

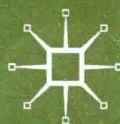
WORK AND WELFARE IN EUROPE

**Social Vulnerability
in European Cities**

**The Role of Local Welfare
in Times of Crisis**

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**Edited by Costanzo Ranci, Taco Brandsen
and Stefania Sabatinelli**



Social Vulnerability in European Cities

The Role of Local Welfare in Times of Crisis

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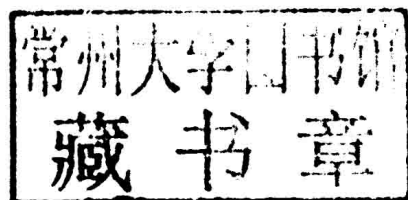
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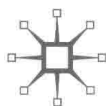
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First published 2014 by
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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978–1–137–34691–9

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

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Preface

Comparative research about cities is often presented as the best strategy to understand current changes in social structure and welfare policies, yet it is far less often actually achieved. Many obstacles have prevented scholars from accomplishing this endeavor: huge costs and hard practicalities, difficulty in adopting similar methodology in very different urban conditions, lack of comparable and reliable data, complexity of doing comparative research by considering multi-level dimensions (national, regional, urban), troubles in the research design in combining costs with an appropriate number of cases and with the need to respect the huge local variability that is peculiar to urban Europe.

Nevertheless, social problems are always more evident in cities. And it is in cities that the current financial crisis has hit the hardest. The long flood of social and political changes prompted by the crisis and consequent austerity policies has strongly affected the urban population throughout Europe as well as local welfare policies. The coincidence of crisis phenomena and cuts in national welfare expenditures has provoked a paradoxical impact on local welfare systems: they have to deal with less financial resources and more social problems at the same time. In their search for blame-avoidance strategies to cut welfare programs, many European states have gone further in the long-standing process of rescaling financial and delivery responsibility to local levels. At the same time, poverty and social vulnerability have increased throughout Europe, contributing to growth in social needs and demand for social intervention.

The research presented in this volume was very hard to be completed but necessary in order to really capture the social impact of the current crisis. We wanted to understand what has happened in European cities in the last decade, looking at the most relevant drivers of social vulnerability: the changes which occurred in the labor market, in the housing sector, in the demographic composition of the population, in the organization of families, and in the ethnic mix that characterizes today most of the urban contexts in our continent. We also wanted to understand what is the role currently played by local welfare policies, considering the complex institutional frame within which they operate, the changes induced by austerity programs, and the capacity for social innovation that is specific to local actors. Finally, we wanted to take a close look at the practical experience of social vulnerability, reconstructing the coping strategies, social networks, and institutional and social support that are peculiar to some of the most disadvantaged social groups inhabiting contemporary European cities. Social vulnerability is indeed not only a matter of limited resources, but also of uncertainty and

risk of social isolation: aspects that official statistics do not always account for, and which only original empirical research is able to investigate.

The result of such an effort is presented in this book. The three main elements of our research are recalled in the title of the book: *social vulnerability* is the result of weak social integration affecting people who are in an insecure position in society; *local welfare* is the complex system of public and private social intervention that is active at the city level; and *the crisis* is causing the current worsening of financial and social problems that affect most European cities, increasing social vulnerability and putting local welfare systems under greater pressure. In order to study these aspects a composite empirical research has been developed, involving statistical macro-analysis, city-level studies and a set of in-depth interviews with 360 vulnerable people. A comparative approach has been adopted in order to take geographical and welfare regimes variability into account, and to assess to what extent local welfare systems are consistent with national patterns. In reaction to the current huge rhetoric about the virtues of local welfare, our research empirically tests the capacity of local policies to make a difference. And the answer, as the readers will see, is provocative: local welfare can really make a difference only if it does not need to replace national welfare and if the two are tightly and virtuously inter-related.

The book is organized into four main parts. The first sets the conceptual and empirical framework for our research. The introductory chapter (by Ranci, Brandsen, and Sabatinelli) presents the empirical evidence about the emergence of new social risks throughout Europe and discusses the developments of local welfare policies, also in relation to national rescaling strategies coping with the current financial crisis. The second chapter (by d'Ovidio and Ranci) investigates in a macro perspective the relation between competitiveness and social cohesion in a large set of European cities on the basis of a statistical analysis of the European Urban Audit database provided by Eurostat.

The second part of the book is focused at the city level (comparing 20 European cities in ten different countries) and it analyzes the main socio-economic and political mechanisms driving the most exposed part of the population toward social vulnerability. This part pays attention to four main aspects: changes in the labor markets in which cities are embedded and the place of local policies (Chapter 3, by Aguilar Hendrickson and Sabatinelli); local childcare policies addressing new social needs emerging from demographic transformations and changes in the family organization (Chapter 4, by Fraisse and Escobedo); recent migration flows toward cities in Europe and the consequent social inclusion problems and dilemmas (Chapter 5, by Costa and Ewert); and new trends and problems arising in the housing market and in the public housing sector (Chapter 6, by Costa, Bežovan, Palvarini, and Brandsen).

The third part of the book is focused on three specific categories of people identified as being highly exposed to new social risks: young people in

unemployment or precarious employment (Chapter 7, by Maestripieri and Sabatinelli); single mothers with preschool-aged children (Chapter 8, by Siemieńska and Matysiak), and first-generation adult migrants (Chapter 9, by Cattacin and Naegeli). These chapters, based on individual semi-structured interviews conducted in all the 20 cities, reconstruct the subjective experience of these people, their coping strategies, the social networks sustaining them, and the support possibly given by local welfare initiatives.

The last part (Chapter 10, by Ranci, Brandsen, and Sabatinelli) draws some conclusions by developing a comparative analysis of local welfare systems and of their present problems in times of austerity.

Acknowledgments

The book is the result of the collective effort of a large group of scholars. All of them were involved in the Welfare Innovations at the Local Level in Favour of Cohesion (WILCO) research project, funded by the 7th European Framework Programme. Researchers based in ten European countries (Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) were involved in the project. The funding from the European Commission allowed us to carry out original empirical research based on extensive data collection and analysis. Of course, the views expressed in these texts do not necessarily represent the view of the European Commission.

This book is therefore not a standard collection of individual essays, but the result of numerous meetings of editors and contributors, who have shared not only the general aims of the book but also a peculiar strategy for comparative analysis, the same complex empirical methodology, and all sorts of problems and doubts that usually emerge in cross-city/cross-country comparative research. Data and preliminary reports were gathered and prepared by all the scientific partners of the WILCO project, and the co-authors of the final volume thank all their colleagues contributing to this result. We also thank our colleagues at the European Research Network (EMES) – also involved in the WILCO research project – who brilliantly provided the final proof-reading and their editorial support: Sophie Adam, Rocío Nogales, and Christina De Schepper.

The preparation of the book was greatly supported by the excellent referee work of many anonymous reviewers, who revised preliminary drafts of all the chapters included in the book. We thank them collectively for their invaluable, impartial, and completely free collaboration.

Without the collaboration of local administrators, social partners, social workers, experts, local trade-union and political activists, and 360 anonymous European citizens who gave up their own time to explain to us their problems, dilemmas, and coping strategies, this research and this book would have not been possible. They are the real actors of what the reader will find interesting and challenging in the following pages of this book.

Special thanks go, last but not least, to Philippa Grand, who strongly believed in the book project from the start, and to Naomi Robinson, who accurately followed and supported the intellectual and material production of the book for Palgrave Macmillan.

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