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CONDITIONALITY AS A PRINCIPLE AND POLICY INSTRUMENT: ASSUMPTIONS, DISCOURSES, AND PROCESSES OF LEGITIMATION

Abstract:

Conditionality, namely the principle according to which the fulfilment of a need through any form of public intervention is dependent on adopting certain behaviours, has become a widely accepted and almost taken-for-granted feature in many welfare schemes. This is particularly relevant in income support programs. However, conditionality is not merely a "tool" within policy design. Since the mid-1980s, it has evolved into a guiding principle for public action. Building on this significant rise, the article examines the various rhetorical frameworks and narratives – often shared between social workers and income support recipients – that are employed to justify conditionality in its implementation. By analyzing these narratives through the distinction between arguments based on principles of justice and those centered on effectiveness, the study reveals not only the diversity of legitimizing discourses but also how they can be reframed to support critical perspectives. Such critiques, however, generally address the specific forms that conditionality takes in practice, without questioning the principle itself.

Keywords:

Conditionality; income support; welfare legitimacy; argumentative turn.

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1. *Introduction*

Conditionality has become a widely accepted and almost taken for granted feature of many different welfare schemes and especially of income support policies in Europe. Notwithstanding a growing attention and mobilisation for "unconditional" forms of intervention (above all the Universal Basic Income), and the emergence of perspectives calling for an overcoming of this model in other areas of the world (cfr. De Sena 2018), the continental scenario sees the almost univocal presence of conditions regulating access to and use of minimum income, so much to become, in fact, a constitutive feature (Bolzoni, Granaglia 2021).

Given this scenario, reflecting on the discourses and legitimation processes that support the diffusion of conditionality in policy design and that underlie its application appears an extremely relevant task. Regardless of any consideration on its effects or desirability[1], this type of analysis allows us not only to understand the "secret of its success", but also the concrete forms it takes in the processes of implementations of interventions at the level of territorial services. And it is precisely on this level that the analysis proposed in this article focuses, with the aim of empirically observing the discourses and justifications that service providers and beneficiaries construct to legitimise, or criticise, the conditionality envisaged and implemented in the case of the Italian Citizenship Income (*Reddito di Cittadinanza*). The perspective adopted, however, rests on the idea that it is not possible to isolate this level of analysis from the macro one in which paradigms and political principles are shaped. The extensive literature on the relationship between "ideas and policy" (Campbell 2002), in fact, has for over thirty years now highlighted the connection that exists between worldviews that orient public action and daily implementation practices, via policy making processes and definitions of instruments. From this perspective, an understanding of the discourses of practitioners and welfare recipients cannot be separated from an analysis of how conditionality has established itself since the 1980s as a true regulatory principle guiding public action.

Therefore, the analysis of the genesis and nature of the principle is closely intertwined with that of its application, particularly when the discursive space in which they are embedded is placed at the centre of research perspective. In their reflection on the need for an "argumenta-

1 For an extended analysis of these aspects, see Busso et al. 2024.

tive turn" in public policy analysis, Fischer and Forester (1993) note how language is an essential ingredient not only in the conception and design phase of public interventions, but also in their implementation. Moreover, discursive spaces are not the prerogative of policy makers alone or of those in positions of power – albeit relative – in services, but appear to be shared among all actors, including those who confront forms of public action in the role of beneficiaries or "clients" (Surel 2000, p. 496). In this perspective, all actors share a discursive space, and the social and linguistic construction of problems and solutions becomes one of the arenas, if not the main one, in which struggles for power are played out (Fischer, Gottweis 2013). Within this space, not only are acceptable arguments identified, but desirable ones are also defined. As neo-institutionalist analysis (Meyer, Rowan 1977) already suggested, the fields share rules to which one must necessarily conform to take part or speak, and thus acquire capability for voice (Jacobs *et al.* 2003).

Going back to the concept of conditionality, its rise in recent decades has led to its development not only as a reform strategy but also as a hegemonic discourse (Fletcher 2020), to the extent that it has become a globally significant concept and a "hot topic" in welfare debates (Watts, Fitzpatrick 2018). This article builds upon this contextual foundation, and its research questions specifically examine how the arguments used to legitimize the principle of conditionality are applied in its everyday practice at the service level, and how these arguments both support and critique its implementation by practitioners and beneficiaries.

The analysis develops from a reconstruction of some of the policy narratives and discursive regimes that have accompanied the development of welfare systems (section 1) and then turns its attention to conditionality, tracing its genesis and main features (section 2). This theoretical excursus will identify the main analytical dimensions that will guide the analysis of the Italian case (which will be presented in section 3). The results of the empirical analysis will be presented in sections 4 and 5, where a typology of legitimizing rhetorics will be reconstructed, and an attempt will be made to give an account of how the underlying principles are used by practitioners and recipients even to give rise to critical positions. What emerges, beyond a classification of discursive strategies, is a scenario that seems to confirm the naturalization of the principle of conditionality, whose practical application but not its validity *per se* is questioned by all actors involved.

2. *Welfare functions and their public justifications. Discursive regimes and "policy narratives"*

It is well known among policy analysts, as well as considered common sense, that certain stances on policy issues simply cannot be expressed openly. As suggested by Elster, political debate has its own rules that participants must accept before engaging in it, including a tacit agreement on which arguments should not be introduced: «By the very act of engaging in public debate – by arguing rather than bargaining – one has ruled out the possibility of invoking such reasons» (Elster 1986, p. 113). Such an intuitive rule of thumb implies the acknowledgment of a well-known distinction in the sociological literature, which finds an effective formulation in Mills' difference between "reasons" and "motives" (Mills 1940; Burke 1954), the second not to be considered as "inner springs of action", but rather as rhetorical constructs that frame social interactions. The legitimacy of action, therefore, is not so much related to its root causes, but rather to the social acceptance enjoyed by the vocabularies used to explain it (Hopper 1993).

Social policies of course make no exception to this general rule. Being a "political artefact" (Goodin 1988), welfare is supported by arguments that reflect the social construction of problems and solutions, whose connection to the underlying causes that led to its establishment is necessarily loose, and whose legitimacy is subject to change over time. This is not to say that "good motives" are used to cover some hidden, perverse and unspeakable rationale. Rather, it simply means that the justifications will not be chosen by the actors in relation to the degree to which they conform to their own values and ideas (whatever they are), but according to their degree of "acceptability" to the listener.

The gap separating reasons from motives first suggests the necessity of outlining the theoretical functions of social policies prior to, and independently from, analysing the policy narratives employed to support and justify their implementation. At the ideal-typical level, the functions pursued by welfare can be categorized into three broad, analytically distinct categories that are not mutually exclusive in practice (see Tab 1). Widening the gaze outside the field of social policy, the three functions refer to what Anderson (1979) defined as the three "classic principles" to which all policy arguments lead back: justice, efficiency, and authority.

The first function is the guarantee of individual rights and of a life of dignity, which is rooted in Marshall's (1950) concept of social citizenship. This conception assumes that individuals are «ends in themselves» (Kelley 1998, p. 28) and must therefore be provided with instruments that ensure

well-being and individual freedom, irrespective of the macroeconomic effects of the provisions.

The second function underlying welfare provisions is the economic one, which posits that public intervention in the economy can serve as a catalyst for growth, an idea that has been reiterated across various intellectual currents over the past two centuries (Midgley, Tang 2001). In the specific context of income support, for example, this perspective often assumes a Keynesian framework, suggesting that monetary transfers increase individual incomes, thereby enhancing the demand for goods and services and triggering a virtuous cycle of growth. This cycle is characterized as a positive-sum game, in which the benefits of these policies extend beyond the immediate recipients to society as a whole. This latter assumption is a persistent theme in the economic justifications for welfare, although the rhetoric surrounding these justifications is subject to considerable change over time.

Finally, a third "rationale" for social policies does not have to do with the wellbeing of those who benefit from them, but rather with the interest of those who deliver them. Beginning with the celebrated contribution of Piven and Cloward (1971), to more recent analyses such as that of Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011), the literature has pointed out from many quarters how welfare policies can play a function of social control in a broad sense. In this perspective «the most basic purpose of poverty governance is not to end poverty; it is to secure, in politically viable ways, the cooperation and contributions of weakly integrated populations» (Soss, Fording, Schram 2011, p.1). Avoiding the disruptive potential of those living at the margins is therefore the main goal of public intervention, a goal to be achieved even if these were unable to ensure the wellbeing of the beneficiaries.

Tab.1 – Welfare functions

Functions and rationale	**Premises, assumptions and goals**	**Classic principle**	**Main beneficiaries**
Rights guarantee function	Social citizenship, equality, individual rights, equity, freedom	Justice	Welfare recipients
Economic function	Growth and stability of the economic system	Efficiency	Society as a whole

Social control function	Avoid the emergence of social conflicts, limit the disruptive potential of marginal actors, ensure the cooperation of a weakly integrated part of the population	Authority	The "rest of society" (all but the recipients)

Source: author's elaboration

As anticipated, these three ideal-typical "reasons" for social policies are not mutually exclusive, although they can obviously come into tension with each other. Moreover, they do not all lend themselves equally to feeding vocabularies of "motives" to support public action and to reinforce electoral consensus. The dimension of social control is certainly one that requires "careful handling" in the field of welfare, at least contemporary welfare. Indeed, if this logic is fully legitimized in the head of penal and security policies, in social policy the idea that interventions may exclusively serve the richest part of social stratification in spite of their manifest function can be a dangerous rhetoric. It is no coincidence, then, that the disciplining – when not repressive – side of welfare interventions and particularly those aimed at the poor is altogether omitted or, at least, embedded in a broader discursive process associated with the other two functions.

A first, and well-known, discursive strategy is to redefine the beneficiaries of the interventions themselves. By replacing the blameless needy with an imaginary population of lazy, fraudulent and undeserving poor, the terms of the problem are rewritten, opening up space for interventions more oriented toward social control (Schram 1993; Katz 2013).

For the purposes of this analysis, however, what is most engaging are the attempts to redefine the aims of control and disciplinary practices by merging them with the function of guaranteeing rights and/or with the economic function. The legitimization of control, in fact, does not necessarily require the construction of negative imagery on the recipients. Paternalism, for example, declines the imposition of conduct in terms of justice and in the interest of the beneficiaries of interventions. Since the poor are unable to recognize what is best for themselves or lack the will to act according to virtuous principles, any coercion on

them is meant to be "for their own good": a temporary – and necessary – limitation to grant them a future of rights, dignity and freedom (Mead 1997). Over time, efforts to reconcile the value-based foundations of welfare with a disciplinary approach have led to the emergence of various oxymoronic rhetoric, ranging from the "compassionate repression" that according to Fassin (2005) distinguishes the moral economy of immigration policy in France to Tony Blair's "compassion with a hard edge" (Busso 2017).

The British experience of the Third Way offers useful insights to highlight a second rhetoric overlap, namely the one between social control and the economic function of welfare. In order to ensure "dividends for all", welfare cannot afford to waste resources on undeserving subjects, and above all, it must – by all means – ensure the reintegration into the economic fabric of the recipients of the interventions. Indeed, this reintegration is a necessary condition for an "expenditure" to turn into an "investment" (*Ibidem*). Another way of justifying control in economic terms is shown by Dubois (2014) in his valuable research on anti-fraud policies in welfare. In his «socio-anthropological critique of the political implications of economic concepts» (p. 138), he shows how the economic vulgate not only influences policy making but shapes the everyday interactions that arise from its implementation. Showing taxpayers that «welfare institutions are no longer overlenient and do not waste public money by paying undue benefits to lazy or fraudulent recipients» (p. 146) is a typical rhetoric that blends the moral element with the economic one.

The arguments presented above, along with the notion that the disciplinary function is rarely employed explicitly as an independent rationale, ultimately point to a fundamental distinction between two justificatory regimes that have shaped the history of welfare: one grounded in justice and the other in efficiency. While a detailed exploration is beyond the scope of this discussion, it is important to highlight two possible perspectives on their relationship. The first focuses on identifying which regime prevails at a given historical moment, while the second examines how the two are reconciled to bolster reform processes and legitimize them from multiple standpoints. As Van Parijs (1990) argues in advocating for a universal basic income, no significant reform can occur without a "marriage" between ethical and economic considerations. Similarly, as we will explore in the following sections, the blending of these two rhetorical frameworks underpins the evolution of conditionality from a "mere" policy instrument to a guiding principle of public action.

3. *From instrument to principle: the rise and features of a "New Conditionality"*

As we have seen, the choice of certain policy instruments is influenced by the discursive space, the prevailing paradigms, and the dominant principles. The case of conditionality, however, illustrates a somewhat opposite trajectory. Indeed, "conditions" have always existed as tools or policy devices, from the Poor Laws to early interventions aimed at labour market reintegration[2]. However, the transition from conditions as a tool to conditionality as a principle can be situated in much more recent times, particularly in the second half of the 1980s (Busso *et al.* 2024). It is during these years that conditionality rises to a higher level of generality, to some extent independent of the form it takes during implementation, presenting the combination of normative and cognitive elements that characterizes policy principles (Howlett 2019). Furthermore, in line with this "leap in level" it becomes integrated into various policy sectors, marking its departure from being merely a set of devices, and therefore becoming the fundamental ingredient of a revitalized (and renewed) rhetoric of social control applied to welfare.

The turning point of this process, which is crucial for illustrating the partial redefinition it has triggered, can be traced to different moments that are surprising for both their temporal alignment and analogy, despite relating to entirely different domains.

The first concerns the field of poverty governance and social policies and can be identified in the publication of Mead's work (1986) eloquently titled *Beyond entitlement: The social obligations of citizenship*. In the preface to the text, dated April 1985, the author introduces a very strong element of discontinuity in the debate on welfare and public intervention in general, at that time (the first months of Reagan's second presidential term) crushed on the scale and scope of government spending. To the classic neoliberal argument in favour of reducing spending, Mead contrasts that «the main problem with the welfare state is its *permissiveness*, not its size » (p. IX). In his view, which will find confirmation in the transition from the so-called "roll back" to "roll out" neoliberalism (Peck, Tickell 2002), there was no need for a *tout court* retreat of the state, but on the contrary, its role could be used to favour the market. More specifically:

2 In Italy, for example, a Royal Decree issued in 1924 stipulated that unemployment benefits would be revoked if the recipient was unable to prove their status by attending the offices daily or in the event of refusing job offers (Sartori 2022).

> Society's interest in work can be greater than the individual's […]. There are good grounds to think that work, at least in "dirty," low-wage jobs, can no longer be left solely to the initiative of those who labor. The unskilled have too many other sources of income […], for them to work reliably unless programs require them to. At least for these workers, employment must become a duty, enforced by public authority, rather than an expression of self-interest (Mead 1986, p. 69).

Imposing conditions and obligations for access to social benefits would therefore be far more effective than simply cutting welfare to force the poor into the jobs that society needed. In laying the groundwork for what Mead himself (1997) would later call a "new paternalism," it was not only society's interests that were being protected; even those living in poverty would benefit from a more prescriptive welfare system. As Mead himself stated: «The idea is that the poor need support, but they also require structure» (Mead 1997, p. 22). And it is precisely the "structural" nature of the imposed conditions, as we will see shortly, that would become a central element of the new model of conditionality.

A similar approach can be found, in a completely different field, in another historically significant moment. In 1985, just a few months after Mead wrote the preface to his book, U.S. Treasury Secretary James Baker announced his plan to the International Financial Institutions for addressing the debt crisis in countries then labelled as the "Third World" (Babb, Carruthers 2008).

Secretary Baker's plan called on private creditors, international institutions, and regional development banks to increase lending to countries facing economic difficulties, but with a change in the nature of the conditions imposed. Until that point, indeed, the established practice had been to grant loans for specific projects, which in most cases were expected to produce material and tangible outcomes, or at least to link them to some guarantee of repayment capacity. Baker's idea (and not just his) was different. Borrowers were required to commit to broad political and structural reforms: not only to use the funds "correctly" but to transform their economic and political systems. This was the birth of what economist John Williamson (1990) would, at the end of the decade, define as the "Washington Consensus". The goals to be achieved, according to Williamson, could be summarized as prudent macroeconomic policies, openness to the external market, and free-market capitalism, with the means to achieve them being, precisely, conditionality attached to loans.

From a sociological perspective, as Sarah Babb (2013) suggests, the transformation initiated by the era of the Washington Consensus is much more than a process strictly linked to the economic sphere. Rather, it represents the es-

tablishment of a true paradigm of public action and a global institutional shift, which would lead to the creation of "markets everywhere" through what was, for the first time, labelled as "conditionality" (Babb, Kentikelenis 2021).

In both cases, the principle of conditionality refers to the idea that access to a resource or the fulfilment of a need (even a primary one) is contingent upon the implementation of specific behaviours or, more broadly, the willingness to undergo a "structural" or identity transformation. Moreover, both cases rely on the notion that strong public spending (rather than its reduction) is the instrument to trigger these changes. Among the many similarities between the two cases, the most notable pertain to the actors involved and the object of the contract.

Regarding the actors, those who impose the conditions act, at least formally, on behalf of a broader community (whether a state or the international community), while those subject to the conditions are actors in a state of need (whether poor individuals or poor states). There is an inherent asymmetry between the parties, stemming from an unequal distribution of not only economic resources, but also legal and symbolic ones, as the poor are often depicted as "lacking" and "inadequate" across multiple dimensions.

As for the object of the contract, in both cases, the conditions introduced extend beyond the "traditional" aim of preventing moral hazard. It is not merely about addressing the risk that either party may break the agreement by prioritizing its own interests over those of the other (Dijkstra 2002). Rather, a profound transformation is often demanded to individuals or states, frequently in domains that are only loosely connected to their original state of need. This characteristic is what most clearly distinguishes the "new conditionality," which has evolved into a fundamental principle of public policy.

Looking at the numerous classifications offered by the literature on conditionality, this turn may be defined in terms of a growing emphasis on what Clasen and Clegg (2007) define as "conditions of conduct" (the constraints imposed on individual behaviours to ensure that support is received and maintained over time) at the expense of "conditions of category" (the set of eligibility requirements that identify membership in a group entitled to benefits) and "conditions of circumstance" (which certify the extent and adequacy of the need). Similarly, the new conditionality increasingly takes on the features of what Dwyer (2019, p. 158) calls «transformative conditionality». In his classification, drawing on the temporal dimension, this category identifies the promotion of behaviours designed to endure throughout an individual's lifetime, extending intervention into all aspects of the subject's existence, as opposed to forms of conditionality focused

on crisis management or at most aimed at stabilizing the outcomes of an intervention.

The rise of conditionality as a principle, and the transformations it undergoes in this process, define the political and discursive framework in which policies are shaped and implemented. However, while profoundly influencing the perception of legitimacy regarding the behaviour of actors involved, the practice of conditionality is often delegated to service operators, who implement it with a certain degree of discretion (Kaufman 2020). It is from this consideration that the empirical analysis presented in the following sections begins. While it is true that individual actors possess agency, it cannot be overlooked that they operate within a political and discursive space where conditionality is a fully legitimized principle, also bolstered by rhetoric that emphasize its benefits for those who are subjected to it and its effectiveness within an economic system.

4. *Case and methods: the citizenship income and the role of conditionality in public discourses*

The analysis of the rhetoric used to legitimize and critique conditionality, presented in the following pages, is based on research into the implementation of Italy's *Reddito di Cittadinanza* (Citizenship Income, hence RdC) in four regions of Northern Italy: Piemonte, Lombardia, Veneto and Emilia Romagna (cfr. Gori 2023). This program was active from April 2019 to December 2023 and represented the most generous and inclusive minimum income measure ever implemented at the national level in the brief history of such policy in Italy. Its structure, which we will not go into detail here, was similar to that of many analogous measures across Europe, combining economic transfers with a personalized activation plan aimed at labour or social inclusion, made mandatory by the mechanism of conditionality. The latter, as designed in the policy, consists of the obligation to report to services to sign a work or inclusion pact and complete the activities it prescribes, to accept any job offers (if employable) deemed "appropriate" in terms of effort, location, and remuneration, and to devote up to 16 hours per week to "public utility projects" proposed by the services. Compared to previous measures, the potential conditions appear more stringent, a feature often attributed to the greater generosity of the subsidy.

For the purposes of this analysis, however, it is more important to consider the debate around conditionality than its specific characteristics. Indeed, the introduction of the measure was immediately accompanied by fierce contro-

versies, particularly concerning the risk of opportunistic behaviour, incentives for welfare dependency, or laziness (Morlicchio 2020). It is no coincidence, therefore, that at the time of its introduction, the policy was presented less as support for the poor and more as an active labour policy. This is also because: «In Italy, more than elsewhere, the right to income is not culturally and politically perceived as a citizenship right to be safeguarded, also because it is considered subordinate to the primary protection of other citizenship rights, particularly the right to work» (Busilacchi *et al.* 2021, p. 559).

The emphasis on the economic function (see section 1) is also evident in statements by then-Minister Luigi Di Maio, who explicitly referred to the possibility of triggering a "Keynesian cycle": «We will inject 8 billion euros into the real economy, and within a year, this cycle will ensure that within the first 12 months we will offer at least one job opportunity [to recipients] within the national territory[3]».

At the time of the policy's official presentation, the opening slides[4] bore the claim "a revolution for the labour market," outlining the objectives in the following order: (1) Improve the matching of labour supply and demand; (2) Increase employment; (3) Combat poverty and inequality. The role of guaranteeing rights, which had been central at the beginning of the debate, did not disappear but lost ground in the "vocabulary of motives" accompanying its introduction, not only to the economic function but also to the disciplinary one. In the same Ministry presentation document, in fact, the early slogan "no one should be left behind" vanished, replaced by the telling statement "no one can stay on the couch", which introduced the conditions imposed on recipients.

In this climate, where the political debate was more focused on reassuring non-recipients of the measure about the will to pursue a common interest and to prevent potential abuses, conditionality emerged as a crucial tool for legitimization. It is no surprise, then, that it also enjoyed strong support among the operators involved in its implementation. Among the few available quantitative studies, a research by INAPP (National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies)[5] reveals that the percentage of those who consider conditionality "an added value for encouraging the beneficiary to take action" stands at 91%

3 *Reddito di cittadinanza, Di Maio: "Non è misura assistenzialista, immettiamo 8 miliardi nell'economia italiana", in «Il Fatto Quotidiano»*,4 febbraio 2019 https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2019/02/04/reddito-di-cittadinanza-di-maio-non-e-misura assistenzialista-immettiamo-8mld-nelleconomia-italiana/4946731/

4 https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/RDC-Q100_1.pdf

5 With coverage of over 80% of social services and job centres involved in national implementation.

among social services officials, 74% among social services frontline workers, and 69% among employment services staff (Giuliano, D'Emilione 2022).

The data reveal that adherence to the principle of conditionality and appreciation for its implementation is widespread even at the street-level, albeit more intense among those not directly involved with the beneficiaries. The following analysis focuses precisely on this level and is based on empirical documentation collected in the second half of 2021 and the first half of 2022, consisting of semi-structured interviews with 131 recipients of the Citizenship Income and 74 operators involved in implementing the measure in both social services and employment services. The presence of numerous recipients in the sample is a valuable resource for this analysis, as it allows for the observation of similarities and differences with institutional rhetoric, based on the assumption, anticipated in section 1, that they too are part of a unique discursive space[6]. In this way, the perspective on the discourses surrounding conditionality "in practice" is enriched by the views of those who have experienced its direct consequences.

5. *Dissecting legitimacy: the elementary forms of discursive strategies*

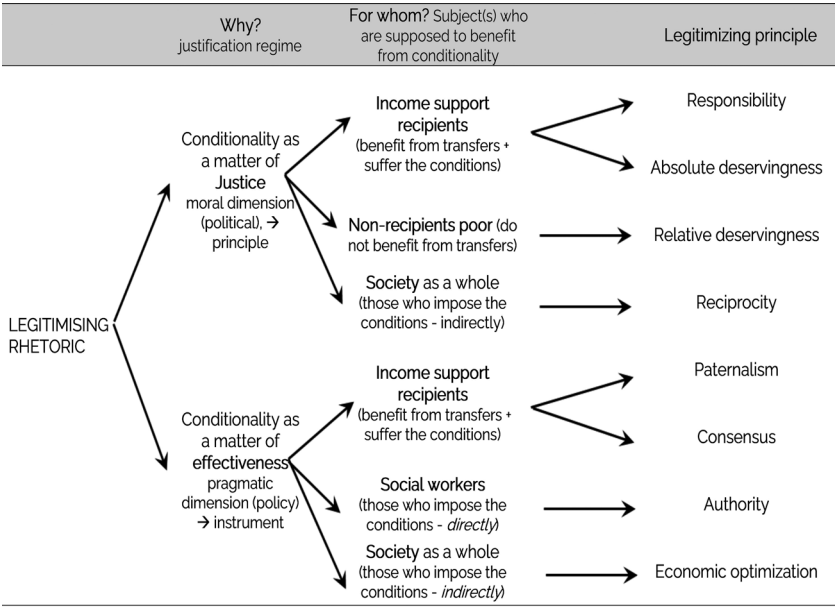
Beyond its widespread adoption and pervasiveness, support for conditionality is discursively composed of many different rhetorics, sometimes based on very distant assumptions. Referring to the categories introduced at the beginning of the paper, it is possible to affirm that we are faced with an especially rich vocabulary of motives, a feature that grant effectiveness as actors can, in practice, build their arguments by choosing from a broad range of possibilities.

Based on the analysis of empirical documentation, it is possible to reconstruct a taxonomy of the arguments that emerge among beneficiaries and service providers, representing the fundamental components of their discourses (see fig. 1). The aim is not to map the variety of positions in the field but rather to define their elementary forms. The taxonomy is built upon two dimensions, informed by the theoretical reflection previously outlined. The first concerns justificatory regimes, focusing then on the "why" of conditionality, and is divided into two approaches: one that views it in terms of justice (as a moral and political principle) and one that sees it in terms of effectiveness

6 It is important to note that contact with beneficiaries often occurred through the services. There is, therefore, a risk, of which it is necessary to be aware, of selecting the most successful cases that align with the services' vision. Nonetheless, also thanks to the guarantee of anonymity, critical positions have not been lacking.

(pragmatically, as a policy tool). The second dimension pertains to the subjects who may benefit from it and upon which the rhetoric is built, the "for whom" of conditionality, based on the theoretically grounded assumption that social policy's potential target is not limited to recipients alone (see section 2).

Fig. 1 – Taxonomy of Legitimizing Rhetorics



Source: author's elaboration

Delving into the specifics of the different types, a first rhetoric, grounded in moral and justice principles, views compliance with conditionality as desirable and appropriate because it is through this that recipients "learn" (and demonstrate) a sense of individual responsibility:

> If you don't respect them [the agreements] conditionality allows us to say: "you made commitments, you didn't respect them, we will reduce the amount". […] it is a different message to people from "I give you a purely welfare contribution" to "I ask you for a commitment and I evaluate…" (Social Worker 11 – Piemonte)

> They signed a service agreement as income recipients, so they have to meet the obligations, and if they don't, they need to be reported (Job centre worker 2 – Lombardia)

Conditionality thus holds intrinsic value, independent of the nature and outcomes of the conditions imposed. Support for the contractual nature of interventions and for the adherence to agreements emerges clearly and is also perceived among recipients:

> It's an important thing, I mean, but it's also right that it is this way. I'm not saying no [to the requests], in fact, there's really no problem, you know (RdC recipient 10 – Veneto)

Closely related, though analytically distinguishable, is the justificatory discourse that views adherence to conditionality as a means to demonstrate the deservingness of beneficiaries. In this sense, the strategy is not only about advocating the importance of individual responsibility but also about assessing the moral entitlement of those who access the measure. Hence, it is not only the fulfilment of the agreement that is important, but also the image of an active subject that is linked to the content of the requests and the practices they trigger. Such a mechanism is well known among recipients, as the following excerpt shows:

> I did it not just to earn some merit, but… also! Probably, (the services) saw in me someone who wanted to be involved and wanted to be active, not passive! So they probably noticed that this was there… (RdC recipient 12 – Lombardia)

The notion of deservingness that emerges in this context refers to the "absolute" conception of the term (Appelbaum 2001), which, in simple terms, involves questioning whether a person deserves a particular benefit or not. However, within a framework of limited resources, the legitimization of conditionality in terms of justice often rests on a relative conception of deservingness. In this case, conditionality would ensure a principle of equity not only by selecting users deemed morally suitable but also by identifying those who are "more suitable" than those who remain excluded:

> The public sector definitely has to [apply conditionality] because… If I have this resource, but everyone comes to take from it, those who actually deserve it are left out. It's a general point, you understand me (Social Worker 9 – Lombardia)

> I mean, part of the population has been left out of this measure… I would totally rewrite the welfare system in general (laughs), because the people taking advantage of the citizenship income are, in fact, the same ones who take advantage of many other measures that are assigned using the same criteria (Social Worker 1 – Lombardia)

A final argument related to the justificatory regime based on justice is constructed not from the perspective of the recipients or other poor individuals excluded from the measure but by looking at society as a whole. Here, the principle mobilized is that of reciprocity, which, as the following excerpt illustrates, can transcend the characteristics of individual measures:

> You're getting the subsidy for nothing! […] Here we go beyond the various discussions; it's not about the income, it's about finding a formula that, for any form of subsidy, whether active policy or not, anyone who receives it has to give something back… (Job centre worker 6 – Veneto)

Nonetheless, the need to "return to society" is perceived as more legitimate the more generous the monetary provision is. While it may be acceptable to apply an unconditional rights logic to minor interventions, when the intervention increases in generosity, it is reasonable to ask for something in return:

> Now the amounts are higher, so in theory, as a "counter-performance", people should give back to society what they take (Social Worker 7 – Piemonte)

In response to a value-based and moral dimension that raises questions of justice, conditionality is also legitimized as a policy tool. In this case, effectiveness lies at the centre of the arguments, often highlighting how the introduction of possible sanctions is a reliable way to compel recipients into specific paths:

> Conditionality works! Yes. Yes. […] It is, in inverted commas, a threat, even in the SMS that we send, […] we write "if you don't show up there will be sanctions" and that a bit already induces the person to come. So the conditionality, honestly, I'm glad it's finally working (Social Worker 12 – Piemonte)

This rhetoric is, predictably, more widespread among the practitioners than among the beneficiaries. Nonetheless, even among the latter, there may emerge a hope that positive outcomes for their lives might arise from this constraint:

> It's right to come here and talk; I said, "Okay, I get it, it's fair that I go." And deep down, I thought, "Wow, maybe they'll offer me a job, who knows what could happen in life" (RdC recipient 9 – Veneto)

When conditionality is framed in terms of effectiveness for the beneficiaries of the measure, the discourse often rests on paternalistic arguments, particularly on the idea that they are not capable of recognizing, or pursuing, the paths that could lead them out of poverty. In this case, the key element in determining effectiveness is not only the practical outcome of the projects but also the beneficiaries' understanding of their significance:

> The sanction is educational, not punitive! It's educational for our people! Huh! (Social Worker 17 – Piemonte)

> And then they get it; they understand, right? I mean, they realize they can still find a way to get active by doing… but at first, they might be reluctant because they don't want to, because they've been sitting on the couch [mimicking quotation marks] for years and years, so they don't feel like getting involved. But then they eventually understand it; this is definitely an incentive… conditionality for me, really… (Social Worker 1 – Piemonte)

Framed in these terms, even the imposition of sanctions can be perceived as a form of "care" (Eriksen, Molander 2019):

> The person might feel supported. So yeah, I totally agree on the monitoring issue, but I also completely agree on the control aspect. And I'm not just talking about checking demographic or income requirements, etc., to see if someone is entitled to the citizenship income… On the conditionality aspect, this is incredible, but it's the same people who say, 'I'm getting this help, and it's only fair that I do something' (Social Worker 37 – Piemonte)

> Because it has a positive objective; it's not just an obligation with a simple sanction. […] The intention was obviously to help people, not just financially but also to actually find a job, that's clear. […] So obviously, the aim is to improve one's situation in a definitive way, like getting back to work or finding a job and not needing to ask for support anymore, being self-sufficient and standing on your own two feet (Social Worker 18 – Piemonte)

The presence of sanctions and control mechanisms can, however, also be considered useful in purely instrumental terms to increase consensus around policies, as suggested by Eriksen and Molander (2019). Income support policies, indeed, risk being delegitimized by opportunistic be-

haviours that jeopardize their public legitimacy and, consequently, their very existence. Adhering to strict rules (which, as we have seen, filter the deserving) can thus foster support for the measure (*Ibidem*), thereby protecting it:

> Even all these controls, I agree with them: [minimum income] It's such a good thing that if it was ruined by the "scoundlers" in this situation… So many poor people may lose this opportunity. This is our point of view and I don't know if it is right or not (laughing) (RdC recipient 8 – Piemonte)

Rhetorics based on effectiveness, however, are not solely concerned with the beneficiaries. Conditionality is also legitimized drawing on its ability to provide practitioners with a professional tool that enhances their agency and strengthens their authority:

> I was able to get people to do things I never would have believed, really. I mean, seriously… it absolutely works because, after all, we're talking about a monthly contribution, and these people need it (Social Worker 5 – Emilia Romagna)

> …finally we have… professionally we have the possibility to say 'but you are not engaging in that, so… so sanction! (Social Worker 11 – Emilia Romagna)

> it's important because when you have an income recipient in front of you, you can have a lot of leverage on this thing, you can really make them weigh the fact that… "watch out kid because if you don't show up and if you don't show me that you are active, I will report you for conditionality and you will lose a month's income" (Social Worker 17 – Piemonte)

Lastly, conditionality serves as an effective tool to ensure efficient allocation of public money and, thus, to optimize the use of economic resources. Regardless of any moral evaluation, the idea is that investing in individuals who do not actively participate in the pathways represents a waste of resources:

> Since we're dealing with public money being spent, I think conditionality should have been put in place much earlier (Job centre worker 4 – Emilia Romagna)

If it is true that the appeal to the correct use of public money is certainly an argument straddling justice and effectiveness, the principle of optimization exists even without invoking the moral dimension, relying instead

only on a typically economic discourse. An excellent example of this type of argumentation is provided by the following excerpt, which compares the cost of sending a warning letter (that workers often do not like to send for various different reasons) with that of paying an "unjustified" subsidy:

> The problem with sending the warning letter… if you think about it, how much could it cost the job centre? Two or three euros? But what about someone who is receiving, maybe even unjustly, a benefit or not meeting their obligations? That's much bigger than those two or three euros! (Job centre worker 1 – Lombardia)

The aim of this paragraph, as mentioned, is to reconstruct and analytically organize the arguments used to support conditionality. Without intending to fall into inappropriate generalizations regarding their prevalence, it is impossible not to notice how the extraordinary variety of these rhetorics provides the opportunity to construct solid discourses from multiple perspectives. Nonetheless, as we will see in the next paragraph, such an extensive vocabulary of motives lends itself, at least in part, to being turned on its head.

6. *Pragmatic criticism. Conditionality as a practice and its limits*

Looking at the everyday discourses of beneficiaries and social workers, the different rhetoric highlighted above appear complementary, rather than alternative: the possibility of choosing between several discursive strategies offers actors valuable argumentative tools to support conditionality, but also to criticise it. Looking at the critics offers a valuable insight on two different levels. First, it allows for reflection on the combinations and ordering of the preferences of the criteria presented above. Second, it highlights a fundamental aspect that we will return to in the conclusion: while legitimization strategies view conditionality both as a principle and as a tool, criticisms primarily focus on its implementation. Although not statistically representative, the large sample of interviews analysed does not provide explicit references to the idea that income support should be a right, guaranteed unconditionally. This does not mean that the interviewees do not refer to a value dimension or the criterion of justice. However, it is the application of the principle that is deemed unjust, not the principle itself. This dynamic is also very common among beneficiaries, as clearly illustrated in the following excerpts:

> But if they make a way to look for a job that is also good for me… I mean, it is not that I have to accept everything because I took the minimum income: accepting the first job they found me is not possible. We have to change a bit here, because it doesn't seem so fair to me (RdC recipient 5 – Piemonte)

> I'm 55 years old; I don't have the same opportunities as you do at 22! The goal should be to get a job, to have a workplace. If you don't accept the job? Your income support automatically gets taken away! (RdC recipient 7 – Emilia Romagna)

In these two cases, the element of injustice is certainly present, but it does not refer to conditionality *per se* (that is, the existence of conditions), but rather to the manner in which it is applied in practice. Specifically, the first case points to the inequity of the conditions imposed (it is not fair to have to accept any job offered), while the second refers to a lack of differentiation in the target group (it is not fair to apply it to all beneficiaries).

Furthermore, a third argument is based on the lack of proportionality between the conditions imposed and the economic benefit. From a perspective of return to society rather than empowerment, inequity is perceived, by both practitioners and beneficiaries, when the conditions are deemed too burdensome relative to the amount of the subsidy, becoming an excessively high compensation:

> I came here a month ago and met with the social worker. I had never had any contact before […] that's when I realized, she made me understand that to keep my 50 euros, otherwise they'll take them away, I have to show that I'm either doing something for myself or painting benches, or cutting trees, or taking computer courses. And I told her, "I thank you, I know you're not to blame, but do you think it's worth it for 50 euros" […] I mean, come on (RdC recipient 11 – Veneto)

> When you're facing really low contributions, then yes, I mean, forcing people to do things often leads to people saying, "I'd rather give it up because I don't want to sit there proving myself, I don't want to be doing this," because the amount is so low that it doesn't make sense (Social Worker 6 – Lombardia)

Nonetheless, where this discourse is perceived as purely utilitarian, beneficiaries who invoke the argument of disproportionality are delegitimized, being labeled as "overly sensitive" or "particular":

> There are some users who are a bit more high, a bit more particular, and they protest more about the whole idea of, "Why do I have to do the community service and commit to 8 hours a week when I'm only getting 40 euros?" (Social Worker 5 – Lombardia)

The rejection of conditionality, aside from this latter case, can therefore be justified based on a principle of value. The social worker below, for example, bases this on her own ordering of "duties" and priorities, placing the care of the family above participation in activation projects:

> Well, you also have to use some common sense a bit. Seriously. Because then some people really… [bangs hand on the table] they tell you, "No, but if I called her, she has to come." Yeah, I get it. For sure, in the list of her priorities, you're really at… the bottom right now! Because the priority for someone with a family is to make sure the family is okay. So if you've managed to carve out that little bit of time to give them some peace of mind, it's only right that they do it. That's it (Social Worker 17 – Piemonte)

Also the rhetoric of effectiveness can be employed to fuel critical positions. However, in this case, constructing the arguments proves to be simpler, as it does not require delving into reflections on principles. Nonetheless, even in this instance, users and practitioners often feel the need to clarify that the underlying idea is not being questioned:

> The structure just doesn't add up… in my opinion, the foundation is lacking because the idea is good. What they say is right. I'll give you the income if you accept the three job offers they propose. That makes sense. And what about the rest? But there isn't any (RdC recipient 5 – Veneto)

In the face of a real or perceived ineffectiveness of conditionality, the entire framework of the measure can be called into question. Here, the interaction with the value and moral dimensions clearly emerges, leading to very different positions, as the excerpts illustrate. While in some cases, ineffectiveness raises simple doubts, in others, it leads to the idea that in the absence of an adequate structure, it would be simpler and less costly to consider an unconditional measure:

> So, to be honest, saying that just giving them the contribution would be enough and putting them through such a crazy process like the income support… well, unfortunately, I haven't really seen much of a difference at the moment […]. So I'm very doubtful, I'm really doubtful that all this framework, all this system, all these steps actually work in the end (Job centre worker 4 – Emilia Romagna)

> I mean, if it was meant to be like this, let's just say… let's just send the money directly to everyone who has an ISEE declaration below X and who is unemployed, and let's not set up this whole operation, because it doesn't really make much sense. It's just a huge waste of time for everyone (Social Worker 3 – Emilia Romagna)

Conversely, where there is a strong value-oriented perspective, conditionality remains desirable despite its ineffectiveness. In the following excerpt, this attitude is evoked in light of an additional element of systemic ineffectiveness, stemming from the fact that the imposition of sanctions effectively worsens the situation of need, generating a demand that services will still have to address through other means:

> Even if you know that it is then a vicious circle… since if you then reduce the amount, you create more need, and then somewhere the money has to come anyway. But it is a different message to people from "I give you a purely welfare contribution" to "I ask you for a commitment and I evaluate…" (Social Worker 11 – Piemonte)

The different configurations that emerge in this section once again highlight the flexibility of the Rhetorics surrounding conditionality, which allow for its application to be justified on moral grounds even in the face of ineffectiveness, or conversely, for its presence to be criticized on pragmatic bases, without confronting the delegitimization that an open critique of the principle would entail.

7. *What simply cannot be said (and why)*

To conclude this analysis, it is useful to go back to Elster's simple yet powerful observation that opened this article: in policy debates, there are things that simply cannot be said. Applied to conditionality, this premise translates, at least as to what it concerns the observed sample, into the impossibility of questioning its validity as a guiding principle for intervention models. As we have seen, even radical critiques are indeed only possible by focusing on its implementation, and namely on how it is operationalized or on the organizational dimension underlying its execution. Ultimately, this type of reasoning points to the existence of a model of legitimation that precedes the arguments presented in section 4, one that is not deduced from the content of the discourse, but rather from what is left unsaid. This dynamic has long been recognized in the literature and finds a place in various theoretical positions and disciplinary traditions. Among the categories that can be used to describe it, we can include Suchman's (1995) concept of "cognitive legitimacy", which rests on the idea of "taken for grantedness", as well as the notion of "discursive depoliticization" (Wood, Flinders 2014), where arguments are removed from political debate and placed in the "realm of necessity".

Processes of this kind apply to principles and instruments that have reached high levels of institutionalization, transforming them into the famous "myths" discussed by Meyer and Rowan (1977), ceremonially adopted by organizations and capable of «increasing their legitimacy and their survival prospects, independent of the immediate efficacy of the acquired practices and procedures» (p. 340). These institutionalization processes foster adherence mechanisms that emerge from the above analysis, which can ultimately be traced back to two opposing models. On the one hand, there is the model of "naturalization", where the actors involved effectively perceive principles and practices as "normal" or "inevitable," to the point where alternative possibilities are not even considered. On the other hand, instrumental adherence stands, where the goal is to be recognized and legitimized within a given field, even without genuine commitment (or even in open opposition) to the principle itself. Both mechanisms, despite arising from very different premises, point to the idea of a narrowing discursive space, where the proliferation of the "words of welfare" (Schram 1995), which provide flexible and persuasive arguments in favour of policy solutions, corresponds to a similar reduction in the terms used to fuel debate about the underlying principles.

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