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The challenges of systemic design in homeless social services innovation

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The article discusses the findings from a multidisciplinary participatory action-research and co-design process that aimed to reorient and improve the public services system for people experiencing homelessness in Turin, Italy. Designers, sociologists, and anthropologists coordinated the research in agreement with the municipality of Turin and with funding from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies. The presented case study has been conducted since 2018 through collaborative action-research and co-design activities that have involved policymakers from the city administration, frontline workers from third-sector organisations, and the beneficiaries of public services for people without housing.

KEYWORDS: homelessness, welfare service innovation, co-design, collaborative action-research, prototyping approach

RSD TOPIC(S): Cases & Practice, Policy & Governance

Introduction

The contribution presents and discusses the participatory action-research and co-design project aimed at innovating the system of public services for people experiencing homelessness in the city of Turin. Starting in 2018, an interdisciplinary research team across Design, Anthropology, and Sociology from the Politecnico di Torino and the Università degli Studi di Torino supported the Service for Adults in Difficulty (SAD) of the City of Turin – which coordinates social and housing support

services for homeless people – and the third sector organisations (social cooperatives) providing and managing those services through public tender procedures (Campagnaro et al., 2022).

Due to the increased heterogeneity of Turin's homeless population and their needs, the SAD revealed the urgency of rethinking and reorienting the system of public services in order to better address the phenomenon, while "promoting the protagonism, ease, dignity and wellbeing of all the actors in the system"[1]. The research group provided support to the system's stakeholders to (i) analyse the existing system, identifying its strengths and weaknesses; (ii) define needs and directions for system transformation; (iii) co-design and evaluate new experimental services.

Turin's homeless social service system is provided within the public sphere and consists of a network of different services coordinated by the municipal public body through the Service for Adults in Difficulty (SAD) and managed by third sector organisations, mainly social cooperatives. The SAD, composed of policy makers, technicians and social workers, oversees the general coordination of services for (i) housing, economic, health and social support paths for homeless people; (ii) emergency, temporary housing system organisation; (iii) some services for social inclusion such as, for example, social and work placements. In addition to this, the SAD acts as a link with the city's political level, transposing and implementing guidelines and directives, drawing and disbursing funds, observing and monitoring the phenomenon of homelessness in the city, and reporting updates and instances in response to the phenomenon to the political level. Temporary and emergency housing is provided in municipal-owned buildings and accommodation referred to (until 2020) as night shelters or in public and private housing. This network of public services and the third sector agencies that manage them represents Turin's reference system against homelessness.

[1] In 2017, the City of Turin stated this purpose in an internal document on its proposal for an intervention to combat severe adult marginalisation and homelessness through a participatory process led by the two Turin's universities.

This system is illustrated in Figure 1, highlighting both the services provided and the path of the individual, from experiencing homelessness to achieving stable housing. All services are grouped into three clusters, representing respectively: (i) low-threshold services at the beginning of the pathway; (ii) first-level services; and (iii) permanent housing solutions (highlighted in light red). Highlighted in striped red are the two new co-designed pilot services – integrated in the original system –, which will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

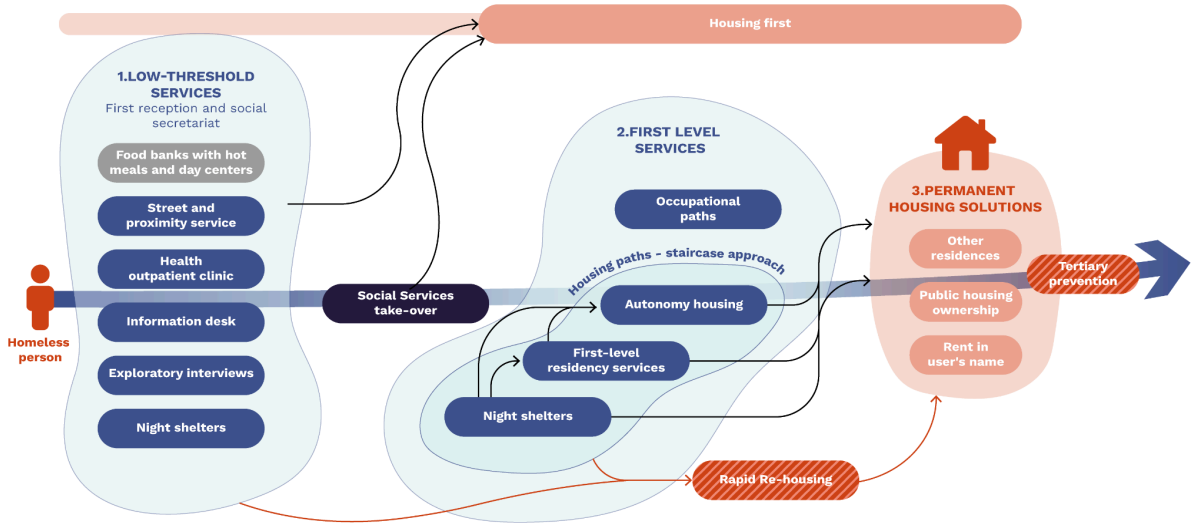

Fig.1:Map of Turin public service system for people in a state of homelessness (authors' image)

Co-designing with the public homeless social service system

The article will discuss this case by highlighting the contribution of Design in supporting this participatory process towards systemic transformations. As it will be further explored in the following paragraphs, the development and outcomes of this process have been significantly benefiting from the approaches of systemic design, participatory action-research and co-design which the research team promoted and adopted throughout the multi-stakeholder process.

These various approaches are needed because homelessness is a wicked problem, not only because it is a multidimensional social and systemic phenomenon with a broad spectrum (Petrova & Campagnaro, 2017), but also because the systems in response to this phenomenon differ at national (macro), regional and city (meso) levels. Moreover, the daily methods and practices within each single service entail a further layer of complexity. Although the services, in general, are defined by responding to general principles of combating homelessness (Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, 2015), social cooperative's different 'ways of doing', habits, regulations, determine the concrete way to respond to the phenomenon, particularly in terms of socio-educational relationship (micro level) between social workers and homeless people.

The phenomenon of homelessness has far-reaching structural (social, economic, political) causes, which will not be discussed in the present case. The article will instead focus on how the municipal services system in Turin responds to the above-mentioned phenomenon in terms of housing (first and foremost) and socio-educational pathways activated with homeless adults involved in the public services system.

Consistently with the application and evolution of systemic design addressing wicked problems (Jones, 2014; Barbero, 2017; Sweeting, 2018), the research team adopted the systemic approach for defining the interrelationships between public and private actors and service users who are part of the system but who do not often have a critical awareness of the system itself. Rethinking the whole of public services as a System was the first activity that was conducted collectively with policy makers and third sector organisations. In order to define the needs, limits and potential of the system, it was necessary to collectively define its boundaries, the relations with other city support systems and to understand which social-educational methods and strategies best guide individuals out of homelessness (Blomkamp, 2021).

Systemic analysis was fundamental towards understanding the system and highlighting transformative directions at the local level. In addition, the systemic perspective was

then used to understand how the relationships between service actors were changing during the experimental phase of the new services to help the research team and actors to re-read the transformative impacts of the experimental services on the entire public services system. This was also useful to understand that, given the complexity of the system itself in terms of the variety of active players, the political influences and variables, the variability of user needs and the diversity of housing and socio-educational responses, and – not least – given the impossibility of suspending active services to transform them completely, the systemic approach was useful to understand that it was unlikely to operate a disruptive transformation of the public services system but rather it was more effective to broaden the types of services in response to the phenomenon. In this respect, it was crucial to adopt a participatory action-research methodology (Cornish et al., 2023) that would allow the whole group of actors to share knowledge and information in order to identify and activate "transformative actions", experiments, projects that would enable the system to expand the types of housing and socio-educational services, testing and evaluating their benefits and criticalities to determine whether they were sufficiently meaningful for the people within the system. This idea of continuous prototyping has in fact made it possible to increase the range of services offered to people from the very beginning. The process that is still taking place shows how this multiplication, albeit at the level of experimental projects, is already having an immediate impact on the service system, bringing benefits to the system and to people, even though there are no “definitive” projects yet.

Furthermore, it was essential to approach the process in a collaborative and participatory way between the different actors. Not only to improve the skills, knowledge and points of view of all, but also to build a system of trust that would allow them to co-design change, and to see them as first-person actors in the implementation of service innovation experiments. Indeed, involving stakeholders and encouraging

discussion between them in a continuous conversation – from analytical and reflective activities to co-design and evaluation activities – has been crucial to the whole process.

As previously mentioned, the participants in the participatory reorientation process are both public service actors – policy makers and social workers –, and coordination and educational figures working in the various private third sector agencies that manage the services. The initial phase of the participatory process also implied direct engagement with individuals experiencing homelessness through semi-structured interviews. In the subsequent stage, which is the focus of this discussion, service users' needs were represented through the insights of social workers from the cooperatives involved in the process. Although this mediated approach had limitations, these were mitigated by the research team's knowledge of homelessness, as well as by long-lasting interactions with homeless individuals in other projects (Campagnaro et al., 2020).

In this sense, the participation in the research-action and co-design activities of these actors is framed in a context of collaboration recognised and supported by the public body which, since the beginning of the project, has requested its employees and coordination figures of the third sector agencies to participate in the various activities. Finally, such a dialogic mode has been favoured by, and has reinforced, in turn, the collaborative framework of *Public Codesign* within which the process here described operates. In the context of Italian Third Sector, *Public Codesign* refers to an institutional framework envisaging the joint commitment of local public administrations and third sector organisations managing the services in the design and implementation of new social interventions, according to a logic of partnership and collaboration and in a perspective of territorial integration of public services (Third Sector Code, 2017). The framework of *Public Codesign* implies that a public administration presents in a public notice an outline project to which interested third sector organisations may respond by submitting coherent proposals. Once preferred partners have been identified among the candidates, the public administration and the selected third sector organisations

jointly draw up an intervention proposal, which is then formalised in a collaboration agreement for implementation. The *Public Codesign* framework is consistent with the dialogic and participatory mindset of co-design in the practice of service design and design for social innovation (Meroni, Selloni & Rossi, 2018). Accordingly, in this experience the research team has urged all actors to assume a responsible and proactive role in a shared transformation process, from a co-production perspective.

The phases of the action-research and co-design process

The public services system reorientation process here discussed consists of two main phases (Fig. 2). The first one concerning analytical and envisioning activities, and the second one being more generative and prototyping-oriented (Campagnaro & Di Prima, 2022). During the first phase, which took place from 2018 to 2019, the Politecnico di Torino's design research team collaborated with anthropologists and sociologists from the Università degli Studi di Torino to guide the Municipality and the third sector organisations in questioning the existing system of services for homeless people, identifying the critical issues and the needs to be addressed, as well as the transformative directions to reorient and integrate the system (Campagnaro et al., 2022). To do so, the researchers supported problem-framing and diagnosis activities in a participatory dynamic (Pereno & Barbero, 2020): by adopting an interdisciplinary and systemic approach, they led a field action-research work that supported a collective inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2008), thanks to meetings, focus groups and qualitative interviews involving the different actors of the system – namely, policy makers, civil servants, third sector organisations, beneficiaries of the services. These activities generated a mapping of the state of the art of Turin's services for people in a state of homelessness (Fig. 1), not simply taking a snapshot of what already existed, but integrating a sensemaking dimension (Jones, 2018) that allowed all the actors involved to critically read the current scenario, thus representing needs, latent demands, and critical nodes where action could be taken to transform the system.

Once this analysis had been discussed and validated, the research team suggested some key design areas in the system, based on which it defined, together with the involved actors, a series of transformation axes to be implemented. At the end of this preliminary analytical phase, a report and a summary and guideline document were produced, serving as a basis for the Municipality of Turin to draft a call in the *Public Codesign* framework addressed to local third sector organisations. According to an incremental logic, this public call sought new proposals for services to be integrated into the current services system and to meet the needs and requirements identified during the participatory reorientation process just concluded.

Building on the proposals submitted by the third sector organisations, the second phase of the broader process began, which has been ongoing since 2020. This phase has engaged the research team in helping the SAD and the third sector organisations, through co-design and monitoring activities, to progressively adapt and improve these new services and eventually incorporate them into the City's social inclusion policies.

The following paragraphs focus on this second phase of the process and analyse its outcomes, particularly questioning the prototyping and systemic logic leading the ideation of the experimental services, and its transformative and innovative potential

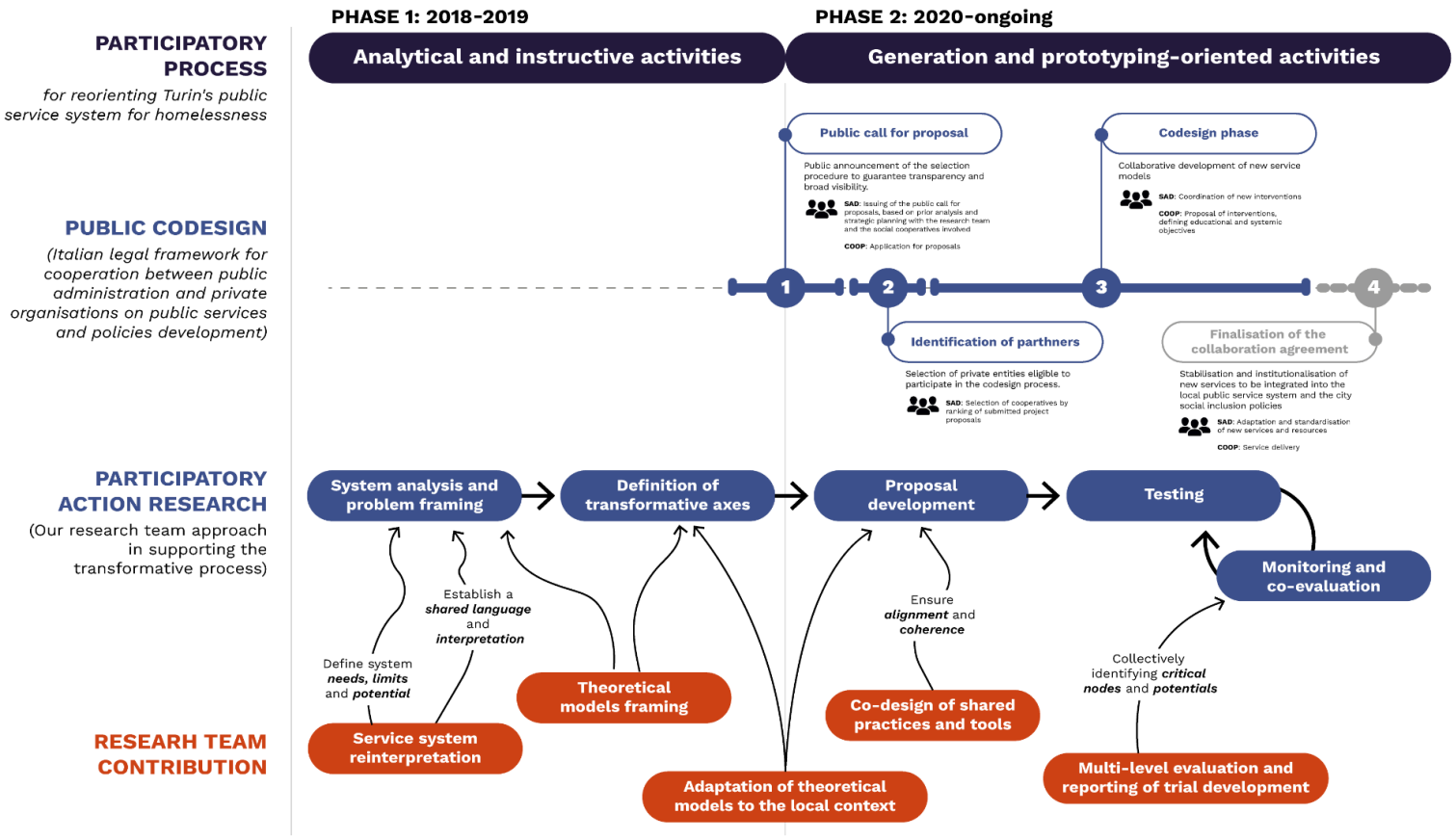

Fig. 2: Mapping of the public services system reorientation process (authors' image)

Case discussion

New public services models

The types of services tested since 2020 comply with two of the transformation axes outlined during the first phase of the process, leading to the *Public Codesign* call mentioned above.

The first axis concerns the issue of housing and aims at providing more and new housing opportunities for homeless people and fostering the “right of domicile” (Cunningham et al., 2015; Byrne et al., 2021). To define the experimentation, the actors involved in the process drew inspiration from the international service model known as Rapid Re-Housing (RRH). RRH is intended as a prompt response to homelessness as citizens enter this condition – before they incur deterioration of psychophysical and relational health – by helping them quickly re-access the housing market without transiting through temporary housing services, such as shelters (Pleace et al., 2018).

The second axis, on the other hand, concerns the third and last of the prevention levels generally identified in the actions tackling homelessness. Tertiary Prevention (PT) is generally aimed at citizens who have already obtained housing, supporting them to regain autonomy and thus preventing a slip back into the condition of homelessness (Culhane et al.,2011; Dej et al.,2020).

In broad terms, these two types of services are being tested to fit into Turin’s services system according to an incremental logic: they do not replace other services, but add to and integrate with the existing system, thereby trying to address the needs not fully addressed by the current services. More specifically, they both aim at experimenting a socio-educational kind of personal support that the SAD and the third sector's social workers define as "lighter" than the usual one. In fact, the support now experimented seeks to further foster the autonomy and self-determination of people and the use of the socio-educational and socio-health resources of the territory, reducing the

commitment of frontline workers at housing, social, health, financial, judicial, bureaucratic, work, and relational levels in assisting each beneficiary of the services.

Supporting the services experimentations by Design

The experimentation of the two new types of service involved 4 third sector organisations for the RRH service and 5 for the PT service, reaching, to date, 40 and 50 beneficiaries respectively. In order to define the experimentation, the research team helped the SAD and these organisations to: (i) frame the theoretical models of the two services in order to establish a shared language and interpretation of the objectives and tools characterising them; (ii) co-design the adaptation of these theoretical objectives and tools to the needs and specificities of the context of Turin services system; (iii) coordinate the interventions of the third sector organisations to ensure the alignment and coherence of their objectives and service delivery modes, also by co-designing shared practices and tools.

As the experimentations were launched, the research team followed their progress by participating in coordination meetings between the SAD and the organisations, thus playing a predominantly observational role. The monitoring and co-evaluation stage (Pollitt et al., 2007) began in the autumn of 2022, after a necessary stabilisation period – also in response to the slowdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This stage, which is still ongoing, was meant to query the effectiveness of the tested models with regard to the objectives shared at the beginning of the experimentation and the relationship with the broader and pre-existing services system. To this end, the research team carried out desk and field research activities, defining a series of elements of analysis, adopting tools such as focus groups and spreadsheets for collaborative data collection, and participating in update meetings to observe the progress of the experiments. These activities provided crucial information to be analysed: (i) the evolution of the beneficiaries' wellbeing within the services; (ii) the types of socio-educational activities performed by the frontline workers and their comparison with other services of the

system; (iii) the sustainability of the proposed models in economic terms and with respect to the resources of the services system; (iv) the integration of these services with the territorial context of Turin.

Furthermore, the monitoring conducted by the research team and shared with the SAD and the third sector organisations set the basis for co-evaluating the new services: all the actors are now involved in critically analysing, starting from first-hand experience, the key characteristics of the pilot interventions and their evolution over the years of testing. This has generated reflexivity among the actors and allowed them to question the objectives and educational methods established at the start of the testing stage. By bringing the collective discussions back to the comparison with the theoretical services models that shaped the experimentations, the shared monitoring let the actors reflect on the degree of innovation brought within the pre-existing system of services. Such a practice enabled not just a (self-)reflection upon these different levels of complexity, but also a shared vision of the whole of the different interventions enacted by the several third sector organisations implied. By doing so, the actors could combine their different views and modi operandi, while respecting the identities and approaches on social work that characterise each of them.

By framing a common ground for all the parties involved, the research team was able to support the dialogue between actors, identify and discuss the critical issues and potentials of the tested interventions, aiming to transform and improve the two experimental models according to an iterative and prototyping approach. In fact, the aim of such a shared critical and projective analysis is to co-evaluate the developments of the pilot services in order to produce hypotheses for improvement which can take into account and enhance the internal resources of the services system for the homeless and enable the scaling of the new types of services, further integrating and connecting with the local social support organisations – both working in the public and the private social sphere.

Consistently with what occurred in the first analytical and preliminary phase of the action-research, the experimentation, monitoring, and co-evaluation phase has been supported by visual devices, such as slideshows, graphs, and diagrams (Campagnaro et al., 2022). These graphic tools were useful, on the one hand, to guide the research activities and, on the other, to represent the saliences that emerged, making them evident to all the actors and facilitating discussion even on complex issues. In this sense, graphic visualisations have represented a key tool to understand and frame complexity, an instrumental means to support systemic thinking (Sevaldson, 2011). On the one hand, the research group has used it as an analytical device to enable exploration and reflection within the research group itself; on the other hand, as a medium for conversation with the actors, a tool "to "walk through their [own] proposals from the point of view of those for whom they are designing" (Sweeting, 2018:18).

Incremental transformation and prototyping as approaches to experimentation

As mentioned above, the PT and RRH pilot interventions have been structured as two experimental services to be tested according to an incremental and prototyping logic (Kimbell & Bailey, 2017). The testing stage has been ongoing for 4 and 3 years, respectively.

Following the theoretical *Public Codesign* framework in the context of the Third Sector presented earlier, the two services should tend to be included in a structured way among public services within the system, therefore, envisaging the end of the current experimental stage. However, it is worth noting that, the policymakers, civil servants, and the social workers with whom the research team has been collaborating prefer a slow prototyping perspective (Murray et al., 2010), which is aimed not as strongly at stably structuring the services, rather at preserving a dimension of flexibility. Indeed, prototyping typically allows margins for modification and adaptation to needs that are strategical in the process here described. The temporal adaptation and expansion of the prototyping stage seems to be more consistent with the necessities of the services

system, in particular the one to adapt – also in terms of system capacities – to the changing needs of beneficiaries and to the variation of human, economic and physical resources over time – e.g. the variable availability of housing in the private housing market, regarding RRH. Although structuring and institutionalising the new services would better ensure their long-term existence within the system in a long-term perspective – e.g., even over political leadership changes –, such a guarantee is less of a priority than the flexibility enabled by the experimental logic preserved so far.

Besides, the "slowness" of this process represents a further interesting element. The prolonged time required in the cycle of experimentation, evaluation, adjustment, and re-testing can be considered, at the same time a spontaneous, almost physiological, outcome of the institutional mechanisms, and an instrumental approach to the reorientation path of the services system. As with other social system transformations, the process discussed requires an extended time due to its complexity, since "ignoring this need for a different pace of innovation might compromise the results of the whole process and the impact on those involved" (Marcelloni, 2018:4).

Currently, it is not possible to predict whether and when there will be a final release of the tested interventions to be structured as city services. In the near future, the research team will support the implementation of the adaptations envisioned together with the stakeholders during the co-evaluation stage and the monitoring of the effects of such changes. In the meantime, even though they represent a sort of draft in the making, the two experimental services already benefit from a remarkable recognition by the public actor, even at the political level, as they appear particularly relevant within the broader purpose of redesigning the system of services for homeless people in the City of Turin.

Final remarks

Following the discussion of the case study, it is relevant to reflect on one last takeaway on the research experience which stands out as a wide-reaching contribution and provides a conclusive remark on the process of collaboratively experimenting and monitoring new service models within a local system. This learning concerns the zooming *in* and *out* to bridge scales and levels of complexity in the system: a methodological approach that has been orienting the research team's attention while guiding the collaborative work. Indeed, the process described in this paper benefited from the cross-analysis between the micro dimension – related to the daily practices and features of services, evolving throughout the experimentation – and the system meso dimension, according to the multi-level perspective which is crucial to systemic thinking (Pereno & Barbero, 2020). During the monitoring stage, the research team firstly focused on daily practices, namely the concrete aspects of social work and the elements characterising the relation between different actors – i.e. between frontline workers and beneficiaries, between cooperatives, between the SAD and the third sector organisations. The scale of analysis then expanded to the service-system embedding the new services tested as a whole – i.e. the sum of the interventions carried out by the several third sector organisations involved. Subsequently, the focus scaled back to the system scale, taking into account the entire system of services for homeless people in Turin and the relationships between the latter and the city's territory.

The scale shifts just described have been repeated in both directions also in the co-evaluation activity, zooming-in on specific elements from a larger-scale analysis and simultaneously zooming-out again to see the impact of single elements on the whole system (Nousala & Davidova, 2021).

The decision to expand and narrow the focus of analysis, consistently with the systemic approach, served a twofold purpose. From an analytical point of view, it firstly allowed the creation of a shared synthesis of the service model based on the practical

interpretation of each organisation, revealing differences and similarities in how the service is approached by different actors. Secondly, it enabled collective identification of critical nodes and potentials unfolding on different levels, such as: the educational relationship between social worker and beneficiary; the relationship between third sector organisations and the SAD; the relationship between the organisations and the territorial system. This multi-level analysis helped the research team to develop a holistic reinterpretation of the experimentations and to be discussed with all the actors. While presenting the results of the monitoring and the co-evaluation activities, the researchers adopted the shift from details to system to guide the collective conversation towards transformative hypotheses that would take into greater account the resources offered by other social organisations from the broader city system. This new opening perspective triggered the engagement of additional local actors with the capacity to broaden and reinforce the network of support and inclusion for homeless individuals.

In conclusion, the dynamic of zooming in and out, combined with the incremental prototyping approach and a systemic perspective supports the continuous refinement of services, making them more efficient, accessible and responsive to users' evolving needs. The synergy between these approaches has proved crucial in building a collaborative and open-ended understanding of the system and its desirable transformations (Blomkamp, 2021) as well as in tackling the challenges involved in improving complex systems such as the city public services and policies.

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