

The Design of Social Informative Systems for a New Strategy of Local Governance¹

*La Progettazione di Sistemi Informativi Sociali
per una Nuova Strategia di Governo Locale*

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Riassunto: La progettazione di un Sistema Informativo Sociale (SIS) costituisce, oggi, una delle vie di conoscenza più all'avanguardia nel panorama delle fonti, per la produzione di informazione utile alla pianificazione di politiche sociali e alla valutazione di *best practice*. Con questo contributo si intende presentare un'esperienza di progettazione ed implementazione di un SIS orientato allo studio del disagio e della povertà nell'area metropolitana di Roma. Un'esperienza attraverso cui osservare concretamente come il dato statistico possa generare informazione utile: 1) a supportare i processi decisionali a livello di programmazione di politiche sociali in risposta alla domanda espressa da una popolazione di riferimento; 2) a sostenere la partecipazione e la capacità di contrattazione dei diversi attori sociali; 3) a favorire i processi di valutazione dell'offerta esistente sul territorio.

Keywords: Informative Systems, Microdata, Data warehouse, Social Policies, Local governance, Poverty studies, Monitoring, Evaluation Process.

1. Introduction

Planning and programming activity has today become a crucial point of social policies strategy in order to improve the quality and the efficiency of the services and their ability to answer to the real needs of citizens. The various pattern of social needs call the policy makers to face to some basic questions that is impossible to delay further. The population is facing a consistent increase of elderly people, associated with a decline in fertility rates and a longer life expectancy: these structural changes constitute a challenge to the social assistance system in terms of both public spending and strategic planning of innovative social services in order to support families that could be at risk to experience a poverty condition.

This context emphasises the importance to acquire timely structured information in order to define the profile of population needs. The implementation of Social Informative Systems (SIS), in accordance with art.21 of Law 328/2000 (Reform of social-assistance services system), is enhanced at different local levels (State, Regions and local administrations) in order to guarantee a more detailed information on social needs, and for supporting the social policies programming, management and evaluation activities. Moreover, the integration of SIS with both health-care, education structures and occupation policies is promoted.

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2. The experience

This project, promoted and funded by an organization of the non-profit sector, starts from the double need: a) to create a structured system for monitoring poverty and social exclusion in Rome through the experience of the wide number of services operating at local level; b) and to produce useful information for supporting the preventing, programming and evaluating activity of local administrators and policy makers. The main goal was to create an on-line network of forty (40) social services, working at local level in different areas of intervention: children, italian and not, without parents; adults, italian and not, in economic and social difficulty; homeless; people victims of usury; persons living with hiv-aids. The realization of the project passed through the following working steps: a) feasibility analysis; b) conceptual project; c) logical and physical project; d) training of users; e) implementation of the α and β version of the system. Within the first phase of work, a detailed analysis of the informative needs has been carried out with regard to both horizontal and vertical dimensions of the topic question: the collection of documentation produced by the services about their activity and the profile of their consumers, a census of the all electronic collecting data systems already existing; the study of the information flows; the definition of the organization of each service; the analysis of the material and human resources available; the definition of a set of basic and specific information needed by each centre. During this phase, the normative questions related to the right to personal privacy, guaranteed by the Law 675/98 and following modifications, have been faced too. A document containing the rules related to the authorization for collecting and treating data has been drawn. The second step concerned the definition of the collecting data instruments and their conceptual schemes: in this working phase, some basic conceptual dimensions of analysis have been identified through an abstraction process and have been traduced into a set of conceptual schemes based on the Model E/R (entity/relations). The subsequent integration of the different schemes needed a standardization of information: for this reason both general and specific data have been identified. General data are those information that all the centres of the network have to collect; the specific data are those that concern only a particular type of service. At the end of this phase nine different schedules have been produced and each one was composed by four sections concerning: personal data, social data, needs data (demand) and specific data (supply). *Personal* data include sensitive information such as sex, race, nationality, civil status, education, family network; *social* data include information about housing, household composition, occupation, incomes, previous experiences of critical events; *needs* data concern the clear request, the social and health-care needs noticed by the social operator; the services authorized (such as mess or surgery), the services where the person is received, previous experiences of needs; *specific* data concern the interventions of the specific centre, and their outcome. All these fields are given a chronological history, so that it is possible to analyse the “social exclusion history” or the s.c. “poverty career” of groups of people with similar profiles. The final conceptual scheme has been traduced in a logical structure and implemented in a physical environment. The system is located in a computer server on Internet and it is accessible exclusively by users booked with a pre-defined user profile. The user profile consists of a user name, a password and a set of privileges assigned by the service responsible and confirmed by the area director. This system of definition of the users profile guarantees a complete control of the access to the system. On request it is possible to specify the time of authorization to access the system. The safety of the system

constitutes a priority and for this reason the transmissions use a SSL Protocol (*Secure Server Layer*), a network protocol that obstacles the interception of transmissions, thanks to its key coding known only by the *remote server* and the *client*. The database and the application are located on a server with an operative system Free-BSD that assures both safety and good performances. The database where the microdata are stocked is the Finnish-Swedish MySQL, characterised by fast elaborations, safety of data and a good uptime. The script language of web pages is PHP, fast and safe. Before starting with the phase β of the SIS, a training session has been offered to the operators, the responsible of each centre and to the area directors, in order to give common rules of usability. The training course has been sustained by the furnishing of a user manual that includes all the procedures for the correct use of the SIS, in order to improve the quality of the data entered by the users.

3. The products

The database of micro-data: it is a wide database that actually counts about 100.000 records in a time range of ten years. It constitutes a really rich font of information for both longitudinal and cross-studies.

The data warehouse: it is an On Line Analytical Processing (OLAP) system of query of the database aimed to support the decisional activity of the responsables of the different services and of the areas directors. The data warehouse allows the analysts to produce tables and graphics in periodic reports useful for the programming activity of the centres. The data located in the warehouse are temporal; the import data process is periodical and asynchronous: but it doesn't constitute a problem for the data source performance. A not perfect alignment of the data is generally acceptable. The data warehouse foresees three types of query: list, flows, statistics. The function "flows" allows to select a period of reference (weeks, months, quarters, years) for analysing temporal series and produce the correspondent graphic representations. With the function "statistics" it is possible to select up to four different variables. The system can produce table of frequencies, double and tri-tables, and the correspondent graphic representation.

4. Validity and quality of the system

Four different levels of control are foreseen within this system. The first one is aimed to avoid violations by persons not allowed to access the Intranet. The SIS starts some specific checks every time a social operator (*user*) is connecting to the system, verifying: a) he is really connected; b) he has the privileges due to realize that data input; c) the input comes through the ways allowed; d) that specific compulsory data are entered by the user. With regard to this point, it has to be specified that the context in which the social operators work every day is particularly critical and for this reason it has been decided to reduce at a minimum level the compulsory field, in order to avoid that the users introduced false information for carrying on their work. A second level of control concerns the acceptability and congruency of the data introduced by the users. In particular the system verifies that: a) the data corresponding to a numeric codebook are effectively numeric and that their value is included within the codebook; b) the data complied with a fixed format; c) the dates are acceptable (e.s. birth date); d) text data don't include

characters that can reveal the will to violate the system. The third level of control is directly managed by the system administrator who periodically carry out congruency check planned in advance. The last level is managed by the statistical équipe that import every month a number of anonymous files from the server and run a set of planned and systematic check directly on the data. This set of data constitutes the database used for feeding the data warehouse.

5. Conclusions: towards a new a concept of *information*

The realization of this Social Informative System confirms a new way to conceive the resource “information”: no more considered such as a simple datum, exclusively collected for administrative aims, but treated as an organic system of collecting data connected by a common strategy directed to planning and decisional activities. It is the result of a process of awareness of the importance of a correct information for: Preventing: a fast access to information constitutes the main condition for an efficacy preventing action, with regard to particularly difficult situations that obstacle the access of citizens to social assistance services. A SIS focused on the analysis of the needs of weak and vulnerable subjects such us immigrants, people with drug-addiction or mental-health problems, children, young and elderly people, allows to provide suitable services of social support sustaining both formal and informal help networks; Programming: a SIS enhance an integrated knowledge of social phenomena. The possibility to manage a precise set of information about the real needs of a target population sustains a more effective resources allocation and a better planning of public spending, the reduction of costs, the production of saving. In this way it's possible to identify the areas where it's necessary to strenghten the training of professional workers; Evaluating: during last decade there has been a change in the relationship between citizens/services. Citizens have developed the capacity to control services quality and this change has been paralleled by a process of study of new measures (benchmarks) for monitoring quality level in social assistance services. The SIS constitutes an important instrument for evaluating the functioning of services and the satisfaction customer; Participating: information sustain the conscious participation of citizens to local governance. Citizens become active subjects (actors) of social policies at local level, strengthening the awareness of population to influence on the choice of the policy makers.

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