

# Introduction

**Franca Zadra – Free University of Bozen-Bolzano**

**Susanne Elsen – Free University of Bozen-Bolzano**

## 1. Transformative Social Work

Social work intends to foster human development by enabling development spaces of reflexivity and change, both in individuals and societies. The transformative potential of social work resides oftentimes in its ability to mobilize diverse social actors in the context of community development approaches, through cooperative knowledge production and engagement in collective action. Communities need such reflexive spaces of collaboration, in order to site social issues into the center of societal discourse and development and avoiding its reduction as temporary and partial dysfunction of an otherwise efficient society, that has to be contained to the margins through careful boundary work.

Thus, transformative social work can bring those margins to the core of the social field, as it originates renewed awareness of the need to deconstruct models and lifestyles aimed at boundless economic growth and foster a vision of collective prosperity associated to social inclusion, human rights and ecological responsibility. This vision enables social workers to connect the dots between different forms of exclusion instead of treating them as isolated issues even if they pertain to different policy domains. Fostering integrated development in a context of structural inequalities is not a marginal issue, but one that stands at the very core of the lifeworld. That's where social work as work on and with society is located.

Professionals in this field understand that individual challenges are originated by wider societal problems and they contribute to implement transformative solutions. The approach of social innovation gives depth and scope to this work, as it is

a constructive way of thinking about, analysing and practising human development (...) characterised by three interconnected core principles: it meets genuine needs neglected or exacerbated by the state/market apparatus; it creates new forms of eco-social/institutional relations and polities; and it collectively empowers people (especially marginalised people) to act -not within the existent systems and modes of governance, but also towards transforming them. (Moulaert, 2019, p. 4)

Thus, social workers can enact social innovation by meeting needs, fostering new relations, providing resources and empowering marginalised people to transform existing structures. The articles contained in this section contribute to the reflection on how this can be enacted.

While we are celebrating in this volume twenty years of social work in the Free University of Bozen, our peers from the University of Calabria are as well. The contribution of Francesca Falcone and Antonio Samà accounts for the collective reflection they had with local stakeholders about the meaning, the impact and the future of their training program. They offer a reflection on the necessary connection between theory and practice in the training of social workers, and the community embeddedness inherent to this professional profile. The cooperative learning described by Falcone and Samà results from conscious efforts in favor of a democratization of processes of knowledge construction. Moreover, the joint thematization and sensemaking with societal stakeholders opens in turn the possibility of collaborative strategizing and action planning, overcoming the artificial separation between “those who think” and “those who do”.

## 2. New Welfare and Space Based Approaches

Overcoming a “silo mentality” is necessary to re-connect a fragmented welfare, along different territorial scales and levels of governance, as well as through different sectors of policy and areas of action. The challenge of extreme specialization and fragmentation is particularly visible in the area of service provision, as Cristiana Ranieri and Roberta Nicolodi note in both of their contributions. They present services in their efforts to be proactive in

interpreting complex unmet needs as well as collaboratively designing and implementing solutions alongside with other local stakeholders. While Cristiana Ranieri offers a comprehensive interpretation of integrated social services and its strategic drive towards a truly universalistic welfare at the local scale, Roberta Nicolodi addresses a specific case study in which such integration is attempted by a local network of social and healthcare services coordinating early childhood support initiatives. The difficulties of such efforts are documented, as are the learning experiences and the reflexive awareness that come from confronting the structural causes of such difficulties.

Space based collaboration efforts between services which attempt to arrive to more integrative solutions are often obstructed by the fear of the single institutional collaborators to lose resources and influence. Therefore, it is a priority to maintain the focus on the users, keeping a holistic approach to their needs and resources, as well as to the social contexts in which they are embedded. This is best achieved by involving them in the process. The challenge to identify and respond to unmet needs not only require shared thought but also shared action. In the words of Pierre Bourdieu: “We must work to universalize in reality the conditions of access to what the present offers us that is most universal, instead of talking about it” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In fact, mapping complex needs and emerging barriers is not a theoretical exercise but a pathway to redistribution efforts.

It is also noted by several authors in this section that acting at the local scale gives a specific context to the effort of reconnecting actors around the solution of social issues. Space-oriented approaches to social transformation and development have the advantage to refer to a common societal context, and the vicinity might generate opportunities for planning coordinated action as well as pooling resources. Transformative efforts in localities often spread beyond, as Frank Moulaert and Diana MacCallum point out: “Territorial approaches focus rather on the relationship between space, social relations and the political, allowing attention to the spaces and places in which Social Innovation to meet situated needs may give rise to new movements for change, and how these may scale into broader socio-political transformations” (Moulaert & MacCallum 2019, p. 91). We have seen virtuous examples of global economic trends (Moulaert et. al 2013; Elsen, 2019) being reinvented

by new actors self-organizing at the local level and making waves that reach beyond localities.

### 3. Mobilizing New Actors Through Participative Approaches

In order to enact collaborative knowledge creation and action, a wider scope of societal actors is to be engaged through participative approaches. The contributions of Elisa Nardin and Alessandra Piccoli explore the field of social agriculture, promoting connections between previously separated sectors, multilevel synergies between various actors with differing interests which find new spaces of collaboration and development. A methodological focus is given in those contributions to the participative engagement of civil society actors exploring forms of self-organization, innovating their forms of production and the relations they create with other groups and institutional actors, and shaping new collaborative arrangements in favor of community-supported agriculture.

All the authors in this section provide reflections on the position of social work in research and practice in such methodologies. They set up participative reflexive spaces, thus changing the dynamics of knowledge creation and circulation. They engage their partners in the field at eye-level, recognizing and fostering their expertise. They support the interpretation of emerging social problems from the bottom, brokering new connections with actors which could provide knowledge and resources. This is how social work can transform society, from within.

## References

- Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. University of Chicago Press.
- Elsen, S. (2019). *Eco-social transformation and community-based economy*. Routledge.
- Moulaert, F., MacCallum, D. (2019) *Advanced introduction to social innovation*. Edward Elgar.
- Moulaert, F., MacCallum, D., Mehmood, A., Hamdouch, A., & Van Dyck, B. (2013). Framing social innovation research: a sociology of knowledge perspective. In *The international handbook on social innovation*, (pp. 466–480).
- Nowotny, H., Scott, P., & Gibbons, M. (2003). "Mode 2" revisited: The New Production of Knowledge. *Minerva*, 41, 179–194.