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# A Systems Perspective for Ending Homelessness in Italy: A Needed Change in Policy Approach and Practice

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## Introduction

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During the last decade a growing interest on the analysis, policy intervention, and service provision on homelessness in Italy can be observed. The interest is also due to an increasing number of people 'on the streets', especially in large Italian cities. Unfortunately, however, the last official statistics still date back to 2014. The National Statistical Institute published the first national survey on people experiencing homelessness in 2011, and the aforementioned follow up in 2014, counting a total of 50 724 people experiencing homelessness (ISTAT, 2012; 2015). The National Federation on service for Homeless People (fio.PSD)<sup>1</sup> has gained more international visibility and a relevant role in the national public debate. It began the first, experimental Housing First approach in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Currently, this approach is known all over Italy and has become part of the national framework of policy intervention on homelessness.

It is nonetheless still difficult to provide a general overview of homelessness services actually available in Italy as local municipalities are responsible for planning and delivering services and the traditional approach, providing only emergency and/or temporary accommodation, still prevails (Pleace, 2018; Baptista and Marlier, 2019, p.83). At present, services and interventions aimed at tackling severe marginality are mostly provided by private voluntary organisations and vary greatly on the national territory, although housing led programmes and high intensity support services are increasingly being discussed and adopted in different cities and

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<sup>1</sup> FIO.psd is composed of 146 members and involves organisations and operators working on homelessness in 17 out of 20 regions. See <https://www.fiopsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Infografiche-fio.PSD-2022.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.fiopsd.org/hfi-la-community-italiana-housing-first>.

regions. At the same time, there is a growing debate on the lack of affordable and public housing because of a consistent decline of the public housing system in the country in the last 20 years (Tosi, 2016; Filandri, 2015; Mugnano, 2017; Jessoula et al., 2019; Natili *et al.* 2021; Puccini, 2022). Given the increasing level of attention that homelessness has received in Italy, as well as the pressing debate on housing exclusion, this paper explores the conditions already at stake for a systemic change toward 'ending' homelessness.

## Homelessness and Housing First Policy in Italy

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In Italy, homelessness has received a higher level of attention in political debate and public policy over the last decades, and in recent times, more academic publications have been focused on this specific condition (Meo, 2000; Barnao, 2004; Consoli and Meo, 2020; Natili et al., 2021). Since the first studies on homelessness in Italy (Negri, 1990; Guidicini, 1991; Pellegrino and Verzieri, 1991), different definitions circulate the phenomenon connecting it to severe marginalisation and extreme poverty, but currently in Italy, it is closely identified with people living on the street, and the last available official statistics reinforced this definition, only referring to the first two concepts of the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) classification, and specifically to Rooflessness and Houselessness (Pleace, 2016; Edgar, 2009).

As a matter of fact, the last national counting was based on data collected through a point in time survey in 158 big and medium-sized Italian cities. This count was done from 21 November to 21 December 2014 and recorded people using a night shelter or a soup kitchen in one of 768 homeless services available in the national territory. Despite the limits of the survey, the final count of 50 724 people experiencing homelessness in Italy is still the last official one, and it has been incorporated in the *National Guidelines for tackling severe adult marginality* adopted by the State-Regions conference from the Italian Government in 2015 (Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, 2015). The adoption of the Guidelines for tackling severe adult marginality represents the official implementation of the Housing First approach in Italy.

In the fragmented provision of welfare due to a lack of national policies and funds directed toward regulating services for people experiencing homelessness and to a missing political will to define and implement basic level of welfare to be granted nationwide, the attempt to define a policy and some common directions is highly

valuable.<sup>3</sup> By giving priority to the “right to housing” over any other welfare or therapeutic interventions, this approach is innovative compared to the existing systems of provision of social and health services for people experiencing homelessness in Italy (Cortese and Zenarolla, 2016; Baptista and Marlier, 2019, p.58).

A crucial role for this result has been played by the National Federation of Organization of Services for Homeless People (fio.PSD<sup>4</sup>) which, since 2014, has launched experimental initiatives for the implementation of Housing First and played a fundamental role in supporting Housing First pilot programmes in many regions. The first pilot period, between 2014 and 2016, involved 35 projects in 10 regions and was implemented without national funding. It produced interesting results for the people entering the programme and also on the national debate offering evidence of the people’s well-being and experimental methods for monitoring Housing First and increasing the debate towards Housing First policies (Molinari and Zenarolla, 2018). Since then, a second wave was implemented and monitored, from 2017-2019, and the Italian community on housing first was institutionalised within the National Federation.<sup>5</sup> Following the approval of the National Guidelines, a funding line (Public notice 4/2016) was financed through EU resources and was launched from 2016-2019. This included the aim to support homelessness services and integrate local policies. A first share of EU funding, 25 million euro, was allocated in 2016 and continued in the following year with the goal of tackling homelessness and promoting local initiatives by regional and local authorities (Prandini and Gaugi, 2021).

In the same period, Italy approved the Law Decree 147/2017 and finally introduced a national measure against poverty. It was first named *Reddito di Inserimento* (REI), but after one year was changed by the new government into *Citizenship’s Income* (RdC). Although the name suggests a universal, unconditional basic income, the Citizenship Income is actually a selective, means-tested measure, targeted at poor households, and is conditional on participation in job-search activities. Constraints of the measure have especially penalised foreigners and people experiencing homelessness, although thanks to the advocacy role of fio.PSD, the Government has recognised civil registration of individual residence as a subjective right for all people on the territory. The measure has undoubtedly played a homelessness prevention function in preventing people from losing their housing by providing an

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<sup>3</sup> The guidelines assume the house as the starting point for any social inclusion path for the homeless and recommend that the transition from the street to the apartment should be combined with local social services supporting people as long as necessary to achieve a state of well-being and social integration (Ministry on Labor and Social Policies, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> [www.fiopsd.org](http://www.fiopsd.org).

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fiopsd.org/hfi-la-community-italiana-housing-first>.

additional €280 to top up the monthly benefit for households who rent their accommodation (a €150 top-up is paid to beneficiaries who pay a mortgage) and this is independent of household size.

Lastly, the *Recovery and Resilience National Plan* is actually supporting interventions aimed at contrasting serious adult marginality and homelessness<sup>6</sup> by proposing the implementation of temporary housing and access to low-threshold multifunctional centres aimed at building the 'infrastructure' of local services, especially in metropolitan areas.

In this general scenario, along which the Housing First approach and its principles have progressively taken part of the Italian public policy on homelessness, where the fio.PSD is playing a strategic role in supporting organisations, social workers, and local municipalities in experimenting housing first, there still persist some contrasting evidence of increasing numbers of people experiencing homelessness, and after COVID-19, the number of people experiencing housing distress has rapidly increased (Caritas, 2020).

First of all, notwithstanding the relevance of the National Guidelines for the national debate about extreme poverty and homelessness in Italy, the document could be interpreted as a list of principles as it has not provided adequate monitoring and evaluation. The implementation phase is delegated to regional and local authorities and therefore highly differentiated. The current pattern of services provision for people experiencing homelessness in Italy still reflects a predominantly staircase approach, even though an interesting shift is witnessed and especially supported by experimental Housing First programmes (Padgett *et al.* 2018; Pleace, 2019).

Secondly, it is nowadays well known that, in order to evaluate the responses offered to homelessness, a structured collection of data is necessary, including the 'hidden homeless', families, youth, women, migrants, and people leaving in insecure accommodation or inadequate housing. Homelessness measurements and counting are always widely debated, but are undoubtedly used for focusing public interventions on the phenomenon and supporting political decisions. Italy is still

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<sup>6</sup> Italy is the first beneficiary, in absolute value, of the two main instruments of the Next Generation EU: the Facility for Recovery and Resilience (RRF) and the Recovery Assistance Package for the Cohesion and Territories of Europe (REACT-EU). In relation to Housing First, 177.5 million Euros will have been provided in three years for implementing bespoke projects aimed at reaching a higher level of individual autonomy and empowerment of people experiencing homelessness while 275.5 million Euros have been devoted to Mailing Station to provide multifunctional centers offering low threshold services to people in need.

missing a regular and national counting and needs to implement a reliable data collection in order to re-construct and understand the dynamics on homelessness (O'Sullivan, 2020).<sup>7</sup>

Thirdly, what still seems to be lacking in Italy is the possibility to prevent 'falling into' homelessness. There is spread evidence that flexible services, integrated with homelessness, health, and housing, work best and should be the core of all homelessness strategies and policies (Pleace, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2021). A very limited provision of preventative services are available now in Italy, and even if there are brilliant local experiences, there is no national strategy or funds allocated to preventative homeless policies.

Finally, connected to all previous points, in order to be effective, whatever strategic policy on homelessness should also include an intervention on housing. At present, Italy is witnessing an extremely low percentage of expenditure on housing per inhabitant, and one of the lowest stocks of social and public housing in Europe (see: Jessoula et al., 2019).

## **Challenges and Opportunities for a Systemic Change**

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The implementation of Housing First programmes has raised the attention on homelessness, and the increasing number of people on the street is pushing the debate about homelessness in Italy further. In a converging direction, there is also a growing understanding of housing distress and social housing spread all over Italy (Jessoula et al., 2019; Natili *et al*, 2021; Puccini, 2022 ). In 2022, a National alliance of active citizens' organisations and researchers published a position paper on Housing policies and social housing in Italy focusing on the missing 'right to housing', the lack of affordable and public housing, and a call for opening a public debate through the foundation of a National Observatory on housing policies and Urban regeneration.<sup>8</sup>

As a matter of fact, housing policies have never been considered as a pillar of the welfare system in Italy and progressively defined rather residual in the general structure of the public definition of well-being (Mugnano, 2017). After the post-war reconstructive phase of the 1950s (INA-casa), and some national plans in the 1970s

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<sup>7</sup> As underlined, point-in-time surveys are widely used to estimate the extent and characteristics of those experiencing homelessness are helpful for monitoring trends and identifying service needs but, as well described in the book, minimize the scale of homelessness.

<sup>8</sup> The forum on inequality and diversity <https://www.forumdisuguaglianzediversita.org/our-project/> founded in 2022. The Osservatorio on Social housing and urban regeneration: <https://www.forumdisuguaglianzediversita.org/nasce-losservatorio-nazionale-sulle-politiche-abitative-e-di-rigenerazione-urbana-appuntamento-a-roma-il-14-luglio/>.

(GESCAL), the main aim of public housing policy has been to support the individual and family property. The 'right to housing' has been classified as a right to 'own a house' through loans and fiscal incentives (Filandri, 2015; Baldini and Pavolini, 2022). In recent years, to further mislead the effective understanding of the problem, the term 'social housing' has been improperly used in the public debate, basically financing access to housing only for specific groups of the impoverished Italian middle class (Bricocoli and Cucca, 2016). As a direct consequence of this approach to housing and given the territorial access of welfare rights, an increasing number of people are pushed into the streets, some are hosted by relatives or friends, others are already hosted by shelters or dormitories and others illegally occupy public and private houses.

In this general scenario, the Housing First Europe Hub has recently commissioned Demos Helsinki to undertake a study on the meaning of 'systemic change' in the context of homelessness in order to support a wider change to ensure ending homelessness as a part of a systemic solution (Demos Helsinki, 2022).

According to the aforementioned characteristics of the country and focusing on a possible systemic change, Italy can firstly be considered a similar case to Spain because of its Mediterranean welfare regime traits and its local and national governance that can be assimilated to a 'fragmented' one. Similar to Spain, Italy has also experienced a Housing First rise, both in terms of pilot projects and being recognised as a policy pillar in the recent policy guidelines and programmes. Finally, on the same line of analysis "the overall lack of capabilities to ensure coordination at the regional level severely hindered systemic change..." (Demos Helsinki, 2022, p.14). While the path toward systemic change is uncertain, the process of cultural change is already on the move and the opportunity provided by the EU funds can provide the right condition for the possibility to expand Housing First to a point of no return.

By focusing on the three keys identified to leverage change: Directionality, Capacity Building, and Learning, we can try to represent the actual Italian situation as follows:

**Learning** – Identification of the key bottlenecks that prevent continuous improvement on Housing First implementation. The fio.PSD has played a strategic role in promoting the Housing First approach and its inclusion in the National Guidelines and has also granted a national bottom-up network for sharing experiences and knowledge on its principles, evaluation's models, and monitoring. At present there is also a growing convergence in the political debate that a strong and persistent bottleneck is the linkage between housing exclusion, social housing, and homelessness. Policies at stake are not openly facing this challenge which requires long-term investment and clear political will toward the change.

**Directionality** – Establishment of a resource flow to support Housing First scale-up and nurturing the long-term political and societal commitments needed to align stakeholders' incentives toward system change. Even if Housing First is part of the National Guidelines and the direction of change is supported in the Recovery and Resilience Plan, homeless services in Italy are still based on an emergency and temporary approach, preventative policies are rare, and often the third sector and private organisations are the main actors in providing the (low-threshold) services. Still, a basic national level of local services is missing, determining a vast heterogeneity of the services provided according to local human and financial resources.

**Capacity Building** – Long-term commitment to align incentives toward systemic change have prevented establishing networks providing the human and financial resources needed to sustain a Housing First scaling-up. In Italy, there is a growing debate around the need for a structural change, but still the local and national governments do not seem to be engaged enough with a clear commitment toward Housing First and with a (different) investment in social housing.

It is now clear that a successful transition to a housing-led approach requires a change in culture and thinking, and in Italy the Fio.PSD has played a real strategic role in how people work. “The national federation was responsible for promoting initial bottom-up Housing First pilot projects in cities, eventually gaining the support of the central government which promoted the use of EU structural fund for housing first” (Jones et al., 2022, p.9). At the same time, “training has been an effective tool to raise awareness about housing first to a wide range of actors, including frontline workers and local authorities and has helped to drive a bottom -up approach to implement housing first across the country, supported by national policy and EU funding (Jones et al., 2022, p.11). Finally, “in Italian small cities, from 2016, EU funds brought financial incentive to many and promotes housing solutions and housing first in place of shelters. The funds could only be used towards more permanent housing solutions. Fio.PSD conducted crucial advocacy work in the territories working with local authorities to try and convince them to switch to housing-led approach. Fio.PSD also facilitated inter-territorial exchanges among local authorities and Italy successfully used the EU-led FEAD and ESF programmes to finance services for homeless people” (Jones et al., 2022, p.14).

Finally, in May 2022, the Fio.PSD organised a Consensus Conference at the end of a bottom-up process, which, during the previous months, involved more than 500 people working with people experiencing homelessness in 42 different Italian cities. The process was basically aimed at listening to the difficulties and priorities of people working in the territories and to identify the reasons why, notwithstanding their efforts, there are still people sleeping and dying on the street. In the first five months of 2022, Fio.PSD counted 141 people experiencing homelessness who died on the

Italian streets. The Consensus Conference was a call for a systemic change in the definition of homelessness and an effort was made to identify new meanings and words and 'give the change a home'. The Consensus Manifesto identifies seven challenges that, if faced and overcome, can generate the change: to develop systemic skills (change); to promote coordinated interventions for people experiencing homelessness (health); to look at all people's dimensions (intangible); to disseminate an evaluation practice (impact); to redefine the condition of being homeless (different equalities); to promote a national policy on (housing); and finally, to update the mandate of (social service) in order to respond to social and economic challenges.<sup>9</sup>

The Consensus Conference and its manifesto will surely be further developed by the fio.PSD, but it can certainly be considered as a public call for attention on homelessness and against the risk of being entrapped in cultural schemes reproducing need definition and pre-structured responses. Therefore, in Italy, change is undoubtedly on the move and the main gaps, as well as the priorities in the provision of services for people experiencing homelessness, have already been clearly stated<sup>10</sup>, but the systemic change will only be the result of long-term policy and an effective coordination of the different actors involved in its planning and implementation.

## Conclusion

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The housing first approach and housing led policies are now part of the national debate on homelessness in Italy and we can observe that the cultural and policy framework on homelessness and extreme poverty in Italy is changing. All the funds and projects financed nationally and through the European Funds and by RRNP are oriented toward Housing-Led services, but in order to be effective, all these interventions have to be integrated within a national housing policy, which in recent years has been oriented toward privatisations with the result that Italy has the lowest rate of public housing of all European countries.

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<sup>9</sup> [https://www.fiopsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Manifesto\\_ENG\\_CC\\_2022-scaled.jpg](https://www.fiopsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Manifesto_ENG_CC_2022-scaled.jpg).

<sup>10</sup> The main gaps in the provision of services for people experiencing homelessness in Italy are: 1. Endemic scarcity of public resources dedicated to the public housing and limited availability of public dwelling; 2. Geographical variance in the provision of services to tackle homelessness and this make it very difficult to fully develop a new strategy; 3. Not all individuals in absolute poverty are eligible for the minimum income scheme meaning that eligibility criteria may be too strict and the homeless may be excluded. The priorities: 1. Improve the overall governance of this policy field also developing a monitoring strategy; 2. Expand the stock of public and social housing; 3. Reinroduce a fund to support low-income tenants; 4. Invest adequate resources in hiring and training social workers; 5. Guarantee the access to anti-poverty monetary benefit- especially the minimum income scheme (Baptista and Marlier, 2019, pp.118-123).



Still, at present a very limited provision of preventative services are available in Italy and the idea that the provision of shelters can be the solution persists even though it is clear that granting affordable housing is the most crucial element in ending homelessness (O'Sullivan, 2020, p.10).

The possibility of these changes is also strongly connected to the skills and the competences of national and local administrations to sustain the direction of change and rethinking the *public* dimension of homelessness (Consoli and Meo, 2020; Stern, 1984; O'Sullivan, 2020). At present, homelessness is still perceived as an individual and private issue, not as an event that can affect people who experience housing instability and labour market precariousness.

Finally, in order to bring about a real change in the public policies on homelessness and housing exclusion, the first steps have to be connected with the empowerment and monitoring of national and local integrated planning and with the provision of an updated collection of data on homelessness and its drivers in Italy.

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