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# Effects of decentralisation: the experience of Italy

“Combating violence against children: from isolated action to integrated strategies -  
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# Out line

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- The development of the child protection services in Italy
- Three phases:
  - Specialized private services ('80s)
  - Child protection services in the health system
  - Children and family services managed by the local authority
- Risks and opportunities of the actual phase
- relationship between child services and the court
- Conclusions

# 1° phase: Specialized private centers

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- In the '80
- Founding the main features of the Italian system (*"behind a maltreated child there is a family in crisis"*)
  - child maltreatment is a symptom of a family dysfunction (*"behind a maltreated child there is a family in crisis"*)
  - intervention has to be multidisciplinary (social, psychological, medical) and with a strict collaboration with justice (different responsibilities)
  - intervention should develop through stages (detecting, protection, evaluation and treatment)
  - not only children but also families have the right to receive help and treatment - protecting the child AND helping the family - a third way



# 2° phase: the services of health public system - the '90s

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- a 'delegation' from the municipalities (family consultations center).
- multidisciplinary team social workers and psychologist, 2° level services (after court referral)
- three levels:
  - a) direct work with the clients (assessment, Protection (also through placement), assistance to children in court proceedings, evaluation of the parental resource, treatment)
  - B) give advice and counselling to other agencies
  - C) Act as local observatories and strategic system actions: collected local data about the phenomenon, and of the functioning of the system, promote institutional linking and working protocols, training courses for different professions (teachers, pediatrician, policeman etc), awareness campaigns for the general population.

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- National laws and mouvement
  - The Ratification of the ONU Child Right Convention and the national observatory
  - the law 285/97 on “rights and opportunities for children and adolescents”. (continuum, working with project, resources, national and local plans)
  - laws on prosecution of crimes against children
  - national coordination of public and private services and professional (CISMAI- grass rooted in the national observatory



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- The 'discover' of sexual abuse: signs of crisis in the relationships between between Judicial and welfare world.
  - Hot debate and need to regulate relationships

# First years of 2000

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- the social services reform (n. 328/00)
  - principle of subsidiarity 'vertical and 'horizontal
  - small municipalities have to group in a social district,
  - Planning in a participative and transparent way allocating resources
- the reform of the health sector ('public utility companies, managerialism, depending from the regional government
- In 2001 a legislative decree establishing who has the duty to guarantee the essential levels of assistance. Child protection as mixed matter
- child protection services moved from the health system to the social,



# III phase: local services for children and families

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- the child protection services moved from the health system to the social with direct management by municipalities.
- The main features:
  - multidisciplinary team, with a tentative of 'desanitarisation' of the child protection services
  - Not only court cases, prevention and 'reparation' (change name - less stigmatizing)
  - Discussion on 'specialization' of social workers
  - Same duties as before for children in danger.
- tendency to re create the two levels and to involve again the health agency for specialized assessments.



# Risks and opportunities of the local services

## Opportunities

- bringing services nearer to the lives of the families
- collect the demand of help at an early stage and with a basis of consensus
- building a more trustful relationship between professionals and parents, trying to share the problems met in rearing children
- deeper knowledge of the life – worlds of children allows to develop community interventions.
- Unify different policies relevant for the life of families (as housing, education, work fare, urban) reducing basic risk factor



# Risks

## □ Of 'despecialization'

- losing the specific knowledge on the impact of violence in the development of the child and of the ways that can to help children as well as families.
- Leaving professionals without support
- Leaving children without competent help

## □ Of 'governance' and participative planning:

- At the 'tables of governance children and vulnerable families have weak representations. Cut spending for 'unpopular intervention'
- The protection of the integrity of the family could become preminent

## □ Of strong bonds in the 'community' -

- child abuse and family violence tend to be hidden and kept secret. The risk of silence

- Risk of political conditioning towards social workers



# Relationship with the juvenile court

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- In 2001 a neo liberal movement pressured and obtained the introduction of stronger rights for the defence (the so called 'giusto processo').
- in child protection in 2001, in the framework of a law on foster care and adoption, the new rules transformed the judicial proceedings from a 'collaborative' to a 'adversarial' setting.
- The judge is 'a third' between two conflicting parts. professionals refuse the idea of being to the part of somebody (want to keep the professional space).
- Professional seems to have loose their place in the relationship with the court. Some new figures arrived on the stage: lawyer Onorary judges independent experts.
- the perception of a 'cultural shift' of the court, from the protection of children to the protection of the family.
- A strong need for a national 'systemic' law



# To conclude..

- services locally based, on the responsibility of local authority linked to the social policies is a good choice, but there is the need of a second level specialized team
- It is necessary a strong and permanent commitment at all levels, for having the best interest of the child putted first. The best interest of the child should not used 'against the parents. Resources plays a significant role.
- It is necessary to have professionals working in a multidisciplinary team and that knowledge is constantly shared both between professional and with users. Teams must have the time to discuss and reflect on their practice.



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- We need to *trust* and *enhance professional judgements*: responsible decision making in complex situations cannot be developed through fixed procedure but it requires professional responsibility, shared and situated knowledges, based on going researches on evidence about effective interventions and organizations able to change and learn from experience (learning organization)
  - Safeguarding resources integrating knowledges and involving clients are the new conditions for the progress
  - The international guidelines are a strong impulse to the developing of a common responsibility, at the different levels

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Thank you for your attention and comments

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