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Folco CIMAGALLI*

Family as a generator of social capital: The role of family associations in Italy

Rodzina jako wytwórca kapitału społecznego:
rola stowarzyszeń rodzinnych we Włoszech

Streszczenie

Włoski system opieki społecznej poszukuje nowych modeli. W rzeczy samej, obecny system przechodzi od kilku lat kryzys strukturalny, który ma różne przyczyny: nadmierna sztywność, niezdolność do odpowiedzi na nowe potrzeby społeczne, nieumiejętność pokrycia coraz wyższych kosztów. Nie jest łatwo wyobrazić sobie, jak będzie wyglądać model opieki społecznej w 2020 roku: jedną z prawdopodobnych hipotez na ten temat jest rozwój tak zwanego „czwartego sektora”, reprezentowanego w swoisty sposób przez stowarzyszenia rodzinne. Jest to względnie nowe zjawisko, które przyciąga – na poziomie narodowym – coraz większą uwagę i wykazuje znaczący rozwój. W tym kontekście rodzina podejmuje się nowej roli – jest nie tylko obiektem politycznej uwagi, ale także prawdziwym motorem działań i zmian. Najważniejszym składnikiem tego zjawiska jest samopomoc wśród rodzin, które mają wspólny problem i które podejmują wspólne działania. Artykuł rekonstruuje zarys tego zjawiska w kontekście ogólnonarodowym i sugeruje sposoby pracy dla polityki socjalnej. Stowarzyszenia rodzinne, jako inicjatorzy związków społecznych pomiędzy ludźmi a grupami, są wytwórcami kapitału społecznego. W tym sensie są podstawowym zasobem opieki spo-

* e-mail: cimagalli@lumsa.it

Dipartimento di Scienze Umane Libera Università Maria Ss. Assunta in Rome; Piazza delle Vaschette, 101–00193 Roma, Italy.

lecznej nowego typu: już nie opartej na połączeniu potrzeb/usług, ale prawdziwie zdolnej do produktywności.

Słowa kluczowe: stowarzyszenia rodzinne, kapitał społeczny, opieka społeczna, Włochy, niepełnosprawni.

Abstract

The Italian welfare system is looking for new models. In fact, the current system has lived through some years of structural crisis which has several causes: excessive rigidity, inadequacy to respond to the new social demands, the inability to sustain ever increasing costs. It is not easy to imagine what will be the welfare model of 2020: one of the possible hypotheses in the field is the development of the so-called “fourth sector”, represented in a particular way by the family associations. It is a relatively recent phenomenon, which draws, in the national outlook, increasing attention and significant development. The family, in this context, takes on a new role: not just a recipient of political attention, but a true engine of action and change. The central feature of this phenomenon is the self-help between families which have common problems and which identify common practices. The paper reconstructs the outline of the phenomenon in the national context and suggests working paths for social policies. The family associations, as activators of social relationships between people and groups, are a generator of social capital. In this sense, they are an essential resource for a new type of welfare: no longer based on a combination of need/service, but truly able to be generative.

Keywords: family associations, social capital, welfare, Italy, disabled people.

A changing welfare

In recent years International literature on the subject has been suggesting how many of the aspects of social sciences in the present system which has lasted for over 30 years in Western Europe, have finally reached the point of no return¹. This is not only due to the present economic crisis, but it seems that the welfare model that had developed at a certain point during capitalistic expansion, in terms of economy, vitality, and population can no longer satisfy the demands of modern society today. The Welfare crisis and its many causes will not be discussed here with its many aspects of the economic and social sciences which go back to the 70's. Since then, a rigid welfare system and the unsustainability of over-generous handouts have become more and more evident. The

¹ G. Esping-Andersen, *Why We Need a New Welfare*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2003; M. Ferrera, *The Boundaries of Welfare: European Integration and the New Spatial Politics of Social Protection*, Oxford University Press, Oxford – New York 2005.

vastness of the theme and the non exclusivity of the economic dimension is emphasized by Belardinelli², who divides the European welfare crisis into six categories of economic unsustainability, the contradictory legal framework, socio-cultural aspects, ecological limits, unsatisfactory wealth assessment and centralization of the State.

Only two crucial aspects will be examined herein. First, as mentioned above, that the sustainability supportive model, because of population growth and economic stagnancy must go. The traditional welfare systems that developed during the Ford era no longer work because they are too rigid and tied to state funds. Lower birthrates and longer lifespans in western countries become a burden to the welfare state and the share allotted to seniors becomes unsustainable. Add to that, less income tax revenue because of the slowing down of the economy plus the relocation abroad of companies and factories. These factors have shaken the very foundations of the system. At the same time, the impact of these welfare policies causes many problems. Many authors underline the lack of flexibility in the traditional setup and the problem arises as to whether there is fairness and efficiency. Funds do not meet social demands at the same pace. So the traditional welfare system is still anchored in the past and is not in tune with the present which presents a different scenario. Where traditional systems had been conceived to meet highly predictable and standardized material demands, the present situation has evolved due to more complex immaterial needs and a variety of subjects previously unknown.

The second crucial issue is the fairness in giving support to newly emerging categories: traditional recipients of the old social policy system, which is static and rarely critical of its own work. It will benefit at the expense of new emerging subjects seeking help. This is because bureaucratic procedures have been established over time and are unable to meet the new demands that challenge their lack of experience in the newly emerging social contexts. There is a need for updating procedures in an ever changing and complex modern society.

In short, “traditional welfare” dating from the postwar period to the 70’s – “the glorious 30 years” – was centered on the individual, who was the central figure in the modern world³. This triggered the rapid economic expansion in postwar Italy. This individualistic period is divided into two sub categories:

- The first, where the State helped individuals in need through inclusive policies and economic support (the individual benefits directly);
- The second, where the State encouraged self-support by the individual and the free deployment of social resources (the individual is still the centre of welfare policies but is proactive);

² S. Belardinelli (eds), *Welfare community e sussidiarietà*, Egea, Milano 2005.

³ P. Donati, *Rinnovare le politiche familiari in Europa: la proposta italiana del family mainstreaming*, [in:] R. Prandini, *Politiche familiari europee. Convergenze e divergenze*, Carocci, Roma 2012.

Both periods actually belong to the “individualistic phase”. Within this model, we note the performance of actions most often conducted by different actors on their own – as is the tradition of public policies – or through the establishment of instrumental arrangements. In this model only one person holding the strategic vision and a number of partners that play an important role as executive or accessory. There is, in other words, a traditional “linear” Italian social policy, which tends to turn on one or at most two protagonists of welfare at a time, by segmenting actions and processes. And this is the situation within the locals’ “area plans”⁴ that, while promoting the activation of networks reaffirm the centrality of the public body as the mainstay of local welfare.

Today this model of welfare is based on the relationship between the individual and the State, which is going through a crisis. As mentioned above, there is no real need for better techniques or more funding in the present scenario, but there is a need for a different *approach* in the Italian welfare system. This approach consists in focusing on the interaction between individuals, by having social relationships, rather than being alone. There are many encouraging signs that this may be the ideal approach to overcome the present crisis. There are two important trends in terms of innovation in social welfare: firstly, change of the point of view and focus on the local: meaning the habitat and life experience of the individual. Secondly, developing closer relations between members of an association (or group) and the individual.

The first tendency involves a progressive shifting of the axis of social policies towards the local dimension⁵. It is a new perspective forcing policies to focus on a completely new local dimension. It is the objective of a long process which started decades ago. Local welfare seems to be more efficient, more democratic and more sustainable⁶. Efficient, besides the comments above, because the local dimension anchors action to the real needs of the community. It is more democratic because by planning locally, people will congregate and cooperate and lastly, more sustainable because in this case is possible carefully weigh cost and results.

The second trend seen – besides those taking place in social policy today – is the attention to new forms of integration between local actors and between the systems involved. Precisely because of the factors observed above, the linearity of the actions and the simplification of processes, there is an increasing development of policies inspired by a systemic view of the territory (where the con-

⁴ According to the law 328/2000, these plans are aimed at the determination of the social policies of a territory. Cfr. A. Battistella, U. De Ambrogio, E. Ranci Ortigosa, *Il piano di zona. Costruzione, gestione, valutazione*, Carocci, Roma 2004.

⁵ Y. Kazepov (eds.), *Rescaling social policies towards Multilevel Governance in Europe*, Ashgate, Farnham 2010; A. Martelli, *La regolazione locale delle politiche sociali*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2006.

⁶ A. Andreotti et. al., *Local welfare systems: a challenge for social cohesion*, “Urban Studies”, July 2012, vol. 49, pp. 1925–1940.

figuration loses the sense of “pipe organ” areas of action) because of which you are implementing new types of alliances between systems and between actors. Along that line of reasoning, not only does it make less and less sense to discuss the categories of recipients of the policies as independent of each other, but the same institutional policies (“social”, work, culture, environment) appear permeable and less distinctive. What’s more, the same scope of welfare policies appears ever more inextricably intertwined with the development policies in toto⁷. Family associations form part of this process.

The family associations as an example of a “New Paradigm”

This process is expanding significantly and drawing attention from policy makers and experts. International literature on this topic is scarce. Some studies insist on the role of Family Associations as being the core of welfare, whilst others point out the self-help factors which these organizations engender.

The first study in Italy on the subject, dates to 20 years ago, from the school of Donati’s Sociological Relations⁸, which attempts a definition and describes four main factors characterizing family associations, namely:

- The relationship which members have with the needs met by the association: members may be more or less directly involved;
- The presence of family members as partners—either single members or whole families;
- Mission of the association: the aim can be general or can benefit members directly;
- Type of help: either as charitable assistance or through the use of empowerment strategies.

There are no up to date statistics of the number of family associations, but existing figures showed that in Italy there are at least a thousand organizations of this type⁹. These associations work in many fields. Most of them work in the fields of disability and mental health, followed by areas relating to education, training, family support, alcoholism and drug abuse, adoption and foster care. A recent study classified them into three categories:

⁷ A. Bonomi, G. De Rita, *Manifesto per lo sviluppo locale*, Bollati-Boringhieri, Torino 1998; C. Trigilia, *Sviluppo locale. Un progetto per l’Italia*, Laterza, Roma – Bari 2005.

⁸ P. Donati, *La cittadinanza societaria*, Laterza, Roma – Bari 1993.

⁹ Were carried out two recent research in Italy in recent years: one for the Lombardy region (R. Bonini, *Le famiglie che si associano e il welfare family friendly*, [in:] C. Gori, *Come cambia il welfare lombardo*, Maggioli, Milano 2011) another relative to Umbria (P. Grasselli, C. Montesi, *L’associazionismo familiare in Umbria: cura, dono ed economia del bene comune*, Franco-Angeli, Milano 2013).

- Those whose common denominator is need: ANFAS in Italy, ELFAC and EPA in Europe;
- Those whose common denominator is value in terms of solidarity and non-profit: CDO in Italy, CISDO in Europe;
- Those characterized more specifically by family factors operating in wider spectrums such as the Forum of Family Associations: COFACE AND FAFCE in Europe.

The analyses that describe the varied world of family associations have also investigated the reasons that motivate many people to take this path. According to Mittini¹⁰, there seem to be three main reasons – apart from special cases – as to why families associate:

1. Families are better qualified than social institutions to meet specific needs. Values are shared by both associations and families; both are based on a shared ‘spirit of giving’- there are no standardized answers and attention is focused on the person;
2. Families are better at mediating and negotiating than most traditional institutions. Family associations allow issues to become public rather than private, favouring advocacy;
3. Gathering in family type associations optimizes use of resources both within and without.

Uniting with other families enables the satisfying of needs which would otherwise be ignored.

In an area where the social demands are not just anchored to the materialistic dimension, the role of the family is crucial. This is not a technical organization, equipped to respond to problems of social and health care, but the agencies of social relationships, which better than other actors can be placed next to people, can create networks, can operate effectually against relational poverty, which is often a consequence and an accelerator of social vulnerability.

Family associations therefore, are characterized in two ways: firstly, they perform inside self-help activities and support between members, meaning legal and psychological counseling imparted by parents to disabled children. Secondly, family associations perform a function of the “external” type: the communication with social institutions including non-profit organizations, the media and the market. A typical case in point is the role of advocacy carried out by many family associations.

The point I want to emphasize is that family associations not only meet the social needs of each member, but are also a social resource and benefit. As a result of responding to the needs of the private individual, social groups become a heritage of the communities they serve. Thus, there are two fundamental aspects to be considered: negotiating power and the new social figure emerging

¹⁰ Mittini E., *L'associazionismo familiare*, [in:] E. Scabini, G. Rossi, *Le parole della famiglia*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2006.

within this framework. The negotiating power is within the very nature of the family which acts as an ideal bridge. According to the Italian Constitution the Family is “a natural society founded on matrimony”¹¹, where the definition “natural” describes by contrast, the bridging quality of the family between nature and culture, the private and the public. In “third generation” welfare, focused around the relationship and not around the individual, the ability to create bonds becomes crucial. For this, reference to the theory of social capital¹² may help to develop this line of thought. According to this theory, family associations¹³:

- carry out a bonding role which binds people and families sharing the same problems;
- carry out a bridging role connecting differing problems which bring together associations;
- have a linking role, since associations strengthen bonds between different members which tends to increase social capital as a whole.

Is this feature of “linking” to be ever more crucial in a changing welfare? The answer is not, in many cases, of associations inwardly inclined towards the particular interests of its members: the nature of the theme that unites these persons and the form of the association tends to foster relationships of a new type, to create networks, to motivate themselves and to influence others.

Considering the emerging role of the new social figure, one must bear in mind that family associations do not meet a “private” demand to the welfare crisis where resources dwindle and one must rely on one’s self. The State goes backwards because it is incapable of providing solutions due to lack of funds and so citizens are forced to fill in. But this is not the case, the very family associations perceive a need for a new figure in civil society as they become more and more aware of the desire to live their citizenship in the first person.

After all, the long process of the emergence of a civil society in the Western world consists precisely in a new autonomy of the different social actors, in the enhancement of “intermediate bodies” that are neither State nor market; neither State nor individual. In this sense, family associations are one way in which it expresses a new responsibility on the part of families, who are not content to wait passively for external answers. State-directed; families of a new type, which become subjects and agents of their own experience, that they try and create resources outside. In a profitable virtuous circle, such family activism regenerates the capital of the territory, nourishes the community trust and makes possible the establishment of new relationships.

¹¹ Art. 29 of Italian Constitution.

¹² P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977; J. Coleman, *Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital*, “American Journal of Sociology Supplement” 1988, 94, 95–120; R.D. Putnam, *Bowling alone: America’s declining social capital*, “Journal of Democracy” 1995, 6, pp. 65–78.

¹³ P. Grasselli, C. Montesi, *L’associazionismo familiare in Umbria...*, op. cit.

A new approach to family policies

The family associations described above, represent an important novelty on the welfare scene. Not only for what they have achieved by generating benefits, but also as to how they operate, in activating a series of processes. Social innovation is not only the latest answer to relevant social problems, but as such, it actually transforms the existing system and provides answers. That is to say, it is often as important “how” (the process by which things happen) as the “thing” (products generated). In this case the reality is obvious: If our hypothesis is true that the family association is able to generate social capital, it is clear that this is a source of development.

In this sense, family associations do not play a mere “supporting” role; they outline in fact, new kinds of welfare generating resources and social relations. It is a new form of participation which triggers direct action between individuals and social groups, and generally speaking, increases the overall response from the system. It is resiliency and a problem-solving capacity. We need to see if there are conditions, and possible brakes on such processes or possible elements of acceleration.

When we introduced the concept of a paradigm shift in the Italian welfare we refer precisely to that capacity. In the new mechanism, is no longer a priority the amount of resources that impact on local systems, but their ability to use them. In other words, while in a welfare state based on the linear relationship between individual institutions and the crucial element, the amount of transfers that pass from one to the other, in a balance of new type (in the welfare “post“ we are drawing) the crucial element is represented by the connecting elements within the system, even with the same total resources or, paradoxically, in the case of decrease of the same. And ‘the strength of the ties – both “strong” and “weak”¹⁴ – which draws the system’s ability to develop effective responses. For this, the theme of the new partnership and a new way of understanding social cohesion¹⁵ now seems increasingly central. Thinking about what is “between” individuals means building social architecture able to establish bridges, alliances, networks.

The new welfare system that is being built is a system that completely rewrites the role of the traditional players. Each player no longer operates exclusively in their own field, but is forced to move in different fields, to meet new themes, to create relationships with different actors, often never met. In this new

¹⁴ M. Granovetter, *The Strength of Weak Ties*, “American Journal of Sociology”, May 1973, vol. 78, No. 6, pp. 1360–1380.

¹⁵ F. Cimagalli, *Coesione sociale e nuove alleanze nel welfare locale*, “Studi di Sociologia” 2013, 3–4, pp. 259–271.

architecture, organizations, such as families, who are “natural bridges”, appear privileged and interesting. Privileged because they incorporate the potential¹⁶ for this relational construction, because they may be able to activate useful resources better than other organizations. Interesting, because, from the outside, they can be seen as new subjects around which to create new forms of coping with some of the social problems. A resource not only for individuals, but for the community itself. For many years, we have been discussing in Italy a welfare which is subsidiary, capable of arousing empowerment. We believe that family associations stand as a fertile ground and a test to measure the real dimensions of this renewal. We have no knowledge of what Italian welfare will be like in 2020.

However, I have attempted to outline a possible working model illustrated above. In a new societal system the role played by the welfare State is redefined: it no longer plays an exclusive role in social policies and services, but operates as a facilitator, a *system entrepreneur*¹⁷ who facilitates relations and activates resources. Accordingly, family policies as such, need rethinking. In this perspective, they no longer answer the question: “How can the State help Italian families?” or rather more frequently: “How can the State help individuals within Italian families?”

We imagine the so-called ‘new’ family policies to consider families not as mere recipients of social policies, but as a social subject that produces relations and therefore, social benefits. There is a need for a change of perspective. This may be a difficult thing to do, but that is exactly how a critical situation like the welfare crisis can be overcome and regenerated.

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¹⁶ It is a potential that is not always expressed. We are well aware that in the family organization there is the risk of particular closure, the close connection of internal type, of that “amoral familialism” mentioned by Banfield observing, back in the 50s of the last century, a small town in the Italian province (E. Banfield, *Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, 1958).

¹⁷ F. Westley, *Social Innovation and Resilience: How One Enhances the Other*, “Stanford Social Innovation review”, Summer 2013.

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