**PROTECTION AND PROMOTION OF THE FAMILY IN ITALY:**

**MUCH TO BE DONE YET - AN OVERVIEW – October 2015**.

Francesco Belletti, Director of Cisf (International Center for Family Studies – *www.cisf.it*).

Italian family policies’ situation is a paradoxical one: on one side families and family networks are still strong and well functioning; on the other side, public interventions on favour of families are weak, fragmented and rarely oriented to at least medium time duration. In brief, Italian families are still resistant and resilient, while public policies are exploiting their strengths, with very low levels of support. Many words in favour of the family, very few actions for them.

1. **Different geographic models**

Family policies in Italy are managed and acted by different levels of public administration: at national, regional and local level. This situation determines a high geographical difference among different areas in the country. This difference is related also to the so –called “welfare mix” of services and interventions. The role of direct public intervention is generally very relevant, but in many areas there are several experiences of services provided by no profit organizations and by family associations. Also the interaction/cooperation between public and private no profit services providers is highly varying across the national different regions.

1. **A weak national model**

At national level family policies are marginal, while the public national interventions are mainly specialized to “categories” (elderly people, disabled persons, as individuals). The Italian welfare is based on a workfare model of social protection, based on rights and services for the individuals. Also from a fiscal point of view, taxation is hardly “family friendly”, and large families are not fiscally supported. On the contrary, the Italian rate of children’s poverty is one of the highest in Europe, mostly due to poverty for large families (families with three or more children), whose taxation is not reduced according to family size.

Generally, all along the last thirty years, passing from left or right politically oriented governments, family polices were not a priority. Therefore families are in some way obliged to provide a “familist welfare”.

For many years no explicit political responsibility for family policies was organized in national government; when designated, the Ministry or Department for family (or for family policies) never had an adequate budget. Nevertheless, in 2012 a National Plan for Family Policies was approved (following a long discussion, and two National Governmental Conferences on Family, in Florence, on 2007, and in Milan, on 2010), with very detailed projects on different areas (welfare and care services, education, housing, fiscal interventions, work-family balance, and others). But, again, no budget was allocated, and nowadays this National Plan remains only “on paper”.

1. **Regional actions**

Regional administrations (twenty areas, *“Regioni”*, in Italy) have direct responsibilities (and high levels of freedom) for planning and organizing social and health policies, as well as for work policies. They can finance these projects and actions with their own resources and relying by national transfers. Other very important actions for family policies are devoted to national regulation (labour market general rules, fiscal legislation, education). So regional administrations cannot build a general and comprehensive plan for family policies, but they are forced to act on specific areas of interest, while more strategic actions in favour of the family need a decision at national level.

From the fiscal point of view, for instance, some Regions tried to approve some fiscal family support at local level, trying to support families who are damaged by the national fiscal system, but only on a small percentage of the whole fiscal burden. There is, in other words, a relevant mis-match between different levels of public administration.

Many Regions did not choose to have a special and dedicated family policy; so family support was included in health services programs, or as a by-product of welfare services. In this model, family policies are marginal, and they cannot promote an active role of families.

On the other side, some Regions, in different times, decided to launch a specific legislation for family policies (in Lombardia, in 1999, in Friuli Venezia Giulia, in 2014, and others), building a framework of innovative services and funds for “family friendly actions”. One of the more interesting aspects of these regional model is the direct support to projects and actions of family associations, in order to finance self-help groups, parents’ associations, and innovation projects, planned and acted by no profit organisations.

1. **Local Experiences**

Many local municipalities (*Comuni*) launched experimental projects and services, supporting specific needs of families (services for divorced fathers, support for migrant families, *tages-mutter* services for early childhood, day care services, and others).

Many of them tried to support large families when using public services (family card services, cost reduction for public services).

In some local municipalities family policies were experimented as “the general framework for the whole set of local policies” (Castelnuovo del Garda, Lecce, Parma). In other words, at local level the administrators tried to plan and act a comprehensive “Local plan for family policies”.

In a different regional area, Provincia Autonoma di Trento (in the west-northern part of Italy) a broad and comprehensive project for being “family friendly” has been carried out for several years. At present two main innovative projects can be briefly reported:

* A certified Audit model for companies “family friendly”, where work life-balance policies are performed, controlled and certified by an external Audit procedure;
* A “Family District” project, where all the local stakeholders (companies, trade unions, local municipalities, no profit organizations, families and citizens as well) are planning together the whole set of policies, coordinated b y the public administration.

Many other innovative projects are carried out in the Trentino area, with a governance directly managed by the President of the regional Council. In this way family policies are not residual nor marginal any more, but they are the general framework through which to plan every sectorial action (work, housing, education, urban development, through “family lenses”).

1. **Some suggestions**

Families in Italy are still one of the main resources of solidarity and social cohesion. But they are not supported by consistent and longlasting social and economic policies, suffering therefore for strong economic stress, lack of housing, precarious jobs, lowering level of quantity and quality of welfare and health services.

This lack of a comprehensive, organic, permanent and well funded national plan for families is one of the main problems of the Italian situation, that cannot be balanced by a set of really new and innovative actions at regional and local level, also because these innovations cannot be easily extended nationwide.

The role of family associations and no profit organizations should be strengthened in planning policies, in providing services, in evaluating outputs, in every level of public administration. Some good examples can be reported at local level (i.e in Trentino, or in Castelnuovo del Garda), but a long way is still ahead, to build in Italy a family friendly and participated welfare.