

# **The future of the welfare state: paths of social policy innovation between constraints and opportunities**

Urbino, 17-19 September 2009

## **Toward Social Services. Change in the Bismarckian Welfare Model in Italy**

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Paper presented at the 7th ESPAnet conference 2009  
Stream 19 "The future of the 'Bismarckian' social insurance:  
consequences of structural reform"

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Paper prepared for the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual ESPAnet Conference,  
“The Future of the Welfare State. Path of Social Policy Innovation  
Between Constraints and Opportunity”,  
September 17-19, 2009, Urbino, Italy

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## Abstract

*The Italian welfare model has generally been considered a clientelistic, particularistic, and familistic one, but since the 1990s different reforms have been suggested to redefine it. This opened a window of opportunity to grow and consolidate those welfare sectors that had previously been neglected, such as social assistance. At the end of the decade, Law 328/2000 established new values and objectives for this sector, as well as fixed new instruments to plan, implement, and manage the services at the local level.*

*Analyzing the processes of institutional innovation concerning social assistance could help to capture the changes in the Italian protection system as a whole. First, the development of this sector is closely linked to the changing role of the family in the production of care services and the new functions assumed by public institutions. The Italian welfare state is distancing itself from a Bismarckian system that was mostly focused on the male breadwinner as a provider and protector of his family. Since the 2000 reform, the system has instead been founded on a universalistic principle of access, which also marks a break with the welfare model based on labor market position.*

*However, many local governments have not been able to support these innovations, as the territorial differentiation that historically affects the social assistance sector still remains. The defamilization process and the universalistic principle are spreading in an inconsistent way, and the reform's impact varies among regions. This can be explained by looking at the institutional arrangements that characterize the different territories and at the relationships among national, regional, and local governments. Even though the new law encourages a national move away from the Bismarckian model, its effects are not equal throughout the country -- rather, we find many processes of change, and in some places no change at all.*

Keywords: Welfare State, Social Assistance, Social Services, Institutional Change, Path Dependency, Local Governments.

The scientific debate on changes in the welfare state began during the nineties after a period in which the discussions had centered on the classification of the different social protection systems (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Leibried, 1992; Ferrera, 1993, 1996; Siaroff, 1994 Bonoli, 1997). The prevailing thesis in those years suggested that the welfare states, far from undergoing radical changes, had moved toward a path of incremental changes, and that this would explain their substantial continuity with the past.

This thesis is at the center of two streams of analysis. One concentrates on the programmatic obstacles in the dismantling process of social protection systems, and another focuses on the institutions' ability to adapt to the socio-economic changes linked to the end of the Golden Age (Kersbergen, 2000).

Paul Pierson (1994) pioneered the first perspective. Looking at the retrenchment politics initiated in the US and the UK by Reagan and Thatcher, Pierson asks himself whether a process of dismantling the welfare state is ongoing, and gives a negative answer to this question. The resistance of the social protection system can be explained, according to him, in political-institutional terms. Namely, the high political costs of explicit and systematic dismantling policies would strongly discourage anyone from undertaking them.

The other perspective has been promoted by Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1996), who addresses the crisis of the social state by focusing on the different solutions offered by various countries. The three worlds of welfare (1990) – the liberal, the conservative, and the social-democratic one – adapt in different ways to socio-economic changes, because the strategies they adopt tend to reflect their own features.

Similarly to Esping-Andersen, later studies on the European integration processes argue that change tends to show strong continuities with the past. Although the European social protection systems are more homogeneous than before (Tomka, 2003), convergence toward a single model is prevented by preexisting institutional arrangements (Ferrera, 1998), and even facing the same challenges, the European welfare states adopt different solutions (Hemerijk, 2002). The differing capacities for answering the «new social needs» can be explained in light of the institutional features and historical paths that typify each world of welfare (Bonoli, 2006; 2007).

The scientific debate that began during the nineties has shown that change is path dependent (Pierson, 2000), that transformations are incremental and consensual, and that the institutional arrangements defined over time filter the push for innovation<sup>1</sup>. Although inside a path dependent framework, some structural reforms have taken place in the Continental European states during the last years (Bruno Palier and Claud Martin, 2007)<sup>2</sup>. These countries have passed «*from a “frozen landscape” to structural reforms*», and their protection systems – traditionally characterized by the presence of Bismarckian/occupational institutions<sup>3</sup> – have thoroughly changed. Incremental changes have now given way to structural shifts, which means that while the earlier reforms were consistent with the Bismarckian model, the later developments have strongly weakened it, thus favoring a change of policy paradigm<sup>4</sup>.

This paper will focus on the innovation processes related to the Italian social assistance policy, which has undergone significant changes since the passing of Law 328/2000. We assume that analyzing this specific sector can be useful in understanding the process of deviation from the Bismarckian tradition that involves the welfare system as a whole.

Social assistance can be characterized as the welfare “Cinderella”, as it has historically played a residual role compared to pensions and health care. Until the reform, it had never been defined as a system of social services provided to all citizens, but rather remained founded on reparative and charitable monetary transfers to those who were excluded from the labor market. According to Ferrera (2006) this fact can be explained by considering the characteristics of the social protection system to which this specific sector belongs. First of all, because of familism, which is a major feature of Italian society, the family – rather a public institutions – has traditionally been

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<sup>1</sup> Even if this thesis is prevalent, we must not forget the presence of discordant positions. Among these we can recall the work of Clayton Richard and Jonas Pontusson (1998) who, opposing Pierson’s argument, maintain that we are in the midst of a welfare dismantling process. As regards the second stream of analysis, we can refer to Wolfgang Streeck (2000), who affirms that it is possible to find a convergence process between the European welfare models. Nevertheless, as I have already highlighted (Agostini, 2005), whether a convergence process is individuated or not tends to be affected by the modality in which it is defined.

<sup>2</sup> This work was preceded by other analyses that just a few years before had highlighted the beginning of change processes in the Bismarckian welfare state (Palier, 2000; Daly 2001).

<sup>3</sup> The presence of Bismarckian/occupational institutions characterizes those countries in which the first social insurances aimed to protect workers. This welfare model contrasts with the Beveridgian/universalistic one, where the insurances were expressly created with the intention of safeguarding all citizens (Ferrera, 1993). Palier and Martin (2007) identify four different features that characterize the Bismarckian/occupational model: 1) access to social protection is based on the labor market position; 2) the benefits consist in earnings-related money transfers; 3) the financial mechanisms are founded mainly on social contributions; 4) the administrative structures involve social partners. The countries that have developed a Bismarckian welfare model are: Germany, Austria, France, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.

<sup>4</sup> On this point it is worth noticing that the interpretation of the change process proposed by Palier and Martin is fully consistent with Pierson’s perspective. Pierson intends *path dependency* as a sequence of “increasing returns”, i.e. as a self-reinforcing process, in which any further step moved inside a path raises the probability of continuing in the same direction.

recognized as the privileged place for responding to social needs, and this conception has hampered the development of a national public services network. Second, the strong role played by peripheral economies within the occupational model of social protection has enabled even those workers who were employed in marginal or low-skill sectors to benefit from social protection and to extend it to their families. These two elements have blocked all attempts to create and consolidate a national system for this policy sector. While both concern the demand of social services, a third element considers, instead, the supply. The weakness of public institutions and the risk of patronage pressures have justified a political choice to limit the welfare provision only to those people whose needs were easy to identify.

As we will see more in depth in the next paragraph, the reforms that since the nineties have redefined the whole Italian social protection model have also helped open a window of opportunity for the passage from social assistance to social services. Law 328/2000 has defined new instruments, values, and targets that contributed to deviation from the Bismarckian tradition. It should be mentioned that the Italian welfare system has been characterized since the nineties as a “mixed” Bismarckian model instead of as a “pure” one, which means that the occupational imprinting has been mitigated by other factors. One of these factors is the universalistic-selective measures which are exemplified in the *pensione sociale* (nowadays called *assegno sociale*) for citizens sixty-five or older (Paci 2009a). Another is the spread of informal assistance agencies, such as families, voluntary service, and even organized crime, which have traditionally been subsidiaries to public institutions and have provided social protection to a relevant percentage of the population. The mixed nature of Italian welfare has been confirmed by the three major reforms that contributed to modernize it; Law 833 that set up the National Health Care System in 1978, Law 335/1995 that reformed the pension system, and most recently the social services Law 328/2000.

The social sector reform reinforces the mixed character of the Italian welfare state and contributes to the move away from the Bismarckian tradition. Access to benefits provided by public institutions is no longer linked to participation in the labor market, and the reform tries to break with a system founded on income transfer for those people who were outside of it. Since the reform, social assistance policies have been based on a universalistic principle. A similar change took place in 1978 with the establishment of the National Health Care System where access to services is now based on citizenship rights and not on occupational status. The increasing political attention that the social assistance sector has received since the nineties and its recent development are linked to the redefinition of the role of the family in the production of care services. Even if family policies are still far from structural reforms capable of promoting a deep reassignment of responsibilities between the genders and between society and the family (Naldini, Saraceno; 2008), the reform of this sector is closely connected to the emergence of defamilization issues. The public institutions’ novel role within the new system founded on the direct provision of care services distances the Italian welfare state from a traditional model focused on the protection of the male breadwinner.

The significance of these changes becomes even more evident when considering that the Italian Constitution does not provide for public assistance as a right based on need; that is on a universal citizenship principle (Paci, 2009b). But while we affirm the relevance of studying changes in social assistance for understanding the changes of the entire Italian social protection

system, it is important to keep in mind that this sector even after the reform still represents a very small part of the whole. The expenditure for it in 2005 was, 5 billion and 741 million euros, in comparison to health care services where 96 billion and 785 million was spent. This enormous difference is even more remarkable considering the per-capita value: for the social sector it is 98 euros, while in health care it is 1.656<sup>5</sup>.

The local governments – which, in the framework of Law 328/2000, plan, manage, and provide social services – assign 38.5% of the whole expenditure to families and the underage, 23.4% to seniors, and 20.4% to people with disabilities. The remaining 17.8% is shared among services to fight poverty and social exclusion; for immigrants; and for people suffering from substance abuse problems. Regarding how social services are guaranteed, we can see that 39% of the expenditure is designated to services directly provided to the people, while 38% finances the structures that supply services, such as kindergartens. Finally, 23% of it is destined to income transfers (Istat, 2008).

In order to investigate the processes of change related to this policy sector, the following presentation will be divided in three sections. The first will be focused on the historical development of the social sector, and this analysis will highlight the notable degree of territorial fragmentation. Additionally, in this part we will examine the difficult path that led to the approbation of the reform law and the new scenarios that should have emerged from it. The second part will be devoted to investigating the results of studies focused on the implementation of Law 328/2000. As we will see, the impact of the reform has been territorially highly differentiated; this means that the processes of innovation have been weak and continuity with the past tends to prevail. The last part will be dedicated to the analysis of some factors that can explain why the reform's impact faithfully follows the traditional territorial fragmentation. These factors will be identified by observing both the institutional features that typify the different territories, and the relations among national, regional and local governments.

### *From Social Assistance to Social Services*

A strong level of territorial fragmentation characterizes Italian social assistance. This feature has longstanding origins that can be traced to the birth of the Unitary State in 1861. At that time there were already strong imbalances between the north and south of the country, and national unification was not able to change the institutional framework of the pre-unitary states.

The first attempt to regulate the social assistance sector at a national level was undertaken by the Prime Minister Crispi in 1890 (Law 6972); but in this phase the State's regulation did not coincide with its financial engagement. Only after World War I did the central government become directly accountable for providing social assistance. The social assistance was recognized for the first time as a right of the citizens and became an integral part of the welfare system, tightly connected with the pension sector by the Constitution Law of 1948 (Fargion, 1997).

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<sup>5</sup> The social sector expenditure data are provided by the National Institute of Statistics (Istat, 2008), the data regarding the health care sector are available on the Ministry of labor, health and social policy website [www.ministerosalute.it](http://www.ministerosalute.it).

During the seventies a decentralization process was undertaken<sup>6</sup>, in which the social sector played a relevant role. Among the «policy reasons»<sup>7</sup> (Baldi, 2006) that prompted this process were claims to improve the efficiency of the assistance policy. With the passage of D.P.R. 616/1977, new and wider competencies were attributed to the local governments within the legal framework set on a national level. These new tasks should have been integrated in a national law concerning this specific sector in order to fix its basic principles, but this law was not approved until 2000. Unitary objectives and strategies were therefore absent for a long time, and this historical occurrence encouraged the development of territorially differentiated welfare programs (Ferioli, 2003).

This excursus shows that the fragmentation of policies has longstanding origins and that the absence of a national legislation for more than one hundred years helped to reinforce it. The long path that only led to the passage of the reform law in 2000 gained momentum during the nineties, when different reforms tried to redefine the whole social protection system and expansive measures were introduced in those welfare sectors that had previously been neglected, such as social assistance (Fargion, 2004). The supranational framework, and in particular the requirements needed in order to meet the Maastricht criteria, have favored the adoption of policies aimed to cut public expenditure. This has created political debate on the validity of favoring the pension sector at the expense of the social sector<sup>8</sup>. Domestic political factors have also encouraged the definition of the reform law. The crisis connected with the scandals of “bribesville” (*tangentopoli*) and with the “clean hands” (*mani pulite*) judicial investigation has strongly weakened the political actors who had obstructed change during previous decades (Ferrera, 2006). Since the seventies, the due process aimed at enacting a reform bill in Parliament has been undertaken and interrupted in every legislature. This process was constantly pitched against the issue of the Institutions of Public Assistance and Charity (*Istituzioni pubbliche di assistenza e beneficenza*, IPAB), which were closely connected to the Catholic Church. The proposal challenged the future of these organizations and gave rise to endless and inconclusive political and ideological skirmishes, leading to the steady postponement of this reform (Fargion, 2004).

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<sup>6</sup> The Constitution Law provided the articulation of the State in regional governments. The birth of the “regional state” is sanctioned in 1948, but in reality only the regions with a special statute were initially established. The others were created in 1970 through the Law 281.

<sup>7</sup> Following Baldi (2006), we can distinguish reasons of “politic” and “policy” that have led the regionalism processes. The policy reasons concern: 1) the need to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of public policies. This process regards, in particular, the social and local development policies that require a middle-level government in order to be managed; and 2) the fact that European integration favors regionalization processes because the communitarian policies often involve the middle level of government. The political reasons, instead, consist of: 1) the idea that democratization, guaranteed by the presence of many institutional levels of government, successfully increases political participation and brings political decision-making near the citizens; 2) the emergence of regionalist parties; and 3) the redistribution of political power that can be offered through the creation of a new institutional level. This reason was particularly relevant in Italy where the Communist party achieved widespread support but was excluded from the national government. For an analysis of that political condition see Colarizi (1994; pp. 12-16; 29-33; 710-711).

<sup>8</sup> Over the course of the last decades comparative analysis of Italian welfare state (Ferrera, 1984) has highlighted that the expenditure is quite negligible in the social assistance sector and rather high in the pension one. Looking at the data provided by Eurostat this feature appears to have persisted: in 2005 Italy spent 16.9% of GDP for invalidity, old age, and survivor’s pensions and 1.6% for interventions for families and the unemployed. The EU-15 countries overall, by contrast, spent 14.3% of their GDP in the first field and the 3.9% in the second one. Nevertheless in Pizzuti’s opinion (2008) these data tend to reflect some problems with statistical interpretation that led to overestimating the pension expenditure.

Finally, in a period in which the political parties and Parliament were deeply delegitimized, the interim governments presided over by Giuliano Amato (1992/1993) and Lamberto Dini (1995/1996) were able to implement structural reforms in the pension system and - highlighting the need to redefine the division of expenditure among different welfare sectors - created fertile soil for the passage of this reform law. Afterward, with the first center-left government in 1996, the restructuring of social assistance policy became a political priority. A year later, a committee, chaired by Paolo Onofri, was created with the aim of analyzing the macro-economic compatibility of welfare costs, and it maintained the need to contain these costs inside the limit imposed by the GDP increase. Further, in order to reduce the most glaring inequities, the committee aimed at rebalancing economic resources, stressing the need to increase protection for unemployed and indigent people, affirming the need to reduce the pension expenditure, and favoring the increase of resources destined for social and employment inclusion policies (Ferrera, 2006). Among the reforms introduced on the recommendations of the Committee, two are particularly relevant. First, the pension and assistance sectors were separated from each other and - by a clear definition of their boundaries - the latter gained a much greater importance than in the past. Second, in the same period, the “National Fund for Social Policy” was established. It united the economic resources coming from different branches of laws in to a single fund aimed at ensuring a homogeneous standard of protection for the whole country and promoting the implementation of new projects at the local and regional level (Paci, 1998).

After this long path and in a partially changed context, the passage of Law 328/2000 should have delineated a new paradigm and led toward a third-order change (Hall, 1993), defining new goals, instruments, and values for this policy sector.

Following on the heels of more than one hundred years of normative silence, this reform has tried to build a system of policies under national control capable of ending the territorial fragmentation that - as mentioned earlier - typifies this sector. Furthermore, Law 328/2000 has restated the basic values and the main objectives on which social assistance has traditionally been founded. Consistent with a Bismarckian model of protection, well-being in Italy was historically conceived as directly linked with the possession of economic resources acquired from participation in the labor market and its correlated guarantees. For this reason, the social assistance policy traditionally dealt with the redistribution of wealth directed to those who, for different reasons, were excluded from the possibility of benefiting from the guarantees connected with the participation in the labor market. The reparative and charitable logic that characterized these monetary transfers has been replaced by a model of provision founded on the offer of services directed toward social integration, as well as on monetary support (d’Albergo, 2003).

Lawmakers indicated that inter-municipal cooperation was the main instrument for the implementation of the new social assistance policy. Now, the municipalities have to allocate services that due to their own features cannot be supplied by the individual administrative units. This cooperation aims to replace the municipal divisions and to identify the territorial context for social assistance policies, with the social-healthcare districts constituted by the union of municipalities. At the local level the cooperation should take shape through the elaboration of a new instrument of planning, the Area Plan (Piano di zona).

Finally, Law 328/2000 has tended to favor a spread of deliberative democracy (Bobbio, 2005). The reform terminates a way of planning services that exclusively involves the institutional level

in favor of a participatory model open to active participation of citizens. First, this applies to the organizations of the third sector that now are called upon to plan services, in addition to implementing them. From this point of view the reform completes a transformation process started during the nineties through some sector laws that have conferred an increasingly prominent role upon the third sector<sup>9</sup>. Second, with Law 328/2000, citizens are no longer passive subjects of policies. At the local level, these new forms of cooperation between public institutions and civil society are further developed by the introduction of the Area Plans, because it favors the diffusion of participatory experience, ushering in a new era potentially rich in democratic participation (Paci, 2008).

### *Change and Continuity*

Nine years after the reform, Italian social services are now characterized by the presence of elements that reflect both continuity and innovation. The innovation consists mainly in the sedimentation of a new modality in the relationship between public institutions and the third sector. The presence of a public/private mix is not new in the history of this sector, and their complementarity typifies the Italian social protection model (Paci, 1989). But this relationship now seeks to end a model that leaves some sectors to private regulation, and replaces it with a new system featuring public responsibility for the regulation of the interventions that now have to be planned and managed together with the third sector<sup>10</sup>. Several case studies demonstrate that a new role for the third sector is emerging.

An analysis of one hundred Area Plans has highlighted a significant level of participation by civil society. In more than one half of the cases, the planning of social services has been achieved through the foundation of “technical-operative groups”: the third sector has participated in them in 71.7% of the cases and the citizens in 30.4% (Teselli, 2005). Other indications of this trend come from a research study conducted in four districts - two in Lombardy and two in Campania – analyzing the capacity of the Area Plans to encourage participation. This analysis shows that, even in a heterogeneous way, citizen participation is a declared and pursued target for all the local institutions that have been investigated (Bifulco and Centermeri: 2007).

At least one research study, devoted to reconstructing the processes of local institution building in Rome, has highlighted the presence of different levels of public participation in decision-making. This active participation can be highly institutionalized or rather informal; it

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<sup>9</sup> Regarding the reform laws of the third sector, see Saraceno and Negri (1994); Ascoli, Pavolini and Ranci (2003); Pavolini (2003).

<sup>10</sup> Looking at the historical evolution of the relationship between public institutions and the third sector, Ascoli, Pavolini, and Ranci (2003) identify three distinct phases. The first one occurred in the eighties and is characterized by the prevalence of a model in which the only private actors are the IPAB and associations linked to the Catholic Church. The mechanism through which the State selected the service providers was based on private agreements, and the financial resources were disbursed without any control. The second phase began in the following decade. New mechanisms were introduced for selecting private suppliers and the competition among them was founded exclusively on cost criteria. Policymaking involved exclusively public actors in both of these phases. It is only since 2000, with Law 328, that it has been a public/private partnership. This third phase is marked by the participation of the third sector in the processes of evaluation and control, whereas the selection of private suppliers was no longer based on cost criteria because the principle of quality has been introduced. As the authors highlight, this three-phase development model does not include all the local governments, it can only describe the changes that took place in the most innovative contexts.

may concern consultation or co-planning or even the sphere of decision-making, creating forms of participatory democracy (Paci, 2008).

These case studies show that in some contexts Law 328/2000 has successfully promoted processes of institutional innovation, but other analyses focused on all the Italian regions show that local governments respond in different ways to the innovations prompted by the reform. This is particularly evident if we consider the results of those studies that have investigated such themes as: the level of reception of the innovations introduced by the reform; the models of governance that have been experimented with at the local level; the features of the individual regional welfare systems; and the social expenditure<sup>11</sup>.

The first research study that was conducted on the implementation of Law 328/2000 (Formez, 2004), analyzing the legislation produced by the regional governments, highlights that Italian regions were proceeding at different speeds – and some not at all – in their implementation of the reform. In 2002 nine regions had not yet embarked on any enterprise aimed at realizing it<sup>12</sup>; four had worked to produce both the Regional plans and the Area Plans<sup>13</sup>; five had begun the development of Regional plans without defining the Area Plans<sup>14</sup>; and the two remaining regions had undertaken the former but not the latter<sup>15</sup>.

A research study promoted by the Ministry of Labor (Min. lav. e pol. soc., 2006) highlights the presence of different models of governance. Considering the forms of coordination adopted in order to develop horizontal and vertical subsidiarity, for example, one can identify regional models based on hierarchy, market, or network. Regions such as Abruzzo, Basilicata, Calabria, Lazio, and Molise are directly accountable for the allocation of services, and accomplish their coordination functions following well-defined rules and adopting formal instruments. Veneto, Liguria, Lombardy, Piedmont, and the Aosta Valley are involved in the development and protection of market competition. Finally, in Emilia Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, and in the Provinces of Bolzano and Trento a reticular mechanism, of cooperation and reliance, prevails and regional institutions participate in a network with the other actors.

A study based on factor analysis aimed at identifying the features of local welfare systems suggests the presence of four regional clusters. These clusters are defined by the following criteria: the level of structuring; the expertise acquired during the construction of their own social protection systems; the level of innovation in planning, administration, and management at the local level; and the level of compliance with the indications contained in Law 328/2000. The first cluster<sup>16</sup> shows a low level of structuring and innovation, and a poor adherence to the reform. The regions belonging to this cluster are all located in the South of the country and are characterized by a decisive delay in the construction of a social services system. In the second cluster<sup>17</sup> we find regions – principally located in Central Italy – defined by a medium level of structuring and innovation and a strong adherence to the recommendations of Law 328/2000. In

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<sup>11</sup> In addition to these research findings regarding the whole national territory, we can find other case studies that have highlighted the problem of regional differentiation. Among these, see Turrini and Montanelli (2008).

<sup>12</sup> Calabria, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Molise, Piedmont, Puglia, Sardinia, Trentino, Aosta Valley, Veneto.

<sup>13</sup> Abruzzo, Basilicata, Liguria, Tuscany.

<sup>14</sup> Campania, Emilia Romagna, Lazio, Lombardy, Umbria.

<sup>15</sup> Marche and Sicily.

<sup>16</sup> Abruzzo, Sardinia, Puglia, Sicily, Calabria, Campania.

<sup>17</sup> Emilia Romagna, Molise, Basilicata, Marche, Lazio, Umbria, Friuli.

the third cluster<sup>18</sup>, mainly including the northern regions, we can notice a strong internal structure deriving from their longstanding experience in social services planning; relevant innovations in administrative practices as well as in the involvement of local actors; and a weak level of compliance with the stipulations of reform law. The fourth cluster<sup>19</sup> is characterized by a high level of structuring and innovation, in addition to substantial autonomy from the indications set forth in Law 328/2000 (Maretti, 2008).

Relevant territorial disparities are also identifiable in the economic resources municipalities invest in order to supply the services. The differences in this field tend to faithfully follow the fracture between the North and South and, paradoxically, the distribution of expenditures move in the opposite direction with respect to needs. The Italian municipalities spend on average 98 euro per-capita, but in the Northeast this value nears a high of €146 while it in the South scarcely reaches €40 (Istat, 2008). At the same time, while 11% of all Italian families live below the threshold of poverty<sup>20</sup>, in North-central regions this percentage is lower than 10%, and in some of them, such as Lombardy, it is as low as 5%. This value in the South, excluding Abruzzo and Sardinia, grows to around 20%, and in Sicily closer to 30% (Pizzuti, in 2008)<sup>21</sup>.

The most interesting result offered by the analysis of social expenditures is the percentage supplied by associated municipalities. In the framework of the reform, the constitution of social-healthcare districts implied that the municipalities should supply social services, and consequently cover their costs, in an associative way. But, as a report by the National Institute of Statistic (Istat, 2008; table 2) has brought to light, individual municipalities still manage 77.2% of the financial resources as a whole, whereas the associated expenditure is only 15.7%<sup>22</sup>. This data shows that the reform's failure consists in the persistence of territorial fragmentation also involving the absence of a deep institutional rearrangement. We can additionally find relevant differences among the regions in this case. In the Northwest the associations of municipalities manage 23.5% of the expenditure; in the Center they cover only 7%<sup>23</sup>.

### *What Explains the Change and the Continuity?*

The different reforms that attempted to redefine the Italian welfare system during the nineties opened a window of opportunity for the development of the social assistance policy, which received growing political attention that led to the passage of Law 328/2000. This reform should have engendered a complete restructuring of the sector not only through the identification of new objectives, values, and instruments, but also because – for the first time – there was an attempt to build a national system to coordinate it.

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<sup>18</sup> Lombardy, Tuscany, Piedmont, Veneto, Liguria.

<sup>19</sup> Provinces of Trento and Bolzano, Aosta Valley

<sup>20</sup> The threshold of poverty, defined by Istat in terms of consuming capability, in 2006 was 970 euros a month for a family of two.

<sup>21</sup> All these studies show that Italian social assistance policy is characterized by the presence of different regional models, but in some cases, strong territorial discrepancies can also exist among districts belonging to the same region (Agostini, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> The remaining 7.1% of the expenditure is supplied by the Local Health Enterprise (Asl) that provides the services on behalf of the municipalities.

<sup>23</sup> For what concerns the other parts of Italy we can see that in the Northeast the associated expenditure is 19.5%, in the South 13.9% and in the Islands only 1%.

The history of Italian social assistance policy had up until then created very disparate territorial situations. The absence of a national law endured more than one hundred years, favoring the development of different strategies to manage, plan, and provide services. Even now that all the local governments are subjected to the same standard of reform, they offer different answers. This means that Law 328/2000 has not successfully promoted an innovation process that enables the convergence of local policies, and it has failed to guarantee that rights of citizenship are realized equally across the nation. It is important to clarify that it would be desirable for social services to be managed, planned, and provided in different ways in order to accommodate the territorial inclinations that typify each locality. The problem is that the territorial disparity reflects different abilities to ensure adequate protection standards. Data on social spending highlights the relevance of this problem as it shows that the level of expenditure follows the North/South rift, and is not consistent with the distribution of social needs.

What elements can explain the continuity of territorial fragmentation and the weakness of the institutional innovation process? Why is reform unable to promote a convergence of local protection systems, and why does the same reform input generate different outcomes?

The answer to these questions can be found, on one hand, by looking at the historical path and at the existing institutional arrangements that characterize the different territories and, on the other hand, by considering the relationships among national, regional, and local governments.

As far as the first point is concerned, we can see that the changes indicated by the reform are more easily adopted in those territories that have already experimented with similar ways of managing, planning, and providing services. This conclusion can be gleaned from the examination of a single issue such as inter-municipal cooperation. The introduction of municipal associations faces major difficulties where relevant experiences of association have been previously absent (Fedele, Moini; 2007). This can explain why the largest portion of associated expenditure comes from the Northwest regions, traditionally characterized by a higher number of small municipalities and where inter-municipality cooperation offers a diffused way to provide public policies and services<sup>24</sup>.

In order to understand why some regions have been able to adopt reform innovations while others have not, we can also turn to the time issue, which has been used to explain changes in different national welfare models (Fargion, 2000; Bonoli, 2007). The social needs, and the population's perception thereof, changed at different speeds in the North and the South. The crisis of the traditional family model in the North-central areas had early on encouraged citizens to press their regional and local governments to strengthen and increase social services. The advent of a post-industrial society meant that the family was no longer able to fulfill the social needs of its members, which created a demand for assistance in order to complement, and in some case to replace, the family's role. This did not happen in the South, where the social and economic changes were much less pervasive and the main needs still arose from widespread poverty (Fargion, 1997; 2000). The regions that had already experimented with changes of the post-industrial era developed a stronger demand for new social services. Law 328/2000 provided

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<sup>24</sup> "Small municipalities" – i.e. those with less than 5,000 inhabitants – constitute 72% of the overall number of Italian municipalities. This value rises to 89% and 74% in Piedmont and Lombardy respectively, which are the two biggest regions of the Northwest. These two regions have the highest amount of "unions of municipalities" and "mountain communities", which are two different kinds of inter-municipal associations introduced by Law 142/1990 (Fedele and Moini, 2007).

an opportunity for them to match the supply with the demand for services, while offering local governors an opportunity to increase their political support. The same process was not undertaken in the Southern regions, where those developments were not as mature when the reform was issued.

The time issue can also be used in studying how the capacity to receive innovation may depend on the features of local institutional arrangements. Italy is characterized by a high level of institutional fragmentation due to the significant number of municipalities. Following Fargion (2000) we can see that reducing the number of local authorities can increase their capacity for providing services<sup>25</sup>. From this point of view, those territories that have initiated a process of institutional rearrangement – by the promotion of inter-municipal cooperation in different policy sectors – can implement the recommendations of Law 328/2000 more easily. This consideration leads, moreover, to highlighting the importance of general issues regarding every public policy that is implemented at the local and regional level. In the social sector, like elsewhere, new and wider tasks have been attributed to local and regional governments without first undertaking their reorganization. It has been emphasized that Italy entered into the «local government era» without having resolved the problem of institutional fragmentation that had existed since the birth of the Unitary State (Fedele, 2008). The «institutional dwarfism» that typifies many of today's municipalities runs the risk of damaging the implementation of those public policies that are based on the principle of subsidiarity<sup>26</sup>. We should also consider this problem in order to understand the weakness of the process of institutional innovation in social assistance policy.

We have seen that local socio-economic features, as well as existing institutional arrangements, can deeply affect the capacity to promote change. Nevertheless, this consideration has not led toward a deterministic view because other factors, such as the presence of particular kinds of local leadership, can expedite the change process in territories where socio-economic features and institutional arrangements are unable to produce innovation. This means that these territories are not necessarily trapped. We can see that this has occurred, for example, in Campania where the implementation of Law 328/2000 filled in the institutional and organizational gaps that characterized this region (Bifulco and Cermenteri, 2007). The reform input has been hailed first of all by the local public administrations, but also by civil society, as an opportunity to end the existing clientelistic tradition. The regional government has assumed a leading role in the implementation of Law 328/2000 as well as in regulating the expanding services system, and has even financed new services with its own funds, thus favoring the growth of local spending.

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<sup>25</sup> In order to explain why the Scandinavian countries have been more able than others to respond new social needs, Fargion maintains that, even if this is certainly due to cultural factors, it is necessary also to consider that these countries have been traditionally characterized by the presence of a strong system of local government and that, in the general framework of the fifties and sixties, the reduction of the number of municipalities increased their capacity to manage new responsibilities. Fargion also underlines the considerable fiscal autonomy that characterizes Scandinavian local authorities.

<sup>26</sup> As Fedele (2008) points out, the latest constitutional reform of 2001 further strengthens this feature, giving equal institutional weight to the State, regions, and municipalities. In this way the reform has defined an atypical model of «three-pointed federalism» that multiplies local veto rights and favors the development of public choices that can be increasingly territorially differentiated. From this point of view, the constitutional reforms have defined a model of federalism completely consistent with the institutional tradition of the Unitary State.

As suggested above, a second set of reasons explaining the continuity of territorial differentiation and the weakness of the institutional innovation processes that followed Law 328/2000 can be found by studying the relations between the different levels of government<sup>27</sup>.

In order to build a system of policies capable of ensuring equal rights, the national level ought to assume a regulating role. This however is not possible after the constitutional Law n. 3 of 2001, which sanctioned the transition of the Italian State towards federalism<sup>28</sup>. This process is exerting a negative impact on social assistance policy. Even if a large part of the constitutional law has not been implemented yet, it has nevertheless blocked the birth of a national system of regulation in this sector because, in the new constitutional framework, the central level cannot perform regulatory functions by law nor by financial instruments.

The constitutional reform has declared that regional governments can decide whether or not their social service systems should comply with the principles of Law 328/2000. Regions received an exclusive legislative power in this sector<sup>29</sup>, so that while they previously only could make laws within the national legislative framework, now they can also legislate without following the principles defined by the central level. In this new system, territorial homogeneity is no longer guaranteed by national legislation but, rather, through the definition of the “essential levels of assistance” (*livelli essenziali di assistenza* LIVEAS) that should be provided across the nation. This leads to the end of a system in which the State defines organizational practices that must be uniformly applied in all its territories. Instead, a new system has been created where the national government cannot affect the organization of social services (Meloni, 2002). The absence of strong political interest in the implementation of Law 328/2000 and of the constitutional reform - due mainly to the change of government in 2001 - has meant that, whereas LIVEAS was prescribed by both laws, it has never been outlined.

It is also noteworthy that the impact of constitutional reform does not concern only the legislative power of the regions but also the ways in which social services are financed. Law 328/2000 defines a mixed system in which the local governments, the regions, and the State come together to finance public services. In particular, this law provides that the expenditures of municipalities and regions are covered both by the “National Fund for Social Policies” and by other resources coming from municipal and regional budgets. The National Fund, established in 1997 through the reunification of several funds instituted by different branches of laws, has after Law 328/2000 become particularly important as an instrument for the State to finance services.

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<sup>27</sup> I analyzed this question more extensively in a previous article (Agostini, 2008).

<sup>28</sup> For an analysis of the main features of federal states, such as Italy, that are born “by separation” — that is, produced by the transition from a unitary state to a federal one — see Ventura (2008), in particular the preface. A deep analysis of the characteristics of the Italian case is contained in the second chapter, edited by B. Baldi and G. Baldini.

<sup>29</sup> Article 117 of the reformed Constitution assigns to the State an exclusive legislative power in matters of foreign policy, immigration, defense and armed forces, public order and security, general provisions on education, social security, electoral legislation, customs, and protection of the national border and of the environment. This also include the determination of the basic levels of benefits relating to civil and social entitlements to be guaranteed throughout the national territory. The same article fixes the matters characterized by concurring legislation; among those we can include education, health care, communications, transportation and distribution of energy, enhancement of cultural and environmental properties, regional credit institutions, complementary and supplementary social security, harmonization of public accounts, and co-ordination of the public finance and taxation system. In this case the legislative powers are vested at the regional level except for the determination of the fundamental principles defined by the State. Finally, article 117 provides that the Regions have legislative powers in all the subjects that are not expressly covered by national legislation: this is the case with social assistance policy.

Furthermore, additional resources allocated by the national government for the implementation of the reform have flowed into this fund, which should have enabled the regions and municipalities to strengthen their social assistance systems (Min. lav. e pol. soc., 2004). However, the State's ability to encourage the construction of a national system of policies by this means is rather limited. The resources are not sufficient to promote the necessary synergies and to bring about the deep change that the lawmakers had intended. The total amount of the National Fund is significantly less than the expenditure incurred by municipalities in order to provide social services. In 2005 this expenditure was 5 billion and 741 million euros (Istat, 2008; table 1), while the resources supplied by the fund were 1 billion and 308 millions<sup>30</sup>. We must also consider that more than half of the fund is assigned to the National Institute of Social Security (INPS)<sup>31</sup>, which means that only a minor part of it is used to finance the social services provided by local governments.

The fact that the national transfers are quite small in comparison to the whole level of expenditure is also confirmed by research promoted by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (2006). The financing provided by the national level represents 22.6% of total expenditures, the resources of the local authorities themselves are 70.5%, and the remaining 6.9% comes from other sources<sup>32</sup>. The State has no right to indicate the allotment of the transferred resources within the new constitutional framework, and this increases the difficulties linked to the introduction of any national intervention. Finally, we should consider that, at present, the National Fund does not correspond with any of the financial instruments provided in the reformed Constitution (Min. lav. e pol. soc., 2004).

The Constitutional reform, together with the failure to define LIVEAS, has implied that, at present, the central government is not able to intervene in order to support the development of a homogeneous system of policies. Moreover, Law 328/2000 affects a territory that is already strongly fragmented. The results of the studies that have investigated its implementation demonstrate that change in this policy sector is characterized by some continuity with the past.

The reform has introduced relevant elements of innovation, which in some cases have taken place at a local level, as is shown by the spread of participative experiences. As we saw, the process of elaborating the Area Plans has often encouraged the involvement of civil society. Moreover, in Campania, a region characterized by a weak system of services and by a prevailing clientelistic tradition, the reform has been welcomed as an opportunity for breaking with the past and helping the development of this sector.

But, beyond these important elements, the studies focused on the implementation of the reform underline a limited capacity to innovate, due, on one hand, to the persistence of territorial fragmentation, and, on the other, to the fact that the innovations introduced by the reform themselves are received prevalently in contexts where they reflect the institutional structures and/or keep on with preexisting tendencies.

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<sup>30</sup> This datum is contained in the *Decreto di riparto del Fondo sociale nazionale 2005* (Decree for the division of 2005 National Fund for Social Policy) available on the website [www.solidarietasociale.gov.it](http://www.solidarietasociale.gov.it).

<sup>31</sup> The allocation of funds among the institutional actors in 2005 was as follows: Inps 54%, Ministry of Labor and Social Policies 3%, regions and provinces of Trento and Bolzano 40%, municipalities 3% (my elaboration of the data of the Decree for the division).

<sup>32</sup> This category includes, by elimination, all the resources that could not be attributed to any of the others.

As we saw before, innovation is favored first of all where the procedure of organizing and managing services pre-dates the new reform, as happens, for example, in the case of inter-municipal cooperation. The level of coherence between the changes introduced by the reform and the historical situation of the various localities assume some relevance as well. The demand for social services had already imposed itself for quite some time in the North, and this is why the reform has been welcomed there as an opportunity for answering deep-rooted social needs, contrary to what has happened in Southern Italy.

These reflections lead us first to a conclusion about the social assistance sector. It is still far from real structural reform and the landscape we are facing tends rather to be frozen. On one hand, a national system of policies able to guarantee a territorial homogeneity of supply is far from being constructed. On the other hand, local governments, even if exposed to the very same reform inputs, often react in different ways, and the path each of them undertakes is coherent with their own pasts.

The issue of territorial fragmentation should also be analyzed in relation to the process of deviation from the Bismarckian model. As assumed in the introductory part of this work, the analysis of the assistance social sector is particularly relevant for studying this process. We can maintain that the more a system of social services is developed and consolidated, the more we are facing a rupture with that model. From this point of view, then, the different levels of reception of the innovations proposed by Law 328/2000 imply different degrees of deviation from tradition. It is worth mentioning that the Southern regions, on an average, spend less on the social sector than the other regions, and of this expenditure a comparatively larger percentage is spent on monetary transfers. While in Italy the overall spending on monetary transfers is 23% of the local governments' total expenses, this value rises to 31% in the South (Istat, 2008). The stronger continuity with the past is made evident by the residual role assigned to social services and by the prevalence of compensating and charitable monetary transfers. This reflection leads us to a second conclusion, regarding the impossibility of identifying a coherent and consistent trend within the social assistance policies. If we analyze the deviation from the Bismarckian welfare model through the lens of the social assistance sector, then we see that it actually involves only some parts of the country. The territorial fragmentation we have witnessed is hindering the growth of a unified, nationwide trend of change.

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