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Re-visioning social work
with individuals, collectives
and communities:
social work research

Program Book & Book of Abstracts



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Social workers role in promoting participation in social policy

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Introduction: In Italy in the last fourteen years a new system for social service planning has been introduced by law (L328/2000). The new system entails a participatory process through which social interventions should be planned at a local level with the contribution of all the stakeholders. Social services and particularly social workers could play a very relevant role in this process. Opening up opportunities for marginalized groups to express their voice, provide room for service users participation is at the core of social work mission. This presentation introduces some reflections from a research over the implementation of the law. It focusses on how social workers are perceived, and perceive themselves, in the development of participatory processes. Research Methods: The research financed by the ministry of University, studied 15 cases of local planning both with qualitative interviews and documentary analysis. In all 75 qualitative interviews were conducted with different subjects involved in the planning processes (policy makers, social service managers, social workers, representative of service users and representative of NGOs). Outcomes: The analysis of the interviews yields the identification of different representations of the role that practitioners play in promoting participation in social planning. At one extreme we found the idea that practitioners' task is to take advantage of their contact with service users for developing ways to involve the population and particularly marginalize groups in defining new local policies. On the opposite extreme, we found representations in which practitioners are seen and see themselves just as mediators between single citizens and policy lines, which are in fact defined from above. These different representations appear to be connected to different views on what participatory processes in social policy consist of, and allow considerations on possible challenges and controversies on social work role.