

# OTHER GAZES.

## The point of view of the beneficiaries of the HOOD project

In this "bite," we report some data and reflections from the interviews we conducted with 7 beneficiaries of the HOOD project. Despite the small sample, some commonalities and reflections emerge from the interviewees' words that help deepen the HOOD project and could be key building blocks for future developments of the project.

Disclaimer: In the text we will use the English term "social worker" to refer to any type of profession that works directly with service recipients, aware that in different partner countries the term social worker corresponds to very different professional profiles.

### The voice of the recipients

Almost two years after we started adopting the Enabling Co-planning methodology, between September and December 2022, we decided to collect the points of view of the beneficiaries of these interventions, to evaluate the effectiveness of the project and the perception of it by the final recipients. Gathering the point of view of homeless people on their journeys in HOOD immediately seemed a challenge for several reasons. Firstly, the people we meet in our work are not always available to carry out an interview, especially if it is carried out in a formal or audio-recorded setting. Furthermore, it could be problematic for the social workers to go and ask the beneficiaries to evaluate their work or the project: the latter would find themselves in a situation of limited freedom of expression, feeling obliged to give only positive judgments for fear of possible reprisals or even just to hurt the feelings of the social workers. At the same time, especially with the rough sleeper persons, the person would hardly have opened up to a dialogue with someone unknown, thus bringing back the need to involve the social workers in administering the interviews.

Faced with these difficulties, the HOOD partners have developed with the support of UNITO and CESIS, a shared schedule of topics to explore and possible questions. Each partner, depending on the reference target and the characteristics of the organization, has developed a different method of interview delivery. UDENFOR, which interacts only with rough sleepers and people in particularly vulnerable conditions, transformed the interview into a dialogue that was not recorded, and which was carried out by the person's reference social worker, together with a sociology student. Ufficio Pio appointed a person external to the team, but internal to the HOOD project, to conduct the interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. SJD asked a social worker, unknown by the recipients, to collect the interviews, but she encountered considerable linguistic difficulties in the dialogue, and consequently, the answers collected are very synthetic. Finally, Klimaka assigned the same people's social worker of reference to collect the interviews, due to the familiarity already gained with the people.

In light of these different methods of data collection and the limited number of beneficiaries involved, these data have no representative value. However, some interesting points in common between the beneficiaries in the relationship with the HOOD project emerge, despite the geographical differences. These data and other peculiarities that came up can be useful for reflecting on the methodology adopted.

## "Something new"

A common perception among the interviewees consists in experiencing the HOOD process as something very different from a traditional social service intervention. «I felt from the beginning that something new was going to happen. The situation, the discussion, the whole process was different and new for me»; «it was something completely new» are the words of two interviewees. This sense of novelty is in part linked to the "collection of the dream" from which the educational project starts (such as we explain in the *Intermediate Toolkit*, in this Italian *article* and the *Bites n. 3*) and which we will discuss later. However, there are also other innovations highlighted by the interviewees, who have experienced HOOD as a path that is «not institutionalized and not bureaucratized», nor «too cold». D. particularly appreciated the fact that he was not asked

**"It was something completely new"**

*«annoying questions, like other social workers who ask for example "where did you sleep last night" or "how long have you been homeless". You were good at asking questions and it was so nice that we could talk about other things» (Interview with D.).*

This confirms the reservations that as partners of HOOD, we have learned to adopt concerning user profiling grids, so much so that in IO1 we decided to develop *a grid* that was not aimed at the characteristics of the person, but at those of the organization which the asymmetry of power.

## Credibility and respect



One of the main innovations highlighted, however, concerned «respect and credibility. Sometimes I have felt that other social workers don't believe me, but» continues D. referring to the HOOD professional «I have never experienced that with you». P. also points out that «in previous experiences they always criticize or they were arrogant when I tried to express plans and dreams», which did not happen in HOOD.

Credibility and respect are two keywords of HOOD. The social workers involved strengthened their skills in taking seriously the projects, dreams and opinions of the beneficiaries without judging and respecting their decisions, even when they did not agree. This required training and self-awareness, which however seems to have been perceived by the participants. In fact, the respondents argue that:

*«They always heard without influencing my decisions. They stand by me and try to understand my feelings, plans, and ideas».*

*«They respect my point of view and my plans, they do not criticize and follow my dreams».*

*«I never felt compelled to do anything. They didn't put limits on me, they always gave me freedom of movement and choice, and indeed they were happy that they saw that I was busy».*

While believing that he was treated with respect and credibility, nonetheless D. recounts an episode in which one of his needs was not accepted by the social worker: when he asked for more pieces of new, clean underpants, the social worker rejected it. The person felt humiliated and thought he was considered greedy, reacting aggressively. This episode can highlight how delicate the issue of feeling believed and taken seriously in one's requests and needs is.

## The dream

In HOOD, the credibility granted to people takes on a central role in the dimension of dreams. To start the educational planning, the social workers of HOOD ask the person to *«imagine himself happy in five years»*. That dream becomes the goal towards which to direct the educational path and the planning. However, the social workers in HOOD had to learn to welcome people's dreams without judging them and without trying

to redirect them towards something more feasible or more "suitable" for them according to their opinion. This is because the idea behind HOOD is that it is the person who decides and learns from the direct encounter with reality, always supported - in attempts and even in failures - by the social worker. The dream is therefore one of the crucial elements of HOOD, but also a complex element.

The people interviewed in turn experienced this dimension of "dream", of "happy future", as a fundamental element. Some people interviewed commented:

*«I like she asked for my dream and asked for my opinion».*

*«I liked it when I heard the question about my dream because someone cared about my dream. (It was) a totally new experience from the beginning».*

Precisely because it is an unusual question for some persons, it was not easy to answer for C.: *«In the beginning felt strange, wasn't able to have dreams»*. During the interview, however, C. claims to have appreciated the project because *«it was the first opportunity I had in my life to search for my dream»*.

Some have experienced this dream request with a more pragmatic approach: *«I thought that this dream thing could come in handy for me to clarify the path I am following here in the city»*. Others, also in the light of previous life experience, approached the request with greater caution, such as G.: *«I am an ordinary person with my feet on the ground... my dream was however an imaginary very connected with the need to relocate... I come from a working-class family. I think dreams work if they are realistic dreams, you don't want more than you can have. Far-fetched dreams aren't for me»*.

Finally, L. appreciated the moment of collecting the dream but did not understand how this moment was connected with the rest of the educational path completed since it perhaps signals a difficulty even for social workers in maintaining the coherence of the path. In fact, the interviewee himself recounts that he has expressed a very clear desire to live in a specific district of the city, close to a green area and in the centre. However, at the time of the interview, the social worker had helped the person to enter a cohousing located in the extreme periphery, at a great distance from the "desired" neighbourhood and no interventions were foreseen to try to change this situation. In this case, it seems that the social worker settled on the more easily accessible options - perhaps also because they are already used by the organization for other people. At the time of the interview, L. still wished to move to the neighborhood mentioned, and sustained that no actions were planned to go in that direction. A few months later, through the joint efforts of the social worker and L., the man had moved into a small studio apartment in the desired neighborhood. This story represents a positive case of the implementation of Enabling Co-planning. At the same time, it remains problematic that, at the time of the interview, L. was unaware of the ongoing work to move in the direction of his dream. Compared to what the methodology calls for, in the interview L. seems less aware of the path and of his own protagonism in the decisions to be made. This remains an important dimension to keep working on in the relationship with beneficiaries.

In summary, the dream seems to be an element appreciated by most of the participants, precisely because they experienced the freedom of being able to freely express desires and pursue them, feeling their content was not judged. However, it emerges that this request is not neutral: G.'s fears of "having unreal dreams" are the same as those of social workers. However, according to HOOD's methodology, unrealistic dreams are also useful: they serve to activate, collide with reality, learn and recalibrate. As in the case of Z.: *«At the beginning my dreams were not so realistic, so I changed my plan a bit»*. Just the changes of direction are one of the elements that the social workers of HOOD have learned to welcome and read as positive elements: they are not a sign of the person's instability, but a demonstration of their activation in their life path. Indeed, it is by taking action, experimenting and changing direction based on what happens that people learn and become more competent and in control of their own lives.

## Places, times and documents

To redistribute power in the educational relationship, HOOD focuses on other elements of the aid intervention. Social workers are encouraged to agree with people on places to meet, which may not necessarily be the office. During the HOOD development, some recipients chose to interview social workers at the bar, some in city parks and some in the office. In the interview, D. says he enjoyed the conversations at the bar: *«it's nice to meet in a café as we did. Because if you had been sitting in "institutional settings" and other people are sitting around you with their own challenges, then you mirror yourself in them»*. The people we meet are very aware of the references that places give them and for this reason, they appreciate being able to choose where to meet. Even the times and cadence of the meetings had to be negotiated, as in the case of C. *«we discussed them together»*. This has not always been possible, as for Z. in which *«she (the social worker) chooses»*, also due to the working hours of the social workers, the work-home balance and the number of people entrusted to them. Among the interviewees, however, the general perception emerges that they have benefited from an adequate number of meetings and that they have had easy access to the social worker of reference.



One last piece of data relates to documents: in HOOD the person must have access to all the documents relating to his or her case. This is essential for it to become the subject and not the object of the project. However, from the interviews, this data emerges in a more contradictory way. Someone argues that *«I have access to sheets and refer to them to harmonize thoughts and feelings»*, while others have accessed the documents only *«when I asked for it»*. Still others, on the other hand, told the interviewer that they asked the social worker for documents as if they were something that did not concern them.

## Relationship

Even with the limitations related to the administration of the interviews within the work group itself, the general perception of the interviewees with respect to the relationship developed with the social workers is very positive. The reference social workers are described as *«warm and friendly»*, *«friendly, emphatic, personal and able to laugh with me»*, *«kind and supportive»*, and *«available and present»*. Only one interviewee, on the other hand, postponed a partly negative evaluation of the project, arguing that his needs *«have not been taken into account»*. The same person, however, says that in the relationship with the reference social worker, he managed to *«understand myself better»*.

## Conclusions

This preliminary evaluation highlights some interesting data: the centrality of dreams in people's perception, experienced as an element of "novelty"; the importance of being perceived as credible and respecting one's ideas and opinions; the perceived difference compared to more traditional methods of intervention. These results are also limited by the limited number of participants and by the difficulties encountered in organizing the interviews and for this reason, it would be interesting in the future to find ways to continue collecting the point of view of the recipients. In general, the project received a positive evaluation from the interviewees, even if it would be interesting to investigate how much the concrete elaboration of educational paths over time has managed to respect the centrality of people's dreams, or how much this has collided with the difficulty of negotiating with the reality as in the case of the over mentioned residence of L. In the future, an evaluation of these issues organized with the recipients would be desirable.

All that considered, to conclude this first preliminary study, we want to mention L. words, which seem to confirm the centrality of the decisions of the person, which is a pillar of HOOD:

*«I liked [HOOD] because I assume I have the potential to move like anyone independently. That is, I am helped with certain choices, both from an economic and a housing point of view, but what I am doing, the final choices, I am making»*.

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