation.

⁴ fio.PSD was a member of the Steering Group for the evaluation of Housing First Europe and since 2015 has been a member of the International Advisory Board for Self-Assessment of Housing First. In 2015, it was nominated by the Italian Government as a 'National Expert in Housing First' and attended the Peer Review of HF on 16-17 March 2016 in Brussels.

⁵ Visit the web site of the event: <http://www.fiopsd.org/nhfi/>

In order to coordinate the field trial of the HF approach in different areas of the country, fio.PSD founded the *Italian Network of Housing First* (NHFI)⁶ in 2014. Organisations were asked to meet three main criteria: to respect the philosophy and ingredients of HF; to guarantee the availability of houses and social workers; to attend what was agreed by the membership and to follow the evaluation programme.⁷ In order to support the process, fio.PSD provided a two-year programme (2014-2016) involving three areas: 1. training in HF (concepts, principles and operational methods); 2. supervision and monitoring of projects; 3. support and advocacy actions favouring the integration of ordinary and structural funds in projects to combat homelessness. Today, the Network represents a collective, dynamic and continually evolving actor (as new members continue to join) that has as its aim the implementation of HF leading to a paradigm shift through the renewal of the means and methods of homelessness intervention and through the development of solutions for people with high housing needs.

The Italian Network of Housing First

As of 30 November 2015, the Italian Network counted 51 members. These include public bodies, not-for-profit organisations, charities and private organisations. These organisations decided to update their services adopting the Housing First approach under the coordination of fio.PSD.

Members of the network agreed that:

- The network (NHFI) recognizes the power of the *Pathways to Housing* as a model but assumes that it is not neutrally transferrable across the country; adaptation to local and contextual needs, and differences in how support is provided and the target groups involved are part of the Italian implementation.
- The Network (NHFI) embraces the core ingredients of *Pathways to Housing* and ensures respect for them in a common 'manifesto of action' (see below).

⁶ www.housingfirstitalia.org

⁷ Impact evaluation is carried out by the Independent Scientific Committee www.housingfirstitalia.org/comitatoscientifico

'Essentials' of the Italian Network for Implementing Housing First:

1. Housing as a basic human right and services that are closely connected with housing
2. Consumer choice
3. Housing that represents client choice and is decent and affordable
4. Users pay rent of 30 percent of their income (whatever this is)
5. Multidisciplinary team
6. Harm reduction philosophy
7. Integration of health, social and labour services
8. Recovery approach
9. Home visits are a must on a regular basis
10. Hiring people with personal experience of mental illness/addiction, as well as services, must meet clients' needs – the case load ratio should be adjusted accordingly

The Network includes non-profit organisations (47 percent), Caritas organisations (33 percent), other religious organisations (12 percent) and public organisations (8 percent) working directly in the provision of homelessness services, care services for poor people, services for alcohol and drug addicts and services for people with mental disorders. The members of NHFI come from different areas of Italy: the North, 57 percent; the Centre of Italy, 16 percent; the South and the Islands 27 percent. The organisations are of different sizes: 52 percent have only 1-15 workers; 17 percent are medium-sized, with 15-50 workers; and 31 percent are large organisations with over 50 staff members. The staff of NHFI's members have a high level of training; most have degrees, including in the Social Sciences and Social Services, but also in such areas as Anthropology, Psychology and Education, and the job profile is also relevant: Director, Coordinator, Supervisor, Psychologist. Since 2014, management and workers have taken part in a 2-year training programme coordinated by fio.PSD. It includes training activities, tutoring/supervision and technical assistance for implementing Housing First. The programme includes frontal learning (summer and winter school) and e-learning appointments (webinars) on different topics, such as the origins of Housing First; how to implement HF services; visiting homes; how to build partnerships with public authorities and the private sector (real estate); having a multidisciplinary team; and the empowerment approach. At the same time, the independent Scientific Committee (comprising national and international teachers, experts and scholars) supports fio.PSD and manages independent evaluations of experimental HF projects.

Methodological Approach and Data Collection

Moving from the awareness that one of the reasons for the wide and rapid diffusion of the HF model in the USA and Europe is the results obtained by the projects that experimented with it, and their scientific validation, the NHFI scientific committee created a research design (Bezzi, 2001) to evaluate experimentation of HF. It uses quantitative and qualitative methods and aims to evaluate the effects of the programme on context, organisations and clients (Padgett, 2011). In order to evaluate the change obtained in these three dimensions, a monitoring system has been set up. It collects quantitative data related to a set of variables at specific moments: for context and organisations, this is at the beginning of the experimentation, after a year and at the end; for the clients, it is a month after they move into the house, after six months and after a year. To collect data about the context and the organisations, two online questionnaires have been developed. The questionnaire on context contains questions about: reasons for experimenting with the HF approach; context needs; the target group; obstacles and resources needed to start applying HF; difficulties in applying HF principles; and strategies to overcome them. The questionnaire on the organisations contains questions about: the mission and juridical nature of the organisation; the number and type of human resources employed in the HF project; typology, provision and location of housing units; the methodology that will be used to apply HF in terms of HF team structure, meetings, client/staff ratio, frequency and modality of contacting clients; services and opportunities offered by the project; and networks with other public and not-for-profit organisations.

In order to collect data about clients and create a 'social profile' of them, a questionnaire was developed relating to nine domains: employment, family relationship, social relationship, income, education and training, law, addiction, housing and health. As at 30 November 2015, the Italian Network of Housing First (NHFI) counted 51 members – public, private and religious organisations. Membership does not mean having effectively started a HF project; in some cases, members head and are responsible for the HF projects and in other cases they are only the executors. Three projects were assigned to councils, which executed them in cooperation with three private organisations (one association and two non-profit organisations). At the end of 2015, there were 28 HF active projects, which were located in ten regions from the North to the South of Italy: Piemonte, Lombardia, Liguria, Veneto, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige, Emilia Romagna, Toscana, Calabria and Sicilia, with most in Sicilia and Veneto. All NHFI organisations are non-profit. In some cases, they are public organisations (4), and in particular local councils; in other cases they are private organisations, such as associations (4) or welfare institutions and cooperatives that operate in partnership with local councils (10) or religious

organisations (10). The religious organisations are local ecclesiastic charitable Caritas organisations (15). These represent the majority of the NHFI members that started a project in the last year.

Motivations/objectives

The HFI Network organisations started to experiment with the HF approach after specific training on the HF model. There were four main reasons for choosing to experiment with HF. The first is to foster and improve services for homeless people (75 percent); participation in the HF Network is an opportunity to reflect on current practices in this sector and to reform and modify them, especially when they are not efficient. The second reason is the HF model itself (71.4 percent); organisations are interested in HF principles and methods. The third reason is that HF regards housing as a human right (46.4 percent), and finally, the fourth reason is that the HFI Network is a way to unite and coordinate all organisations engaged in projects and programmes to combat homelessness and social exclusion (21.4 percent). There are two main motivations: first (78.6 percent), to house homeless and poor people, and secondly (64.3 percent), to provide solutions for other people who need a house or are having difficulties maintaining their current one.

Target groups

The HF projects have various target groups. For 33 of the projects, the target is chronically homeless people while for the other 44 projects, the targets involve other types of people in poverty and social and economic difficulties. There is a significant difference between projects in the regions of the North of Italy and those in the South in terms of target groups. In the North, the target is chronically homeless people, while in the South targets include adults, families and migrants without houses or having economic and social difficulties finding and maintaining a house, and who need support in order to overcome these difficulties.

Table 1. Priority Target of HFI Network Organisations (absolute values and percentages)

Priority target	Frequency	Percent
1. Chronically homeless people with drug abuse	11	39.8
2. Chronically homeless people with problems with the law	6	21.4
3. Chronically homeless people with mental or physical illnesses	16	57.4
4. Single adults living alone and with social problems	19	67.8
5. Single adults with social problems – migrants	13	46.4
6. Families with social problems	12	42.8

Source: Elab. Fio.PSD/IRES FVG (30 July 2015)

Provision of housing

The organisations that have started HF projects have at their disposal a stock of available accommodation to use for the HF experimentation. At the end of 2015, there were 87 units available overall: 30 scattered independent houses and 57 apartments or rooms in an apartment sharing the kitchen, living/common room and bathroom.

Difficulties at the beginning of the HF projects

HF projects had to overcome several difficulties and obstacles, which in some cases delayed the start of the experiment. About half of the organisations that have started a HF project note having had serious difficulties applying the following three HF principles:

- a commitment to working with clients for as long as they need it;
- clients contributing 30 percent of their income to rent;
- housing people without any grant for rent;

These issues are particularly due to the absence in Italy of any form of minimum wage or minimum income for unemployed and homeless people, and the organisations involved in HF have no 'public' financing. As such, it is difficult for them to bear the cost of housing clients who do not work and cannot contribute to the rent.

As a matter of fact, the kind of obstacles that the projects have faced to date can be described in terms of the specific dimensions of all social projects: organisational, methodological and economical.

1. 15 projects (53.6 percent) reported **organisational obstacles**, mainly related to the sustainability of rent and the availability of houses, team composition, and the existence of an efficient network with existing institutions working in the area. The first obstacle reflects the fact that the private rental market does not offer sufficient, or economically sustainable solutions. The second obstacle relates to problems putting together a programme team to provide 'intensive support' – in other words, a team of professionals dedicated to the HF approach, that share the same goals and that are able to drive and follow beneficiaries within the experimental project. These difficulties arise from the historical weakness of public psychiatric services and territorial health services in Italy, as well as difficulties integrating health services and social services. Finally, in terms of the third obstacle, it is extremely difficult to coordinate public and private actors and services operating in a region using a community approach; the non-integration of social interventions usually prevails.

2. 11 projects (39.3 percent) experienced **methodological obstacles** relating to the profiles of the beneficiaries (the target), the training of operators (working methods and tools) and the adaptability of the HF programme to the local context. The identification of a specific target with whom to start testing has long been a subject of debate and reflection in the start-up phase, and it is a strategic element that is linked to the expertise of the operators engaged in the projects. As a matter of fact, the HF approach to homelessness and to groups in need (families and migrants) that operators had to deal with, underlined the opportunity for innovative training when compared to traditional methods of social intervention, and the need to adapt to the local context and to the people in need living in the context of intervention. Many organisations and operators note the need for specific training in the HF philosophy and methodology. The principle of 'service user choice and self-determination', for example, represents a great challenge for all social and health workers employed in public and non-profit organisations. HF entails a radical change in the organisational culture of service, involving a different framework for the client and the service, as well as the practice of social intervention.
3. 12 projects (42. percent) struggled with **economic obstacles** related to the availability of financial resources for the start-up phase and the overall economic sustainability of the HF project in the medium and long term. A lack of funding and of a basic income measure for poverty have strongly impacted on support for the experimental phase of the projects, along with concern about sustainability of the projects in the medium and long term.

HF project clients: individuals and families

On December 2015, a year and a half after the beginning of HF experimentation, the Italian Network had in its charge 174 adults and 67 children hosted with their parents. The survey presented below concerns only adults, despite situations of distress involving whole families, including children. Clients are mainly single adults (73 percent), while the remaining (28.7 percent) are single parents and couples with or without children; families are mainly concentrated in Sicily.

The majority of adults accepted onto HF projects are Italian (71.8 percent) and male (69.5 percent); foreigners come mostly from non-European countries (79.3 percent). The age structure of this population is highly differentiated: the young age of foreigners affects the overall distribution, while all Italian clients are aged between 51 and 60. Most adults in HF programmes are not employed. Those in employment did not exceed 14.4 percent while 72.4 percent were out of work (unemployed or looking for their first job). Others who were not working included inactive housewives, disabled people and pensioners.

Equally problematic is the housing situation at the time of entry into residential facilities of the NHFI. The survey uses FEANTSA's ETHOS classification of homelessness and housing exclusion. In Italy, 33.3 percent of those participating in a HF project fell into the first group, which is the most problematic – roofless people living on the streets or in dormitories; 23.6 percent of those hosted were in the second group, which is strictly houseless, characterized by conditions of great hardship and the lack of a home. 27 percent were living in conditions of high uncertainty and the remaining 16.1 percent were in situations of inadequate housing on a temporary basis and of extreme overcrowding.

The extent to which people hosted in the Italian HF projects came from poor living situations is underlined by the amount of time they had spent in homelessness or housing exclusion before entering the project: 53.4 percent of adults had experienced housing exclusion in the previous 12 months while the remaining had experienced housing exclusion over periods from one year and up to four or more..

Costs and expenses

How accommodation costs were covered depended on individual plans and the institutions involved in the HF projects. As there is no basic income support in Italy, the costs of individual programmes are covered through a mix of public and private resources, with distribution varying from case to case. The greatest cost is carried by the public or private organisation that is implementing the HF project: 67.8 percent of people received a benefit from the organisation; another 10.3 percent is paid by the third sector organisation(s) collaborating with the local HF programme; 43.1 percent of people in HF projects share expenditure costs; and for an important 34.5 percent of project clients, the local council contributes to the costs. Of all people accepted onto projects, it was only possible to start a planning process integrated with local health and social services for 96 adults (55.5 percent of total).

Table 2. Distribution of Individual HF Project Costs (absolute values and percentages)

Project cost	Frequency	Percent
Local councils (single and aggregate)	60	34.5
Public Health Services: Addictions	1	0.6
Public Health Services: Mental Illness	3	1.7
National Ministry for Social Policy/Justice	3	1.7
HFI Network Organisations	18	10.3
HF Service Users	75	43.1
Organisation responsible for the project	118	67.8

Organisational Opportunities and Challenges

The main contribution of HF to date is in outlining the relevance of a bottom-up approach in the debate on homelessness and highlighting the importance of elaborating a national effort to face it. fio.PSD has played a strategic role in this in recent years, thanks to its cooperation with the Italian Statistics Institute (ISTAT) and the Minister of Labour and Social Policy in the field of national investigation of homelessness in Italy. In this context, the chance to discuss and renew the policy paradigm in the treatment of serious marginalization in the country is one of the most interesting opportunities that the HF is now offering to partners and operators.

This opportunity is strengthened within the network by a high representation of Italian regions (10 out of 20) with 28 projects already active and new membership requests and project commencements being registered in recent days. Active (and potential) projects are based on different local realities with different internal organisations (see Table 1), which makes HF one of the most valuable opportunities in the regionally and categorically fragmented Italian welfare system. Specifically, in relation to the targets of these projects, being able to ‘normalize’ the homeless person (after Law 180/78 on mental illness in Italy); being able to focus on the social capacity of reintegration; and, most of all, being able to affirm housing as a human right are all challenging opportunities in the structured provision and definition of social services. However, institutionalized care, the staircase model and reception facilities that serve as ‘containment’ for the phenomenon still prevail and are offered locally, as in many other countries.

HF is opening the way to new ideas of housing. One of the basic goals of social policy in terms of extreme deprivation and poverty is linked more and more nowadays to re-evaluating the idea of ‘home’ in terms of its related well-being and the enhancement of personal autonomy. HF, as all operators and scholars know quite well, is not a solution to all forms of homelessness but it can offer great success, even if firstly designed for chronically homeless people and users with severe mental illness. In Italy, HF currently has a range of different targets. For example, in southern Italy, as already outlined, HF projects usually target families and migrants’ families with high priority social and housing needs. The evaluation process used in HF is also particularly interesting, and the results of the projects, as well as the possibility of assessing the costs of homelessness with and without Housing First, provide another learning opportunity for the local welfare administrations and for both fio.PSD and operators. In 2013, the European Observatory on Homelessness published a report called *The Costs of Homelessness in Europe* – the very first comparative report on the costs of fighting homelessness in thirteen European countries (Pleace *et al.*, 2013). The HFI network now has the chance to support ‘new’ methods and aims in service evaluation, where local interaction

between public health services, social services and voluntary work are closely connected. Finally, it is worth pointing out that all the organisations involved are non-profit ones and that the Italian network has no 'public' financing. The role of Catholic organisations such as Caritas has been central to supporting the experience in Italy generally, but especially in Sicily.

However, notwithstanding the opportunities offered by the HF projects, the projects are also facing some challenges: the first is the availability of resources, the second is team composition, and the third relates to the evaluation of results and interaction with policy decision-makers.

As regards resources, the challenges concern the local availability of apartments and accessible health and social services. Neither the public nor the private housing market has readily available houses to offer Housing First projects, even where expectations are modest and the guarantees provided very high. Redistributing the housing stock can help meet demand. As has already happened in some experimental HF projects, a stock of complementary real estate may include council houses that don't meet the needs of families on the waiting list (for example because they are too small or need to be restored); religious buildings that are not in use and could potentially be converted; and public heritage and old buildings in historic urban centres with plans for urban renewal. Furthermore, as we have already said, Italy (like only Greece and Hungary in the EU 27) does not have universal income support. Poverty measures on a national level are represented by the social pension or the pension of those who are unable to work, or by lesser impact measures, such as the 'Social Card' (a monetary support introduced as an experiment in 12 big Italian towns), and a range of family and social economic support measures, including supported housing offered by individual councils or regions. Cooperation with neighbourhood and local community norms is also perceived as strategic in terms of enhancing the social integration of participants and supporting the decrease of anti-social behaviour. At present, cooperation is still weak and should be strongly enforced. Being able to access services easily and strengthen ties with the health services would obviously help. In addition, monetary resources can be extremely scarce especially when it comes to a beneficiary contributing 30 percent of their income (in Italy there is no national safety net) but also in terms of the role of professional and – more and more – of volunteers.

The second challenge, already referred to above, is focused on organisational and 'internal' aspects of the working team. Even if not sufficiently underlined in the literature, the working of the team is crucial (Ornelas, 2013), and the integration of different approaches and professionals and the kind of team structures as envisaged by Tsemberis (Assertive Community Treatment (ACT) or Intensive Case Management (ICM)) can produce different results according to the level of internal

cooperation within an ACT team and external coordination with other services. What has recently emerged is also the role of peers that can be locally enforced but require a profound change in the operators' view and need to be strongly supported (Tsemeris, 2010). The cultural challenge and the resistance of administrations and bureaucrats to organisational change have to be considered as the main obstacles to a HF approach.

The third challenge is linked to the evaluation process in terms of the well-being of beneficiaries but also in terms of policy implications and (necessary) changes in the local organisation of welfare services for people living in severe deprivation. The debate on social services and policy evaluation, while still an exciting academic exercise, is unfortunately perceived more as a bureaucratic requisite by many operators and administrations. Even if problematic to assess, HF projects can be less expensive than those using the staircase model as they can, for example, partially reduce the use of emergency shelters. Also, in Italy the scientific committee of HFI is collaborating closely with the fio.PSD in order to offer decision-makers a better understanding of the strengths and weakness of this model. The Italian welfare state lacks a general strategy around extreme poverty and homelessness and, as many analysts have pointed out, regional differences are deepening inequality and new ways are needed to set out a national social policy. In this context, HF is actually one of the best opportunities for non-profit and public services to discuss and act.

Conclusion

The path of the Italian network presents conditions and opportunities that make it stand out from the experiences that have been had – mainly with European funding – in some other EU countries. The most relevant aspect that can be conclusively underlined is the strong involvement of bodies and non-profit organisations that have accepted the innovation proposed by fio.PSD. The NHFI is a bottom-up movement that already works on behalf of homeless people and, at present, the lack of a minimum income and of intervention projects that are developed and funded by the central state or the appropriate Ministry for Political Science puts a major burden on the shoulders of fio.PSD: responsibility for a national experimental process in a fragmented welfare system and in an area of social disease and homelessness, where there is no existing national strategy or service. The process did not involve joining a Housing First model defined beforehand or constructed by simply re-proposing practices adopted at international and European level. During training and events linked to the path guided by the fio.PSD, different variations to the approach have been analysed with the idea of experimenting with a local pathway that would include the important points of the HF approach. The presence

and representation of numerous regional situations, different services and approaches is enriching all participants and is progressively structuring the Italian HF model. Having overcome the start-up phase, the path is heading towards a more mature phase of experimentation that will bring most people in the network to a more advanced stage in which they will be able to evaluate and verify the good practices already at work.

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