"Presa in carico" or how to take care: chronicle of a visit to the Microareas of Trieste.

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No threshold. No boundaries. Full opening, without conditions, without any kind of requirements. People come and share their needs and concerns without restrictions, without appointments, without the mediation of paperwork.

Monday, December 4th, eight o'clock in the morning. Four people kneading chickpea flour in the kitchen. Marina and Lorena fetch us some coffee they just made while telling us they are from the National Civil Service and will be working here for a year. We move closer to a small office at the back where Monica, the Microarea coordinator, alternates phone calls with the updating of the list of visits to elderly people that Giovanni is filling out. Patricia comes up to me; she has just arrived and wants to introduce herself.
She lives in the neighbourhood and comes here three times a week to knit because she *"feels accompanied by everybody here"*. Giovanni is from the neighbourhoods´ association; he comes here every morning and is responsible for the daily activities: he registers the specific needs neighbours have and coordinates the volunteers from the Civil Service. Andreas has been the van driver of three Microareas for the last three years, and now he comes here as a neighbour nearly every day. Today there will be a lunch in the Microarea with two football players of the Triestina team, and mid-morning he leaves with Marina and Lorena to pick up neighbours who need a little support to walk and come to the event.

Monica tells me that approximately 1600 people live in the Ponziana Microarea; most of them have low incomes and live in public housing. Giovanni comes in and out of the office picking up different phones that don't stop ringing. There are a lot of people dealing with mental health problems and substance addictions, (mostly alcohol); lots of elderly people living alone in small flats; and there aren´t many children. Marina and Lorena come looking for Monica and take her away for a few minutes. Three new faces appear at the office door and have a heated conversation with Giovanni until his phone rings and he leaves apologetically. Monica comes back, sits down and immediately stands up again to talk to Sandra, the social worker who acts as the link with ATER, the public housing company, and also manages the socialisation activities in the Microarea.

A strong sense of vertigo overwhelms me. A very strong vertigo. I feel nobody is in control of what is happening, the things going on; people are coming and going, in and out, they do and undo things and I don't really understand what role professionals have here. Where does Monica stand, exactly? I am in her office, which is also Giovanni's office, and a stream of people are constantly coming in and out, the door is always open, and I can´t help asking myself how she can work with this amount of movement. I feel overwhelmed by this way of working - dealing with things as they occur, attending to people as they come. There must be some kind of limit to all this, some kind of planning I´m not aware of…?

Monica comes back, apologising for the constant interruptions and tells Giovanni to close the door for a while. *"We are not a service with a specific assignment of tasks. This is the reason why we do not solve everything first-hand"*. The Microarea is a device with an open mandate – to activate resources that already exist, to come up with new ones, to connect and support community bonds . The resources it engages can

be institutional – like healthcare assistance, social help, educational support, economic benefits or housing support – or they can be found within the community, resources people have. Not having thresholds means leaving the door open to welcome people´s needs, any kind of need –to think them over together and find the best ways to care for them, taking into account the resources the person and/or the community already have.

To quote Margherita, a former Microarea coordinator, "a Microarea worker cannot say, at any time, *this is not my task, because it is my task to think with you about what you need*". To ask oneself "how can we best care for this need?" means taking charge, taking responsibility for responding and satisfying peoples´ needs and adapting the institution and professional work to better care for them, going beyond the idea of only responding to those needs which have been previously defined as the competence of each institution.

The Microarea bridges the gaps established historically between health-care and social-care, intertwining individual and social problems, health needs and their social determinants, by creating a space that enables shared responses that come from both a professional and an experiential knowledge.

Elena and Luis come into the office. They are social workers from the local social services that deal with the whole district, including the Microarea of Ponziana. Today they have a meeting with Monica to assess which people from the Microarea could benefit from an employment project they are developing along with three social cooperatives. I let them work, and walk over to talk to Sandra, the social worker of the Microarea who acts as link to the municipality.

She recounts how during the first years of the Microareas project ATER used to have a stronger mandate over its tasks, which went from checking the conditions of houses to make sure they were good enough to live in, up to facing problems that would occur on the estate, but also mediating to ease conflicts between residents. Today the mandate is the same, but the implication of ATER has changed, and this implies she cannot work like she did before: she cannot visit the apartments of the Microarea like she did, keeping in touch with the everyday life of the neighbourhood and responding to the needs that appeared along the way. Now she has to work in her office everyday and attend to people from here. This difference, between "*going to look for*" peoples´ needs to care for them and "*waiting for people to ask*" has also meant a difference on the impact she feels her work has—which, she feels, has now decreased.

Alongside dealing with everything that is connected to housing, Sandra is also responsible for socialisation activities, which are very varied. Every Tuesday morning they organise a meeting for elderly people with memory problems and foreigners who need to learn Italian. The former practice their memory by conjugating verb tenses, while the latter learn the language. Neighbours have developed all sorts of activities which the Microarea has supported as needed: dance classes, English lessons, reading groups, knitting groups, study support. Every Monday some neighbours cook and organise a social lunch. Once every month, this lunch has a theme and they invite someone significant from town to eat and chat with the neighbours. Today, as the chosen theme is sport, we will sit down to lunch with footballers from the local club.

Monica has finished her meeting and is looking for me so I can ask her any last questions before we sit down to eat. They have already prepared the common room to host about fifty people; people are arriving and it seems like everybody knows what has to be done: moving tables, setting them, folding napkins,

serving plates. The atmosphere is lively and merry, and I realise I am quite thrilled and excited without really knowing why.

We sit down in her office again and I ask her about the figure of the volunteer, as I don´t quite understand their role, and it makes me feel some contradictions related to the (probable) economic precarity of those who volunteer, the institutional implications of it being a device that supports itself through volunteer labour, and the fragility that this implies for a long-term project. Her explanations help me approach the structural complexity of the Microarea and they inspire me to think about how through the Microareas they are not only creating ways of caring for people needs, but they are also experimenting care practices towards the needs of professionals and the device as a whole, in order to keep the whole thing working.

The core team of the Microarea of Ponziana is made up of six people: Monica, the coordinator of the Microarea and the only one who has a contract with the Health Department; Sandra, who works for a social cooperative hired by ATER and the municipality; two people from the Voluntary Civil Service and two people from the employment programme for people who live in disadvantaged areas, who work part-time and receive a small economic compensation.

These four people, who only work here for a year and are called "volunteers", receive quite a unique practical training, during which they can contribute as much as they like depending on their knowledge and abilities, getting involved as much as they want and always trying to promote activities and spaces which will be able to continue once they move elsewhere. This movement of people every year enriches the Microarea greatly, as it helps to prevent stagnation in the ways of doing things and inventing new ways depending on the people that compose the Microarea.

This "core" team has been joined by a lot of neighbours over the years, who we could say take part of the Microarea as volunteers who get involved with different degrees of commitment; but we could also say that they have made the Microarea theirs, and making it theirs, they have become a part of it. The potential of the Microarea is strictly linked to the will of the neighbours to become a part of it, thus the fragility of the Microarea is supported by the network of the community: "*the reciprocity is not fixed, but it is one of the pillars that support this fragility of volunteer work. It´s not fixed in the sense of "if you want to eat, then you have to clean", but it is in meaning that we make it clear that everyone has something to share, and we can each share as we wish. Cooking, bringing something for the food larder, suggesting an activity for the time bank…*"

"*The Microarea is a device that cannot work on another scale. The transversal dimension and the lack of barriers would be lost, because to care for a bigger population you necessarily have to divide it*".

Just as if they had been listening to us, we get called to the dining table, and I suddenly realise the noise in the common room which I had completely ignored, and I´m thrilled as I look around me and feel part of the hubbub going on. I feel quite at home, and burst into laughter trying to explain to the two old ladies sitting next to me what the *falafel* they have just been served are exactly.

The next day I find myself in quite a similar situation, eating macaroni with sixty other people sitting around an enormous table shaped like a "U" in the Microarea of Campi Elysi. If Trieste is the city which has one of the oldest populations in Europe, Campi Elysi is the Microarea with the oldest population in Trieste. Its

organisation is different to Ponzianas´ because it deals with different kinds of needs; but also because its location and resources offer different possibilities. Wandering around the rooms of Campi Elysi, I remember something Margherita had told me: *"Microareas are not a model to export. They are a device that helps to think about the institution according to the context: each microarea will have to be developed in different ways depending on the places, the institutions, the needs and the resources".*

Sergio is the nurse of the Microarea, where he actually works only two days a week, because the other three days he does home-visits to people that need them. He adjusts and checks drugs and therapies, he takes samples and prescribes diets, he accompanies families in learning how to take care of their loved ones, and he coordinates with Federica—who is the coordinator of this Microarea— for all the needs that he encounters during his visits which are not directly health-related. She in turn will then activate resources, often related to social care, to help people reach the highest degree of autonomy and the lowest possible degree of institutionalization.

I leave Federica and Sergio working, and enter a room where a group of elderly people are doing memory exercises. When they finish, Grazia, one of the group coordinators, tells me they organise a socialization space three times a week. They organise different activities and exercises during the mornings, dividing people into different groups depending on their needs (for example, if they have mild cognitive impairment they will take part in the memory group instead of the socialisation group) and after the morning activities, most people stay to have lunch in the Microarea. This lunch is organised by people from the neighbourhood, and it is payed for with voluntary fees.

She is moved as she explains how they have started a new workshop this year with a professional cooking school. In the workshop old people exchange traditional recipes with the youngsters who, in return, share contemporary recipes with them. Also, once a month, they set up a themed workshop and people create beautiful and useful things, then to be sold in the local market set up by the Microarea. All the money raised through these sales is reinvested within the group to buy materials, as well as to organise small trips to different places. Very proudly she tells me about the success a history workshop had had— the elderly people of the neighbourhood organised routes around the city with schools to share their wisdom of the places, giving value to their experience and knowledge.

The relevance of giving value to the knowledge, experience and abilities of elderly people in the process of caring for their needs is essential to understand the way care and `putting people in the centre´ is understood in the Microareas. Blending both things together is how people *make sense* of being a part of spaces like these —making sense both for themselves and for the people around them. In other institutions it´s quite common to come across interventions with elderly people that at first sight could appear to be similar, but actually part from an entirely different approach— *keeping people busy.* In the Microareas, activities are organised considering that elderly people have a lot to share with others, and not only needs to be taken care of.

In the Microarea of Valmaura they have set up a project called "Ci vediamo domani" ("See You Tomorrow") for very frail people who have a high risk of being institutionalised. Alfio, the Microarea coordinator, identifies who could benefit from a more constant support and then Patricia, hired by a social cooperative, will visit them daily to identify and fulfil their social and health needs. She aims to make people feel better, helping them to access and enjoy simple daily pleasures, helping them to do beautiful things that satisfy them, building a space that helps to improve their self-esteem; so that all of this will ultimately help them

recognize themselves as fully entitled citizens with rights, and therefore with bargaining power. "*Inside a care home everything is predetermined in your life, and this leads to much discomfort. Here it is the exact opposite, it is all about the respect for people. It is about reconstructing citizenship.*"

Alfio takes me to visit a housing experience shared by five elderly people. Two years ago they lived alone, and couldn´t afford the social support they needed at home so as to not be institutionalised. Through the Microarea, Alfio helped them get together and share a single ATER flat: between them they can afford to employ one person who looks after them throughout the day. We continue our tour, and visit a person with alcohol-related problems that Alfio sees quite often. As time has gone by, dynamics of caretaking have developed among neighbours and it is now quite common for people to come and tell Alfio if someone else needs something when they aren´t able to come themselves, or if somebody has not left the house for a few days and needs checking on. He tells me the story of a person who had economic problems, and how he connected them to another in need of someone to cook for them. Currently, the latter has employed the former for two hours a day. Alfio insists on how "*everyone has resources that can be shared. This is why we try to connect people with each other, as everyone has something to share that can help others.*"

A few hours later, during a meeting with different Microarea coordinators discussing the positions they occupy in relation to the positions citizens have, I realise this idea of "*not having everything under control*" I experienced my first day in Ponziana is something well-thought-out and acknowledged. It is not an unexpected consequence of how things are organised. It is a position of openness towards reality, it is about letting this reality invade the Microarea in all its complexity. It is about welcoming it into a space of caring that gives prominence back to the people. It is a position of workers towards *caring* that enables giving back responsibility about one's own life, but also other people's, back to the people. I question myself and feel very moved by experiencing the level of involvement these professionals have in questioning their role, their interest in thinking about it, their generosity in sharing it with me, being very much aware that our role as professionals is a place in motion, and that the process of deconstructing power *over* people into power *with* people cannot be concluded with closed recipes.
As I say goodbye to everybody, I feel the honest affection that blooms when you experience real practices, that are real because they touch the reality of people´s lives and have the courage to uphold the conflict which is inherent to them.