



‘The Social Managers Are Back in Town’: the Challenges of Housing Management in a Residualised Public Housing Sector

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Abstract: *The residualisation of social housing sectors requires housing managers to intensify social management activities aimed at promoting tenants’ wellbeing and social cohesion. This paper discusses the implementation of such activities in the Italian public housing sector. It juxtaposes the vision conceptualised at the policy level with the daily activities of housing managers in practice on the ground and highlights the gaps between policy goals and realities of tenants’ involvement. While social management activities are expected to contribute to breaking the vicious circle of financial, technical, and social decline that has long affected public housing estates, the short timeframe of the planned interventions raises the question of the potential for structural change.*

Keywords: housing management; residualisation; tenant participation; welfare policy; Italy.



Introduction

The increasing residualisation of social housing sectors has brought additional challenges to the practice of housing management. The growing concentration of vulnerable tenants in low-quality estates along with the spread of anti-social behaviours and tenants' mistrust of institutional landlords question housing managers' capacity to improve the social living environment and tenants' wellbeing as part of providers' social welfare goals. In many countries, social management activities, such as promoting care services or tenant participation, had been neglected since the managerial turn of the 1980s, which increased the marginalisation and exclusion of poorer residents (Walker 2000). However, recent developments in social housing management have shown that non-profit housing providers are keener to increase tenant involvement in decision-making processes to better meet social welfare goals (Mullins et al. 2012). While increasing tenant empowerment may improve the living situation of residents, engaging them can be a challenge due to a combination of different factors connected to residualisation, including mistrust, exclusion, and low social capital (Dekker and van Kempen 2009). This paper aims to better understand the challenges of the implementation of social management activities in residualised public housing sectors using the case of Italy as an example. By examining a programme of social management in a former working-class town in the north of Milan, this paper highlights how social management is conceptualised at the policy level and how frontline workers practice it on the ground and discusses the gaps between these two perspectives. The next section provides an overview of the main issues and current directions in the management of publicly provided housing in Italy followed by a section presenting the research methodology. The main findings are presented and discussed in the subsequent sections following Priemus and colleagues' (1999) distinction between strategic and day-to-day management. Conclusions are provided in the last section.

Managing public housing in Italy: back to social welfare goals?

The public housing sector in Italy (*edilizia residenziale pubblica*) consists of roughly 800,000 dwellings (less than 5% of the total housing stock), which are owned and managed by regional or province-based public companies or city councils. Since the 1980s, the sector has been experiencing an increasing residualisation process. Once home to blue- and white-collar workers (62% and 27%, respectively), today the sector accommodates mainly households with multiple vulnerabilities in terms of age and socio-economic and health conditions (Bronzini and Moretti 2015). The combined effect of right-to-buy schemes introduced in 1993 and the low rates of residential turnover resulted in lowest-income tenants becoming trapped in unattractive, low-quality estates, which exacerbated social exclusion and micro-segregation. Despite the growing share of tenants in need of additional care and support, public housing companies have been neglecting social welfare goals or outsourcing them to the social work departments within city councils.

Since the managerialisation phase started in the 1990s, public housing companies have been focusing on the technical, financial, and administrative aspects of management and withdrawing from neighbourhood development processes and tenant care services. Yet, some public housing companies have failed to fulfil their responsibilities in property management. Bankruptcy and over-indebtedness, combined with state budgetary cuts, left some of these organisations without enough revenue to cover basic maintenance expenses. As a result, the



number of empty dwellings increased and the share of rent arrears and squatting grew, which further aggravated the management problems of public housing. In several local contexts, the public housing sector is in a vicious circle of social, financial, and technical mismanagement that cannot be broken without additional public investments and a more focused management strategy.

In recent years, social management has made a comeback on the political agenda. Enhancing social management activities should help housing organisations to achieve neglected social welfare goals and improve the condition of public housing residents. A return to social management would close the gap between tenants and institutions, reduce conflicts over the misuse of common spaces, and combat concerns about anti-social behaviours and insecurity. This rests on the idea that public housing estates lack social cohesion. However, it is worth noting that the negative social atmosphere in some public housing neighbourhoods is often exacerbated – if not caused – by poor technical maintenance in the estates for which housing providers are responsible. Thus, it is important not to blame only individuals' behaviours for the lack of social cohesion, but rather to acknowledge the complex dynamics and responsibilities that affect the relationships among tenants and between tenants and social landlords (Bertoluzzo and Poggi 2015). Most public housing organisations are not prepared for shifting to social management activities, which adds another layer of complexity. The managerialisation process has resulted in public housing organisations losing their original social welfare function, turning them into 'traditional' building companies. This is evident when observing housing managers' professional identities and tasks. A recent survey showed that only 5% of the staff of public housing organisations sampled are involved in social management activities, compared to 26% who are involved in construction and maintenance, 19% in administration, and 9% in financial management. According to the same source, 33% of employees have a technical background (they are either architects or engineers) and 67% have mainly administrative skills (Fosti et al. 2019).

Current housing policy in the Lombardy Region (regional law 16/2016) requires public housing companies to promote social management activities, such as conflict prevention and mediation, boosting tenants' participation and social cohesion to improve the quality of public housing services. Under the programme 'Planning the Social Management of Public Housing Neighbourhoods in Lombardy' (*Progettare la gestione sociale dei quartieri ERP in Lombardia*), the Lombardy Region supports the development of new approaches to social management to better meet the needs of the most vulnerable households in public housing estates by facilitating access to labour market and training opportunities. Considering the longstanding gaps in terms of both property- and community-related aspects in the regional public housing sector, a relevant issue to explore is how social management activities are being implemented and what challenges frontline housing managers face. The next section presents the case study project of this paper and explains the research methodology.

Data and methodology

'New Opportunities for New Skills' (*Nuove opportunità per nuovi SAPeri*) is one of the projects that received funding under the above-mentioned programme. This project was implemented between 2018 and 2020 in two public housing estates with about 150 dwellings in total in a public housing neighbourhood in Cinisello Balsamo in the north of Milan. The project had four pillars: tutoring on housing-related issues; involving tenants in (self-)management; the



prevention and management of rent arrears; designing individual-based interventions to escape poverty. On a practical level, these pillars informed two main areas of intervention: sociality and active inclusion. The project was led by the City Council and involved five organisations: social cooperatives and companies for work and training services.

The findings presented in the next sections draw on a qualitative analysis of official documents (regional housing law n. 16/2016 and public call) and semi-structured interviews with a director of the Department of Welfare and Social Housing in the Lombardy Region (Interview 1, May 2017), a civil servant in Cinisello Balsamo City Council (Interview 2, December 2019), and two practitioners of the cooperatives involved – one per each area of intervention (Interview 3, December 2019 and Interview 4, January 2020). The selection criterion of these respondents allowed us to collect information on both the medium-term and long-term institutional vision (strategic housing management) and short-term decisions and reactions to everyday problems experienced by practitioners working on the frontline with tenants (day-to-day housing management).

Institutional actors were recruited through direct e-mail contact, and they were asked questions about the priorities, goals, and expectations of social management in public housing. Practitioners were reached using the snowball method. They were asked questions about their activities, tenants' reactions, and the impact of their work. Although this research did not include tenants' opinions, because of the limited resources available, the viewpoints of both institutional actors and practitioners complement each other and provide a balanced picture of how social management in public housing is conceptualised and implemented. All interviews were collected face-to-face, audio-recorded, and transcribed for content analysis drawing on Priemus et al.'s (1999) distinction between strategic and day-to-day management. The next section presents the findings.

Strategic social management

The perception that public housing estates have become more difficult to manage because of their lower 'social cohesion and living standards, lack of conviviality, un-ability to live together, spread of petty crimes, and attitudes to bend the rules' (Interview 1) has the effect of questioning the institutional capacity to improve the urban management of these spaces. Social management is conceptualised as a kind of intervention addressing multiple domains of residents' lives, i.e. physical and relational, and involving actors with different types of expertise and backgrounds who work together as a network. As one respondent argued, this conceptualisation of social management is a legacy of urban regeneration programmes of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Neighbourhood Contracts) that first introduced an integrated approach to neighbourhood problems in Italy. These area-based interventions aimed to improve the social and built environment in public housing estates by combining physical – for example, the maintenance and renovation of dwellings – and social measures – for example, social animation, work programmes, community development. Although not explicitly named as social management activities, social measures pointed to similar goals: improving relations among tenants. As our respondent explained: 'when the programme Neighbourhood Contract ended, we made the best out of that opportunity. We overcame the idea of public housing as only "bricks-and-mortar" to widen our perspective on the relationships with dwellers and those who represent them. As we now understand it, housing is at the crossroad of different issues, such as safety and sociality.'



In this sense, we encouraged new stakeholders to come in, from the police to volunteering associations' (Interview 2).

Previous urban regeneration programmes shaped the current understanding of social management by allowing staff members to develop 'professional expertise and experience in working in deprived neighbourhoods' (Interview 2). This translated into the City Council taking a leading role in the coordination of the current social management project, unlike in past urban regeneration programmes, where regional public companies played a key role, while third sector actors continue to be responsible for face-to-face relationships with tenants, as we will explain later. According to the civil servant in the City Council, the aim of social management is to 'reconnect with tenants', which would allow the creation of new opportunities for tenant empowerment. More specifically, the ultimate goal of this social management project is to empower tenants to represent themselves – for example, by forming a tenants' committee through which to establish 'an authentic and frank relationship with the owner of the dwellings' (Interview 2). A tenants' committee would offer a space to discuss practical things, such as repairing leaks or fixing the light system, while providing opportunities to address broader themes, such as safety issues, in line with the overarching vision of a dwelling as more than a roof over a tenant' head.

The need to boost such an empowerment process stems from reported concerns about the inappropriate use of public space and negligence that fuelled anti-social behaviours and illegal activities. As the civil servant argued: 'households may play a key role in tackling these situations, thus it is important to consign these spaces to respectable families'. The use of the adjective 'respectable' recalls a longstanding issue in housing management related to its social control function, which is enacted through interventions aimed at behavioural change (Damer 2000). It suggests that specific expectations regarding tenants' behaviours are present in the conceptualisation of social management examined in this paper. Such expectations, underpinned by welfare contractualism ideologies, envisage a proactive attitude on the part of tenants, who 'should give back a desire to do things, not just wait', as opposed to a vision of the tenant community that 'is only about saying what is not working' (Interview 2). In this sense, behavioural attitudes and compliance with rules shape tenants' entitlement to receive help from the social management programme. This was particularly evident when our respondent discussed the approach to managing rent arrears. 'For those [tenants] who are in difficult circumstances because a negative event has occurred, the logic is: "I support you by advising practitioners to get close to you. These tenants will benefit from the training offered by the programme [active inclusion area] to start over (...), which is different from a person who says: "I live in a public dwelling, and I don't pay, I don't care"' (Interview 2). The next section discusses practitioners' challenges to get tenants involved in the social management programme.

Day-to-day social management

Constant face-work with tenants represents a pillar of the social management practice on a ground level. Repeated encounters between practitioners and tenants allow establishing interaction and nurturing social relationships, fulfilling the aim of social management of reconnecting with tenants, as conceptualised at a policy level. However, findings show that practitioners had to deal with tenants' mistrust and other reluctant attitudes stemming from the combined effect of both longstanding (mis)management issues and tenants' socio-economic



circumstances. As one practitioner noted: ‘some tenants were kind of suspicious. They got defensive when somebody tried to approach them (..), so it was about repairing trust between tenants and whatever is around them. Because similar projects had never been made here, tenants were not used to seeing external people’ (Interview 3). To increase trust, practitioners ensured a visible presence in the hallways or courtyards arguing that ‘if they [tenants] know who you are, it’s easier to get accepted when you make a suggestion’ (Interview 3). Housing managers also embraced an open attitude aimed at listening to what tenants needed or asked for. As a result of this approach, practitioners were able to organise dinners in the courtyard after learning about tenants’ wishes to do something they were used to doing.

Some tenants reacted to practitioners’ proposals sceptically. As one respondent reported: ‘in the beginning, they were saying: “it’s very good, but one day the project will come to an end and these things are not important because there are drug dealers in the staircase, broken gates, door phones out of order (...). They were saying that this project was not going to solve real problems’ (Interview 3). While these reflections warn about the risk of overemphasising the potential of social activities, such as conviviality moments, to address wider management problems, there is a case for believing that social management contributes to positive changes in the living environment. In fact, reconnecting with tenants through informal chats and social events is seen as the first step in boosting tenants’ capacity to negotiate solutions with the institutional landlord. The tenant empowerment process benefitted from the daily contact and encounters between tenants and housing managers that took place during social events, which were followed by other initiatives. Practitioners organised the first condominium meeting in which tenants could discuss their concerns and propose solutions. For example, some tenants argued that certain internal rules were too difficult to understand and, together with practitioners, they were able to rewrite some of them and distribute leaflets to make communication more effective. In other circumstances, tenants specifically asked to have waste removed from the courtyard, a request that was promptly fulfilled, which helped to improve the living environment.

To a certain extent, social activities also improved the outcomes of financial management. Some households were able to sign agreements with the City Council in which they promised to pay their rent arrears. As one respondent argued, this was possible because of two areas of intervention: social assistance and active inclusion were interlinked ‘like connecting vessels’ (Interview 4). This means that professionals in both areas worked as a team exchanging information about assisted households on a daily basis, which made it possible to obtain more in-depth knowledge about tenants’ needs and provide them with timely solutions. Practitioners acted as contact points steering tenants towards the nearby services or facilities they needed. For example, they would advise tenants on allowances and other benefits that households did not know they were entitled to or ignored learning how to apply for because of a lack of digital skills. In this sense, social management activities provided ‘indirect economic help’ (Interview 3) with which households could improve their socio-economic situation and fulfil their legal obligation to pay rent, and this in turn helped to improve the financial situation in the estate.

Despite signs of early success, the duration of this project (two years) was considered too short to have a significant impact, which forced practitioners to lower their expectations about how much change they could realistically achieve. Social management activities require frequent, positive, and visible interaction between tenants and managers if they are to yield longer-term benefits. According to practitioners, the outcomes of this project can only lay the foundation for ‘something bigger, which may - or may not – come’. The chance of social management



activities continuing depends on the future schemes and policies that institutions will enact. Yet, whether and how it will happen is still uncertain. In the worst scenario, as one respondent explained, future policies will require stakeholders to target different estates and tenants. This would be disappointing given that social relationships among tenants and between tenants and professionals need continuous investments of energy and time if they are to last. Nevertheless, it may be possible that the positive outcomes of current social management interventions will be passed on to future management schemes and cohorts of tenants, as previously observed in relation to prior area-based regeneration policies, helping the residential community to thrive.

Conclusion

This paper examined a social management programme introduced in the Italian public housing sector, which is characterised by a longstanding residualisation process. After decades of mismanagement that resulted in poor maintenance and the decline of social cohesion, social management activities have re-entered the local political agenda aimed at promoting residents' social welfare. By juxtaposing policymakers' visions and housing managers' daily practices, this paper showed how policy goals informed frontline workers' actions. It demonstrated that policymakers attribute social management activities with a remarkable capacity to address problems beyond the mere relational dimension. Reconnecting with tenants, as the main goal of social management, is in fact a means of achieving greater power for tenants to negotiate management issues with the public landlord, by holding tenants responsible for reporting problems in their estates and proposing solutions.

Social management, as conceptualised in this programme, represents the first step to addressing complex issues in different spheres of housing management, including rent arrears. In this sense, it has the potential to break the vicious circle of technical, social, and financial decline affecting many estates, provided that a longer-term and integrated vision for the regeneration of public housing is guaranteed. The findings suggest that the short timeframe of this project (two years) and uncertainty regarding the target of future policies risk frustrating the efforts made. Rather than patchy interventions, the tenant empowerment process needs a longer-term approach with constant face-work and on-site presence. The mismatch between the project timeframe designed at the policy level and the realities of tenants' involvement experienced on the ground raises the question of whether tenant engagement represents a short-term palliative or the beginning of a new form of more effective management style with potentially transformative effects on public housing governance and residents' lives. A longer-term commitment would also benefit from stronger integration with other management tools, such as a more effective rent-setting and allocation policy, the regular maintenance of dwellings, and increasing public funding, which would necessarily imply a shift in the current residual orientation of Italian public housing policies. Future research could assess whether, despite short-term social management interventions will have a lasting impact on both the policy and community level, i.e. an accumulation of knowledge and learning from past experiences. In other words, it is important to understand to what extent future interventions will benefit from the seeds planted by social managers in their 'quick return' to public housing estates.

These findings have several implications beyond the specific research context and case study of Italy. In a time of the increasing residualisation of social rental sectors across Europe (Angel 2021), a better understanding of housing management challenges and solutions could help future policies and practices to tackle or prevent common issues. Specifically, these findings



suggest that social management approaches should be designed on the basis of long-term objectives, proximity between institutions, housing practitioners, social workers and tenants, and integration with welfare services at the local level. The social management intervention examined here highlighted the importance of considering tenants as active actors – rather than passive recipients – of housing services as well as developing a stronger alignment between strategic and daily management. While promoting the active role of tenants in housing management activities is common in many different forms of housing provision today, such as social and cooperative housing and collective and self-organised housing, greater attention to the context of tenant participation is needed when it comes to addressing tenant participation in public housing sectors at a later stage in the residualisation process (such as in Italy, as observed in this paper, in Australia, or in British council housing). In these contexts, social management interventions face additional challenges that require greater consideration for the institutional framework in which they are implemented, a critical assessment of the outcomes of previous management strategies, and the set of arrangements and rules shaping the opportunities for tenant involvement in the long term. In a similar vein, it is also important to pay attention to the long-term trajectories of target estates and communities and their changing socio-economic composition as a result of allocation policies and residential mobility.



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