**FACTSHEET** n. 2/2022

Promoting early intervention and participation as HOOD's cornerstones

Early intervention is a cornerstone of project HOOD. The whole first Intellectual Output has been focused on early intervention. In this factsheet, early intervention is discussed according to the knowledge developed during the first year of the project. Moreover, the factsheet traces some connections between early intervention and other elements of HOOD, such as the final recipient's participation and power redistribution in social work.

Debating early intervention

Promoting the importance of early intervention and developing a new methodology based on the Dialogic Practices and on the Enabling Co-planning Approach in the work developed with people who recently become homeless are essential cornerstones of project HOOD. The first Intellectual Output of project HOOD has been entirely focused on early intervention, and also it has been integrated with other project's activities such as the Enabling Co-planning methodology.
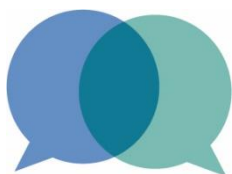
Early intervention is crucial for tackling homelessness. As emphasised by a recent report, "homelessness services in Europe are not sufficiently preventative in focus, and there is not enough emphasis on establishing procedures for the early detection of homelessness risk situations (e.g. evictions), on ensuring prioritised access to housing and/or on rapid rehousing" (Baptista & Marlier, 2019: 94).

Time is a core factor that shapes the person's ability and identity elements. People who spend a longer time living in the street and in low-threshold services tend to progressively lose resources and abilities and moving into a more and more vulnerable condition. Beyond a certain amount of time spent in the streets people tend to standardize their behaviours. In order to develop coping strategies with the situation they are faced with, the homeless person tends to lose abilities, to reduce his/her social networks and to narrow future perspectives, becoming 'trapped' in the present dimension. As Antonella Meo (2000) pointed out on the basis of a qualitative research about homeless and rough sleepers people in Turin and on the effect of time on their well-being, the amount of time spent in streets and in low-

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threshold services constitutes an element that differentiates the modality of survival and identity's construction, calling for the importance of a more timely intervention.

> *"Interventions should consider the person's resources, interests, personal values, etc.. Involving users, working with them individually with a focus on positive relations, creating community-feeling among the participants, self-determination and recognising the participants perspective; these are all important aspects"*

Thus, it is necessary to analyse homelessness with a sequential model that takes into consideration time as a core element of the individual paths of homelessness. There is the need to promote perspectives putting the prevention of homelessness into a comprehensive framework and ensuring that early intervention involves policies, practices, and strategies designed to address the immediate risk of homelessness through the provision of information, assessment, and access to necessary support.

Early intervention can also be a strategy adopted to facilitate the progressive shift of paradigm from an emergency-centred to a prevention-centred approach. This could be part of the 'map to solving homelessness' identified by Pleace et al., for whom a demonstrably effective response exists and "can be used at a strategic level that will bring numbers down significantly and greatly reduce the risks of experiencing homelessness and, particularly, of experiencing homelessness for any amount of time or on a repeated basis" (Pleace et al., 2018: 97). Evidence from Canada also points to the same direction. Stephen Gaetz and Erin Dej (2017) too recognize the potentiality of early intervention as a practical approach that could sustain the progressive shift from an emergency-centred to a prevention-centred approach. They analyse the importance of early intervention strategies and of targeting individuals and families who are at imminent risk of, or who have just become, homeless. Especially they focus the effectiveness of early intervention in the work with young homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. These latter, indeed, are considered as being especially at risk of suffering from further traumatisation and exploitation if they spend any time at all in homelessness.

Impact of professional culture and power redistribution

Additionally, the heterogeneity of the homeless population should be acknowledged as well as the complexity of the connection between structural and individual factors. Interventions should consider the person's resources, interests, personal values, etc.. Involving users, working with them individually with a focus on positive relations, creating community-feeling among the participants, self-determination and recognising the participants' perspectives; these are all important aspects.

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Traditional professional cultures tend to constrain these possibilities because they consider that professionals should be in control so that the process develops exactly as planned. In this professional culture, contingencies, changes and uncertainties are disturbing factors. If recipients make personal choices that divert from established pathways in the social services they may end up being punished or excluded. Such sanctions may impact very negatively on their existences and may even be defined as a form of structural violence, i.e. a form of violence wherein social structures or social

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institutions harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs (e.g. Galtung, 1969; Lee, 2019). Indeed, literature has emphasized that often the social systems in place to help socially excluded people may be an excluding factor in itself. The requirements, punishments and sanctions imposed on the recipients are frequently understood as a reminder of personal inability, leading to further self-stigma and further exclusion (Maini-Thorsen, 2018; Ramsdahl, et al., 2018). These also happen due to the cultural conceptions spread in society that permeate the social services for homeless people. As Curto and Stefani (2021) underlined, blame is a core aspect of the collective consideration of homelessness, in a way that hinders homeless people's possibilities to advance their needs, preferences, dreams and opinions in the relation with social services. Behind the blaming framework, the compassion is another core element in the social framework about this issue, that fails in considering people in extreme poverty as rights holders. Raising awareness on these cultural roots inscribed in current social policies and services would be an important step toward a right-based welfare, aimed at empowering beneficiaries. Considering the fact that early intervention also aims at promoting empowerment, it is necessary that the professional adopts a dialogic position: they will no longer assume that they know better both as far as the goal is concerned and as how to get there and they will adopt a position not of orientation but support. Only in this way will the person be sustained in imagining their desired future, which will be developed slowly in their minds when an authentic space (of aims, things to do) appears empty without this imagined future.

To this end, methodologies and practices themselves adopted by social workers could be revised. Dialogic Practices and the Enabling Co-planning methodology implemented in project HOOD aim to offer innovative perspective and tools coherent with the issue raised here. Within the scope of Dialogic Practices and of the Enabling Co-planning Approach, indeed, the power relation changes and is redistributed. The dynamic whereby the social worker defines the best path for the person and expects him/her loyalty to this proposal is removed. The person has the power to steer the intervention and social workers become tools for sustaining it. In each dialogic activity, the discourse's object (the problem, the need, the intervention...) is defined not by an unique voice, but rather by a multiplicity of voices. They are in an equal relationship with each other: none of them is entitled to provide the unique, ultimate account of the event or the situation. Indeed, each person needs the others to collectively shape meanings. The opening of spaces without predefined answers, the happening of things that were not planned, the rethinking and changing of his/her

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path by the person are welcomed elements. They are all part of the process of meaning remaking that the professionals have to promote, not to hinder.

An effective power redistribution also ends the opportunities of defining strategic alliances aimed at changing what the other sees, thinks, and does, but it opens up space for building authentic relationships. At the same time, when the professional is freed from all the evaluating tools based on the assumption that he/she owned the clearer definition of the situation, he/she will need the real engagement of all the people involved.

Methodological reflections on power redistribution and on early intervention should hopefully work together. Indeed, power redistribution should be implemented since the first contact with people in condition of homelessness, to develop a coherent educational path, aimed at empowering the recipients and at widening their choice and life possibilities.

Further information on HOOD is available on the website: *www.hoodproject.org*, where the possibility to subscribe to the project mailing-list is provided. To get deeper information regarding the project, on the website there will be a second section beside the "factsheets", called "bites". As the name suggests, bites are more informal and briefer considerations coming from HOOD's development that could help other practitioners, policymakers, researchers, citizens to understand our work. Additionally, as the dialogic approach leads our project, we will always be happy to share our next steps with all those interested: do contact us!

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