Chapter 24
Delphi MIX for the Construction of Future Critical Scenarios in Social Distancing

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ABSTRACT

In the era of digital society, social research must devise innovative and adaptive methodologies in relation to new forms of communication and social interaction. The social distancing measures aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19 have produced the need for social sciences to face new research challenges by making the best possible use of information technology and tools. The researchers' aim is to present an innovative method of remote participatory social research, which can be framed in the context of future studies. This method, called Delphi MIX, has been developed by CNR-Irpps researchers since 2003, and its last adjustment has been designed as a consequence of the coronavirus crisis. Delphi MIX is a method for participatory strategic planning. It can be understood as a political agenda that aims to a desirable and achievable future.

INTRODUCTION

The Social Planning in a Future Perspective

The complexity and rhythms of modern societies expose us to choices that are often too conditioned by the present. This diverts the attention from medium and long-term objectives, without which it is not possible to build up future in a complex way, meeting the most concrete needs and desires of citizens and public administrations. The fact that the planning of the future suffers from the present and its problems, rather than foreshadowing objectives that point at an innovative future, is often a political limit. Public

administrations are called upon to provide immediate answers to problems which would require long-term planning. This is due to the search for immediate electoral consent, but also because of the lack of specific methods and competences addressing problems that cannot be approached in a general way.

As we know, the spread of coronavirus, during the first months of 2020, has generated repercussions on all fields of human activity. Therefore, interpersonal relationships have been strongly conditioned and limited by physical distancing in order to prevent the spread of the virus. This unpredictable condition has produced important repercussions on the psychological and relational health of the population. Serious interventions are needed to support the welfare system that must be defined and provided at the national level (Cerbara *et al.*, 2020). COVID-19 was an unexpected and highly intrusive event, which fully involved citizens' lives as well as politics. National governments and local authorities have been called upon to provide immediate answers to new problems. Often, however, because of the emergency situation, but also because of organisational limitations and lack of specific competencies, we have been faced with partial and inconsistent choices. These choices have proved not to be futureproof, also when compared to what has been implemented in other countries or geographical areas. What has been lacking most in such a time of crisis was an expert and organic judgment based on which it is possible to identify priority objectives to be achieved in a predefined timespan. Probably, this is one of the reasons why in Italy, several months after the start of the pandemic, the essential scientific and health recruitments have not yet been carried out or validated. At the same time, intensive care departments have not been substantially strengthened, teachers have not been trained for distance learning nor have sufficient measures been provided to support parenthood. This situation applies to the context of a country where many people, especially women, spend their own time for guaranteeing essential care services to their relatives, including the elderly. Such an unremitting effort acts against their work and the national economy as a whole. As is so often the case, there has therefore been a lack of an innovative vision of the future capable of rethinking specific human dynamics in a constructionist perspective. It seems, in fact, that we only have responded to the emergency at present, without having a prospect for the next steps to be followed in the medium-long term. This seems to be the result of an action that waits for the future, rather than shaping it. When the future is perceived as a coherent extension of the present, planning, which is among the most visionary components of the political action, then becomes lacking. In the absence of this perspective, the possibility of making a break with the present is withdrawn; a break that would be crucial in conceiving any possible future development through a multi-perspective approach.

Scenario planning studies are aimed at defining political and organisational interventions in social and economic sectors, and more generally in all fields of human action, starting from the strategic planning of the future. As foretold, however, these investigations are exposed at the risk of giving up to the temptation of believing in a logical evolution of time. The result of this evolution would directly derive from the characteristics of the present, but most importantly from its weaknesses. This approach outlines a future dimension which is radically conditioned by the problems of the present, rather than its strengths and opportunities (Cooperrider, Whitney, 2005). The exercise of competence, combined with a visionary capacity for addressing problems, can instead produce long-lasting constructions of the future. In this process free will plays a key role in overcoming a multiplicity of social conditionings laying under the socio-cultural identity. To what extent can external factors influence free will and political or individual choices? There is no simple answer to this question. However, given the intrusiveness of social conditioning on human attitudes and behaviours, it can be said that free will is often strongly curbed, especially at government level. Therefore, it can only be preserved through the exercise of an "informed will" based on competent and critical judgment (Tintori, 2012). Therefore, we believe that the construction of the

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