

The 'Innovative Job Agency': an experiment in renewing local social services in Pisa (Italy)

Elena Vivaldi, Andrea Blasini and Federico Bruno

Introduction

This chapter analyses and evaluates, from the perspective of social innovation, the *Agenzia per il Lavoro Innovativo* (ALI – 'Agency for Innovative Work') project, an experimental social policy project promoted and co-designed by Pisa (Italy) Società della Salute (SdS),¹ together with the social cooperatives Arnera, Aforisma, and Il Simbolo, and with the Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna – the latter involved in the assessment of social impact.² The project aimed to foster the autonomy of socially vulnerable people by promoting their job placement. To this end, ALI involved participants in highly personalised individual projects that included access to a series of services aimed at providing new skills to participants (for example, training courses) and bringing them closer to the labour market, both directly (through internships), and indirectly – that is by providing services that can alleviate the family, relational and personal conditions that hinder individual autonomy (for example, childcare services, basic home care and psychological support). The experiment consisted of two rounds: the first from October 2020 to December 2021, and the second from January 2022 to June 2022. Overall, ALI involved 207 participants, selected from citizens assisted by Pisa social services.

Despite the limited number of participants involved (207 people overall), and its experimental nature, ALI presents two interesting social innovation aspects concerning the approach to social exclusion and the governance of service provision. The first aspect concerns the kind of intervention proposed by ALI. ALI offers a range of services to tackle the different dimensions that determine social vulnerability and to empower the participants. This is particularly evident in some personalised projects (some of which are reported in this chapter) where ALI addressed the various vulnerabilities of the participants and of their families (for example, parenting problems, psychological distress and unemployment) to create the conditions for their

empowerment. The second aspect concerns its governance, which sees the public actor – the SdS – taking a central role in coordinating and managing the work of the third sector organisations – the cooperatives – that carry out the interventions. ALI is therefore an attempt by the public social services to modernise their methods of intervention and offer a service capable of tackling the various risk factors that determine social vulnerability.

This chapter aims to verify whether, and to what extent, ALI has realised its potential for social innovation. Based on observations and interviews made from October 2020 to June 2022, throughout the project's duration, the chapter reconstructs ALI's individual projects and their outcomes, identifies the factors that hindered or favoured the implementation of the measures and examines the balance of ALI's experiences. The chapter is structured as follows. The next section defines the theoretical framework, focusing on the social innovation aspects that best characterise the ALI project. The methodology and data of the research are then described, followed by the functioning of ALI, and the characteristics of the participants and the activated services. Then, the results of the focus groups and interviews will be presented, which reconstruct the outcome of the individual paths, and identify ALI's strengths and criticalities. Finally, the factors that facilitated or hindered the success of the projects are discussed. The chapter ends with a reflection on the perspectives that ALI has opened for the local social services in the province of Pisa.

ALI and social innovation

This chapter analyses ALI through the lenses of social innovation. The concept of social innovation dates back to the nineteenth century and refers to the development of new practices and ideas to tackle societal challenges and improve life conditions of marginalised groups; social innovation is contextually embedded (that is, it must be appraised in its institutional and social context) and dynamic, as it concerns not only objectives but also processes (Jessop et al, 2014; Moulaert, MacCallum and Hillier, 2014; Satalkina and Steiner, 2022). Social innovation is a widespread concept, not only in the scientific literature, but also in public debate and in the reform agenda of European welfare systems (for a review of social innovation in the European Union, see Addarii and Lipparini, 2017) – ALI, which includes innovation in its name, is a perfect example of how this concept sounds appealing to the policy makers. The success of this concept derives from the dual need, on the one hand, to adapt welfare systems for the transition to a post-industrial society and the emergence of new social risks (Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Bonoli, 2005; Armingeon and Bonoli 2006; Bonoli 2007; Häusermann 2010) and, on the other, to make their costs sustainable in light of the constraints on public spending posed by globalisation, especially following

the Great Recession, through greater efficiency and the mobilisation of new resources, not only public but also private (Ferrera and Maino, 2014; Fougère et al, 2017).

As often happens with concepts widely diffused in the public and academic debate, definitions of social innovation have flourished through the years: the variety of interpretations of this concept reflects the variety of fields of social innovation, of actors involved, and of approaches to evaluate it (for instance, see Moulaert et al, 2014; Galego et al, 2021). The vagueness and indeterminacy of this concept posed the question of finding one (or more) working definition of social innovation that could be employed in empirical research (Pol and Ville, 2009; European Commission, 2013; Grimm et al, 2013; Campomori and Casula, 2022).

This chapter adopts the approach of Madama et al (2019), who based their definition of social innovation on that of the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA, 2010), which played a fundamental role in placing the concept of social innovation at the centre of attention for European policy makers (Sabato et al, 2015). According to the BEPA (2010, p 9),

[s]ocial innovations are innovations that are social in both their ends and their means. [...] Specifically, we define social innovations as new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations.

This definition is particularly restrictive, as it allows to speak of social innovation only if a measure offers a new response to a social need in a more effective and efficient way than existing solutions, and with the objective of renewing or improving the relationships and social skills of the beneficiaries. Madama et al (2019) reworked the BEPA definition to make it less demanding and more able to grasp different levels and intensity of social innovation. For them, it is possible to define as socially innovative a measure that presents at least one process innovation (therefore, relating to the organisational methods and the actors involved) or one product innovation (relating to the services offered and the social needs addressed), which is aimed at objectives such as limiting the need for assistance, improving the level of services offered, reducing costs, or improving quality of life and making beneficiaries more independent. In this sense, ALI shows two potential forms of social innovation.

The first form of social innovation is product innovation and relates to ALI's audience. ALI incorporates the approach to poverty described in the literature on new social risks. The welfare systems of industrial societies were designed to address old social risks – mainly, unemployment and incapacity for work due to illness, disability, or old age – but they have proved to be

ineffective against the new risks that emerged in post-industrial society. While old risks tended to manifest themselves in people who were middle-aged or older, new risks emerge early in the working age, and are found in the gap between the labour market, family, and the welfare state – making them particularly difficult to identify for the traditional welfare systems (Ranci, 2010, pp 4–15). The new social risks include difficulties in reconciling work and family time, single parenthood, having a fragile relative, having low-level or obsolete work skills, and poor access to social security mechanisms (Bonoli, 2006, pp 6–8). These risk factors interact in a complex and multidimensional way, determining the conditions of social vulnerability to which people such as women, the young, and people of foreign origins are particularly exposed. ALI aims to tackle these vulnerabilities by making available a series of integrated professional services that act on risk dimensions in order to provide beneficiaries with the tools to follow a path of autonomy in the logic of individual empowerment. This approach to poverty is not innovative in itself: these are well-established concepts in the scientific literature which are slowly also finding application at the policy level – an example of this is the Italian minimum income scheme, the *Reddito di Cittadinanza* (RdC – ‘citizenship income’), which, despite its limitations, reflects this same approach.³ The innovative element of ALI, rather, concerns the attempt to introduce in the province of Pisa a working method for the local social service capable of offering integrated, customisable, and flexible empowerment-oriented services.

This brings us to the second aspect of innovation, which is related to process. Italy is a typical example of southern welfare regime (Ferrera, 1996; Saraceno, 2017) characterised by ‘a rather limited intervention model in social assistance, social care and family support’ (León and Pavolini, 2014, p 354); this, in the context of the general trend towards the retrenchment of the welfare states of post-industrial Western countries started in the late 1970s (Levy, 2021), determined an under-development of the Italian social assistance policies. In 2001, a constitutional reform assigned to the regions and local authorities the competence over social assistance and introduced the principle that basic levels of social assistance should be guaranteed and defined at the national level; however, these minimum standards were not precisely defined until recently, nor have dedicated funds been allocated to guarantee them. This contributed to scarce investment in social assistance matters at the national level and to a gap between northern and southern regions (Sacchi and Bastagli, 2005; Maino and Neri, 2011; Kapezov, 2015; Pavolini, 2015; Martinelli, 2019). The situation began to change only in recent years, when a minimum income scheme – the RdC – was adopted, national minimum standards of social assistance were defined, and the government allocated significant resources to strengthen the local social services. Against this backdrop, ALI represents an attempt to offer

a cutting-edge social service through the involvement of different actors and the mobilisation of financial, human, and professional resources. ALI in fact makes use of €793,165 from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies and is the result of a co-planning by the public social services – Pisa SdS – and the third social sector – the Arnera, A.FO.RI.S.MA, and Il Simbolo cooperatives. SdS is involved in management, coordination, and monitoring, and the cooperatives implement the individual projects of the participants. Cooperation between public bodies and cooperatives has a double advantage. Management by SdS makes it possible to coordinate and integrate the services provided by the cooperatives so as to offer participants a package that can respond to their conditions and adapt to their needs. The work of the cooperative operators, carried out in close cooperation with the social workers, allows social services to establish more direct and closer relationships with the people they assist, who have tended to see social services as a remote and unresponsive institution.

With its product and process innovations, therefore, ALI represents an experiment in renewing the working methods of the local social services aimed at providing beneficiaries with the tools to follow a path of autonomy with a view to empowerment. Following the most recent lines of scientific literature and of political intervention on the subject, ALI tackles poverty as a complex phenomenon, and acts on the different dimensions of risk that determine social vulnerability – such as foreign origin, single parenthood, relational poverty, unemployment, and psychological fragility – from the perspective of empowering the individual. As regards its governance, the collaboration between the public actor and the third sector organisations has two advantages: it allows local social services closer contact with the beneficiaries of the services, and also enables them to offer an integrated package of services that allows highly customised individual projects. The rest of this chapter is devoted to verifying whether, and to what extent these potential innovations have been realised, and which factors have favoured or hindered their achievement.

Methods and data

The research followed an essentially qualitative approach and is based on two focus groups held in May 2021 and eight interviews held between July and August 2022. In all, 22 people with various roles in ALI were heard. The purpose of the two focus groups, held in the middle of the first round of ALI, was to collect the experiences of the first projects to recount the functioning of ALI, to offer an overview of the types of services and specific services provided, and on the results of the first projects, and to identify the critical issues and virtuous mechanisms that emerged in the first months of the project. The first focus group involved five social workers and a manager,

all employed by SdS, and the second focus group involved four cooperative counsellors (who act as case managers, together with the SdS social workers), two social educators, two primary care workers, and a psychologist. The two groups – the first made up of staff from the public social services, the second from staff from third sector organisations – were asked the same questions.

In order to determine what emerged in the focus groups of the previous year, and to evaluate the outcome of the paths at the end of ALI, seven interviews were organised which involved two counsellors, two tutors (who follow the participants during their internships), and three educators. Two methodological observations must be made. First, a social impact assessment would ideally have required the collection of information about what happened to the participants at the end of the project – for example, whether or not they found work, took training courses, or continued to use local social services – in order to make a comparison with the sample of citizens who, despite being eligible, were not selected to participate. Unfortunately, these data were not available, but this does not compromise the outcome of the research in a decisive way. Given the nature of the project and the number of participants, a quantitative evaluation of the results could have been misleading: the participants and their families present important vulnerabilities that are difficult to solve in the few months that the individual projects last. While several participants managed to find employment, thus achieving the highest goal of ALI, for others – as we will see later – the fact of having taken the first steps on a path towards autonomy with the local social services was an important result in itself. Taking a qualitative approach based on interviews with privileged witnesses has therefore made it possible to appreciate the emergence of these mechanisms of activation and autonomy, which would otherwise risk going undetected. Secondly, the interviews involved only the operators of the cooperatives; it was not possible to interview the social workers, as their contracts had expired at the end of the project. An eighth interview was therefore organised to report the perspective of the public local social services and involved an SdS manager and a social worker with coordination functions in the project.

Finally, the research made use of documents provided by the SdS and the cooperatives – in particular, the 'Access and Evaluation Forms', compiled by the social workers of the SdS, which allowed to reconstruct the characteristics of the participants in the projects and the activated services.

The ALI Project in practice

This section reconstructs the ALI Project in its concreteness. First, it covers its most practical aspects: the selection of participants, the design of the personalised projects, and the funding available to ALI. Then, it presents the characteristics of the participants. Subsequently, it discusses the outcomes

of the personalised projects and presents some significant cases. Then, it discusses the strengths and, finally, the critical issues of the project.

Operational aspects: selection of participants, personalisation of the projects, funding

The potential participants in the ALI were selected by SdS from among those who, already in charge of the local social services, showed the most suitable characteristics for the project. The social services summoned potential participants for a first interview held by a social worker from the SdS, generally the person in charge of the potential participant, and by a psychotherapist from the project. During this first meeting, the ALI operators described the project and invited them to talk about themselves and explain their needs, desires, and abilities. During the first interview, the social worker filled out an 'Access and Evaluation Form' to report information relating to the psycho-physical health of the individual, the composition of their family unit, and possible elements of personal or family vulnerability. The form involves an assessment of employability⁴ and indicates, on the basis of the interview, which possible interventions could be activated.

If the candidates were interested in participating in ALI, they were sent to a second interview, held by the operators of the cooperatives, where they met the case manager that would follow their progress. The purpose of the second interview was to create a relationship between the candidate and the case manager, and to better define the personalised project. In fact, the interventions hypothesised in the first interview do not always turn out to be the most suitable; a deeper knowledge of the candidate can therefore help to improve the personalisation of the project. The objective of the second interview (and of any subsequent interviews, if deemed necessary) is therefore to define the personalised project which is then included on a 'Personalised Individual Project Form' which specifies the objectives of the projects and the interventions activated. The case manager monitors the progress of the individual project, compiling a register of the activities and coordinating with the operators who implement the interventions, and with the social worker who is in charge of the beneficiary. At the end of the project, the case manager draws up a conclusive evaluation that summarises the objectives achieved, the skills acquired, the critical issues that emerged, and the resources that were activated.

The services made available include:

- internships;
- training courses (forklift training, Italian for foreigners, HACCP, and workplace safety);⁵
- home educational services for minors;

- basic home care;
- psychological support;
- orientation to local services (for example, relations with schools, municipalities, and management of personal files with the public services).

The type of activities proposed by the project reflect ALI's approach to the autonomy of socially vulnerable people. In spite of its name, in fact, ALI not only offers services directly aimed at entering the labour market, but also interventions that address the social, personal, and family obstacles that limit the autonomy of an individual. This approach to poverty, albeit with well-known (and perhaps inevitable) limits, also characterises the RdC.⁶

The total allocation for ALI amounted to €793,165; the beneficiary and manager of the funding was the SdS. Every three months, the cooperatives reported on the activities of the project and were reimbursed by the SdS for the expenses incurred. As previously mentioned, ALI was divided into two rounds. The first round, from October 2020 to December 2021, made use of the Poverty Fund (intended for RdC recipients) and the National Operational Programme (NOP) for Social Inclusion (intended for social marginality in the broad sense and co-financed by the European Social Fund). This made it possible to involve not only RdC recipients in ALI, who are mainly Italian,⁷ but also families being cared for by social services, many of whom do not have Italian citizenship. The NOP for Social Inclusion funds ran out in the second round, and consequently, only RdC recipients could be involved in ALI. As we will see, this led to a change in the composition of ALI participants, with consequences for the individual projects and their outcomes.

Characteristics of the participants and activated projects

The first round of ALI involved 144 people, while the second one 63,⁸ for a total of 207 people involved in the project. [Tables 8.1, 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4](#) show, respectively, the gender of the participants, their country of origin, their age groups, and the composition of families.

The tables show how the participants of the first round of ALI reflect the definition of new social risks. The participants were mainly women; people

Table 8.1: Gender of participants

	<i>First round</i>		<i>Second round</i>	
	Number	%	Number	%
Male	59	41	22	44
Female	85	59	28	54

Source: Authors' elaboration on data provided by SdS

Table 8.2: Country of origin

	<i>First round</i>		<i>Second round</i>	
	Number	%	Number	%
Italy	65	45	32	64
Other country	79	55	18	36

Source: Authors' elaboration on data provided by SdS

Table 8.3: Age ranges

	<i>First round</i>		<i>Second round</i> ⁹	
	Number	%	Number	%
<= 24	17	12	2	4
25-34	26	18	7	14
35-44	37	26	14	29
45-54	33	23	18	37
55+	31	21	8	16

Source: Authors' elaboration on data provided by SdS

Table 8.4: Number of family members

	<i>First round</i> ¹⁰		<i>Second round</i>	
	Number	%	Number	%
1	35	25	24	48
2	28	20	9	18
3	27	20	7	14
4	23	17	3	6
5	13	9	2	4
6	12	9	5	10

Source: Authors' elaboration on data provided by SdS

of foreign origin were more numerous than Italians; people who lived alone were the relative majority but, overall, families composed of two or more members were more numerous. The age groups most represented are those between 35 and 44 years old and between 45 and 54 years old, with an average age of the participants equal to 42 years.

The change in the composition of participants between the first and second edition is evident when the data is compared. Women remain the majority,

Table 8.5: Services activated for the individual projects

	<i>First round</i>	<i>Second round</i>	<i>Total</i>
Internship	43	12	55
Forklift training	21	19	40
Italian for foreigners	27	13	40
HACCP course	46	17	63
Safety in workplace course	68	39	107
Home educational services for minors	47	19	66
IT training	<i>Not active</i>	29	29
Soft skills	<i>Not active</i>	9	9
Basic home care	5	4	9
Psychological support	34	12	46
Orientation to the local services	17	12	29

Source: Authors' elaboration on data provided by SdS

but their percentage drops to 54%, and the average age of the participants rises to 45. The change in the participants emerges more clearly in their country of origin – Italians are now the absolute majority – and in the composition of the family unit, where people who live alone rose from a quarter in the first round to almost half in the second. The percentage of single mothers with children is also significant: this was 26% (37 participants) in the first round, compared to 18% (eight participants) in the second round.

Table 8.5 shows the services activated for the individual projects. Note that each individual project can include more services. Internships are the service most requested by the participants. The operators of the cooperatives contact the firms which offer the internships; participants are supervised by a counsellor, which oversees the correct behaviour of the intern and of the firm. The realisation of the internships was hindered by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused many of them to be postponed or cancelled. Home educational services for minors and basic home care are two services which sometimes overawe the participants: participants often perceive them as an invasion of their private space and as a criticism to their lifestyles. However, these perplexities tend to disappear as the intervention is implemented and the participants become aware of their usefulness. Psychological support consists in a series of meetings with a psychotherapist; it is meant to alleviate situations of discomfort but is no substitute to the specialised mental health service: in the most serious cases, the psychotherapist has sent the participants to the specialised service. The orientation to the local services illustrates the various services present in the territory to the participants. Finally, ALI offers a series of training

courses – two of which (IT training and soft skills) could not be activated because of the pandemic.

Outcomes of the paths and significant cases

The interviews and focus groups reported that the outcomes of the individual projects were generally positive, however, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by a positive outcome, bearing in mind the aims of ALI, the characteristics of the participants, and the duration of the courses. ALI is aimed at people already in the charge of social services, with different levels of social unease. As reported by an SdS manager, ‘social need is not like health need, where a need is met with a prescription that solves the problem’. In fact, these situations require work for many months, even years, and cannot always be resolved in the relatively few months of ALI’s projects. ALI’s goal of providing the tools to initiate a path of autonomy is therefore achieved with varying degrees of intensity, depending on the case. Sometimes the projects ended when the participant was hired by the workplace that had offered the internship, or at another workplace; in these cases, ALI achieved its highest aspiration, that of finding a job for the participant. The projects can also end positively without resulting in the participant acquiring a job, however, for example with the completion of a training course, or with the achievement of other objectives such as obtaining a school diploma. As stated by a tutor, ‘it is considered positive if the project activates individuals. The goal is to change attitudes towards the condition of social hardship, and to instil the idea that there is a path towards improvement and possibly autonomy’. The individual projects that succeed in activating this mechanism of autonomy are considered successful by the operators.

The most significant individual projects are those in which the different activated services interact to operate on the different social risk profiles of the participants and their families – a classic example is that of the foreign participants who followed the Italian course and were helped in their everyday life and in carrying out internships. Two cases are particularly significant. The first is from a foreign family residing in Italy for many years, recounted by a counsellor.

The family was composed of father, mother and four children – two minors and two adults, a male and a female. The family was socially integrated: the children studied here and speak perfect Italian, but their mother hardly speaks it. The father is a worker with extremely precarious temporary contracts of very short duration. The breadwinners were the father and the eldest son. The adult daughter took care of the underage siblings, enrolling them in school and keeping in touch with the teachers; the

mother, who did not speak Italian, could not even interface with the services, and limited herself to cooking and cleaning. We also activated the intervention of school educational support and socialization for the children and placed the adult daughter in a fashion store through an internship, where she was then hired and later became shop manager. We have also activated services for the rest of the family. The mother took the Italian course and started to leave the house alone, while the father took the forklift course and the workplace safety course. (Counsellor 1)

The personalised project addressed the various aspects that determined the vulnerability of the family. The school educational support was activated for the children, thus freeing the adult daughter and the mother from the onus of taking care of them. This created the framework conditions for the empowerment of the two women: the daughter could do an internship which resulted in her hiring, while the mother could attend the Italian course which made her more autonomous in her everyday life.

The second case is that of an Italian family recounted by an educator.

The family consisted of mother, father of foreign origin, and three children. The family were evicted from their home in the middle of the project; the children had many personal difficulties, one with ADHD, another with language problems. The mother had always been tied to the house and was frustrated because she could not relate to her children. She used ALI's psychological support and began meeting more frequently with the social worker, who managed to visit her at home and to find her an emergency apartment following the eviction. An ALI operator was assigned to the child with ADHD, I provided parenting support to the mother, who had to take care of the other daughters. Initially, my role was to play with the children while the mother took time for herself. She then took advantage of my presence to be with the children more and learnt to play with them. The children then started asking their mother to play and do things together. In the meanwhile, I assisted the mother in her relations with the school: at first, I accompanied her to meetings with the teachers; at the end of the school year, she was able to deal with the teachers and the school on her own. Eventually, both parents found a job thanks to our assistance. (Educator 1)

This is another case where ALI project addressed the different vulnerabilities of the family – the mother's need for psychological support and the difficult relations with the children and their school. Thanks to the personalised

project, the mother managed to become more autonomous, find time for herself, and improve her relations with the children and with the school. The project resulted in both parents finding a job.

These cases are particularly significant because they demonstrate how ALI's approach – which acts on the various social risk factors to create the conditions for a path to autonomy – has led to directly observable results. There have been cases, however, where the paths were interrupted, or the participants withdrew their availability, as we will see in the section relating to the criticalities of the project.

Strengths

The strengths that emerged in the focus groups and interviews include the accurate reading of the participants' needs, the personalisation of the individual projects, and their flexibility. The situations of the participants are carefully analysed during the two interviews in which the individual paths are defined: this differentiates ALI from the traditional working method of the social services, which, given the short intervention times, and the need to respond to a person's primary needs, tends to a less accurate reading.

Closely related to personalisation is the question of the flexibility of the projects. The counsellors of the cooperatives constantly follow the development of individual paths, and this allows them to adapt them according to needs. An emblematic example, reported in the focus groups, is that of a young female adult in a family unit in particularly disadvantaged conditions: the original project was envisaged as focusing on the father, but later the operators realised that it would be more useful to focus on the young female adult. Following an internship, she was then hired by a company and now contributes significantly to the sustenance of the family.

The relationship created between ALI operators and participants is another strength. ALI means that participants have a network of professionals at their disposal, ready to respond quickly to their needs. This point is emphasised by an educator, according to whom quick answers are particularly important in the relationship with the participants:

Quick responses to needs are essential. Often, when a request is made to the social services, an eternity goes by, because the social worker has so many cases and is unable to see a family more than once a month, or to contact the other professionals who work with the family. With ALI, instead, we were in constant contact with social workers, through e-mails, meetings, and periodic reports. We met every week and updated ourselves on the progress so far. Participants had a network of professionals at their disposal, who looked after them and were able to respond promptly to their

needs and questions. This has increased trust in the services for many families and has allowed us to continue monitoring them. This is the best thing ALI could offer. (Educator 2)

ALI also enabled the social services to get to know the participants better, to 'enter' problematic families, and to observe difficulties that otherwise would have remained hidden. Services such as basic care, or the educational service for minors, are often used to 'probe' the situation experienced by the family unit. Since the conditions of need do not always emerge in the interviews with ALI operators or with the social workers, the educators who deal with this service also have a role in identifying the possible further needs of the family, so as to prevent situations and difficulties remaining hidden or degenerating. As reported by an educator:

School support is often used to control the family and domestic situation with a view to prevention, to bring out further possible problems. This kind of intervention has saved many situations that risked ending up with a report to the family court¹¹ due to the situation of minors. (Educator 3)

In this sense, ALI's preventive intervention allows to tackle problematic situations involving children before they degenerate and force the judiciary authority to order the foster custody of the minors.

Critical issues

The ALI project was not without its difficulties. A first group of problems involves the relationship between the operators and the participants. The operators involved in the focus group indicated three problematic dynamics. The first relates to the initial resistance of participants, who did not always willingly accept interventions such as home care or education for minors, which was considered a criticism of their lifestyle and an invasion into their private sphere. A second problem arose from the fact that participants were not always fully aware of their condition of need – for example, in relation to the education of children or hygiene in the home. As a result, ALI interventions were not always recognised as useful, and the family becomes unresponsive. As reported by an educator, 'the cultural level of families intersects with economic needs. Families who recognise the importance of cultural growth and education appreciate school support for minors. Conversely, educational support is less appreciated by families with a lower level of education.' A final difficulty involved the dynamic of exchange that some participants establish with ALI. Some participants were, in fact, interested in the project, thinking that it would allow them to obtain in

return, to obtain more quickly, or not to lose benefits given by the social services, such as shopping vouchers or a subsidy for the payment of bills or rent. In some cases, after having expressed their willingness to participate in the first interview (the one with the social worker), some participants withdrew from the second (with the cooperative operators), thus abandoning the project. Other cases involved an exchange mechanism, whereby the participant agreed to continue in the project only in exchange for concessions from the social services. A counsellor reported on these cases:

In one case for the home education service for children, the mother said she did not need it, and that she only accepted because she needed help with the rent. She wanted a bigger apartment and agreed to the home education service, but since the social worker had not found them a larger apartment, she wanted to finish the project. In another case, the education service was fine, and the child was satisfied, but the mother wanted to stop it because the social worker had not responded for a month. Continuing to accept the service, according to the mother, would have meant sending a message to the social worker that everything was fine; by refusing the education, she could signal that there was a problem. The emergency was resolved when we explained that her child would be negatively affected, and that this was not a way to solve the issue. (Counsellor 2)

If these difficulties led to the interruption of progress in some cases, they were overcome in other cases as the paths proceeded, and the participants realised the usefulness of ALI.

A second type of problem related to the services offered. In the interviews, some operators complained about the limited variety of the types of jobs offered in internships. Others, similarly, complained about the limited variety of the professional training courses offered, and suggested that ALI should be able to purchase other training courses, in addition to those already offered, for interested participants. One interviewee observed a tendency to assign training courses automatically, simply because they are available, and regardless of a participant's interests.

The second round of ALI presented some critical issues. The first related to its limited duration, meaning that individual projects had to be shorter. Some individual projects which would have taken longer were interrupted at short notice, prompting negative reactions from the participants. An educator offered this example:

I followed a young male adult who at some point had interrupted his path. It was going well, albeit in a fluctuating way. When

he learned that in a month and a half the project would be interrupted, he had an emotional breakdown: everything he had relied on in the last year ended. He changed the way he approached us. He was more and more oppositional, he increased the absences from the internship, and finally he interrupted the path saying that it did not make sense to continue it. (Educator 4)

A final critical issue was the high turnover of SdS social workers. Although the workers of the cooperatives – both those who acted as case managers and those who operated the interventions – remained relatively stable, the same was not true of social workers in the SdS, some of whom were hired with temporary contracts. This meant that some of ALI's potential, in terms of both learning and of relationships with the participants, was lost.

Facilitating and hindering factors

Overall, ALI proved that its multidisciplinary approach to poverty can be effective in empowering the participants. This section proposes a reflection on the factors that may facilitate or hinder the success of the projects. The aim is not just to evaluate the experience of ALI, but to draw some insights for similar measures and policies.

According to the interviewees, one factor in ALI's success was the presence of a professional network that could make a timely response to the requests and needs of the participants. This allowed an accurate reading of the need, the provision of flexible and personalised services, and the creation of a closer relationship between participants and the local social services. From this point of view, the management role of the public actor must be emphasised. As pointed out by an SdS executive:

The idea was to integrate the project with institutional activity. Until now there were very valid projects, even better than ALI, but in which the public social services were marginal. Public service, instead, should be the cornerstone of the welfare system. In ALI, the public social services became the central node, offering direction and control. The success of ALI is the success of the public social services. (SdS executive)

In this sense, the cooperation between the public actor and the third sector organisations appears the key to the success of ALI. The public social service alone could have never implemented personalised and flexible individual projects like those of ALI. The third sector organisations, on the other hand, needed the guiding role of the public actor, which coordinates the projects and integrates the various services present in the territory in a consistent

package. This brings us to a first potentially hindering factor: the fact that the kind of services offered depend on the supply in the territory. This was particularly evident in the case of the training courses and of the internships. Some interviewees argued that the offer of training courses should be more diverse, whereas others observed that the jobs proposed for the internships should be more differentiated.

A second determining factor for the success of ALI is the careful selection of participants. Participants in the first round of ALI were selected from a shortlist of people already assisted by the local social service. The selection process identified potential participants whose vulnerabilities suited the type of services offered. This contributed, according to the interviewees, to the overall success of the projects. Conversely, an inaccurate selection of participants can hinder the success of projects. This emerged in particular in the second round when, according to some interviewees who participated in both rounds, some people with unsuitable profiles were included in the project. This was due to the fact that, for the second round of ALI, only RdC recipients could be involved in the project. In some cases, the vulnerabilities were severe and would have required specialised services (for example, addiction services, psychiatric care); in others, the participant's main need was to find a job. In other words, in these cases the vulnerabilities of the participants did not match the profiles ALI is targeting. This has had negative consequences on the work of operators and on the outcome of individual projects.

A third determining factor was the time available to conduct individual projects. Firstly, ALI operators need time to familiarise with the participants and create a bond of trust with them; secondly, the given the nature of the vulnerabilities of the participants, bringing about a change in their lives requires time. The relevance of this factor emerged, once again, in the second round, which lasted less and during which some individual projects had to be concluded suddenly, causing a negative reaction from the participants.

Finally, a factor that remains in the background, but which was fundamental in the success of the ALI project, was the availability of financial resources. A project such as ALI, which offers a package of qualified and customisable professional services, is more demanding than the low-threshold services usually offered by the local social services. The question of financing becomes all the more pressing when the social services in Pisa, having finished the ALI project, are preparing to translate its experience into its ordinary operating methods.

Conclusion

This chapter described and analysed the experiences of the two rounds of the ALI project. Our analysis indicates that, overall, ALI succeeded in achieving

its goal of offering an integrated, personalised, and flexible service package that can provide participants with the tools they need to initiate a path of autonomy. ALI's approach proved effective in tackling the various aspects that determine social vulnerability, when the participants were accurately selected, and the individual projects had enough time to induce a change in the participants. In particular, ALI can be particularly defined as a socially innovative measure, as it brings both product and process innovation.

Product innovation regards ALI's approach to social vulnerability. ALI offers a series of services to address the new social risks that determine social vulnerability in post-industrial societies. Ideally, an analysis of the social impact of ALI interventions would have required a period of observation of the participants to collect data on how their life has changed at the end of the courses. The lack of this data, however, did not prevent conclusions from being drawn about the effectiveness of ALI's tools. The focus groups and the interviews with social workers and cooperative operators made it possible to verify that ALI was able to activate a mechanism of change in the participants, through the logic of individual empowerment. Apart from some critical issues, ALI's tools proved effective, if applied to the right participants and with the right timing. Process innovation – that is, at the organisational level – has been fundamental in ALI's success. On the one hand, the role of the public actor – Pisa SdS – must be highlighted: the organisational role of the SdS allowed to organise the third sector organisations present in the territory in order to offer a structured and articulated package of services aimed at addressing the different aspects of social vulnerability. On the other, coordination of the cooperatives allowed the creation of a network of professionals able to respond promptly to the needs of the participants, and to strengthen the relationship between users and the local social service.

ALI was conceived as an experiment by Pisa SdS, aimed at renewing the operating methods of the local social services. The services offered by ALI are personalised and flexible and it would be impossible, because of budget and personnel limitations, to extend them to the entire public assisted by the local social services. As mentioned by an SdS manager during an interview, one way to integrate the ALI experience into the ordinary operating modes of the social services could be to reorganise the work by differentiating, on the one hand, a low-threshold social secretariat, which users can contact for emergencies or urgent needs (for example, help with paying bills or rent); and, on the other hand, a high-intensity service, structured on the ALI model, aimed at families who were already charges of the social services. Despite its experimental nature and the relatively small number of participants, ALI therefore indicates a possible path of renewal for local social services in Italy. This is all the more significant when the huge investments made possible by Next Generation EU open a window of opportunity to renew European welfare systems.

While the lessons that can be drawn from the ALI experience primarily concern Italy, they are relevant to other countries as well. ALI is a tale of how a local public actor managed to harness the resources present in the territory to provide a modern and integrated package of services. In a context where local welfare systems emerge as a consequence of the transformations of the national welfare states and various actors become increasingly more involved in policy design and implementation (Bode, 2006; Johansson and Panican, 2016; Oosterlynck et al, 2020; Notarnicola et al, 2022), and where the integration of social care services is a priority of many Western countries (see for instance Wodkis et al, 2020; European Commission, 2022), ALI represents an example of how the local public actor can play a decisive role in mobilising the third sector organisation and become a promoter of social innovation.

Notes

- ¹ The Società della Salute ('health agencies') are the provincial public agencies that administer healthcare and social policies in Tuscany region.
- ² This work deepens and develops ALI's social impact assessment report delivered by the authors to SdS in August 2021. We would like to thank all the participants to the interviews and focus groups. In particular, we would like to thank Maria Atzeni (SdS), Barbara Marchi (SdS) and Serena Voliani (Arnera).
- ³ The *Reddito di Cittadinanza* consists of a money benefit linked to the right and duty to undertake personalised projects of social or labour-market inclusion. See Grasso (2020) for an account in English of the RdC.
- ⁴ The assessment of employability consists of assigning a score to an individual's characteristics in the following areas: personal conditions, family conditions and networks, economic situation, education, training and skills, communication skills, language skills in Italian, IT and digital skills, stability of employment contracts, transversal skills and autonomy of movement. Past work experience, skills, possible difficulties in work contexts, and professional interests and aspirations are indicated.
- ⁵ Originally, the following courses were also planned, which could not be provided due to the COVID-19 pandemic: green maintenance, furniture assembly and restoration. Basic and advanced IT training and soft skills training were activated in ALI's second round.
- ⁶ See, for example, Baldini and Gori (2019).
- ⁷ One of the conditions of access to the RdC is a ten-year stay on Italian soil for foreigners.
- ⁸ Data was only available for 50 participants in the second round.
- ⁹ One missing value.
- ¹⁰ Six missing values.
- ¹¹ In Italy, the juvenile courts have the task of child protection and have duties of family courts.

References

- Addarii, F. and Lipparini, F. (2017) *Vision and Trends of Social Innovation for Europe*, Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union.
- Armingeon, K. and Bonoli, G. (eds) (2006) *The Politics of Post-Industrial Welfare States. Adapting Post-War Social Policies to New Social Risks*, New York: Routledge.

- Baldini, M. and Gori, C. (2019) 'Il Reddito di Cittadinanza', *Il Mulino*, 2: 269–77.
- BEPA. (Bureau of European Policy Advisers). (2010) *Empowering People, Driving Change: Social Innovation in the European Union*, Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union.
- Bode, I. (2006) 'Disorganized welfare mixes: voluntary agencies and new governance regimes in Western Europe', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 16(4): 346–59.
- Bonoli, G. (2005) 'The politics of the new social policies: providing coverage against new social risks in mature welfare states', *Policy & Politics*, 33(3): 431–9.
- Bonoli, G. (2006) 'New Social Risks and the Politics of Post-Industrial Social Policies' in K. Armingeon and G. Bonoli (eds) *The Politics of Post-Industrial Welfare States. Adapting Post-War Social Policies to New Social Risks*, New York: Routledge, pp 3–26.
- Bonoli, G. (2007) 'Times matters. postindustrialization, new social risks, and welfare state adaptation in advanced industrial democracies', *Comparative Political Studies*, 40(5): 495–520.
- Campomori, F. and Casula, M. (2022) 'How to frame the governance dimension of social innovation: theoretical considerations and empirical evidence', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2022.2036952>
- European Commission. (2013) *Social Innovation Research in the European Union. Approaches, Findings and Future Directions*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- European Commission. (2022) *Study on Social Services with Particular Focus on Personal Targeted Social Services for People in Vulnerable Situations: Final Report*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Ferrera, M. (1996) 'The "southern model" of welfare in social Europe', *Journal of European Social Policy*, 6(1): 17–37.
- Ferrera, M. and Maino, F. (2014) *Social Innovation Beyond the State. Italy's Second Welfare in a European Perspective*, 2WEL Working Paper Series, n 2/ 2014, Turin, Luigi Einaudi Research and Documentation Centre.
- Fougère, M., Segercrantz, B. and Seeck, H. (2017) 'A critical reading of the European Union's social innovation policy discourse: (re)legitimizing neoliberalism', *Organization*, 24(6): 819–43.
- Galego, D., Moulart, F., Brans, M. and Santinha, G. (2021) 'Social innovation & governance: a scoping review', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 35(2): 265–90.
- Grasso, E.A. (2020) 'The Italian *reddito di cittadinanza* in search of identity: a comparative perspective', *Revue de Droit Comparé du Travail et de la Sécurité Sociale*, 4: 28–41.

- Grimm, R., Fox, C., Baines, S. and Albertson, K. (2013) 'Social innovation, an answer to contemporary societal challenges? Locating the concept in theory and practice', *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, 26(4): 436–55.
- Häusermann, S. (2010) *The Politics of Welfare State Reform in Continental Europe. Modernization in Hard Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jessop, B., Moulaert, F., Hulgård, L. and Hamdouch, A. (2014) 'Social innovation research: a new stage in innovation analysis?', in F. Moulaert, D. MacCallum, A. Mehmood and A. Hamdouch (eds) *The International Handbook on Social Innovation. Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp 110–30.
- Johansson, A. and Panica, A. (eds) (2016) *Combating Poverty in Local Welfare Systems*, London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Kapezov, Y. (2015) 'Italian social assistance in the European context: residual innovation and uncertain futures', in U. Ascoli and E. Pavolini (eds) *The Italian welfare state in a European perspective: A comparative analysis*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, pp 101–32.
- León, M. and Pavolini, E. (2014) "'Social investment" or back to "familism": The impact of the economic crisis on family and care policies in Italy and Spain', *South European Society and Politics*, 19(3): 353–69.
- Levy, J.D. (2021) 'Welfare retrenchment' in D. Béland, S. Leibfried, K.J. Morgan, H. Obinger and C. Pierson (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State* (2nd edn), Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 767–84.
- Madama, I., Maino, F. and Razetti, F. (2019) 'Innovating LTC policy in Italy from the bottom: Lombardy and Piedmont confronting the challenge of inclusive local care environments', *Investigaciones Regionales/Journal of Regional Research*, 44(2): 125–41.
- Maino, F. and Neri, S. (2011) 'Explaining welfare reforms in Italy between economy and politics: external constraints and endogenous dynamics', in *Social Policy & Administration* 45(4): 445–64.
- Martinelli, F. (2019) 'I divari Nord-Sud nei servizi sociali in Italia. Un regime di cittadinanza differenziato e un freno allo sviluppo del Paese', *Rivista economica del Mezzogiorno* 33(1): 41–79.
- Moulaert, F., MacCallum, D. and Hillier, J. (2014) 'Social innovation: intuition, precept, concept, theory and practice', in F. Moulaert, D. MacCallum, A. Mehmood and A. Hamdouch (eds) *The International Handbook on Social Innovation. Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp 13–24.
- Moulaert, F., MacCallum, D., Mehmood, A. and Hamdouch, A. (eds) (2014) *The International Handbook on Social Innovation. Collective Action, Social Learning and Transdisciplinary Research*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

- Notarnicola, E., Berloto, S. and Perobelli, E. (2022) 'Social innovation in social care services: actors and roles in the innovation process', *Public Management Review*, 24(2): 182–207.
- Oosterlynck, S., Novy, A. and Kapezov, Y. (eds) (2019) *Local Social Innovation to Combat Poverty and Exclusion: A Critical Appraisal*, Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Pavolini, E. (2015) 'How many Italian welfare states are there?', in U. Ascoli and E. Pavolini (eds) *The Italian Welfare State in a European Perspective: A Comparative Analysis*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, pp 283–306.
- Pol, E. and Ville, S. (2009) 'Social innovation: buzz word or enduring term?', *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, 38(6): 878–85.
- Ranci, C. (2010) 'Social vulnerability in Europe', in C. Ranci (ed.) *Social Vulnerability in Europe. The New Configuration of Social Risks*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, pp 3–24.
- Sabato, S., Vanhercke, B. and Verschraegen, G. (2015) *The EU Framework for Social Innovation – Between Entrepreneurship and Policy Experimentation*, ImPROvE Working Paper, 15/21, Antwerp: Herman Deleeck Center for Social Policy – University of Antwerp, Social Policy Committee.
- Sacchi, S. and Bastagli, F. (2005) 'Italy—striving uphill but stopping halfway: the troubled journey of the experimental insertion income', in M. Ferrera (ed.) *Welfare State Reform in Southern Europe. Fighting poverty and social exclusion in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece*, New York: Routledge, pp 65–109.
- Satalkina, L. and Steiner, G. (2022) 'Social Innovation: A Retrospective Perspective', *Minerva*, 60(4): 567–591.
- Saraceno, C. (2017) 'Southern European welfare regimes: from differentiation to reconvergence?' in P. Kennett and N. Lendvai-Bainton (eds) *Handbook of European Social Policy*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp 218–29.
- Taylor-Gooby, P. (ed.) (2004) *New Risks, New Welfare: The Transformation of the European Welfare State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wodchis, W.P., Shaw, J., Sinha, S., Bhattacharyya, O., Shahid, S. and Anderson, G. (2020) 'Innovative policy supports for integrated health and social care programs in high-income countries', *Health Affairs*, 39(4): 697–703.