UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Social and Cultural Planning

2627-1-F8702N033

Learning objectives

The course aims to achieve the following educational objectives:

- To provide a theoretical-conceptual framework for analyzing social policies, programs, plans, and projects, placing them within the historical and current transformations of the welfare state;
- To offer tools for recognizing and deconstructing the ways in which social problems are defined, constructed, and placed on the agenda;
- To distinguish and compare planning models and approaches (rational-synoptique vs. incremental, top-down vs. co-design and social innovation), evaluating their assumptions and implications;
- To acquire operational skills for project design (needs and context analysis, Theory of Change (ToC), definition of objectives, phases, and actions);
- To cultivate a reflexive and critical stance toward professional and institutional practices.

Expected Learning Outcomes
DD1 – Knowledge and Understanding
By the end of the course, students will have acquired advanced knowledge of the concepts, tools, and models of social planning, with particular attention to welfare transformations, decision-making processes, and the actors involved.
DD2 – Applying Knowledge and Understanding
Students will be able to apply the acquired knowledge to critically read and interpret social plans, programs, and policies, recognizing the actors and logics that guide their formulation and implementation. They will be able to analyze complex case studies and use analytical and design tools to set up and evaluate social interventions.
DD3 – Making Judgments
The course promotes the ability to formulate autonomous and reasoned judgments on public and social policies, starting from a reflection on the implicit values in policy choices, social divides, territorial inequalities, and the tensions between principles of universalism and equity versus market logics and neo-managerialism.
DD4 – Communication Skills
Students will develop the ability to present and discuss cases, policies, and theoretical reflections, including through group activities, classroom discussions, and dialogue with guest speakers and professionals.

DD5 – Learning Skills
Through a combination of lectures, individual study, group work, and practical cases, students will be able to critically update their skills by integrating theoretical materials and policy documents, and to recognize the value of reflexive analysis as a core dimension of social practice.

Contents

The course approaches social planning as a practice for building change, tracing its evolution from classic welfare planning to neo-managerialism, up to recent approaches (incrementalism, social innovation, co-design, networking). It weaves together a critical perspective — examining how public problems are constructed and how categories, agendas, and imaginaries of the future are crafted — with an operational focus on the core elements of project design (needs, objectives, outcomes, targets). Finally, it positions the territorial dimension at the very core of planning: not as a neutral backdrop, but as a constitutive and dynamic variable, shaped by the relationships, inequalities, and conflicts within which social action is called to operate.

Detailed program

The course approaches social planning as a practice for constructing change—the process through which imagined futures are translated into concrete actions—by tracing its evolution. This journey spans from the characteristics and limitations of classic welfare planning, rooted in a synoptic and top-down rationality, to the major transformations imposed by neo-managerialism, and finally to more recent approaches framed around incrementalism, social innovation, co-design, and network and community work.
Along this common thread, the course weaves together a critical and structural lens with an operational and professional focus, adopting a territorial perspective. On the critical side, it will question how public problems are constructed—who names them, who is assigned responsibility, and which solutions are rendered legitimate—as well as how categories, agendas, and thinkable or unthinkable imaginaries of the future are fabricated through mechanisms of non-decision and depoliticization. Particular attention will be dedicated to the actors involved in planning and their shifting roles: different theories of the State, the regional rescaling of welfare, the growing role of the third sector and "second welfare," up to the practices of co-planning.
On the operational side, the course will focus on the core elements of project design—needs and territorial analysis, objectives, outcomes, beneficiaries, and targets. Central to this approach is the spatial and territorial dimension, understood not as a neutral background for interventions, but as a constitutive variable shaped by relationships, belongings, inequalities, meanings, conflicts, and struggles. .

Prerequisites

A good capacity for independent learning and critical analysis, combined with an interest in social policies, welfare systems, and the processes that generate, reproduce, or counter inequalities.

Teaching methods

The course consists of 49 hours and includes a mix of lecture-based teaching (29 hours of frontal lectures using slides) and laboratory and interactive teaching activities (20 hours consisting of dialogic discussions between

students and the instructor, peer workshops, exercises, guest presentations, and related discussions).

Specifically, the course will be organized as follows:

- 7 lectures of 3 hours and 4 lectures of 2 hours conducted in lecture mode (total 29 hours)
- 6 laboratory and interactive teaching activities of 1 hour and 7 of 2 hours each (total 20 hours)

Lectures, classroom discussions, and assessments may be conducted in both English and Italian.

Assessment methods

The exam offers a choice between two options:

- Option 1: An oral examination based on the study materials presented and provided by the instructor.
- Option 2: The development of a report or a research project on a topic agreed upon with the instructor and based on the template provided, followed by an oral discussion of the report/project.

Evaluation Criteria
In both cases, the evaluation will assess the student’s capacity for critical analysis, the ability to connect the main themes of the course, mastery of the discipline's conceptual lexicon, and the ability to provide concrete and relevant examples.
In addition, specific criteria apply to each option:

- For Option 1: Knowledge of the course materials, the ability to critically re-evaluate them, and clarity of presentation.
- For Option 2: Clarity of the topic and the research question, full utilization of the provided template, the quality of the analysis, and the ability to illustrate and justify design/project choices during the oral examination, in accordance with the core concepts developed in the course.

Textbooks and Reading Materials

The professor will collect all the materials covered in the course into a handout that will be made available to students.

Sustainable Development Goals

NO POVERTY | GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES