The local governance of social services

La gobernanza local de los servicios sociales

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Abstract

This paper studies, from the point of view of local politicians, the governance of social services in different municipalities and County Councils in Catalonia. The political dimension of local social services has rarely been studied and this article contributes to the understanding of which actors and what kind of relations are developed during the policy process. From a qualitative approach, the study is based on 17 in-depth interviews with local politicians, as well as two focus groups with managers and front-line social workers. The results reveal that local politicians do not have a long-term and strategic perspective, and that they feel more comfortable dealing with management rather than politics. At the local level, social services tend to be a depoliticized issue. Although local politicians have a positive attitude towards dialogue and working together with all actors, they lack regular coordination and strong commitment to facilitate a comprehensive approach to the challenges they face.

Keywords: local governance; social services; local politicians; local government; welfare

Resumen

Este artículo estudia, desde el punto de vista de los políticos locales, la gobernanza de los servicios sociales en diferentes municipios y Consejos Comarcales de Cataluña. La dimensión política de los servicios sociales locales ha sido raramente estudiada y este artículo contribuye a la comprensión de qué actores y qué tipo de relaciones se desarrollan durante el proceso político. A partir de un enfoque cualitativo, el estudio se basa en 17 entrevistas en profundidad con políticos locales, así como en dos grupos de discusión con directivos y trabajadores sociales de

primera línea. Los resultados revelan que los políticos locales no tienen una perspectiva estratégica y a largo plazo, y que se sienten más cómodos tratando con la gestión que con la política. A nivel local, los servicios sociales tienden a ser una cuestión despolitizada. Aunque los políticos locales tienen una actitud positiva para dialogar y trabajar juntamente con todos los actores, no consiguen una coordinación regular ni un compromiso firme que facilite un abordaje integral de los retos a los que se enfrentan.

Palabras clave: gobernanza local; servicios sociales; políticos locales; gobierno local; bienestar.

INTRODUCTION

This article analyses the governance of the local social services in different municipalities in Catalonia. Local authorities in Catalonia and Spain play a crucial role in the provision of social services, as the law gave them different responsibilities and because they are the closest tier of government to the population (Aguilar Hendrickson, 2016). Their accessibility to citizens is of great importance, even though they often have to deal with increasing demands and funding cuts (Reilly, 2007). However, other actors are also important in order to provide wellbeing. These include other tiers of government, the private sector, NGOs and informal support, especially in overcoming the limitations of the public sector to guarantee social rights (Daly 2006; Walker 2005). In this sense, the literature on the welfare mix has highlighted that, in a context of social policy and social services reforms, non-statutory bodies have been important in providing welfare and filling some of the gaps in public provision (Herrera, 2001). In addition, Johansson *et al.* (2015:1601) claim that "the complex set of problems that many central governments face are seen as best handled at local level, by local politicians and including the enrolment of various types of local stakeholders".

In Spain, social services include both social care services (long term care, child protection, etc.) and social assistance (access to benefits to cope with basic needs). As in many other domains, the ideas that are implemented are a political matter, and can be analysed from different perspectives. Depending on the policies carried out, and the way they are framed, funded and implemented, they will flourish or have a lower level of development. In this case, we specifically focus on the role developed by local social services politicians during the policy process, especially to better understand this role, their relationships with the different actors that are involved and that influence them during the various stages of policy process.

The Spanish Constitution, unlike what happens with other social rights, does not explicitly recognise the right to social services, but simply states in article 148.1.20 that the regional governments may assume competences in matters of "social assistance". Social Services in Spain are an example of decentralisation and multilevel governance, and different institutional levels participate to a greater or lesser extent in their government. Based on the legislation, regional governments have passed laws on

social services since the 80's, but always with collaboration with local authorities, as the Law 7/1985, Regulating the Bases of Local Regime, recognises in articles 25e and 26c the "assessment and information of situations of social need and immediate attention to people in a situation or at risk of social exclusion" as a service to be provided by municipalities with a population of over 20,000 inhabitants. This means that municipalities with less than 20,000 inhabitants are not obliged to provide them and that in many cases they turn to other administrations to manage them, such as "Diputaciones provinciales" or "County Councils" [Consejos comarcales], as it happens in Catalonia.

In the Catalan case, local authorities have the responsibility of delivering what is called 'basic social services', as well as promoting welcoming policies for immigrants. Some of the services included under this label are: Basic Social Attention Service, which is the main entrance to the system; In-Home Help Service; Telecare Service; Community Kitchen, and Short-term Housing Facilities. Indeed, two of the principles recognized in the Catalan Law of Social Services are proximity and devolution. Their role is not secondary because, even though other tiers of government (the central and regional governments) are responsible for legislating and funding these policies, local authorities also have their own responsibilities, especially regarding the provision of services and benefits.

Stoker (2011) claims that local authorities have, among their functions, welfare provision and redistribution, as well as the expression of identity. That means that local governments matter to citizens because they feel attached to their town or city, and they can also easily identify politicians in order to hold them responsible. For instance, previous studies have emphasised that, 'the local government is an important arena in the Swedish welfare state because it administers the lion's share of social welfare services and is also an important donor to local civil society organisations' (Lundåsen, 2019: 3).

However, if we broaden the scope, it is worth paying attention to the growing role that cities and towns currently have—and will have in the future—as many researchers have pointed out. The crisis of the nation-state due to globalization, as well as the emergence of supranational institutions such as the European Union, has diminished the role and the political influence of nation-states (Kooiman, 2003; Cerny,1999). This does not mean states have lost their power, as witnessed during the Covid-19 crisis, but rather that it has been transformed and reduced.

In the age of globalization, building transnational institutions could seem to be the best way to provide solutions to global problems, instead of from an isolated perspective. Nevertheless, and this may seem paradoxical, cities are insistently calling for more power and legal competences, to better respond to their citizens' needs. The main argument for this demand is that they are the closest tier of government to citizens and, at the same time, citizens are increasingly demanding more services from them. According to this view, local social policies are widely considered more effective under the premise that the closer the service being delivered to the population, the better (Subirats, 2016). Cities and towns have a detailed knowledge of their inhabitants' reality and they can

better identify their needs and give a personalized response to them (Ranci *et al.*, 2014; Andreotti *et al.*, 2012). However, in Spain local authorities have traditionally faced underfunding (Bonet, 2020), a situation that worsened during the Great Recession and the outbreak of Covid-19 (Navarro and Pano, 2019; Salmon, 2017). Moreover, in 2013 the approval of *Law 27/2013, of 27 December, Rationalization and Sustainability of the Local Administration*, was also an attempt to recentralize and limit local autonomy as well as the local competences on social services (Vilà, 2014).

Barber (2013) claims that cities can overcome some of the main limitations of states, and that they are more prepared to combat inequalities. Others, such as Blanco and Gomà (2016) and Subirats (2016) highlight the importance of new municipalism and proximity, to promote social innovation and the participation of new actors, moving from a vertical to a horizontal form of local governance. There are many examples that illustrate this tendency. In Catalonia, for instance, the mayor of Barcelona, along with the mayors of Paris, Lesbos and Lampedusa, promoted a manifesto in 2015 to put pressure on European institutions to relocate refugees in cities that expressed their desire to receive them. Similarly, she sent a letter to the president of the Spanish government in which she urged him to offer political solutions, and to engage in the funding of basic services, instead of promoting security measures[1]. Verhoeven, Strange and Siles-Brügge (2022) refer to «municipal contestation» to deal with threats to their political positions.

However, multilevel governance, as well as scale problems (Kazepov, 2010) and wicked problems *(*Buchanan 1992), pose several challenges to local government aspirations. As Sabatinelli and Semprebon (2017:129) claim, 'In contexts where the vertical division of responsibility lacks a clear attribution of responsibilities, local bodies cannot really pursue innovative and localized interventions as they need to try and compensate for inadequate policies developed by other institutional levels.' In the field of social services and phenomena such as social exclusion and vulnerability, there are many examples that illuminate the dysfunction that accompanies the complex problems municipalities face with a lack of legal, political and economic resources: migration and refugees; housing exclusion; gentrification; and precariousness are good examples of global phenomena with a significant impact on local governments.

Neither the political dimension nor the local governance of social services has frequently been studied in Catalonia, Spain, or even in the international context. The contribution of this article is to shed some light on the role of local politicians during the policy process, as well as the way they govern local social services policies with other actors. Our aim is to explore how local politicians from municipalities and county councils in Catalonia govern social services, and more specifically, to what extent they develop (and what kind of) relationships with different actors, and to analyse their role in the policy-making process. Basically, the aims of the article can be couched in three questions: How are local social services governed? What types of

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1.   https://www.publico.es/actualidad/barcelona-paris-lesbos-y-lampedusa.html

priorities do local politicians have? Who are the main actors involved and how do they lobby local politicians?

The article is divided into various sections: First, we describe the political dimensions of social service. Then, we analyse the role of the local authorities regarding the provision of social care and social services. Third, we explain the methods. Then, we examine the governance of local social services, with emphasis on the relationships with local politicians and different actors involved in the policy-making process and, finally, we share some conclusions and discuss our findings.

LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Many authors from different academic perspectives have examined the notion of governance. Even though some authors have used it as a synonym of government, the literature has emphasized its broader sense, and its definition as a paradigm (Kjaer, 2004; Bevir, 2011). The concept of governance emerges as a catchword (Jessop 1995) and has various meanings (Rhodes, 1996). Different theories are developed on different spatial perspectives—international, European, the nation-state—but also from the local one. Others have focused on multilevel governance, referring to different relations between different tiers of government (Bache *et al.*, 2016; Cerny, 1999). Governance can be understood as a process of government during different stages of the policy process—from the definition of the problem to the evaluation—within the public sector, but also with other actors, and private and voluntary sectors including NGOs (Torfing *et al.* 2012). In this sense, no single actor has a monopoly on tackling complex problems, and each of them can influence the others (Kooiman and Van Vliet, 1993) and play a role during the policy process (Stoker, 2000). Moreover, the governance perspective ensures a more democratic process and contributes to overcoming some of the limitations of liberal democracies, although this is currently threatened by populism (Stoker, 2019). According to von Sydow (2004: 20), 'Governance is the process of governing, in conditions where a single actor does not have the capacity to effectively tackle problems unilaterally or in situations where actors can mutually benefit from co-operation.' Governance involves working across levels and sectors within the public sector as well as between the public, private and voluntary sectors. Other scholars have explored the relationship between governance, welfare mix and social policy. The reasons for doing this analysis are 'the relationships among local, regional and national levels, the role of the state and its relationship to civil society, the (re)positioning of different interest groups and the framing, orientation and implementation of policies' (Daly, 2003:115).

Brugué and Vallès (2005) analysed local government during the 1980s and 90s through its representatives. Their research is based on local politicians from different policy areas, and one of the main conclusions is the transition from local administration to local governance (Andrew and Goldsmith, 1998). In other words, a shift from

a less technocratic government to a more relational one (Stoker, 1999; Goss, 2001), which is mainly explained by social transformations including globalization, the changing nature of the nation state, the consolidation of New Public Management, more demanding citizens, etc. (Peters and Pierre 2016; Newman, 2001).

In Spain, different scholars have analysed the governance of the social services. Arrieta and Sobremonte (2016) point out that the Basque model is characterised by its complex governance, with a fragmented system based on the foral regime that has not developed in the same way as the other pillars of the Welfare State. The main deficits include a lack of coordination and shared leadership, as well as a lack of social debate and institutional perspective, beyond the ideological perspective. Martínez Virto *et al*. (2017) identify some of the challenges for municipal social services based on a comparison of Navarra, Galicia, Catalonia, Castilla-la Mancha and Castilla y León. Among them, some related to governance stand out. Specifically, they highlight the lack of definition of the institutional mandate, budget cuts, the lack of regulatory development and strengthening of management tools, specifically planning and evaluation. Finally, Pastor (2012:153) analyses and evaluates the institutional mechanisms for citizen participation in social services in the region of Murcia. From his analysis, he concludes that most municipalities have promoted participation strategies that promote access to information, although consultation and decision-making are rarely carried out.

As mentioned before, few researchers have focused specifically on the political dimension of social services. Daniel and Wheeler (1989) wrote a seminal work on social work and local politics. In this text, the authors point to the importance of building close relationships between social workers and local politicians, and overcoming some of the barriers that have historically hampered their relationships. 'Frontline social service workers have an enormous amount of experience and information about services and areas of need which ought to be communicated to councillors and fed into the planning and policy process.' (Daniel and Wheeler, 1989: 6).

In the Catalan case, there is an important work written by Pelegrí (2010). He describes the profile of social service politicians; examines the role of different stakeholders and their relationships; describes the extent to which social services is an appealing area for politicians; considers its importance in the parliamentary arena and, finally, looks at the policy-making process. According to him, social services have not traditionally been a particularly important policy area in Catalan town councils, especially if we compare it with other areas, such as urban planning, economic development or finance. Others policy areas seem to be more attractive to those local politicians seeking political power, and social and media attention.

It is not the aim of this article to discover the reasons for this secondary position, nor the consequences of the lack of political attraction of social services policies. However, in Catalonia and Spain, social services are often perceived by the population as being for the poor, or those excluded from society. This perception is partially due to citizens not having a clear notion of the purpose of social services (Martinelli, 2017). While people clearly identify what education, health or pensions offer, they do

not know what social services can offer them. This misconception of the social services—based on prejudices and stereotypes—affects them adversely (Fantova, 2008). Others, such as García Manrique (2013), suggest that this lack of importance is because social rights are the only ones that can be satisfied through the private sector, as opposed to civil and political rights. In line with this, those who are wealthy enough to pay for them are able to overcome the lack of provision from the public sector, and thus do not consider it an important policy area.

Other authors study the role of local managers in social services. Reilly (2007) claims that the changing nature [of relationships] that local governments are facing is challenging, and the role and skills of managing must be transformed. This change is illustrated by the adoption of a skill-set, 'including managing in turbulent environments characterized by chronic funding issues, shifting priorities, special interests, and charged political environments, coupled with skills in engagement, negotiation, persuasion, and community practice, ideally position them to assume lead positions in local governments' (Reilly, 2007:65). Other scholars have studied the relationship between politicians and civil servants. For instance, Ramió (2015) claims that one of the major problems of the Spanish administration is the role reversal between politicians and civil servants which is particularly relevant in local government. This confusion is produced by the blurring of two legitimacies: one, democratic and the other, of knowledge. This can lead to politicians who are comfortable exercising the functions of civil servants, and civil servants who act as if they were politicians. Iglesias (2015) stresses the importance of strategic planning processes in local governments as instruments of innovative public management, and points out the importance of political leadership in order to move away from the traditional bureaucratic model. In the specific field of social services, political-technical relations are conflictive and situations such as meddling, professional questioning, ignorance of the field or clientelism are highlighted (Pelegrí, 2010; Roldán and Chacon, 1999). On the other hand, Carrera *et al.* (2019) point out some of the limitations of small municipalities for being favourable to innovation: one of the limitations is their amateurism, as they are keen to take action but sometimes they are not professional. This is also important as some of them are politicians but still working on their jobs, and that means they don't have the skills and the experience to deal with a wide range of problems.

Henriksen and Rosenqvist (2003) compare how municipal and county councils' politicians and managers understand elderly care policies. They identify different contradictions among them that can have an impact on the services users receive, as well as lacking clear goals, strategy and leadership. Brodie (2001), providing examples from a municipality, highlights five challenges for social care politicians, as their role is evolving. Some of these challenges are the need to find a balance between the national and the local perspective, the importance of the knowledge that local politicians have about their communities, and the need for partnership. As she claims, 'There is a complex network of connections and relationships to be co-ordinated and made to work in a coherent whole system. The changes are leading to exciting new councillor responsibilities and ways of working, and a different engagement with

communities and stakeholders. The fundamental political challenge is to make these structural changes deliver for the benefit of local people, so that they see real improvement in services.' (Brodie, 2001:7).

In relation to this, research on political participation has shown the correlation between class, social and human capital and electoral behaviour, and the negative consequences in terms of unequal political participation and influence (Krauss, 2015; Lijphart, 1997). In this sense, policies on social exclusion could be perceived by some politicians as being harmful to their electoral interests, especially in a context of individualism and weak community tiers. All of this is especially important to local politicians, as it is easier to receive political pressure from one's own constituents rather than from those at the state or regional level.

Finally, other researchers have studied the relationship between gender and responsibilities at the top levels of different policy areas. Traditionally, women have been underrepresented in political institutions and parties. In Spain and Catalonia, this gender bias has changed since the legislation on parity with men in politics was introduced. However, in his analysis Pelegrí (2010) shows that before 2010 women were traditionally in charge of policy areas related to care, and less represented in other policy areas that traditionally have had greater political power and recognition, for instance, as mayors.

METHODS

This article is based on fieldwork carried out in the Girona region, in Catalonia. As the aim of this paper is to analyse the role of local politicians in the governance of social services, the research is qualitative and based primarily on in-depth interviews with local politicians and focus groups with front-line social workers and those in charge of social services departments.

We conducted 17 in-depth interviews with three profiles of local politicians of social services from different municipalities: 7 social services politicians from towns with more than 20,000 inhabitants; 4 social services politicians from towns with fewer than 20,000, but that are county towns; and 6 social services politicians from county councils (Consejos comarcales), which are administrative and governmental units of counties. This selection is based on the local competences of social services in Catalonia. According to the law, municipalities with more than 20,000 inhabitants have the legal competence to deliver social services. On the other hand, municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants delegate this competence to the county councils. We also included 4 interviews with politicians from municipalities with less than 20,000 inhabitants, but which are county towns and have more than 10,000 inhabitants. Even though they do not have the legal responsibility, the characteristics of these town councils are interesting to study, as they are not as small as the others, and their politicians usually have part-time or full-time jobs. The 17 interviewees are elected councillors of the municipal governments.

   In total, 17 out of 19 of the politicians of the region agreed to participate and were interviewed (10 male and 7 female). The fieldwork was carried out in 2019, and this was an excellent opportunity to talk with them as they were at the end of their mandate, and most of them had already self-evaluated this period. The electoral term was from 2015 to 2019, and all of them were politicians for at least one mandate of 4 years. The interviews were face-to-face and structured, even though we had two samples, one for politicians from town councils, and the other for county council politicians. Both samples shared almost the same questions, with only a few questions being specifically addressed to each profile. These samples were previously discussed with two experts to improve the questionnaire and to obtain specific information on legal issues regarding social services from experts.

Table 1.

Municipalities and county councils, and population

Municipality /County council	Population
Girona	99,013
Blanes	38,813
Lloret de Mar	36,878
Olot	34,194
Salt	29,836
Palafrugell	22,725
Sant Feliu de Guíxols	21,721
Banyoles	19,615
Santa Coloma de Farners	12,894
Ripoll	10,913
La Bisbal d'Empordà	10,859
Alt Empordà (CC)	139,705
Baix Empordà (CC)	132,906
Gironès (CC)	190,786
Pla de l'Estany (CC)	32,006
Garrotxa (CC)	56,613
Selva (CC)	169,029

   Apart from the interviews, we also conducted two focus groups with front-line social workers (FG1) and social services department managers (FG2). In total, 11 participants with different profiles were involved: 6 top non elective officers or front-line managers of local social services, with more than 10 years of experience in the field, and 5 social workers from county councils. Of the 11, 10 were female, which also reflects the proportion found in the whole Catalan System of Social Services, a highly feminized sector.

All the interviews and focus groups were registered and transcribed. The information from these sources was introduced in a matrix of analysis, codifying the information and interpreting the transcriptions. Different categories and subcategories were used, based on different parts of the interviews and focus groups. On ethical issues, participation was voluntary (2 individuals declined the invitation); participants were informed about the content of the research, and signed an informed consent document. They were also told that the information collected during the fieldwork would be anonymized, and that if a literal citation was included in the text, in no case would the informant be identified.

THE GOVERNANCE OF LOCAL SOCIAL SERVICES

This analysis is based on some of the components of local governance, as well as the policy-making process. In concrete, we analyse 3 principal aspects: the main priorities of local politicians; policy and decision making on social services; and the agenda setting and role of different actors during the policy process.

The main priorities of local politicians

One of the basic elements of public policy is providing a solution to a public problem. In this sense, the definitions of the problems to be solved, or the political priorities that politicians have in mind, are important elements of analysis.

When we asked local politicians about their main priorities for the 2015-2019 term, or for the future, surprisingly they did not have a clear idea. Some of them understand the necessity to continuously adapt to a changing reality, because, 'We are in a very rapidly changing society. One example is the arrival of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFM); not long ago this reality was nonexistent. We have to be prepared, to adapt to the new times because of globalization, the crisis … a series of factors, which are not indigenous, because everything is changing. The main thing is to adapt to changes in society to make policies geared towards where they are effective.' (I1, municipality). However, many of the responses were based on daily activities or projects, but none of them had a clear policy orientation regarding important challenges for the coming years. They seem to feel more comfortable dealing with operational issues rather than thinking about complex challenges and introducing innovations. Operational, short-term and reaction-based perspectives prevail, as opposed to strategic, long-term and preventive approaches. Some of them, for instance, identify different issues, 'Energy poverty, evictions, creation of a community kitchen, providing food for the elderly, strengthening the food bank, and volunteering. In the latter, we put into operation a network of volunteers for different areas' (I6, municipality), but with a lack of challenging perspective.

Moreover, we identify a lack of a common strategy and strong networks among town and county councils. County council politicians do not have spaces of

coordination nor a regional perspective, and every municipality thinks according to its own interests. This is especially negative in regions such as Catalonia, with a territorial structure comprised of a large number of small municipalities. In a context like this, many services or resources should be defined beyond the municipal perspective, in order to guarantee efficiency and the same level of access to social services rights for all citizens, independently of the town they live in. But this lack of coordination is also present within town councils, where there is a lack of coordination between different departments. 'A global vision does not exist within the same city council, and therefore no resources are ceded between the departments that comprise it. They are laminated budgets, which hinder establishing a group view and setting priorities.' (FG2). There are some exceptions, which highlight the multidimensional breadth of social services and the main topics they deal with. 'We must make alliances with other departments. Especially in job development, redirecting newcomers or persons in precarious situations. Departments cannot be sealed, there must be transversality.' (I8, municipality).

Despite the fact that the Catalan Social Services Law states that local authorities must elaborate local planning of social services, most municipalities have not done so, and in the cases in which they have complied, it is understood only as a procedure, and not taken as seriously as it should be.

This lack of planning by politicians can be supplemented, in some cases, by practitioners. Some of them criticize politicians' lack of political ambition and try to introduce a more strategic orientation in their organizations' annual planning. In this sense, practitioners highlight the importance of having politicians with power within the town councils, as this can facilitate the introduction of changes and overcome certain difficulties, such as tensions with other policy domains and funding. 'We have the role of doing a lot of educating and even at certain times to show that that is the best thing, and that is where I put my efforts, to make governance possible. You need to take a very active role, and if need be you have to give the role to them [the politician] and get their idea done. You have to be very strategic to get something done.' (FG2).

But, apart from the absence of political priorities, what was most striking was that many of the politicians agreed on one priority, which was housing. And we say it strikes us because even though housing has been and still is a great problem in Catalonia, it is not a matter for social services politicians. That is to say, the majority assume responsibility for an area which does not correspond to their position and that they have no authority to act upon. Social services politicians do not have the competencies to deal with housing. It is certainly true that they can provide some services to people and families facing housing problems, such as evictions or homelessness, but it is not incumbent upon them to develop a general strategy to deal with this structural problem in our society.

This reality concurs with the conclusions of some debates in Spain and Catalonia on the limits of social services. Many authors agree that, 'defining and delimiting social services is tricky' Martinelli (2017:12), and others alert that if social services do

not have a clear scope of their main policy objectives, they will fail in the aim to build a strong new social pillar. This weakness of the Catalan social services is not due to the role of local politicians, but rather to a structural problem that should be solved as soon as possible.

Policy and decision making on social services

The second dimension of analysis is policy and decision making on social services, and we will focus on different aspects related to the policy process.

In this sense, the first thing to highlight is the significant differences between politicians on town councils and politicians in the regional administration (county councils). Another important difference is between large and small municipalities, especially because they have a different administrative structure and are able develop different kinds of projects and policies according to their human resources, budgets, and so on. Moreover, local politicians from large towns are more likely to work as full-time politicians, whereas in small towns, politicians have their own jobs, and it is more difficult for them to follow all the issues dealt with by the council.

In accordance with the lack of clear priorities, in many cases local authorities do not have institutional structures with politicians and practitioners, or with other types of non-official actors. The most common way to manage their responsibilities is through weekly meetings with department heads, as well as occasional meetings with other practitioners. Moreover, as we will see later, local politicians can have informal meetings with other actors, but local social services policies are mainly structured in a bottom-up way, without any kind of horizontal structure with multiple actors sitting together at the same table.

However, it is worth mentioning that some good practices have been developed in recent years, such as the creation of local consortiums. The main idea is to create a new organization responsible for social services for all municipalities in the management of local social services, and with a global perspective encompassing the entire region. This institutional arrangement has had positive effects—not only from the political point of view, but also from that of practitioners—and many politicians and practitioners value them. However, some of them recognize that every county has its own characteristics and political dynamics, and it is not possible to replicate innovations everywhere.

Agenda setting and the role of different actors

Turning to the next section, in this part we analyse the agenda-setting phase, including the definition of problems, alternatives and solutions; but we will mainly focus on the roles of official and non-official actors during the policy process.

Many of the politicians express their willingness to talk with all the actors involved in social services policies, and they claim they are always open to discussion with all

agents in order to listen to their opinions, suggestions, or to work closely on a variety of issues. 'I always receive everyone; I talk with everyone. I don't think I've stopped talking to anyone, nor will I. But I'm not committing to anyone right off the bat. Based on that demand, I speak to the affected or involved team—whether it's youth, housing, the elderly, equality, whatever. We look at it, evaluate it, and decide together. It has always been a matter of consensus, whether the request is individual or coming from an entity.'(I5, municipality). However, local politicians did not create any formal participation structures, and most of them are informal and sporadic. In this article we studied the relationships between 5 different kinds of actors: 1) Non-profit care service organizations and social movements; 2) Opposition political parties; 3) Council officials; 4) Service users; and 5) Other public institutions.

Regarding non-profit care service organizations and social movements, local politicians do not perceive their interventions as constituting lobbying. Some front-line social workers mentioned that some of them depend on funding from public institutions, and that could be a reason for this lack of political pressure. They mention organizations such as the Red Cross, Caritas (Catholic Charities) and others, with whom they maintain dialogue, interaction, work meetings, etc. As mentioned before, there is a lack of established formal dialogue frameworks (even though the law says that Social Services should promote Councils of Participation on Social Services). Thus, NGOs and third sector organizations are interacting individually with politicians. The only organization that is considered to be an actor presenting active demands that exerted pressure on them during the last term is the PAH (Platform for People Affected by Mortgages). Despite acknowledging their pressure and insistence, some local politicians recognize that their activity has indeed facilitated the implementation of better policies for solving housing problems. 'Social movements are very well organized, you feel politically pressured. And therefore, they provoke a reaction. I think about the nightmares that PAH has caused me. Now, seen in perspective, they have achieved their goals, and you have done more than you would have, had it not been for them. At the time though, it gives you a lot of grief… so well-organized social movements play an important role.' (I3, municipality)

Concerning the opposition political parties, social services are not usually an element of political confrontation at the local level. Social services politicians are rarely questioned on issues in their domain in plenary sessions. However, on some issues that could be potentially problematic, social services politicians try to inform all the members of the opposition in advance, preventing greater resonance if these issues were dealt with in the plenary and caught media attention. 'We have decided not to use certain issues politically. Reach consensus and involve the opposition and institutions. The opposition congratulates us, even twice in one plenary session, when there is no need…' (I2, municipality). It seems there is a tendency to *depoliticize* social services, leaving them out of political debates. 'Pressure in the negative sense, no. Yes, there may be some opposition proposals in a plenary. In my area the four years went very smoothly. We don't have much room to manoeuvre […] It's also a very dense area and maybe the opposition doesn't control it enough to make demands. The area

is complicated. There are other things that are more visually perceptible […] it is very airtight.' (I15, county council). In the case of county councils, as their role is not clear, this also means they have little political influence. Politicians on these councils do not receive pressure from local politicians, except possibly from small-town mayors not wanting to pay too much money for social services, as municipalities with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants have to pay money to county councils, which, in turn, manage services for them. In many cases, mayors are concerned about this, as they only want to pay an amount of money proportional to the number of users in their towns.

The third group of actors we will look at are council officials. In this case, politicians acknowledge their expertise and respect their roles. They express their willingness to work closely with them and also to be part of a team, especially with those who are in charge of social services departments. Most of them feel more attached to their professional members rather than to their party colleagues. However, some risks should be stressed. First, in small municipalities, where social workers on the front-line can receive a lot of demands, some of them are from other areas (because these councils do not have many professionals, so politicians can ask them to deal with a wide range of matters). 'We still find people with very welfare/assistance-oriented profiles.' (FG1). 'They don't understand that there are tempos and protocols. It has to be when they want to. And when you tell them no… They want you to do it now, and that is a very hard habit to break. You always need to justify yourself, so that they don't think that… even though you're just doing your job.' (FG1). And second, in large and small municipalities alike, there are politicians acting as practitioners, but also practitioners acting as politicians. It is important to establish limits and clarify roles. One politician, for instance, claims that, 'Neither going over the technician's head, nor leaving decisions in their hands' (I12, county council), while front-line workers, 'sometimes get stuck on small and operational issues when all it takes is a long view.' (FG2). Practitioners are the key actors in agenda-setting, as they are the only ones who can influence them, proposing demands and priorities that politicians can assume as their own. However, politicians highlight the difficulties of relating to a very specific profile of civil servants—municipal secretaries and auditors. 'They do much more policy work beyond their technical functions, probably due to a lack of political leadership from the directors themselves, because they are the ones who know the institution best, especially when someone new comes in. When there is a mayor who has been around for twenty years, they already have the knowledge to be able to oversee issues; but when someone comes in without much experience, they tend to give a lot of orders. They direct you towards their own interests.' (I10, municipality).

Regarding the relationship with service users, in the case of the county council social services politicians, they are rarely in contact with service users. They are not directly elected, and citizens do not know them or their responsibilities. In the event that they receive any demands from users, they would not act upon them, as they do not want to cause institutional conflicts with town councils. On the other hand, town council politicians receive a lot of demands from service users, which are mainly for personal reasons. As mentioned before, some politicians would like to give a quick

response to social demands, and do not respect the role of professionals, especially in small towns. However, many of them do respect the professional domain, and they always try to mediate or steer the situation to professionals. Many of them mention that they separate the political from the professional. 'Social services are overwhelmed, and when they have to say something they say it very directly, and then [users] are angry when they come to see you. And I tell explain it to them calmly and patiently, and they end up understanding. It's important to defend the technician... Sometimes it's true that the worker has had a bad day, but I won't tell that to the citizen either, you try to contain things...' (I7, municipality). As mentioned before, local politicians tend not to have a regular council of participation, and in cases in which they do have one, they assume that third sector organizations represent service users' interests.

And finally, the last actor is other public institutions. The main institution that local politicians refer to is the Catalan Government, particularly the Social Services Department. However, they do not interact regularly, and most of them only mention the moment when they sign a contract for funding and programs, or interactions on occasional issues. Some local politicians regret the fact that sometimes they should act together in order to put more pressure on the regional government, as well as to share similar problems, find inspiration to tackle some of the challenges they all face, etc. 'It's a top-down relationship. We don't have much influence, if any at all. They are the ones who hand it down. Another mistake, I think there should be more capacity, more encounters and meetings between councillors, to be able to highlight things that you think should be done, since who is in charge is the Generalitat [Catalan government] (...) I have never met with the delegate of social services of the Generalitat, we've coincided... but, one meeting a year? It doesn't happen, we seem to be worlds apart...' (I14, county council). Instead of this, most of the local politicians act alone; they do not know about other experiences or solutions carried out by other politicians, and which may be useful to them. 'I search, I call ... I'm very stubborn. I'll dig wherever I have to, write whatever is needed, and call whoever I must... and I'm insistent.' (I5, municipality). In this case, only social workers who are in charge of social service departments have common spaces, as they believe they help each other to better deal with issues. Another aspect to consider is the relationship with other departments of the town council, in order to coordinate a common strategy and set social services in their political agenda. Most of them express the idea that they try to promote a global strategy and coordinate with all the departments. However, they recognize that it is still difficult, even though all of them agree on the importance of working less in isolation and promoting a more comprehensive view of the problems they face.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper has dealt with the role of local politicians, as well as the governance of social services. As several researchers have shown, the role of local governments today

is increasingly complex, as new demands and requests arise from citizens, but without the inversely proportional growth of political, legal, and economic resources required to respond to them, with all that that entails for local governance. Thus, 'The ability to provide services has also become much more reliant on a complex mesh of private, public, and non-profit organizations.' (Reilly, 2007: 64).

Similarly to what other research indicates (Henriksen and Rosenqvist, 2003), it has been found that local social services politicians have difficulty prioritizing medium —and long-term policy strategies, as well as developing strategic leadership within their area of responsibility. In most cases, local politicians feel more comfortable dealing with aspects related to management than to politics (Ramió, 2015). This perspective contradicts what other research suggests, in which the importance of local politicians in encouraging innovation is emphasized, especially through promoting a clear strategy and overcoming certain limitations, such as, 'politicians' limited time horizons; an over-cautious approach to risks; the challenge of getting agreement in a complex political organization; and working in silos' (Munro, 2015: 224). Although more research is needed to delve deeper into this issue, some initial hypotheses lead us to point to several factors, such as a certain 'amateurism' of local politicians (Carrera *et al.*, 2019), who are unaware of political logics and who, in some cases, have not received training on local government or social services policies, as well as the lack of political clout, within local governments, of social services.

Likewise, local social services politicians have not exercised strong leadership among the set of actors with interests tied to social services. Their position has been largely discreet, open to participation and dialogue, but without a clear initiative capable of bringing together the various actors. Leadership skills are essential for the modernization of local government. Managerial and communication skills, strategic thinking, planning and prioritization, as well as the promotion of relationships and links with other councillors, political parties and other actors (Bochel and Bochel, 2010), are abilities that have been rather absent in the case studied. This discreet leadership of politicians does not exclude that, in the governance of social services, there are multiple relationships with different actors. In our study, we analyzed the relationships with non-profit care service organizations and social movements; opposition political parties; practitioners and policymakers; service users and other public institutions.

In the case of non-profit care service organizations and social movements, according to Lundåsen (2019), two types of relationships are identified with insider and outsider entities. It is clear that, with those entities with which it regularly collaborates, because they manage services delegated by the local administration, relations are more fluid, although limited to monitoring and coordination. On the other hand, with outsider entities, with whom they have no formal ties, relations are more conflictive, with pressure on politicians. It is doubly significant, in this area, that the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages is the organization that has put the most pressure on local social services politicians, who have felt pressured by receiving demands on one aspect, housing, which for the most part it is not within their competence, and in which local administrations have little room for intervention. Despite

this, housing policy has occupied social services policy agenda during this term, as in Catalonia evictions have been an important issue that has garnered great attention in the media and social networks.

Despite this serious social problem and the dramatic episodes that have plagued many families, local social services have not received much attention nor have they been the object of political confrontation between politicians with government responsibilities and those of the opposition. Social services is a depoliticized issue at the local level, as they tend to be left out of debates in municipal plenary sessions; nor are they the subject of major debates in the media, nor do politicians receive excessive demands from the public. If they do receive demands, these are usually in the form of individual demands, not collective ones, which dilutes the capacity for influence and political pressure. Probably, practitioners are the only actors who actually influence local politicians. As mentioned above, the relationship between local politicians and technicians is somewhat particular. On the one hand, politicians trust technicians and especially value their knowledge of an area that, as they acknowledge, is complex and in which they need their support in order to grasp all the details of a very broad policy area. In some cases, especially with politicians in small municipalities, as well as in the case of county councils, it is common for politicians to perform functions specific to technicians, and they often want to carry out functions that would not correspond to them. Likewise, in other cases, technicians also overstep their functions, and often adopt discourses and actions that go beyond the scope of their duties. In this regard, the cases analysed show that managers often have a more strategic perspective of what social services policies should be, and that they try to influence politicians in order to convince them to prioritize certain actions over others.

Finally, relations with other administrative bodies, especially regional and state administrations, are usually not very substantive. This is so because they are limited to administrative and procedural issues, as well as the fact that most politicians work individually. There are no spaces for coordination and joint planning between local governments to collectively pressure higher levels [of government] on needs that are common to the majority of local governments. It seems clear that local politicians must work more closely with each other in order to increase their power and influence in the realm of regional and state-level politics.

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