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## **Reframing social mix in affordable housing initiatives in Italy and in the Netherlands. Closing the gap between discourses and practices?**

### **Abstract**

*European countries are facing rising demand for affordable housing by a widespread and differentiated audience. Both in Italy and in the Netherlands policy-makers and practitioners address this emerging need by implementing new social housing projects targeting diverse social groups – such as students, young households, welfare dependents, and refugees – which results in a fine-grained social mix. This paper discusses the development of these initiatives within wider trends in housing policies and in relation to the domestic debate on social mix in the two countries. Drawing on Magic Mix and Housing Sociale projects as case studies, respectively in the Netherlands and in Italy, we aim to explore and unfold the contemporary meanings and the practices attached to the idea of social mix. In so doing, this paper paves the way for a new conceptualization of social mix in the current post-crisis and hyper-diversified European scenario. We discuss traces of continuity and discontinuity between these forms of social mix and the mainstream idea of tenure mix, which has been a cornerstone of area-based urban renewal policy in many European countries. This paper contributes to the existing literature by offering insights into new practices of social mix in housing sphere.*

**Keywords:** social mix; Housing Sociale; Magic Mix; Italy; The Netherlands

### **Introduction**

Social mix has played a pivotal role within state-led integrated area-based urban renewal policies of deprived neighbourhoods in many Western European countries (Van Gent et al., 2009). Policy-makers have claimed that mixed neighbourhoods would help tackling the so-called negative neighbourhood effects which stem from the socio-spatial segregation of poor populations (Van Ham et al., 2012). The essential philosophy of social mix assumes that increasing residential proximity between middle- and lower-classes would improve liveability, social cohesion and neighbourhood reputation. In addition, neighbourhood social mix may provide low-income residents with more opportunities to diversify their own social networks through social interaction with middle-income groups (Camina & Wood, 2009) who are supposed to act as 'role models'. However, despite being claimed as a solution for several urban problems (i.e. inequality, deprivation, social exclusion etc.) a large number of studies have questioned the presumed benefits of residential mix (Atkinson & Kintrea, 2000; Bolt et al., 2010; Bond et al., 2011; Kleinhans, 2004; Musterd & Andersson, 2005).

In this paper, we put forward an original perspective on the study of social mix by relating its mainstream implementation in the context of deprived neighbourhoods with ongoing trends in housing and broader societal developments in Europe. This includes the neoliberal reconfiguration of

welfare states, the effects of post-crisis austerity measures<sup>1</sup>, the continuing shortage of affordable housing for low- and middle-income groups, along with new migration flows enlarging the already strong diversity of European cities.

Recent societal trends and political climates might provide opportunities to reframe the concept of 'social mix', marking a turning point in the current debate. In so doing, we contribute to the existing literature by connecting the current debate on social mix to on-going macro dynamics. The central argument in this paper is that a reframing process of the concept 'social mix' in housing field is on-going. However, such reframing does not stand in opposition to earlier definitions of social mix in urban planning and urban renewal policies. In line with current policies and practices of social mix, this paper adds an original conceptualization of this notion taking into account the context of new social housing initiatives addressing mixed audiences at building level. Based on empirical findings, we unfold the 'social mix' concept along five main axes: discourses, target groups, practices, institutional frame, and urban downscaling.

Previous research show that meanings and outcomes of social mix policy are strictly context-dependent (Bolt & Van Kempen, 2013; Rose et al., 2013). In order to account for contextual differences, we draw on a multiple case study approach. The paper looks at contemporary forms of social mix in Italy and in the Netherlands, where innovative, small-scale social housing projects are being developed for a variety of low-income target groups. Despite remarkable differences between these countries, especially in terms of overarching housing and welfare policies, a similar framing of the concept 'social mix' in the housing practices seems to occur. As will be discussed further on, there are a number of commonalities between examined Italian and Dutch social mix projects that makes this comparison relevant. For example: the discourses attached to social mix, the identification of vulnerable and resourceful groups as project targets, a *quid-pro-quo* mechanism regulating the access to affordable housing, and an opportunity-driven approach adopted by all housing providers. We address two research questions: *how is the concept of social mix currently reframed in the context of changing urban and housing policy in Italy and in the Netherlands? What are its main features in terms of theoretical assumptions, policy frame, and target groups?*

In the next section, we problematize the concept 'social mix' in light of contemporary macro political and societal transformations. The third and fourth section briefly discuss the domestic debate around social mix in the two research settings, and relate it to the on-going trends in housing sphere. The fifth section explains the research design, stressing the context-sensitive approach adopted. Finally, we discuss our findings based on case studies analysis and interviews with local stakeholders.

## **Towards a reframing of the concept 'social mix'?**

The idea of social mix in Europe originated and developed throughout the industrial society, characterised by remarkable division between social classes and high stability of labour and housing careers (Sarkissian, 1976). In the post WWII Western Europe, flourishing welfare state and economic prosperity guaranteed relatively easy and affordable access to housing for large portions of society, especially middle-classes (Scanlon et al., 2014). Households' residential mobility was relatively low, which facilitated the development of territorially based identities, community and neighbourhood belonging (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013).

In the post-industrial society, many of these traits started being questioned. Since the 1980s, a process of erosion of the welfare state has affected many European countries, culminating in increasing socio-economic polarisation and segregation (Tanmaru et al., 2016). The growing gap between different social groups risks weakening social cohesion and hampering chances for intergroup relationships (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013).

Bearing in mind contextual specificities, overall similar trends are ongoing throughout Western Europe. Along with precarisation of the labour market, housing careers have become more flexible, contributing to reshape housing markets on both demand and supply sides (Arundel & Doling, 2017). Growing social inequality and the neoliberal turn of welfare state exacerbate the access to affordable housing for a variety of income groups, also as consequence of post-economic crisis austerity measures (Priemus & Whitehead, 2014). The reduction of affordable housing stock in largest cities

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1. Including the ending of large-scale urban renewal programs targeting the social housing stock in several EU countries.

affects also the ‘squeezed’ middle-classes (Jonkman & Janssen-Jansen, 2015), who struggle both to access social housing – due to residualization trends – and to afford rising prices on the private rental market. The precarious position of middle-classes in the housing market might depict a new scenario for – already questionable – theoretical assumptions and – unconvincing – empirical evidences of social mix policy.

A basic assumption of social mix is that poor groups living in deprived neighborhoods lack of positive role models, mainly defined in terms of social classes. Thus, the presence of middle-classes should help to activate mechanisms of distant or proximal role modeling, meaning stimulating marginalized people to emulate desirable behaviors of higher-class neighbors either by observing them from distance or by having direct social interaction (Graves, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. Yet, research show that despite residential propinquity, middle-classes tend to avoid mixing with lower-class neighbours in public spaces and in other domains of everyday life (Pinkster, 2014; Watt, 2009). Indeed, social contact is much more a matter of lifestyles than simply tenure mixing (Kleinhans, 2004). In addition, role models other than neighbours, notably mass media, are able to influence individual behaviors too (Bandura, 1977).

Social mix policies in the post 1990s aim to increase neighbourhoods’ diversity, mainly defined in terms of residents’ income, social classes and tenure composition of the housing stock. However, a recent strand of research puts emphasis on wider forms of diversity characterizing the 21<sup>st</sup> century society, attaching this term with new meanings and bringing about broader implications. Next to ‘super-diversity’ (Vertovec, 2007), Tasan-Kok and colleagues (2013) coined the term ‘hyper-diversity’ to indicate an “intense diversification of the population, not only in socio-economic, social and ethnic terms, but also with respect to lifestyles, attitudes and activities” (p. 12), suggesting that income and social class alone might not be any more the only criteria for effective diversity-oriented policy design. Adopting a hyper-diversity perspective might question the basis for the definition of role model groups since an interpretation of role models primarily grounded on socio-economic criteria (i.e. income and social classes) is central to the social mix debate. In addition, policy discourse is apparently shifting from concerns about ‘too much homogeneity’ to ‘too much diversity’, loading the latter with increasing negative connotation (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013) that questions the desirability of social mixing.

The role of residential neighbourhood in shaping people’s networks and social contact is object of academic debate, in light of increasing mobility and online communications opportunities (Van Kempen & Wissink, 2014). A ‘sedentarist’ view of social mix has dominated policy assumptions (Gwyther, 2009), which hardly accounts for social relations and interaction out of residential neighbourhoods. The different ways of experiencing social contact (i.e. through ICT) question the territorially-based character of social mix, and more broadly the effectiveness of area-based policies (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013).

In order to address similar challenges, like those aforementioned, urban and housing policy-makers are tempted to copy and paste ideas, tools and policies, often without proper accountability of national and local peculiarities. Social mix is no exception, as this concept has travelled worldwide in the past (Bridge et al., 2012).

In the next two sections, we review the debate on social mix in Italy and in the Netherlands in relation to each domestic context and main trends in housing. Particular attention will be paid to address the ‘local’ declination of general concepts that have appeared most frequently in the literature debate on social mix, notably *discourses* (i.e. rationale, aims and institutional frame of social mix) and *practices* (i.e. scopes, target groups and means of implementation of social mix).

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2. See also the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954).

## Social mix: a ‘silent issue’ in the Italian housing debate

With public housing stock accounting for only 5.5% and a homeownership rate of around 72% (Eurostat, n.d.), Italy is an emblematic representation of the metaphor ‘housing as the wobbly pillar under of the welfare state’. As a typical Southern European housing system (Allen et al., 2004), a residual share of public housing accommodates the most vulnerable groups, while the private sector has taken up the task of providing housing for more affluent groups, including low-middle income households.

Since the 2001 reform of Constitution, housing policy in Italy has been regional-based. A devolution process has transferred housing competences from the central state to regions, creating a fragmented national scenario in terms of housing policy (Mugnano & Palvarini, 2013). The reform also laid the foundations for greater involvement of third-sector organisations (foundations, cooperatives, private-social actors) in the provision of local welfare services and housing.

One of the most important changes affecting the Italian housing system concerns the shift towards a public-private cooperation. Besides existing public housing supply (*Edilizia Residenziale Pubblica* in Italian), which is fully provided by public housing companies or municipalities, third sector housing organisations (i.e. foundations, cooperatives or social enterprises) deliver and manage a new or refurbished supply of social rented units (known as *Housing Sociale* in Italian). Most of newly constructed Housing Sociale units are built through new financing arrangements such as the Integrated Funding System (*Sistema Integrato di Fondi*) that combines national and local funds to build new social housing (see Housing Plans 2009 and 2014).

One of the major drivers of such governance shift is the need to address a widening demand for affordable housing of specific segments of population, which a dualistic housing system is unable to meet. These segments, known as grey area (*area grigia*), vary according to socio-economic and social conditions (people with unstable income, low-middle income households, single-parent households, young households, temporary workers), ethnic background (migrants), and lifestyles (students). These groups are entrapped in a limbo either because the availability of public housing is insufficient to cover their needs, or because they cannot afford rising prices in the private rental market. Such unmet housing need has been detected by third-sector housing organisations (i.e. housing cooperatives or foundations) through a (rising) number of housing projects labelled as ‘Housing Sociale’ (HS). We refer to HS as a set of social-oriented housing projects targeting a diversity of groups in housing need, the grey area, who lacks of adequate housing protection and struggle to find affordable homes, especially in largest cities.

The 2009 National Housing Plan formalises such new configuration of housing system, within which third-sector actors consolidated their role in providing good quality housing at affordable prices to heterogeneous groups, which would serve also as means to make local communities more cohesive (Poggio & Boreiko, 2017).

The political *discourse* around social mix in Italy is rather ‘fuzzy’ and unclear, especially if compared to the Dutch counterpart (see next section). The relevance of such policy tool in the Italian context might be questionable. There is a common agreement on the fact that Italian ‘compact’ cities can benefit from a good level of socio-ethnic mix. Low levels of socio-spatial segregation along with residual share of public housing have made the rhetoric of social mix less pervasive compared to other EU countries (Bricocoli & Cucca, 2014), though it is still present. Traces of social mix can be found already in the first public housing national programme in 1949 (*Piano Fanfani*), which implicitly encouraged the residential proximity between social rented tenants and homeowners (*target groups*) (Mugnano & Palvarini, 2013). More recently, several policy tools have been deployed to diversify the social composition of public housing tenants. In 1993, a right-to-buy law (*Legge 560/1993*) entered into force creating the conditions for tenure mixing operations (*practices*) within public rented sector. This law can be considered part of a broader and longstanding strategy of demise of public housing stock by the national government.

The fragmentation of welfare and housing policy has increased the territorial divide amongst regions and cities. Within the national scenario, the Lombardy region can be considered a best practice in terms of ability to combine public-private partnerships aimed to promote social innovation in welfare and housing initiatives. In this framework, Lombardy – of which Milan is the capital – stood out as a breeding institutional ground for the development of social mix policies since the 2000s. In line with other EU countries, local authorities adopted social mix policy in the *frame* of

urban renewal programmes at *neighbourhood scale* (Mugnano & Costarelli, 2015) as well as in housing policies that deliver new residential opportunities for specific *target groups*, like middle-classes (Belotti, 2017).

The Italian housing system is currently experiencing a transition phase. At institutional level, public-private partnerships strengthen the engagement of third-sector housing organisations in new practices of affordable housing solutions targeting socially mixed groups (i.e. HS).

In today's public debate, HS is presented as a versatile tool to cope with a number of social vulnerability-related issues. Improving social cohesion through community building represents one of the most commonly used *discourses*, which is associated to such housing practices. Not the least, in a country where welfare and housing were traditionally separated domains of public action (see Allen et al., 2004), the HS model aims to bridge this gap by acknowledging housing as a component of broader social policy. We will now switch our perspective to the Dutch context and debate.

### **A persistent ideal in a changing context: the Netherlands**

The share of the social rented stock in the Netherlands is currently around 30% (Eurostat, n.d.), revealing a gradual decrease over the last 20 years. Traditionally attractive and accessible for a wide range of income groups, including middle-classes (Priemus, 2003), social housing is provided by housing associations (*woningcorporaties*), private organisations operating within the frame of specific public law (*Woningwet*) since the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Affordable housing provision for all socioeconomic group is a cornerstone of the Dutch welfare state, classified as a crossover between conservative and socio-democratic regimes (Hoekstra, 2003). Nevertheless, the Dutch social rented sector is increasingly moving towards residualization, targeting almost exclusively low-income groups (Hoekstra, 2017). Such a shift is also a manifestation of the neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state since the 1990s (Musterd, 2014). Besides the residualization of the social rental sector, the Dutch housing market is experiencing flexibilization and precarisation trends (for extended discussion see Huisman, 2016). In 2015, a new law entered into force (*Wet Doorstroming Huurmarkt*) allowing new forms of short-term rental contracts. The Dutch rental market discloses a mismatch between those households who benefit from a 'protected' position in the rental market and those who struggle to access it on permanent and affordable basis.

In recent years, the question of housing affordability has become more pertinent in the Netherlands and it is now back at the centre of the political discussion. This issue was first raised following the large inflow of refugees and asylum seekers in 2015. Soon after, along with recent welfare reforms of the care system and social services (Dijkhoff, 2014) and the introduction of stricter allocation rules of social housing to the lowest-income tenants (*passend toewijzen*) (Hoekstra, 2017), it became clear that a pool of people (so-called *spoedzoekers*) was also concerned by similar problems. According to recent welfare reforms, welfare dependents such as elderly, psychiatric patients and homeless people are now supposed to live independently. Several housing associations started to think about possible solutions to accommodate a plurality of social groups urgently looking for housing who differ in terms of lifestyles (students), ethnicity (status holders, migrant workers), and social conditions (young households, people with mental disorders or less invalidating problems, homeless, anti-squatters<sup>3</sup>). These groups face difficulties in accessing the regular rental market, either due to affordability-related problems in the private sector or long waiting lists in the social rental sector caused by strong competition. A recent Dutch research report (Van der Velden et al., 2016) introduced the term 'Magic Mix' (MM) to indicate a new typology of small-scale social housing initiatives, mainly on temporary basis, coming to the forefront in several middle-sized and large Dutch cities.

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3. Renters occupying empty buildings as live-in security guards (Huisman, 2016).

Social mix is a longstanding issue in the Dutch urban and housing policy. *Discourses* and *practices* around the notion of social mix have been cyclical, following government priorities and different urban agenda (Van Kempen & Bolt, 2009; Van der Velden et al., 2018). The idea of social mix became very dominant in policy discourses and practices throughout the 1990s in the context of urban restructuring programmes (*institutional frame*) tackling socio-spatial segregation. From 1994 onwards, the Big Cities Policy enabled 31 cities to draft physical and socio-economic measures to revitalise problematic districts. More specifically, the Urban Renewal Act (*Wet Stedelijke Vernieuwing*) of 2000 launched long-term urban restructuring process that included demolition and reconstruction operations in post-WWII social housing districts (Van Kempen & Bolt, 2009; Kleinhans, 2012).

At the beginning of the new millennium, the debate on social mix shifted from socioeconomic to ethnic terms, as the spatial concentration of ethnic minorities was increasingly perceived as detrimental to integration (Van Kempen & Bolt, 2009). Building on the policy as carved out in the Urban Renewal Act, a slightly different policy approach (*40 Wijkenaanpak*) targeted 40 Dutch urban districts from 2007 onwards, aiming to improve social cohesion in those neighbourhoods with an over-representation of ethnic minorities and low-income households. Housing diversification (*practice*), which increases the proximity between low- and middle-income households (*target groups*), continued to play a pivotal role in the achievement of mixed post-war neighbourhoods. In this paper we explore how the ideal of social mix is being reframed since the ending of Urban Renewal Act in 2015 within the context of MM initiatives.

## **Research design**

Previous research showed that the connotation of social mix, especially in terms of discourses and aims, is strongly shaped by contextual differences at national and/or local levels (Rose et al., 2013; Veldboer et al., 2002). Thus, a multiple case studies research in different settings (countries) allows a greater understanding of each peculiarities. Our focus is on the mobile nature of social mix concept and on its implications for policy and practices. Following McCann and Ward's (2012) approach of 'policy assemblage, mobility and mutations', we consider social mix as dynamic and mobile assemblage of ideas, assumptions and practices, which we aim to unfold in the context of affordable housing initiatives in Italy and in the Netherlands.

Considering the exploratory nature of our research questions and our available resources, we adopted a qualitative approach using four case studies (social housing projects). Social housing initiatives include two HS and two MM projects respectively in Italy and the Netherlands, chosen upon specific criteria: (1) realisation time after 2008 (outbreak of economic crisis); (2) target socially heterogeneous groups; (3) location in cities with high problems of housing affordability.

The Italian case studies are *Ospitalità Solidale* and *Casa dell'Accoglienza*. The first project consists of 24 small-sized dwellings scattered in several public housing estates situated in two neighbourhoods in Milan, i.e. Niguarda and Molise Calvaire. Dwellings are allocated at below market rent price for maximum two years to young people aged between 18 and 30 years old, who are asked to engage in supportive and solidarity activities, such as organizing convivial moments, meals or gardening workshops, to the benefit of sitting public housing tenants for at least 10 hours per month. *Casa dell'Accoglienza* provides short-term accommodation for a variety of households in need of affordable and/or temporary housing solutions in a peripheral municipality, i.e. San Donato Milanese, located in the southeast of Milan. By entering such housing project, the most vulnerable tenants (i.e. evicted households, welfare dependents etc.) will have the opportunity to expand their social networks and benefit from the contact with other 'resourceful' tenants (i.e. students) to overcome temporarily problematic situations.

The Dutch case studies are *Startblok Riekerhaven* in Amsterdam and *Majella Wonen* in Utrecht. *Startblok Riekerhaven* consists of more than 500 social housing pre-fabricated units, which are home to young people between 18 and 27 years old. Half of the tenants are asylum seekers and half are Dutch. It is assumed that the integration of newcomers in the city, especially in terms of learning new language, works better if Dutch people and asylum seekers live close to each other. In this project, all tenants are actively involved in the housing management process (self-management) for which they are responsible. The *Majella Wonen* project in Utrecht has been established in a residential estate that

was initially set to be demolished. It consists of 70 social housing dwellings. Half of these dwellings are allocated to 'regular' tenants and half to 'vulnerable' tenants who have recently left social care institutions or shelter facilities. The aim of Majella Wonen project is to build a supportive community which can facilitate vulnerable tenants to form new social networks that will ultimately improve their social inclusion in society. Similarly to Ospitalità Solidale in Milan, also in Majella Wonen 'regular' tenants are expected to contribute to community building activities, for 16 hours per month, as part of their tenancy agreement.

Tables 1 and 2 offer a schematic description of these case studies. From a comparative overview, it can be noticed that in Italy both the scale of initiatives and the length of tenancy are far smaller than in the Netherlands. We interpret such dissimilarity as a prominent sign of distinct traditions in social housing development and diffusion of social mix strategy in the two national contexts (see previous sections).

### *Methods and analysis*

Between January and September 2017, we conducted 26 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (one hour each on average) through a snowball sampling approach. Respondents included three key informants (researchers and civil servants), 17 housing practitioners and project managers (seven in Italy and ten in the Netherlands), and six public servants (four in Italy and two in the Netherlands). We did not include tenants as potential targets of our interviews since the aim of this paper, which is part of a larger research project, was to study the concept of social mix from a practitioners and policy-makers' perspective. We were interested to explore how practitioners and policy-makers implement social mix, including the discourses, rather than exploring tenants' perceptions and opinions about living in a mixed housing project.

Interviews were taped, transcribed, and coded using Atlas.ti. Coding strategy was mainly a deductive approach deriving from the mainstream framing of the concept 'social mix' as found in the literature, that is policymakers' ambition to attract middle-class (*target groups*) 'role model' households (*discourse*) in low-income neighbourhoods (*scale*), by means of tenure diversification (*practices*) in the frame of urban renewal policy (*institutional frame*). Accordingly, coding procedure resulted in two main domains, *discourses* and *practices*, and three sub-domains, *target groups*, *institutional frame*, and *urban downscaling*, which all together build up a new framing of the concept 'social mix' (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Schematic overview of concepts and domains.

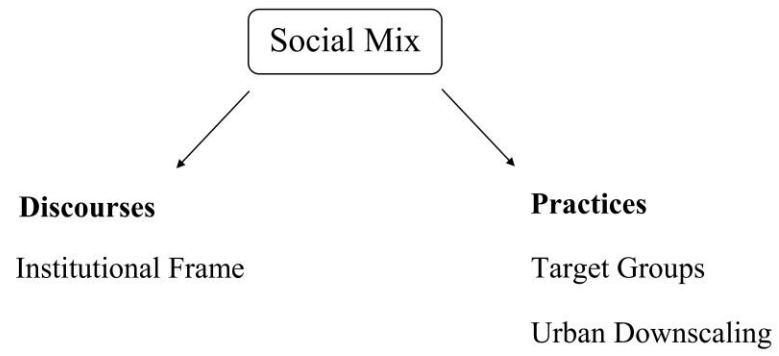




Table 1. Main features of the case studies (Housing Sociale).

Name	Dwellings	Tenancy (max)	Target groups	Partners	Start	Characteristics
Ospitalità Solidale	24	Two years	Young people (18-30 years old) mixed up with low-income, public housing tenants.	Housing cooperative DAR=CASA, associations Arci, Comunità Progetto, Municipality of Milan.	2014	Scattered social mix programme in refurbished public housing units in District 4 and 9.
Casa dell'Accoglienza	Six (three studios, three two-room apartments)	18 months	People with disability or less invalidating problems, students, elderly, low-middle income groups, single parent households.	Municipality of San Donato Milanese, cooperatives: La Strada, Consorzio SIS, Spazio Aperti Servizi.	2015	Temporary accommodation for households in urgent housing need. Two-storeys house with communal ground floor available to tenants and neighbourhood initiatives.

Source: own elaboration based on interviews transcripts

Table 2. Case studies description (Magic Mix).

Name	Dwellings	Tenancy (max)	Target groups	Partners	Start	Characteristics
Startblok Riekerhaven	565 (463 studios, 102 rooms in shared units)	Five years	Status-holders and Dutch students or workers (18-27 years).	Housing association De Key, housing organisation Socius Wonen, Municipality of Amsterdam.	2016	Two/three-storeys blocks of removable housing units where tenants are mixed door-to-door. Renters are expected to manage communal spaces and liveability-related issues by themselves.
Majella Wonen	70 social housing units	Three years	35 dwellings allocated to self-selected tenants (Portaal) and 35 dwellings to vulnerable ones (De Tussenvoorziening clients).	Housing association Portaal, social service organisation De Tussenvoorziening.	Mid-2016	The community provides guidance and support to help vulnerable tenants gaining self-reliance. Tenants are mixed door-to-door.

Source: own elaboration based on interviews transcripts.

## Rephrasing the concept ‘social mix’ in five domains

### *Discourses*

Common to all examined initiatives, social mix is, above all, a by-product of affordable housing projects, which primarily seek to satisfy the housing demand of different groups. However, higher expectations are attached to the mix between vulnerable (i.e. status-holders, welfare dependents, homeless) and resourceful groups (mainly students and young people) in terms of better opportunities of social inclusion for the former.

Bearing in mind that in socially mixed communities inter-group interaction was often hampered by middle-classes’ avoidance towards marginalised groups (see literature section), these initiatives put forward a new perspective. As one Dutch respondent argued:

We wanted to transform NIMBY to WIMBY approach (...) by appealing to people who think they can live together with fragile people and maybe give some help, it’s all right for them. We appeal to a very different interest and I think that’s the genius of this concept. We give different starts by appealing to positive energies and interests...so from NIMBY to WIMBY it’s the most crucial idea and maybe even a strategy for our housing association because we have more and more people in similar situations (Practitioner, Portaal)<sup>4</sup>.

Interestingly, social inclusion as project goal builds on the idea of self-reliance. By joining these projects on a temporarily basis, vulnerable tenants can find a supportive environment to start afresh after difficult periods of their life. This argument applies especially for those projects where vulnerable tenants used to rely on public welfare support (i.e. Majella Wonen and Casa dell’Accoglienza). In both cases practitioners aim to boost self-reliance by shaping vulnerable tenants behaviour (see Manzi, 2010). Yet, in the two contexts, this goal is pursued in different ways. In Casa dell’Accoglienza, project staff (including social workers) designs *ad hoc* programs during tenant(s) stay in the project as a tool to achieve desired changes:

Local authorities demand us to draft a training project to foster self-sufficiency (*accompagnamento all’autonomia*) (...) for each individual according to his/her need. Self-sufficiency means that individuals are able to leave this project on their own feet, (...) with the ability to support themselves (Practitioner, La Strada, own translation).

In Majella Wonen, greater emphasis is placed on creating mixed community (referring to the members of housing project) as a tool to provide positive role models to ‘get vulnerable tenants back on track’, including incentives for tenants who successfully internalize desirable norms of conduct.

First aim was to create a community where fragile tenants could make a better start than in ‘normal’ situations. We thought that this could be better for them and for people who choose to live in this Magic Mix.

In three years, if this is going well, vulnerable tenants will have their own regular rental contact with Portaal, and Tussenvoorziening leaves the scene (Practitioner, Portaal).

Although the link between social mix and (inclusive) communities is far from new in the debate (see Arthurson, 2002), we found traces of discontinuity which relate to current ‘responsibilisation’ and ‘activation’ discourses in welfare systems in many Western European countries (Peeters, 2013). Thus, the degree of inclusiveness of mixed community results from a twofold dynamic: on the one hand, the extent to which resourceful tenants are able to mobilize pro-actively individual resources to the benefits of the collectivity (*activation*); on the other hand, the extent to which boosting self-reliance through politics of responsible behaviours does effectively equal to increasing social inclusion (*responsibilisation*). The next section provides further insights on how resourceful target groups contribute to realise mentioned discourses.

### *Target groups*

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4. In the Netherlands, due to recent reforms, municipalities and housing associations must provide accommodation to a growing number of vulnerable groups who were previously living in specific social care institutions (see Dijkhoff, 2014).

Early 21<sup>st</sup> century social mix policies used to target low- and middle-income residents (Kleinhans, 2004), whereas examined social mix initiatives distinguish between resourceful tenants (i.e. those in relatively advantage position like young workers or students), and vulnerable tenants (i.e. welfare dependents, low-income, and refugees). Of course there are significant differences between social groups, e.g. between refugees and people with disabilities, even though they are both considered as ‘vulnerable tenants’. These differences are likely to influence the outcomes of social mix.

In both research settings, we observed that the role model idea underlying these social mix projects is built upon the differentiation between ‘resourceful’ and ‘vulnerable’ tenants. Common to all case studies is the idea that resourceful people should be willing to provide vulnerable neighbours with help, and mobilize their capabilities to contribute to the benefits of the collectivity (see previous section), in this case the housing project.

Resourceful residents might be a driving force for vulnerable ones. (...) They can bring a *know-how*, even basic things like using computers. They can be reference persons in the project for other people who haven’t same skills (Practitioner, La Strada, own translation).

We still keep on mixing people and we think that is good especially for refugees and for vulnerable people. They can live together with other people and it is always good when people can meet and learn from each other, so we make living rooms where people can live, cook, chill together, watch TV or whatever (Policy-maker, Municipality of Amsterdam).

While in traditional social mix policies target groups were defined mainly along income or tenure differentiation, in these projects different criteria apply in the selection of target groups who wish to become ‘a driving force’ for somebody else. While, generally, no specific criteria other than urgent need apply to the selection of vulnerable groups, in the case of resourceful residents, since they should be willing to ‘act’ as role models, practitioners often carefully select candidates through face-to-face interviews and/or motivation letters. Such selection is based on a combination of objective (i.e. income, age, citizenship etc.) and subjective requirements. The latter may include the endowment of personal attitudes towards social commitment, ‘motivation’ or ‘enthusiasm to participate’, meaning:

People must be motivated to live here with refugees, have attitudes to help persons from other countries and introduce them to Amsterdam, or are curious about how is to live with them. People who are willing to be part of a community to build up here (Practitioner, De Key).

In our view, the reference to those subjective features echoes the concept of ‘hyper-diversity’ (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013), in a way that diversity – as a proxy of social mix – does not only refer to ethnicity or income levels, but includes age, life styles and personal preferences such as motivation and attitudes (which are difficult to gauge and to account).

Mixed communities are not anymore a combination of low and middle-income groups in different tenures. In our case studies, the social diversity refers to ‘outsiders’ on the domestic housing markets, whose demand for affordable and/or urgent housing solutions cannot be satisfied by the current supply. To a certain extent, it is by definition a fragile social mix of low-income tenants (young people seeking social housing units) and groups with other forms of social vulnerability. In such situation, some (resourceful) people can turn personal attitudes (e.g. sociability) into a sort of ‘bargaining counter’ to increase their chances to find affordable housing. As the next section will show, the described situation is part of a mutual obligation framework amongst future tenants and housing providers.

## ***Practices***

A grounding assumption in these social mix initiatives is that diversity can be a strength for meaningful relationships amongst residents. Likewise, it is evident that living side by side does not make necessarily good neighbours as envisaged by mainstream assumptions of social mix (see theoretical section). According to our respondents, social mix is intended not only as residential proximity of different social groups, but as a sum of daily practices that enable positive encounters and community building. As a respondent argued:

I don't think it's a good idea when you build, put people there and then say 'good luck!' I think you have to do more. It might work but it might be possible that the atmosphere there is not OK, and you don't have any control in your complex (Practitioner, De Key).

Daily practices range from sport activities, movie nights, language exchange, walks to garden or cooking activities. Not the least 'it's also about little things [such as] (...) step in and say hello!' (Practitioner, Portaal). Such practices reflect the idea of 'proximal role modelling' as diverse people are expected to interact, rather than just observing each other (see literature section).

The practices of social mixing are embedded in a *quid pro quo* rationale. Selected tenants commit themselves to be involved in social-oriented activities aiming to build trust relationships and provide mutual support. The tenants can benefit from lower rent prices (compared to private rental market) or quick housing provision ('jumping' long waiting lists for regular allocation of social housing dwellings) while in return they are asked to invest a certain amount of time in social activities. A principle of conditionality, meaning the admittance to housing projects in return to solidarity activities, is common to both Italian and Dutch cases:

We look for tenants who will pay lower rent (...) and in return he/she will pledge his/her time to manage other tenants' necessity, such as helping old people (Practitioner, La Strada, own translation).

You join the project with the idea of helping and supporting each other (...) we also made an agreement...a little bit of commitment: you agree to spend like 4 hours per week on a project (Practitioner, Portaal).

Conditionality applies both in the selection procedure of candidates, in order to establish the endowment of needed attitudes (see previous section), and during the tenancy, to assess tenants' contribution to project objectives (i.e. through periodic meetings and interviews). Two observations arise. First, while *quid pro quo* mechanisms are not new in other welfare domains, such as work and social benefits (see e.g. Veldboer et al., 2015), these initiatives show how similar principles are entering the housing field. They provide potential insights to explore how conditionality is reshaping the access to certain social housing opportunities within the broader paradigm shift from traditional to post welfare regimes in Western Europe. Second, social mix as a 'cure' for marginalized groups shifted from top-down tenure differentiation strategies, usually policy-based (see Kleinhans, 2004), to bottom-up, project-based approaches to boost everyday practices of social interaction at building scale. We will now shift to the last two domains, which explore institutional and spatial dimensions of these projects.

### ***Institutional frame***

By 'institutional frame', we mean the set of relevant laws, policies, reforms, including actors, in which the idea of social mix is contextualized and implemented. Social mix was a fundamental element of area-based urban restructuring policies in the Netherlands (*Wet Stedelijke Vernieuwing*) (Van Kempen & Bolt, 2009; Kleinhans, 2012), and in Italy (see the National Programme of Neighbourhood Contracts - *Contratti di Quartiere*). Despite contextual differences, both policies were partly funded by central governments and applied nationwide to low-income neighbourhoods (mainly of social housing). Housing associations (HAs) in the Netherlands, and public housing companies (*Aziende Casa*) in Italy were key players in social mix policies. Public housing stock in Italy is owned either by regional public housing companies (ex-IACP) or by municipalities. In Lombardy, public housing company ALER (*Azienda Lombarda Edilizia Residenziale*) owns and manages most of the stock.

In terms of institutional frame, our cases studies suggest a paradigm shift from *policy-based* (e.g. *Wet Stedelijke Vernieuwing* and *Contratti di Quartiere*) to *project-based* approach. Both HS and MM

initiatives are jointly run by *ad hoc* local-based partnerships involving housing providers (cooperatives and housing associations), public authorities (city governments), and other organisations which bring relevant expertise to the projects, such as socio-cultural associations (Italy) and/or social care organisations (The Netherlands).

The local-based character is an outcome of broader devolution processes from central to local authorities that occurred in the two countries at different timing. While devolution trends in housing and welfare field in Italy date back to early 2000s, the Dutch counterpart experienced massive devolution processes since the 2014 Social Support Act (see literature sections). Although such processes mainly concerned welfare services, these had evident implications also in housing. In the name of informal care, many care homes in the Netherlands have been progressively vacated. As far as possible, vulnerable or socially disadvantaged people, such as elderly, homeless or psychiatric patients, ought to rely on the resources provided by citizens and communities in urban neighbourhoods. In addition, parallel to the ending of Urban Renewal Act, the 2015 Housing Act re-adjusted housing associations' tasks by forcing them to stick to their core business (i.e. providing shelters only for low-income people) and by reducing their freedom to build more expensive houses for middle-income households (a cornerstone of Dutch social mix approach). In this light, it is likely that Dutch HAs will have to accommodate a growing number of socially disadvantaged and low-income people in the future (e.g. in MM projects) while limiting tenure mixing operations in neighbourhood regeneration. This implies a shift from area-based urban renewal policies to more individual-based policies targeting vulnerable groups (see Van der Velden et al., 2018).

As mentioned earlier, in Italy, downscaling processes from central government to local authorities (*regionalisation*) date back to early 2000s. Focussing on Region Lombardy as the context of our empirical research, the last decade witnessed a greater involvement of Third Sector housing organisations in HS initiatives (see literature section). This has occurred in parallel to – and partly because of – the declining capacity of regional public housing company (ALER) to address the housing needs of diverse social groups (also due to shortage of financial resources). This provides a possible explanation of the increased tendency to establish partnerships with private housing organisations (limited or not for profit) to enlarge the provision of affordable housing for mixed audience.

More than 600 (public housing) units have been put into the hands of third-sector organisations to deal with social disadvantaged groups, whose needs can be addressed also through those apartments that we (public housing company) made available to these organisations. [These apartments] need some refurbishment interventions to comply with minimum standards of living, so associations that can do this investment can have the apartment for several years (Civil servant, ALER Milano, own translation).

The 2016 regional housing law (*Legge 16/2016*) further strengthen this development as it 'entitles private stakeholders and third-sector organisations to manage public housing units' (Civil servant, ALER Milano, own translation).

From a spatial scale perspective, the paradigm shift from post-1990s *policy-based* approach to *project-based* approach means a downscaling of the concept 'social mix' from neighbourhood(s) to building(s) level.

### ***Urban downscaling***

Both in the Dutch urban restructuring policy (*Stedelijke Vernieuwing*) and in the Italian National Programmes of Neighbourhood Contracts (*Contratti di Quartiere*), social mix applied to specific neighbourhoods with relatively high levels of socio-economic deprivation. Conversely, in all case studies, practitioners tend to implement social mix when opportunities arises, regardless of location. It is no coincidence that, frequently, such opportunities are vacant buildings (Casa dell'Accoglienza,

Ospitalità Solidale, Majella Wonen) or empty plots of land filled with removable houses (Startblok Riekerhaven).

In today's austerity climate and cutbacks to public spending, providing affordable housing is a continuous challenge for policymakers (Mulliner & Maliene, 2013). In the Dutch situation, new construction of social housing is going very slow and in insufficient numbers to cater for the growing demand. As mentioned, recent welfare reforms left lots of empty spaces in former care homes for elderly people and this is where some HAs seek to implement new MM projects. One of the most emblematic examples is Genderhof (Eindhoven) with almost 200 apartments converted into flexible housing for different groups. In Italy, the high number of (publicly owned) vacant dwellings is often due to mismanagement reasons (e.g. lacking maintenance or substandard for regular allocation). Until recently, this situation was not particularly problematic as many Italian households could benefit from relatively high levels of tenure security. Today, however, as a new the housing question is back at the forefront (see literature section), vacant stock represents an unused asset that could be more efficiently allocated to address emerging housing needs.

The intent to maximize benefits from disposable resources to cope with unmet housing demand is clearly present in both case studies, suggesting the sharing of a 'doing more with less' philosophy. In our Dutch and Italian respondents' words:

Eight or nine years ago that building was set to be demolished (...) to build more middle-class dwellings. We did a step back and decided to maintain and repair it (...). We saw the opportunity to make a new mix in building that was already there (Practitioner, Portaal).

We already had those houses. We haven't bought them, we only had to move and renew them a little bit. So we can exploit them for nine more years (Practitioner, De Key).

Due to financial limits, public housing companies like ALER struggle to maintain the units in good conditions, so we look for those individuals or organisations who, even with small investment of money (10-15,000 euro), can do some maintenance work (e.g. changing doors or toilets) by themselves. In return, we offer a discount on charges. This way allows us to value our stock, which, otherwise, could not be rented due to current normative restrictions (Civil servant, ALER Milano, own translation).

Vacancies result from very different dynamics in the two countries and produce different configurations, scales and layouts of social mix. In the Italian case studies, where vacant units could be considered as a 'structural' feature due to longstanding disregard of public housing stock, vacancies are scattered in different public housing neighbourhoods and buildings. This might result either in fine-grained social mix at building level (Casa dell'Accoglienza) or in 'pepper-potting' social mix programmes filling empty units in public housing estates (Ospitalità Solidale). Within this frame, social mix results from the matching between existing opportunities (public housing units that are made available for HS projects) and the current demand of social housing (social profile of households). It follows that 'smallest [available] units are usually allocated to singles or couples while bigger ones to larger households' (Practitioner, DAR=CASA, own translation). In that sense, Italian practitioners retain less room of manoeuvre in designing type and balance of social mix as they have to stick to broader structural conditions (e.g. available dwellings and buildings), at least in the HS initiatives taking place in publicly owned stock (as those examined in this paper).

In the Netherlands, vacant spaces where HAs decide to launch MM projects can be considered as much more linked to circumstantial consequences of recent political reforms (i.e. healthcare), which, however, might predict more structural changes in the future. In these contexts, project managers benefit from relatively more freedom to decide to whom allocating dwellings and in which percentages (balance). As both Dutch case studies show, project managers opted for allocating units to vulnerable and resourceful categories in equal numbers (50% each) and according to a *door-to-door* configuration, pursuing the maximum spatial proximity between different groups at the smaller scale (same building, same floors).

The 'grabbing opportunities' approach, discussed above, recalls the dichotomy that we highlighted in relation to the *discourses* underpinning social mix in the examined initiatives. This refers, on the one hand, to social mix as the by-product of structural mismatches in the housing systems and, on the other hand, to social mix as an explicit strategy to foster social inclusion of the weakest component of housing projects through proximal role modelling mechanisms triggered by committed tenants. On

this basis, we argue that the ‘silver thread’ running through all the domains that compose such reframing process of ‘social mix’ is the shared belief to make a virtue out of necessity.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The societal and historical context influences policy approaches, discourses, and values attached to the ideas of social mix and mixed community (Cole & Goodchild, 2001). Within this framework, we have investigated how the concept ‘social mix’ is being reframed in times of deep socio-economic transformations fuelled by austerity politics and welfare retrenchment, growing socio-spatial segregation, increasing diversification of European cities, and shortage of affordable housing.

Starting from McCann and Ward’s (2012) approach of ‘policy assemblage, mobility and mutations’, we have conceptualised social mix as a dynamic and mobile assemblage of ideas, assumptions and practices, unfolding in the recently changed context of affordable housing initiatives in Italy and in the Netherlands. Although housing and welfare systems in these countries are remarkably different, a similar reframing of the concept ‘social mix’ seems to occur, which continues to be important in post-crisis social housing provision, but in different ‘assemblages’ from the pre-crisis context in both countries.

We empirically examined four recent affordable housing projects, respectively Housing Sociale in Italy and Magic Mix in the Netherlands, which target a mix of social groups with urgent housing needs. In so doing, we contribute to the existing literature a new post-crisis framing of the concept ‘social mix’ described along five domains: discourses, target groups, practices, institutional frame, urban downscaling.

In conclusion, we identify two specific aspects that have emerged from our analysis and provide clear evidence of a reframing of the concept of social mix in recent years.

Firstly, instead of attracting *middle-classes* into low-income *neighbourhoods* – a key element of the highly criticised frame of the pre-2015 social mix policy via tenure mix – the analysed initiatives aim to bring in *resourceful* tenants. Together with vulnerable tenants, they create a fine-grained social mix at *building* level. Interestingly, the adjective ‘resourceful’ does not refer to a better economic condition (i.e. a relatively higher income) but to the disposal of (relatively higher) socio-cultural and human capital and to the willingness to make it available to all the other tenants in the housing projects. The attribution of the ‘role model’ function to resourceful tenants indicates an utterly new approach in social mix discourses, recognising the importance of personal attitudes and motivation to interact with neighbours from different socio-cultural backgrounds over and beyond the differentiation in terms of tenures and income levels. In order to better understand the magnitude of such paradigm shift we should also recall that, in the ‘mainstream’ social mix policy, one of the main reasons why the ‘role model’ assumption has proved ineffective was the post-intervention lack of social contact between low- and middle-income groups, also because of different lifestyles.

Secondly, social mixing as a set of daily practices requires that tenants engage themselves in community building activities on regular basis. Although, the short-term tenancy makes it clear that these initiatives represent a temporal and/or a transitional phase in one’s own housing career (one may also wonder how far these strategies are realistically addressing housing problems) warm and lasting relationships among neighbours are essential to nourish the community development process.

Notwithstanding the commendable intentions, in the long-term tenants’ efforts may inevitably face high and low tides which might jeopardize the social sustainability of the project. In this regard, two key mechanisms should guarantee the presumed effectiveness of the current social mix assemblage: the relatively high *turnover* rate of residents, and the *conditionality* element, that is the mutual agreement to take part in community-oriented activities in return to affordable rents.

The high turnover constantly provides new, motivated people with opportunities to join the project. Thus, future tenants will bring fresh energies and inputs for continuing to pursue established goals,

which can help to counterbalance former tenants' decreasing motivation. As for the conditionality element, previous research in mixed communities show that stimulating residents' participation in social-oriented activities can be important driver of social interaction, provided that people do not feel forced to (Mugnano & Palvarini, 2013). Thus, while this paper revealed policymakers' expectations and hopes regarding very recent projects (see Tables 1 and 2), we recommend future research to explore the assumed 'magical' consequences of such mix, especially in terms of 'project-linked' social relationships between tenants. Equally important is to better understand how different scales of social mix projects as well as differences between social groups, e.g. asylum seekers and welfare dependents, influence the outcomes of social mix projects.

In the same vein, we also stress the need to shed more light on the mechanisms adopted in order to measure tenants' efforts (i.e. contribution to project goals), and to understand what the implications are if expectations do not materialize. A *quid pro quo* system – according to which tenants exchange supportive actions in return to affordable rents – may raise issues of fairness, especially if the number of similar projects increases or ever scale up to policy level, moving beyond grabbing ad-hoc local opportunities. In a climate of overall trends towards residualization of social housing in Europe, we should critically ask whether linking the provision of (scarce) affordable housing to the endowment of subjective attitudes and willingness to take up social commitment tasks might be a just and universal prospect for the future, especially in countries with a residual share of de-commodified housing stock, like Italy.



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