

EXPERIENCES OF ENABLING CO-PLANNING

The social cooperative Vedogiovane Asti

Learning a new working method, training a gaze able of observing one's own established professional practices and questioning them, experiencing something that seems uncertain and not always clear is a difficult path. Thus, it is for us, in our transnational partnership of the HOOD project, which since January 2021 has been adopting the methodology of enabling co-planning in the daily work with people in conditions of homelessness. Adopting and adapting the enabling co-planning to our social work is a tricky path, but a path that others before us have already travelled. In this phase of the project, we met and talked with two realities from Piedmont – the Vedogiovane Asti social cooperative and the public social service of the city of Chieri – which have been trained to the enabling co-planning approach and are adopting it in their work with people with disabilities.

It is precisely in this context and, specifically, in the heat of the radical reflections on independent life and rights recently rose into the transnational community of people with disabilities and their families (first and foremost the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), that the enabling co-planning was born and was finetuned by the working group of the DiVI Study Centre, partner of the HOOD project. The comparison with social workers from the Vedogiovane Asti cooperative and from the Chieri social service gave us material to reflect on, insights to cultivate and the perception of participating, albeit in a different way, in an ongoing cultural change. At a first reading, it could be argued that the reality of disability is very distant from that of homelessness, problems and resources encountered are different and for this reason what works in one area will not necessarily work in the other. Faced with these objections, we invite you to change your gaze as the social workers we met have told us: to start thinking in terms of unconditional rights – regardless of one's condition, situation, or ability – to be part of everyone's world, to live a full citizenship and to decide for themselves.

In these two "bites" (the number 9 and 10), as the nature of these documents requires, we would like to share with the reader some "bites" of these dialogues, making public the valuable reflections that the practical experience of these social professionals nourishes. All the names of social workers and people with disabilities in the text are fictitious to respect the privacy of the persons interviewed.

The Vedogiovane Asti cooperative

The experience of the Vedogiovane Asti cooperative tells of a case in which it is a private social entity that is carrying on a change, engaging in a path to transform its professional and organisational culture. Vedogiovane Asti is a social cooperative that has been working since 1998 in the province of Asti, in Piedmont, a region located in the North-West of Italy. Asti is close to Turin, the city where two partners of the HOOD project are based (Ufficio Pio Foundation and DiVI Study Centre). Over the years, Vedogiovane Asti has been involved in working with children with disabilities. Seeing them growing up, the social workers of the cooperative have begun to deal with the lack of future

perspectives that awaited them at the end of their compulsory schooling path. This discomfort with which the cooperative had been faced for some time, has allowed social workers to understand the potential of the proposal that the DiVI Study Centre was developing at that time with the City of Asti.

Indeed, thanks to the pressure of an association of relatives of people with disabilities, the Study Centre has been embarked on an experimentation with the Social Services of the Municipality of Asti and the cooperative. During the first phase, the DiVI Study Centre directly took care of the launch of some "independent life paths" with young adults with disabilities, in the project "19pari". Some months later, in October 2019, the team made up of six professionals from the Vedogiovane Asti cooperative took over the initial intervention of the Study Centre. The transition involved an extended training process: after an initial period of weekly theoretical lessons, the social workers began to directly observe the work practice of the professionals of the Study Centre. Finally, they replace them, benefiting from their weekly supervision and from a collective training based on the practical experience, according to a "training-on-the-job" approach.

At the moment, the Vedogiovane Asti cooperative is still working with this approach, deepening its commitment to transforming the traditional way of working in the field of disability. In May 2021, Ufficio Pio Foundation - the leader of the HOOD project - facilitated two focus groups which, overall, involved the six operators of the cooperative who are currently working with the enabling co-planning methodology. Below, we have chosen to share some accounts and reflections that emerged from these dialogues that seem to us to be of greatest inspiration and interest for those who, like us, are venturing in this direction.

Hoping to be well is scary



"The biggest step was to be able to see the future and see it happy. Moreover, we started this path during the first lockdown for the pandemic, when it was difficult also for us to see a future. Thinking you can feel good is scary", told us Giulia, a social worker. Imagining a happy future was not an easy request for people with disabilities and their families. This was also because, as a second social worker pointed out, the families they met were not used to thinking about the future. For years they had been focusing – and were invited to focus – on the "here and now". Often it was not possible to imagine one's child happy and grown-up. If until the end of the school the path of people with disabilities is "thinkable", the following years are perceived as fraught with anxiety and poor in possibilities. To dare to imagine a happy future it takes courage, as the social workers of Vedogiovane Asti told us. Courage from people with disabilities, from families, but also from the professionals themselves, who in turn have the need and desire to broaden the scenario of imaginable futures, to go beyond the unattractive prospects reserved by the widespread ableism in current social reality.

Before starting the enabling co-planning path, for Marco, a young autistic man, the future after school was only the day centre care. Day centre care are recreational services that host exclusively persons with disabilities. They do not offer neither an experience of socialisation integrated with the rest of citizenship, neither a real perspective of work. It wasn't an attractive future for him and his family, but it was the only one "they saw". "We too had to move and see something that before... it's not that we didn't see it, but we saw it from a different point of view". Giulia talked about overcoming her fears, even as professional, in imagining that a boy with autism could "live alone, work, have friends, go out and party until four in the morning!". In the two years of enabling co-planning, the Marco horizon of future – and the ability of Vedogiovane Asti's team to imagine it – has expanded. Marco expressed the desire to

do a real job, which was sought in a local company and adapted to him, in order to enhance his skills and accommodate his difficulties. After a first experience of stage, the work of Marco was increasingly appreciated by the company, which gradually increased the number and complexity of the tasks required of him and hired him with a regular employment contract. “Today when Marco is sick or on vacation it is a real problem for the company!”. The desired and enabling experience of work has opened up new possibilities: Marco has chosen to go and live alone, twenty kilometres from his parents, to be closer to friends and to the workplace. Together with him, the social workers of Vedogiovane Asti have shaped his organisation of adult life, alone, and have cultivated a welcoming and mutual care context with the neighbourhood, capable of supporting Marco in the pursuit of his dreams. “In two years, we have gone from a single perspective, the day centre care, to a life in which Marco has a job, a house of his own, has friends with whom he goes out, goes to dance in the evening”. For this to be possible, Alice told us, it was necessary for the social workers to change their position.

A change of position: take a step back



“For years we have carried out our profession in a strategic way”, underlines Alice. The social workers said they were used to looking for solutions. Francesco stated that during the early days of learning the enabling co-planning method he realised that, in the dialogues with young adults and their families, his mind was in constant motion. Listening to the problems, Francesco thought that he had an answer for a problem, a solution to offer in front of another. The enabling co-planning requires instead a change of position: “taking a step back”, as Alice said. Clear the field from one's own judgments, expectations, fears, but also from solutions. Learning to wait, even to be silent: “Why do I have to anticipate you? I wait for you to ask me that thing. Maybe it is also your desire and I have already guessed it before, but I am still waiting for you to ask, and this makes the difference”. It is only by leaving the space, in fact, that young adults and their families have begun to occupy it and take on the direction of their own path. “When you don't provide the solutions, persons move”. “When you empty your judgments and comments, how the words of other persons fill up!”. The team experienced directly how, faced with their ability to take a step back and tolerate the uncertainty that this expectation entails, both families and young persons gradually manage to enter into this perspective. They take back their stories and their lives.

Taking a step back means recognising that you are not the holders of all the answers and having faith in the desires and capacities of the persons themselves. It means “supporting families in finding their best way”, without offering a pre-packaged solution. “We are a stair, use us as you wish: to go up, to go down, to make a bridge. You decide”.

“When you don't provide the solutions, persons move”

Persons with disabilities and their families are not used to having this space and this power to choose and act. “Families rely on services; they are not used to make requests”. Lucio, for example, a young protagonist of another ongoing independent life path, at 23 years-old had never decided on his own how to dress. A part of the enabling co-planning project was dedicated to his exploration of this space of decision, taste, and pleasure, so that “You could even get a little look! The mother had never imagined that her son was capable of it”. Even from these small actions starts the redistribution of power and the self-discovery as subjects in the conditions of being able to decide for themselves.

Looking at the context

It is often the context in which we are immersed that does not recognise to persons with disabilities the right to decide for themselves. One of the families involved thought that their child would be better off changing schools. In this case, the co-planning work consisted in legitimising this decision and supporting it: the family struggled to make a request that for every other student is a right taken-for-granted. Often, however, in the relationship with institutions and services, families and fragile persons are used to being told what is best for them, what choices they have to make and what options to follow. The enabling co-design becomes a process that supports them in recognising and pursuing their rights, especially the right to choose for themselves. “And also, to make mistakes, change your mind and retrace your steps. This is not the traditional attitude of a social worker, of a teacher” says Pietro “it is not so easy to accept changes, because you are too focused on the goal”.



Another word that has returned several times in the dialogue with Vedogiovane Asti is the “gaze”. “For years we had our gaze focused on the individual, on the recipient of the intervention”. During the training course, the social workers learned to focus their gaze on the context around the person, recognising the criticalities, but also the resources present. Elena says that “at the beginning I found it very hard to think that there were really persons around ready to become a network and support. How could we go to an apartment building and ask a neighbour to have that function? It’s a high responsibility! Instead, I discovered persons are very willing to be part of a network and to be supportive! In this climate of trust, things happen”. In addition to the construction of an environment capable of mutual care and support, the team’s task was to form the contexts, prepare them. “It often happens, for example, that we enter a bar, and the waiter speaks to us and not to the person with disabilities”. The work becomes no longer focused on the person, but on the workplace, on the condominium, on the school, on the sports association. To promote a culture that recognises and respects the adulthood of persons with disabilities and, at the same time, offers the attention, resources, and possibilities so that they can choose and build their own path of life in everyone’s world.

Changing an organisation

The enabling co-planning has not only challenged the gaze, the position, and the attitude of the social workers. The ongoing work transformation has come to touch the very organisation of the social cooperative. The professionals we met do not only work as tutors of independent life paths, but they are also employed in other more traditional projects, such as after-school, or school support. If the latter have rigid and marked rhythms and schedules, “a life project is not. Fortunately – or unfortunately – life has no timetables”. The enabling co-planning requires a great flexibility of schedules and tasks. “It is also a creative job, which requires you to imagine new tools and make them as clear as possible for the family”.

Faced with the need for creativity and flexibility, the organisation itself had to partly change, reorganising the timetables and the working scheme of social workers. The cooperative itself asked them to enable themselves: that is, not only to present the problems they encountered, but to start suggesting possible solutions to these problems. This is how the cooperative gradually began to change the organisational practice, to seek strategies aimed at allowing greater flexibility. The professionals found themselves making choices in their work and changing their professional habitus. Today, social workers act in pairs, involved as equals in each individual “independent life path”

project, in order to benefit from more resources and schedules to respond to the non-programmable needs that a life project raises. Today, the cooperative has managed to incorporate a good level of flexibility into its working, which allows it to support the implementation of the enabling co-planning approach.

A cultural change

The experience recounted by Vedogiovane Asti was not an easy process. In the focus groups, the social workers shared the hardships, fears, and resistances they encountered, especially in the early stages of training. They narrated there were times when they thought change was impossible and they considered giving up the project. Others in which they were forced to face aspects of themselves they did not know. But they also told us about a deep change, which substantially changed their way of acting and thinking. “We have started, we have trained, we were included in some projects that have already started. But what I realise is that the approach of the enabling co-planning, the focus on the context, on networks, on rights, now has become something unavoidable for me”. The social workers have described this process as a change of gaze, which, once completed, permanently changes their approach to social work.

“Independent life is not living alone. It is independent thinking.”

“It has become difficult to think of other projects that are not necessarily called independent life paths without using that lens there”. If part of the cooperative's work today is explicitly dedicated to independent life paths, other projects are also taking advantages of this change in professional habits.

The social workers are aware that what they are engaged in is not the mere application of an approach, but it is a cultural change, which involves them, persons with disabilities, families, the contexts in which they live, places of work, schools, social services, etc. As Alice argues, “We give up the idea that it is the person who has to change” in order to live in everyone's world. “Independent life is not living alone. It is independent thinking. Being able to think about your future, with your own head”. To make this happening it is the context around the person that must change, it is a broad, transversal, and cultural change, which recognises that “everyone has the right to be able to dream their own life”.

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