Service Integration in Practice. The Role of Discretion in the Implementation of the Italian Policy Reddito di Cittadinanza in Two Regional Contexts

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This paper aims to apply the street-level bureaucracy approach to the analysis of the policy outcome of service integration, within the case study of the Italian measure Reddito di Cittadinanza. Service integration can be defined as collaboration across service boundaries. It represents the precondition supporting the personalization of services and the "whole person" ways of working with citizens, which are more and more required by welfare policy designs. At the street-level, service integration materialized in the work of a multidisciplinary team, who customizes the service path of citizens in need. The way in which service integration is actually practiced is relevant for 1) the features of local welfare systems – especially on the supply side; 2) the shape that policies take in practice in a concrete territory; 3) the final service that it is offered to/coproduced with the citizen.

The street-level approach is particularly appropriate to open the "black box" of policy implementation and investigate these practices. Street-level organizations (SLO) and their bureaucrats (SLBs) concretely shape action prescriptions, stemming from different sources. In this field study, the discretion of SLBs is the most debated and fascinating phenomenon. The concept of discretion refers to the spaces for action that SLBs inevitably have and use to deal with several inputs and the related accountabilities, coming from many input producers. SLBs develop and usually routinize strategies to cope with these conditions. The patterns of discretionary actions are rarely random, it is therefore crucial to understand the factors that systematically influence discretion in an empirical context. Intervening factors can belong to the micro-individual sphere (socio-demographic characteristics, values, etc.), but also to the specific organizational and institutional contexts within which the SLBs operate (meso-macro); for this reason, it is useful to analyze the entire policy process with the aim of understanding how discretionary practices at the street-level might be influenced by decisions taken at higher levels.

The street-level bureaucracy (SLB) approach and the analysis of the forms of discretion have been key to understanding the relational practices that involve bureaucrats and citizens in the implementation of public policies. The focus of most part of SLB research is thus on this top-down relation involving, on the one hand, SLBs and citizens, and on the other SLBs and managers. The ways in which this relationship develops influence the main outcomes of the policy, usually in terms of the reduction of social risks. However, what is less considered is that the discretion of SLBs might have effects on other types of policy outcomes, more organizational and

horizontal – involving peers more than citizens. Among them is service integration. The collaborative work across service boundaries cannot be taken for granted but is the outcome of processes in which street-level organizations and street-level bureaucrats – the components of the multidisciplinary teams – construct it. In this context, discretion matters, and it is relevant to understand the factors influencing it and its various outcomes.

To this aim, I will discuss the proposal by Rutz and de Bont (chapter 18 of the book "Discretion and the Quest for Controlled Freedom", 2020, edited by Evans and Hupe), who look at collective forms of discretion at the street level. The collective meaning of discretion has the advantage of going beyond the strictly organizational perspective since the group perimeter can be under-organizational (i.e., a professional group) or cross-organizational (multi-agency teams). Moreover, it helps analyze the policy transformations that occur and stem from the street/local level as collective experiences of discretion are also used to adjust the rules and institutionalize the adjusted rules.

The empirical section of this work analyzes practices of service integration put in action to implement the Italian guaranteed minimum income, Reddito di Cittadinanza (RdC), in two regional contexts. The choice of this case study builds on three main characteristics of the policy system itself: 1) RdC is the most important minimum income measure in Italian history, in terms of the number of financial resources and beneficiaries; 2) Having a national character, it obliges all territories to implement a set of objectives. Among these objectives, there is service integration (between social services and employment services); 3) Despite the national character, its implementation takes place in an institutional system that delegates competences for social and employment services to the regional and municipal levels; this element enables the possibility to account for institutional factors influencing practices of service integration, adopting a comparative approach.

The research relies on 41 in-depth interviews conducted in the period 2020-2021 with SLBs of two Italian regions, Lombardy and Emilia Romagna, characterized by two different welfare systems.

In conclusion, this work broadens the scope of the theoretical and empirical study of discretion to the policy outcome of service integration, yet keeping the focus on street-level (collective) practices.