

Paolo Molinari and Anna Zenarolla (Eds.) (2018)

***Prima la casa: la sperimentazione
Housing First in Italia [Home First.
The Housing First Experimentation in Italy]***

Rome, Milan: Franco Angeli, pp.254, €30

This book is based on the Network Housing First Italy (NHFI) experience. This was promoted by Fio.PSD (the Italian federation of bodies for homeless people) to help launch a Housing First (HF) approach in Italy by supporting NGOs (associations, social cooperatives, local Caritas) in local HF projects that are building social innovation through continuous comparative and social research.

A special acknowledgment must go to the editors, Paolo Molinari and Anna Zenarolla, who build a useful framework for understanding the potential of this approach in Italy. The book conveys the passion and competence developed and nurtured by a “bottom-up” approach by professionals involved in the NHFI. Despite the Italian welfare system’s structural and legislative limits, the HF approach is growing.

Zenerolla contextualises the structural challenges facing the use of HF in Italy, which make it difficult to apply the founding criteria upon which HF was founded. Such challenges include the diversity of regional and intra-regional welfare systems, fragmentation of services, and narrow perspectives on poverty and homelessness. By comparison, HF “proposes to make a real reversal (...) with a unified policy vision to address homelessness, inside a model based on person centrality and integration between sectors, institutions, organizations and operators “(p.85).

This book is also the story of the innovative function of a Scientific Committee (which includes the editors) in the Italian homelessness area, called to evaluate and validate NHFI methods and outcomes. They (often) highlight the limitations of the assessment tools and the difficulty in comparing very different experiences due to the diversity of target groups, local welfare systems, and quantity and quality of available economic and professional resources.

The book consists of three sections, the first describes data that the NHFI gathered between March 2014 and December 2016, the second discusses monitoring and evaluation of the HF projects; and the third section explores the impact of HF on beneficiaries, operators and the territories involved.

In the first section's extensive description of the experimentation of HF in Italy, some noteworthy features include:

- of 54 NHFI NGOs members, almost 50% are small NGOs (reflecting the administrative, productive and social composition in Italy);
- NHFI involves 120 professionals in 35 local projects;
- the number of flats were 190, 70% rented on the free housing market;
- HF projects mainly involve medium or small cities, while in large metropolitan areas, where homelessness is more prevalent, Milan's NGOs promote only two small HF trials, and none are found in Rome;
- there were 688 beneficiaries, about 38% of whom are single homeless people, the rest are families with dependent children; more single "chronic" homeless people are in Northern Italy, and more homeless families are in the South.
- Italian users have a profile marked by significant health needs, while for families (the majority of whom are immigrants), social issues appear to prevail. These differences reflect the social and economic crisis that Italy has undergone in the years under study (which still continues for the poorest). In concrete terms, the lack of (minimum) income makes compliance with the principle of 30% salary devoted to rent difficult, thus invalidating a basic principle of HF.

The book's main shortcoming is in relation to theoretical development, in part due to its use of fragmented and limited data. For example, Chapter Six on health needs, integration and satisfaction of beneficiaries starts from a strong theoretical assumption but clashes with data by only using a small beneficiaries group, without control groups and minor replication over time on the same person. In relation to beneficiary empowerment, the book presents a weak thesis and sometimes with some lexical and content contradiction, and inconsistency in defining factors that determine responsibility and power of homeless people by HF. The Scientific Committee wanted to measure fidelity to the basic principles of HF using the Pathway Housing First Fidelity Scale. Only four NGOs used the tool with 18 operators involved (this limit is pointed out by the same authors, p.78). Such a small sample limits the quality of conclusions.

Meanwhile, Zenarolla's reflections in Chapter Five are very useful. She illustrates a fundamental and concretely innovative factor alongside the NHFI experience: the monitoring carried out of the projects, operators and beneficiaries through a series of different tools. This also clarifies a lot of the data shown in previous chapters. She describes the difficulty of adopting international tools to understand the considerable variety in the different territorial contexts in Italy. Unfortunately, the time period of monitoring, although significant, is still limited considering that a HF approach needs cultural changes (within organizations and operators) and existential ones (for beneficiaries) that require significantly longer evaluation times.

Despite the difficult characteristics of Italian welfare, an assessment was carried out into HF cost/benefit evaluation by a new tool "Osvaldo" (Chapter Seven). However, the implementation suffers from rather limited samples, each of which provides very different data, linked to territorial, organizational and beneficiary variables. Moreover, it should be remembered that tackling homelessness is not a national competence with dedicated public funds. Municipalities are not in charge of the costs of health services and justice issues, both of which remain the fundamental responsibility of those organisations providing services to homeless people.

Molinari and Zenarolla have also set up a new tool (called "Rossella") for NGOs' self-evaluation according to the HF criteria, through the detection of the main projects' organizational factors. The illustration of the construction and experimentation process is interesting, as well as the tool for evaluating life changes for the beneficiaries ("Wave") born from the best known "Outcome Star" and still being tested at the moment.

In the third part, Zenarolla proposes reflections generated by interviews with 10 NHFI operators. The reflections are interesting to compare to service providers' difficulties with changing their attitude towards users. Zenarolla outlines how a HF approach can set out principles useful to innovate social work (p.171 ss.). Briefly:

- The centrality of the person with his/her capacity for freedom and self-determination that generates new forms of accompaniment by professionals based on a fraternal code;
- With a HF approach, the aid system is no longer based on the triad "question, intervention, solution" but rather on "recognition, self-determination, integration";
- Furthermore, social work must be able to take on the complexity and dynamism of poverty by excluding simplifications and challenging the welfare system strongly characterized by the separation between social services and health system;

- To succeed this transformation, it is crucial to invest in training at various levels of the operators involved.

Two other chapters of note include one on “Design Anthropology”, with anthropological reflections on homelessness starting from an articulated reading of physical space in HF projects and from the story that beneficiaries and operators make about HF flats. The second is a chapter that proposes an interesting narration on a local project in Cosenza. This HF project is located in a small city in the Calabria Region, affected by poor structural and economic resources. The project was set up by a group of operators promoting HF for a significant number of people. The project clashes with three large-scale limiting factors: poor structuring of welfare services that obliges operators to act in great autonomy in all fronts; the lack of a measure to support poverty, and the cultural dimension that does not give value to a house path for homeless people but prefers to set up generic assistance by shelter.

Despite these limits, NHFI represents the story of a strong and decisive experience, able to generate social change and that has been the fundamental substratum to implement the National Guidelines on Homelessness of the Ministry of Social Affairs.

More in-depth analysis of the HF experience compared to the “ordinary” social and economic Italian reality would have been welcomed. Because NHFI focus on specific local and individual needs, it is difficult to discuss national-level strategy (p. 33), which also highlights the difficulty of comparing the qualitative/quantitative elements in the projects with the general dynamics of the Italian socio-economic system.

Using some reflections by Molinari and Zenarolla (pp.144-5), the work of NHFI testifies “the cultural climate, the desire to innovate, the strong motivation to get involved by the operators, the desire to participate in policy changes for homeless people “. As mentioned, what is described in the book still falls short on data, but points to the prospects of great expectations for the future. This book is a concrete block in this construction.

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