

# Social Public Services: Quality of Working Life and Quality of Service

## *Summary of the Italian national report*

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EUROPEAN FOUNDATION  
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In Italy, gradual progress is being made towards a global approach to the problems of social exclusion. The failure to meet the multi-faceted needs of the users of social services has a number of causes: the limited nature of basic services and the resources channelled into them, the weakness of the public machine and policy formulation that is traditionally centralist and uses unchanging methods. Attempts are now being made to make up for lost time (for instance the reforms of employment services and of health and welfare), but Italy is still lagging behind other countries.

The areas covered by this report: services for elderly people living alone, for young jobseekers and for people with severe learning problems, play a key part in any definition of social well-being. In general terms, the situation in Italy is far from encouraging. There are few services for the elderly (only 20% of local authorities have started to provide home care services) and what services there are tend not be comparable throughout the country, with greater shortcomings in the south. The employment services system has required a complete overhaul, which is not yet complete; links between schools and the productive sector are lacking; any instruments to help the population group that is most at risk of marginalisation are completely lacking, i.e. young people who, in addition to having no work, are facing deteriorating social and mental conditions. Opportunities for the mentally disabled to attend vocational training centres, social cooperatives or day centres are also limited.

Interesting experiences that may be important points of reference are, however, emerging from this situation which is not very encouraging overall. The report has analysed nine good practices in the three areas, in order to show what measures are being developed and pinpoint their potential for transfer to other contexts. In choosing these good practice, we abided by the criterion chosen by the European Foundation in Dublin, i.e. that initiatives should have made major efforts to meet users' needs by integrating services and coordinating all the partners involved. These are, in brief, the cases examined and the reasons for their importance:

### **Elderly people living alone**

- *Social services for elderly people facing hardship in the Commune of Bologna*  
Wide range of services offered; integration of the social and welfare system and the health system from both the structural and procedural points of view; coordination between the public agencies working in the area under the planning agreement; the role of the "third" sector and of accredited private concerns; the establishment, in each neighbourhood, of a standard point of access to the range of integrated social and health services;
- *The "Estate Serena" Emergenza Anziani programme of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano*  
Intended to diversify the services on offer, by providing a more extensive range of specialist services at various times of the year in order to take account of new and changing needs at different times;
- *The "Area Development Plan" of the Agro nocerino-sarnese (the northwest area of the Province of Salerno)*  
The first experiments in southern Italy with inter-commune planning based on networking and projects involving all the partners working in personal services with the integration of social and welfare services, institutional services and the local community, and public, private and non-profit-making agencies and that involve the voluntary social and welfare sector.

## Young jobseekers

- *Employment Agency of Autonomous Province of Trento* where since 1983 an innovative initiative has been running, in comparison with systems in the rest of the country, for active labour policy to cut down on the red tape involved in employment services, through vocational training and guidance initiatives and the involvement of social partners also in drawing-up a multi-annual plan of action;
- *The Società per l'Imprenditorialità Giovanile (Ig - Young Entrepreneur's Company)* for services, largely in Southern Italy and in depressed areas, for enterprise creation, local leadership, training for public and private organisations working with young people. IG coordinates a network of professional and social skills;
- *"La Tenda" association- Salerno Solidarity Centre* for prevention and re-integration schemes for young people with problems. Other local partners have been involved and an integrated system of work placement for disadvantaged groups, which combines public and private action, has also been set up.

## The mentally disabled

- *The Centro Socio Educativo (SCE- Socio-Educational Centre), in Lissone (Milano).* Socio-educational rehabilitation of people with severe mental disabilities through high-level collaboration between public, private and non profit services, an integrated range of educational, health, welfare and social services, the formulation of personalised rehabilitation and training plans, the supportive role played by users' families who were fully involved in the centre's activities, the strong motivation and identification of employees helped by a continuous training programme.
- *The Capodarco Vocational Training Centre in Rome* - a national reference point for vocational training for people with learning difficulties, because of the very innovative methods that it uses, its focus on a range of groups at risk of marginalization and its links with the labour market.
- *The "Alto Vicentino" Servizio Integrazione Lavorativa (SIL- Work Placement Service) of Thiene* for its very clear organisational model, whose objective is that of mediating between disadvantaged people and the production system, linking rehabilitation and training measures with employment measures. The involvement of the various institutional partners and economic and social forces and the network structure are other remarkable features.

Changes in the social and welfare system in Italy, entailing both problems and developments, are described in order to provide a context for these initiatives. Very briefly, these include:

- demographic and economic changes;
- institutional decentralisation;
- the rescaling of the role of the public sector in service provision;
- public funding cuts and the pressure exerted by the demand for services which are causing service providers, including public sector providers, to improve their efficiency by conversion into businesses and wide-ranging local reorganisation;
- the introduction of competition between service providers to ensure that services are financially viable;
- changes in employees' employment relationships.

The study looks at employment and working conditions in the nine good practices and, in particular, in two case studies (Bologna and the Lissone CSE). Social cooperatives are undoubtedly the most typical way in which work is being made more flexible in Italy in the social services sector, and have labour costs that are lower than those of public sector employees. In the cases examined, it can be seen that employees' professional skills and the efficiency of measures have improved in recent years, but that there is still a major differential between the working conditions of public sector employees and cooperative members. The latter also seem disadvantaged by uncertainties about the security of their employment linked to the system of calls for tender and by lower pay levels.

The way in which the labour factor is integrated into the organisation of an activity plays a key part in the quality of a service. In the services examined, team work is widely used to improve the efficiency of action, within adequately streamlined organisations where management and workers are not too far removed from one another. The perception of undertaking important work and pride in an activity that is of use to others means that employees identify highly with their work. In the cases studied, commitment, involvement, cooperation and in particular intelligence are required from workers, but not more complex levels of participation.

There is nevertheless a contradiction between strong emotional involvement in work and dissatisfaction with important aspects of working conditions. In order to ensure that the quality of the service can be sustained in the long term, the parties should therefore try to find a fair balance between security and flexibility. Market mechanisms need to be reconciled with a prospect of relative stability that enables suppliers and employees to plan in the medium to long term. Human and professional skill losses need to be curbed by providing more opportunities for people to modify their work commitments throughout their working lives, strengthening the commitment to training, placing more emphasis on the usefulness, importance and responsibility of employees' work, negotiating instruments for participation and linking employees' pay to the quantity, quality and economic viability of services.

The quality of a service requires continuous monitoring. In the case studies, widespread use is made of user satisfaction which generally gives very positive results. This instrument is not felt by suppliers of the service to provide results that are a true reflection of reality. The pensioners' unions are critical of the excessive weight attached to this criterion and feels that it should be balanced against an assessment of the quality of the service by workers and of the achievement of objectives for individual users. Experts in this area consider that a "contracting culture", i.e. expertise in evaluating cost and service quality ratios in calls for tender, is still largely lacking.

The ability to meet differentiated needs is shaped by the ability to promote dialogue between and to integrate services run by various agencies with different legal status, organisations, philosophies of action and different locations. This networking makes it possible to call on different skills and specialisations as facilities obviously cannot meet every need on their own. This is not a purely organisational problem, but involves the attitude of not working in isolation. Generally speaking, the ability to work in an integrated way is lacking in Italy, where the approach tends to be vertical. The problem is therefore one of reorganising the overall system to promote cooperation between services and operators. Action also needs to be taken to promote wider-ranging transfers of experience, practices and expertise. On the basis of Article 137 of the Treaty of Amsterdam, exchanges of information and good practices between the Member States, promotion of innovative approaches and evaluation of

experiments need to be encouraged. It may well be that Community action could take the form of coordination of measures and schemes, along the lines of the employment model, leaving the Member States the task of formulating policies of social integration.

The case studies show some solutions to the problems of user empowerment. All the initiatives involving training for the mentally disabled include periodic meetings between instructors and families to check on progress and to provide information on programmes. In the three good practices for young jobseekers, widespread use is made of tutors. In other cases, voluntary associations often run by users or users' families are involved in the promotion or in the supply of the service. User empowerment is the more efficient the more it is based on a solid structure of knowledge and professional skills. In the case of service planning, this work is carried out through local concerted action in which the social partners have a major role to play. Indirect representation by unions and the social partners should be strengthened by more direct representation by youth associations that moves away from political cooption. User empowerment should also focus on an area which has up to now not been explored, that of mediation between the market and the individual.

In Italy, where the burden of care of people with hardship falls on the family, and therefore predominantly on women, stepping up social services objectively strengthens the role of women in society. The large numbers of women in social public services both as users and as employees raises gender problems. In decisions on resource allocation, on institutional structures and on organisational methods, women are most exposed on both fronts. The case studies show some reassuring developments, however, given that there are instances of women in jobs that are not subordinate, highly professional skills, involvement and interest in continuing training. Labour market strategies that allow for flexible working hours for employees and policies that favour the family, that increase women's participation rate and that reconcile work and family life for men and women are essential.

Social public services are a sector with a high employment density in which there are major opportunities for job creation. Delors' White Paper saw them as an instrument for competitiveness and a chance for employment. According to some estimates, these services have a major job creation potential. However, a high potential demand that is currently unsatisfied co-exists with major obstacles, from the point of view of both supply and demand, that prevent the development of new activities. There is a need for public intervention to strengthen markets through measures to support the demand and promote the supply that are able to build up markets. The former include the issue of vouchers to consumers that are modulated on the basis of needs and ability to pay and cover a variable proportion of the price of the service, using users' associations to stimulate demand and setting quality standards for services to provide guarantees for users. On the supply side, measures include the launch of real services (in the areas of information and training) as well as financial services for new enterprises and non-profit-making organisations in the sector, reductions of the social security charges on labour and simplified payment schemes and access to a wider range of contractual instruments for employment relationships and working hours that provide a better match between supply and demand.

Public support for the construction of new markets immediately opens up a need for increased public expenditure, but also means that fewer efforts are needed because taxation revenue is increased and burdens are reduced as a result of increased employment. The doses of public expenditure needed for the start-up phase can also be gradually reduced as markets become more mature. Many estimates in various European countries show that the cost/efficiency ratio of a social services job is more favourable than that of other measures and is also greater than that of public investment.