

The Challenges of Social and Health Care Networking in South Tyrol.

A Case Study in Early Childhood Support Interventions

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1. Introduction

The principle of subsidiarity inspires social policies in South Tyrol. According to the last provincial social plan carried out in 2009 (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano, 2008), it is suggested that social policies should be implemented in close collaboration between the public sector, the private sector, and civil society, promoting a system of hybrid solutions known as a “welfare mix” (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano, 2008, p. 10) between the public and the private sectors. South Tyrol is an exemplary field of expansion and specialization of welfare services (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano & Libera Università di Bolzano, 2015). These are high quality services which are appreciated by the local population (Ausserbrunner et al., 2016), however social care and healthcare services seem to be struggling to respond to the needs of citizens. These services operate with an individualized and specialized performance logic with a limited holistic view of the individual (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano & Libera Università di Bolzano, 2015).

This context makes collaboration between services difficult. Despite the Italian progressive legal provision that fosters and sustains integrated work (laws have been in force for about 20 years)¹, studies have demonstrated

1 The Provincial Law no. 131 of 1991 on the reorganization of social services in the Province of Bolzano, subsequently supplemented by National Law no. 328 of 2000, the framework law for the implementation of the integrated system of social interventions and services

that there is a lack of collaboration among Italian welfare services (Fargion et al., 2015; Ferrari, 2010).

Although there is already a substantial body of work on inter-organizational networks, this research project adds to the body of knowledge by focusing particularly on the network governance in the local welfare (Moulaert et al., 2017).

With this intent, a case study was carried out, observing the implementation of an inter-organizational network in a neighborhood of Bolzano where there is a high percentage of families with children (Comune di Bolzano, 2018). The project aimed to integrate a delivery service of healthcare, social care, and educational organizations in order to offer services that are more suitable in the field of early childhood support interventions, namely children in 0-3 age group and their families. The research was part of a PhD program in the Free University of Bolzano which took place from January 2018 to June 2019. Network dynamics were analyzed through the concept of bottom-linked governance.

While recognizing and enhancing the perspectives of civil society in local spaces by looking at the interplay among professionals, stakeholders and interested persons in the local context (horizontal governance), the bottom-linked governance (García et al., 2015) aims to highlight the dynamics that encourage and stimulate the encounter between different hierarchical levels and among social and institutional actors (vertical governance). Similarly, space-based approaches of social work point out the necessity to acknowledge and foster civil society and citizens as social actors in the territory (Spatscheck, 2012). The two dynamics cannot be split: bottom-up initiatives need to be supported and institutionalized according to a top-down dynamic, instrumental to redefining the public sphere, guaranteeing universalism and democracy (Martinelli, 2014).

2. Inter-Organizational Networks in Early Childhood Services

The research on early childhood education and care (ECEC) acknowledges the importance to work with integrative approaches with families and children in their environment (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2001; 2006). Segregation and fragmentation of early childhood services has led to a countermovement of integration and networking in many countries (INTESYS, 2017; Transatlantic Forum on Inclusive Early Years, 2015). In Germany, networking was specifically developed (Thiesen, 2018) which led to the development of Early Support at federal level for the target group of children aged from 0 to 3 years and their families. The German and Austrian early childhood intervention programmes became the model for the implementation of the present pilot project in South Tyrol (Ladurner et al., 2016).

The implementation of networks depends on both context and on the institutional setting. Countries with a tradition of universal services, such as Northern Europe, are probably more prone to exchanging knowledge and experience between services, often with proportionate universalism as a guide. In anglophone countries, with a tradition of targeted services, the trigger seems to be a critical event which leads to the creation of a new service (Vermeiren et al., 2018).

The literature assesses both advantages and disadvantages of networking. However, there is no consensus about the utility of said networks (Breimo et al., 2017; Van Haute et al., 2018; Vandebroek & Lazzari, 2014) and critical approaches to network governance are still scarce (Bode, 2017).

The challenges are multiple and can give rise to tensions and difficulties at different levels. Even when they have common general objectives, inter-organizational networks may respond to different interests depending on whether they focus on the direct beneficiaries (families and children) or on the operators and organizations involved. These interests do not always match. One example is the expectation of network efficiency which can lead to the request to share sensitive information about families (Haute & Vandebroek, 2018; Hood, 2014). While the communication between involved organizations might be improved, it can result in intrusive practices and

excessive control of families. The crucial aspect which seems to be less researched is the intrinsic contradiction between the need for network efficiency in a managerial perspective and the creation of a collaborative and free exchange platform between network's partners. In this sense, networks can be "a double-edged sword" (De Corte et al., 2017): They can trigger the creation of space of democratic exchange, but at the same time, there can be dynamics of control regarding both the practitioners and the beneficiaries of these interventions. The risk is to neglect the competitive context in which the organizations work. Conflicts of competence and scarcity of resources can lead to avoidable behaviors by presenting forms of "latent passivity" (Bode, 2017, p. 65).

3. Methodology

The selected methodology of the research used was based upon a case study. Case studies require a blend of mixed methods and a holistic approach (Kirby et al., 2010). Documental analysis, qualitative semi-structured interviews, and participants observations of meetings were the selected methods used. The data was gathered from five practitioners involved in the pilot project's working group (they were interviewed twice, at the beginning of the research and after 9 months). Semi-structured interviews were further gathered from specialists and professionals in the field of early childhood and prevention (N = 14), and from social actors in the neighborhood (N = 11). The latter were practitioners working in local NGOs as well as families. Participant observations of the working group added further information (14 meetings in three different settings). The case study method was combined with a collaborative approach in the form of participant discussions which included the use of visual tools, such as relational maps, which were realized by the participants involved during a large network's meeting. The meeting gathered forty-one practitioners together and, in an assignment, they were asked to match the existing connections and their desired connections with specific sectors and services. The distribution between the private sector (N = 16) and public sector (N = 15) professionals was balanced and involved all the three areas considered.

The direct content data analysis was progressive (Kirby et al., 2010), i.e., the data was to be analyzed during the process, enabling an iterative process, involving reflection about the meanings of the selected criteria involved.

The pilot project in Bolzano was characterized by a high level of complexity (Vermeiren et al., 2018) since different groups and sub-groups were involved in the process. It developed at least two different formal networks and fostered the construction of new relationships among and within sectors. The analysis of the network governance focused on two different networks that represented the two pillars of the pilot project: the working group (the operative professionals' network) built up by a smaller group of territorial representatives belonging to the three selected sectors (healthcare, social care and ECEC) and the enlarged network composed mainly of local stakeholders in the field of Early Support.

4. Results: The Dimensions of Network Governance

4.1 Vertical and Horizontal Governance

The observed network governance can be represented as a "lead organization-governed network" (Provan & Kenis, 2008): an organization governs the network by coordinating and facilitating the activities of the member organizations. This model was further revised considering the different layers of vertical complexity (Vermeiren et al., 2018). The coordination board was aware of the complexity of the pilot project and was able to link the different networks and to secure the communication flow between both the different hierarchical levels and the sectors. In this sense, the coordinators played a strategic role. Furthermore, connectivity with the supranational level was sustained by linking the project to the German and Austrian National Centers for Early Support. In addition, social and health care directors have influenced the process by not only offering support but by also slowing it down. Their presence was frequently requested by practitioners in the working group, who felt insecure and sometimes isolated in managing the process without them. The coordination board could not always reassure participants, however. One practitioner noted that the process took a "leap forward"

when the directors publicly stated their willingness to continue the project. This happened during a public conference when all levels met together for the first time. The aim was to inform and sensitize practitioners belonging to the three different early childhood sectors. A side effect of the event was the physical connection of all the hierarchical levels, according to several interviews of professionals and expert informants.

Relational maps contributed to visualizing the horizontal connectivity between sectors and services. The images returned showed the complexity of the existing relationships in an area that was well equipped for early childhood services, highlighting both ties as well as a lack of connections. The services appeared somehow disconnected, and as one practitioner commented “the intersectoral connection is missing”

The service members involved did not always know each other. Some members of the services involved in the enlarged network met for the first time, even though they had been working on similar topics for more than a decade. A similar divide concerned health care and social services which have been working in the same building since 1999. In this regard, the working group participants experienced an increased awareness of their specific role in the process. The sociosanitary practitioners positively stated that they could stop the clandestine meetings at the coffee machine.

Two distinct meanings of networking emerged. On the one hand, there was a managerialist perspective which focused more on the inter-organizational efficiency by looking at what was missing. In this respect, networking was aimed to improve the efficiency between the existing services. This could be attributed to the starting phase of the pilot project:

I have the impression that the network is more focused on services and operators than on families. The aim is to improve the services available, the collaboration between services and then obviously to sustain users i.e. the mother and child. All the objectives that we have set for this year are a bit self-centered. (practitioner)

On the other hand, networking was valued as achieving a more comprehensive view of social dynamics by the interviewed expert informants. The network understandings seemed to shift between more transformative ap-

proaches and managerial ones. The discussions in the working group seemed however to be less aware of these polarized understandings.

The focus on network governance highlighted tensions and conflicts in the process. Conflicts and tensions emerged from the different hierarchical levels, so that the divide between sectors and organizations which was already envisaged in the enlarged network was assessed at higher levels. Explicit references to the distinct initiatives on Early Support carried on by three different provincial departments resulted from interviews with specialists and public officers. The provincial departments dealing with early childhood prevention also have specific interests and goals that might hinder collaboration and networking. These different policies and procedures influenced practitioners' attitudes in the working group, who felt disconnected and insecure. Furthermore, other issues affected the process, such as the last administrative elections (November 2018) and the turn-over of managers. The coordination board had to handle the process, navigating in these challenging waters. Tensions and hidden conflicts arose in specific circumstances when different public and private services had the opportunity to meet and discuss issues, such as the enlarged network or a workshop dedicated to volunteering.

Experts highlighted institutional conflict in the field. They pointed out the quite difficult communication between organizations: "We have a homogeneous territory on the one hand but also very fragmented in terms of services and in terms of collaboration" (expert informant).

According to an interviewee, the issue of conflict of competences was also within organizations which were characterized by an overload of specialization that hinders a holistic vision of the family. For example, in health care, breastfeeding concerned five different professional figures, which creates conflicts among professionals and confusion in mothers.

Tensions and conflicts were rarely addressed openly in the process. Less reflection arose in the working group in order to generate collaborative practices in a competitive field. According to the interviews gathered in the neighborhood, competition was not an issue for local NGOs either. However, NGOs' practitioners who were interviewed recalled feelings of "fear" or "threat" towards local competitors.

4.2 Actors Involved

The construction of the network laid between a top-down and a bottom-up process. The project was decided by the directors at policy level, so that it opened a top-down process, a “decision taken above us”, in the words of a practitioner. However, a previous research on Early Support (Ladurner et al., 2016) carried out by a nonprofit local organization paved the way for the pilot project, placing it in between a top-down and a bottom-up process. The organization that conducted the research on Early Support later steered the pilot project. It was a difficult process which required time and patience to let policy makers understand their intentions.

The process of construction of the working group gradually involved new actors. In this regard the process seemed distant from that of the German sociosanitary model. Firstly, the participation of a representative of ECEC since the very beginning of the working group was quite innovative. ECEC were considered as a pivotal resource in the pilot project. Secondly, a partner from the private sector has been included later, i.e., the family counselling center that was well rooted in the neighborhood. Thirdly, since January 2019 a social worker was assigned to coordinate the operative sociosanitary team and was selected precisely because of her expertise. She worked in a service that implemented an innovative approach of active citizenship. Perhaps also for this reason, the operative team later took a more concrete approach in the neighborhood by opening a dialogue with local NGOs, even with more informal groups. Nevertheless, the working group did not seem to reflect on the issue that it represented mainly the public sector. Civil society was basically involved in the extended network meetings that were organized twice. The aim of these meetings was to get to know each other and to spread awareness about Early support.

The organizations in the neighborhood did not express a clear understanding of their role in the pilot project. It seemed that social actors were not valued for their active contribution to the implementation of the pilot project. NGOs asked for more active participation in planning and creating projects, according to a social actor in the neighborhood. Furthermore, social actors were still missing in the pilot project, including representatives of the economy and direct beneficiaries. The coordination board was also aware of the importance of valuing

parents' knowledge, however parents' participation in the construction of Early Support interventions was not questioned. At the same time, less reflection was given on the value of community development projects to involve local families. These projects have been developed in the neighborhood for at least a decade.

5. Discussion

South Tyrol has recently developed a complex welfare mix system which was well represented in the relational maps generated by the participants involved in the pilot project. Segmentation and specialization of services covered all three sectors of healthcare, social care, and education (Ladurner et al., 2016). This idea was also supported in the social report of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano (Provincia Autonoma di Bolzano, 2015).

The maps were designed as an internal working tool that might not be representative of local welfare because it reflects the point of view of those who were present at the meeting. In this respect the results could be biased. Nevertheless, relational maps pointed out the services' perspectives and, comparing the reciprocal connections, might suggest that different expectations were at stake and might require clarification.

The use of the maps supported both researcher and working group reflexivity. The working group practitioners could visualize their own sector in connection with the others. This was then confirmed in the second round of interviews with the working group. The pilot project has been an exemplary space of multidisciplinary reflexivity.

The pilot project was a setting of mutual learning between organizations and services. This mutual learning process involved achieving concrete results, forms of knowledge shared between organizations and forms of collaborative practices. The project also fostered awareness around the conceptualization of prevention in social services; the organizational limits and difficulty reaching vulnerable families and children in the 0-3 age range; and in the special contribution of social services in developing networking and collaboration between organizations. In addition, practitioners and managers in the district belonging to both social care and healthcare could sit around the same table to bridge the divide. A structured collaboration between social

and health professionals was designed by considering the risk of practitioners' isolation from their home organizations.

It was challenging to move beyond the sociosanitary integration. The enlarged network oversaw the inclusion of civil society and stakeholders whose roles and responsibilities would need additional clarification. In the implementation of the pilot project, the inclusion of families' perspectives was lacking. Available studies on inter-organizational networks for early childhood interventions seem to confirm this aspect (Van Haute et al., 2018). In addition, other areas, such as work or housing, have not been considered, thereby narrowing a holistic perspective.

The findings seem to confirm the paradox of collaborative networks in a competitive field. The fact that services did not previously meet raises questions as to the cause of this delay. This kind of reflection did not arise openly during the process. Competition was never an issue in the working group. However, participant observations indicated hidden conflicts and open tensions between organizations. Competition was not an issue for local NGOs either. However local NGOs pointed out insecurities which could be related to this complicated and competitive field. Furthermore, there is evidence that local NGOs are not committed to joint work and that no exchange settings were available. Expert testimony gave more detailed information about the lack of communication and the difficulties related to the establishment of collaborative settings between sectors and organizations.

6. Conclusion

The literature discussed warns against a simplistic implementation of networks. Networks are tools, not goals (Canali et al., 2019). The other side of the increasing popularity of networks is that they potentially risk being considered a "silver bullet" for overcoming institutional fragmentations (Bode, 2017). The whole process of integration requires an awareness of the possible negative side-effects and results, warning researchers against "network euphoria" (De Corte et al., 2017).

The findings are consistent with theoretical premises and highlight the context-embeddedness and path-dependency of the process (Moulaert

et al. 2010; Spatscheck, 2012). The data collected seems to confirm the sectorialization and fragmentation of local welfare policies which might have hindered both the horizontal and vertical processes of collaboration between sectors and services (Bode et al. 2016; Moulaert et al. 2010). In this context, the pilot project is an example of an exemplary space of multidisciplinary reflexivity which requires specific time and space in order to build a common ground among the practitioners involved. The meetings and the other spaces established and developed during the pilot project helped in overcoming distrust among the working group: "Knowing each other and getting in touch help to break down the wall of skepticism and mistrust. Then you realize that there is no need to be afraid" (practitioner).

The focus on bottom-linked governance shed light on the lack of connectivity between sectors and hierarchical levels. On the one hand professionals were free to create a multidisciplinary team. Yet, on the other hand, the lack of guidelines from authorities enabled the risk to shifting responsibility to lower levels. Furthermore, the local NGOs seemed less involved in the whole process and asked for more participation in the construction of social policies. The presence of different understandings of networking, shifting between managerialist and multidisciplinary approaches corroborated the polarization which is well known in the literature (Ferrari & Miodini, 2018; Houston, 2012).

Relational maps produce visualizations of processes and social actors, becoming an understandable and comparable working tool. One difficulty which arose was generating a process of self-reflexivity among practitioners. A multidisciplinary setting where hidden tensions and power relations are present might mirror the existing relations, without producing transformations in social relations. Future research into inter-organizational networks might usefully focus on network governance.

These complex dynamics would require renewed skills for social workers. Social workers have project skills, knowledge of social phenomena and networking capacity, which could successfully be applied in the attempt to find innovative responses to societal needs (De Ambrogio, 2016). Given that multidisciplinary settings are unavoidable, spaces of reflection are increasingly being required. The process of reflexivity strengthened the awareness of social workers as key actors in the building of inter-organizational

networks. However, specific training would be required to successfully navigate the complex interplay of actors and relationships in terms of enhancing awareness to impact the lifeworld of families. The life experience of children and their families requires systemic approaches, moving beyond the institutional settings and embracing a holistic view of the local context with a focus on global economic factors and social factors.

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