

NETWORKING

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1. INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS PILLAR

To be a homeless, in most cases, means to have multiple needs that require multiple answers to be coordinated and that can hardly be met by a single agency: housing, bureaucratic, working needs, physical or mental health problems.

Furthermore, the way most of the homeless persons ask for help is not usually direct and explicit: very often the necessities emerge because the person “breaks” the fragile balance between the social context and his exigencies.

It is significant that third parties mainly convey the help’s requests: ordinary citizens, volunteers, social operators, and policemen.

Being urgent and not specific are therefore two additional characteristics of such requests, although the need that is detected in immediacy is usually of a health nature or to defend the public peace.

One of the institution involved in these cases is usually the health care system, which, once resolved the emergency (mostly a state of poisoning or a psychiatric acuity) tends to avoid, for several reasons, a more comprehensive sanitary takeover of the person.

A further level of care in case of a hospitalization, is the one, normally supported by family members, consisting of a response to basic needs: clothing, changing of linens, toiletries, as well as company, encouragement and support, which is missing or is absolved in a discontinuous and not exhaustive way by the most various figures (nursing, medical, volunteer).

In addition to the issues strictly related to healthcare, this is often interfered by bureaucratic and administrative irregularities, a phenomenon that is increasingly present as a result of the large migratory flows affecting Europe in recent years: two thirds of this population is in fact composed by migrants.

Suppose that instead of calling for a health emergency to assist the person in trouble, the Social Services were directly involved: in the luckiest case, they will provide a more or less temporary shelter to the person until his recover, in compliance with the legal requirements and the legal status of the person.

Rarely, however, the matter is exhausted through a solution of the housing order: it is very likely that the same reasons that led to the call, will occur again in the short time and that the situation

will be repeated in a vicious circle that makes the failure of interventions an element of deep frustration for those who are responsible for them and for the person themselves.

To summarise, for an intervention that led in this way has a very high probability to fail, we may need to refer to the following agencies: healthcare workers, municipal police, law enforcement, social workers, embassies, volunteers none of which really responsible for the situation and each of them maybe delegating towards other institutions.

For all the above, in some European realities it has come to the constitutions of networking, that is, of meta-organizations including all the formal and non-formal institutions, which in various ways deal with this phenomenon.

Networking is a “process which fosters the exchanges of information, ideas and practices among Individuals or groups that share a common interest” (<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/n/networking.asp>).

Networking, in our case, means to optimize resources and competencies and to avoid contradictory interventions.

Creating a network allows to build good diagnosis of the problem and to design the intervention and share it at the presence of all the involved entities; it allows to organize the intervention in a procedural and organic manner, granting the continuity of care; it allows to overcome each institutional limitation and the different timing between organizations; it allows to take part in the difficulties, not feeling to be solely responsible or, even worse, getting out and avoiding any responsibility.

2. MAIN IDEAS WE WANT TO HIGHLIGHT

To build a network is not a spontaneous process: it underlies willingness and a specific effort and may take a long time and care.

First of all it is necessary to “detect” the knots of the net, those sharing with us the same “problem”. It is important to know the role of each “player”: missions, specific competencies, limitations, and inspirational values. To deeply respect the identity and values of each participant, even the “free players”, for instance volunteers whose contribution may become really significant but is rendered on chance and out of any structured organization, is the first step of a process that should lead to share common goals and to design appropriate and coordinated tasks.

In this first phase of contacts, the most common feeling may be of fear and suspiciousness: not to be understood or recognized in our efforts or limits; to be those who will receive most of the duties and responsibilities; to lose our decisional power. It is a very delicate moment, in which the aim should be to create the conditions for a mutual trust and to build a “win/win” playground.

A “win/win” approach rests on strategies involving: going back to underlying needs; recognition of individual differences; openness to adapting one’s position in the light of shared information and attitudes; attacking the problem, not the people. Where both people win, both are tied to the solution: they feel committed to the plan because it actually suits them.

To build a network means to overcome the feelings of solitude and disqualification that too often are part of these disadvantaged situations. To cooperate in a network allows to become more aware of each other skills and difficulties, to feel in turn recognized and appreciated and makes possible to leverage over proactive elements even dealing with a complex reality as homelessness.

A better cases’ management through networking prevents the defensive occurrences of delegating operations and also plays a significant role in reducing burn out phenomena.

Even considering the economic level, networking prevents the recurrence and the overlapping of interventions: unsuccessful admissions due to lack of planning; distribution of essential goods to the same person by several contemporary operators; paperwork being taken and never concluded, impossibility to access to safety valve for insufficient documentation.

3. DIFFICULTIES WE MIGHT EXPECT

Several issues can undermine the set up of the good functioning of a network.

Different values, cultures and languages between different professionals or roles, may represent a barrier in terms of sharing a goal or in the way this is reached.

To be a public organization or a private, as well as to be an official or unofficial one, can rise the feeling of a power imbalance between the institutions and threaten the identity of the parties.

In some cases it may occur that the persons representing the organization to which they belong to, do not have any decision making power, a condition that could weaken the specific role or function.

The number of participants too can represent a problem: being “too many on the boat”, may affect the decisional and operational processes, creating the condition for a role blurring phenomenon.

A poor communication flow, a fragmentation or a lack of information, the absence of a coordination between operators, may affect in a serious way the continuity even of a good plan, but especially of the long term ones.

Another issue often disturbing the positive functionality of a network is the tendency to convert the role of the “facilitator” of the meta – organization, into a “coordinator”, as the only responsible for the integration of the entire process, the only entitled to take decisions or, even worse, the only responsible for the outcome.

Last not least in a list that might be longer due to the complexity of the subject, is the handling of all is related to the personal data protection (General Data Protection Regulation, UE 2016/679) a complex matter to manage, being many the agencies involved and the data shared between different professional figures and agencies.

4. GOOD PRACTICES TO FACE THOSE DIFFCULTIES

Building a network is a process that foresees several steps. It is important at first, that all the organizations involved achieve a mutual knowledge of the specific missions, duties and competencies. In the aim of this it is necessary to detect all the entities, official, unofficial, even including the single persons who sometimes represent a very sensitive and widely linked knot of the net.

This phase is very delicate, it is mainly about building relationship and any initiative that has to do with the promotion of social situation, is highly recommended in order to meet and better know each other, even in an informal way.

In a second time it will become necessary to plan a series of meetings with the attendance of all parties, to organize the activities and be debriefed on the developments of the different cases. Moreover a continuous follow up activity is needed in order to check achievements, monitor results highlight difficulties and implement recovery plans.

It may be necessary to have “extra – meeting”, due to the urgencies that may arise dealing with human “material”: to be flexible is always a good way to cope with difficulties and complexity.

A good communication, based on shared Information is the basis of the network functioning: not only to provide the updates on each single case that the network is caring for, but also to have access to the information and the resources available in the net.

Communication and commitment should follow the top - down and bottom – up way, and this is also why it is necessary that the persons in charge for each organization, should have the decision making power of the institutions they represent.

It is a good practice to agree on a Memorandum of Understanding, which should sound not as a strict and mandatory contract, but as document fine tuning each entity, duty and responsibility.

The more the mutual understanding develops, the more will become a necessity to make experience of joint training, which means for instance to visit the places in which each member of the net works and operates: on the street for nurses, doctors, social workers; in some “war room” for the coordinators of the outreach team; in hospital wards or clinics; inside the houses of our clients; in some soup kitchen or shower service; in some government office, etc. etc.

To experience in real life and real time the way the other partners work and the problems they have to deal with on a daily basis, increases the mutual understanding and tolerance, and improves the esprit de corps.

In the light of the above, once the network is well structured and that suspicion of subjugation or dominance by any party have been dispelled and a mutual trust is acquired, to provide a common training could strengthen the links and the mentality of the group.

To share a common space, in which contacts and communication may happen in a fast way and the intervention may follow in an easier way the possibility to be tailored for the person in need, may be a big challenge for many European realities, but a good solution for many reasons.

A representative and very concrete experience of networking is the one structured in the city of Lisbon since 2015, namely the establishment of a Nucleo Planeamento and Intervencao sem Abrigo NPISA, which brings together in a single headquarter all the agencies dealing with this phenomenon, each respecting their own mission and identity.

The person addressed to this structure is welcomed and listened to, by a social worker and a psychologist simultaneously. Starting with this meeting, an agreed and shared plan for caring corresponding to the needs takes shape, whether these needs are of a physical, psychic, housing, or working nature.

By doing so the operational times and costs are enormously reduced, as well as the bureaucratic obstacles: it is evident that the opportunity to draw up an assistance through the establishment of a network shall then determine effectiveness or even success to a large extent and makes the eventual failure more tolerable as it becomes less frequent and widely shared.

KEYWORDS

Communication

Complexity

Cooperation

Coordination

Continuity of care

Facilitator

Follow – up

Formal/ Non formal Institutions

Meta - organization

Networking

Plan

GLOSSARY

Complexity: characterises the behaviour of a [system](#) or [model](#) whose components interact in multiple ways and follow local rules, meaning there is no reasonable higher instruction to define the various possible interactions.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Complexity>)

Facilitator: someone who helps a person or organization do something more easily or find the answer to a problem, by discussing things and suggesting ways of doing things.

(<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/facilitator>)

Meta – organization: is defined as organizations who are formed of other organizations, rather than by individuals

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meta-organization>)

Networking: A process which fosters the exchanges of information, ideas and practices among individuals or groups that share a common interest.

(<https://www.investopedia.com/terms/n/networking.asp>)

Win – win position: the “win/win position” is about changing the conflict from adversarial attack and defence, to co-operation. It is a powerful shift of attitude that alters the whole course of communication: I want to win and I want you to win too.

(http://www.consultpivotal.com/win_win.htm)