

## **The interface of power and charity: the case of MIA in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries**

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### **Abstract**

The importance often assumed by charities in the social context where they operate makes their analysis by accounting historians an interesting topic.

This paper explores the interface of power and charity, considering the case of an Italian charity during the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, adopting Foucault's "governmentality" framework.

In particular, the paper inserts accounting, referring of both financial and non financial information, in a complex of technologies accomplishing the 'government of poverty', showing the role of the MIA charity within the socioeconomic context involved. In this sphere, evidences about technologies of 'government of poverty' are shown.

The paper aims to enhance an understanding of the role of accounting, intended in its function of social practice considering the interfacing role of the MIA charity between the State and poverty.

Keywords: *Power, charity, poor relief, governmentality, Italy*

### **Resumé**

L'importance présumée le plus souvent par les organismes de bienfaisance dans le contexte social dans lequel elles opèrent rend leur analyse un sujet intéressant par les historiens de la comptabilité.

Cet article explore l'interface du pouvoir et de la charité, en considérant le cas d'un organisme de bienfaisance italienne (MIA) au cours des 16<sup>e</sup> et 17<sup>e</sup> siècles, dans le cadre du concept de "gouvernementalité" défini par Foucault.

En particulier, l'article intègre la comptabilité, se référant à la fois à l'information financière et non financière, dans un complexe de technologies accomplissant le «gouvernement de la pauvreté», démontrant le rôle de l'organisme de bienfaisance MIA dans le contexte socio-économique impliqué. Dans ce domaine, les témoignages sur les technologies du «gouvernement de la pauvreté» sont affichés.

L'article vise à améliorer la compréhension du rôle de la comptabilité, destiné dans sa fonction de la pratique sociale, tenant compte du rôle d'interface de l'organisme de bienfaisance MIA entre l'Etat et la pauvreté.

Keywords: *Pouvoir, charité, assistance aux pauvres, "gouvernementalité", Italie*

## **The interface of power and charity: the case of MIA in Italy in the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries**

### **1. Introduction**

'Governmentality' approach has been adopted in several studies on the government of people, nevertheless administration of the poor and the role of accounting in their control in the social context, apart from some rare exceptions such as Walker (2008), has not been so widely developed.

This paper explores the interface of power and charity in the government of the poor intended in a Foucauldian sense as the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1982: 220-221), analysing the case of the MIA charity in the Italian context of the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Section 2 shows the theoretical approach adopted underlying the 'discourse of Poor', as the discursive field the government issue dealt with in the paper is located in. The role of 'technologies of government', as a mechanism used to shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct towards desirable aims and feature of 'technological thresholds' for government are also exposed.

In section 3, the scenario of the investigation is outlined that, in the period considered, involves a political, social and cultural context characterised by a political fragmentation of Italy in different States with a high level of conflicts, a high frequency of famines and plagues and diffuse situations of poverty, which needed to be governed by specific dispositions (Poor Laws).

The organisation of MIA is exposed in section 4 and the role of its poor relief activities within the socioeconomic context considered are explored in section 5. Section 6 discusses our findings and concludes about the role of this charity in the 'government of poverty'.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

The Foucauldian concept of 'governmentality' builds on three main pillars (Foucault, 2007: 108):

First, by 'governmentality' I understand the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics to allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security, as its essential technical instrument. Second, by 'governmentality' I understand the tendency, the line of force, that for a long time, and throughout the West, has constantly led towards the pre-eminence over all other types of power - sovereignty, discipline, and so on - of the type of power that we can call "government" and which has led to the development of a series of governmental apparatuses (appareil) on one hand, [and, on the other] to the development of a series of knowledges (savoirs). Finally, by 'governmentality' I think we should understand the process, or rather, the result of the process by which the state of justice of the Middle Ages became the administrative state in the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries and was gradually "governmentalized".

The analysis that will be developed in the rest of the paper involves institutions, procedures and forms of calculation, having the population of poor as its target. The role of accounting technologies in rendering people governable and measurable will be shown (Miller & O'Leary, 1987).

In order to understand the role of technical means used and their aims in the modes of government, an analysis of their 'political rationalities' is needed (Rose & Miller, 1992: 175). All this requires the identification of a 'wider discursive field' (Miller & Rose, 1990: 5) to locate government in. In this sense our analysis can be embedded in what has been called the 'discourse of Poor', whose architectonics can be synthesised by its 'governing statement' (Dean, 1992: 220):

Who are the numbers of our Poor?' or, to make all things explicit, 'Who constitute the number of nation's Poor?

The need of a measurement is fundamental because it represents a strict link between the discourse and what is perceived as a sign of strength and wealth of a town or of a State, i.e. its dimension. The answer to this question is based on three categories of poor people, that even if with different denominations

will be found in the MIA case. These categories are represented by 'industrious Poor',

'idle Poor' and 'impotent Poor', corresponding respectively to those who will labour, to those who won't labour and those who cannot labour (Dean, 1992: 220).

As a practical form of knowledge (Foucault, 2002: 181), the discourse of Poor requests that answers to the governing statement can be connected to a prescription which involves restraint for idlers, encouragement for the industrious and relief for the impotent. An illustration in this sense coming from the XVII century is in the words of Dunning (1685), who, in defining duties for parishes, indicated to provide

work for those that will labour (*sic*), punishment for those that will not, and bread for those that cannot (Eden, 1928: 36)

This idleness problem, the aim to set the poor to work and the need to support people who cannot was common to all Europe (Dean, 1992: 224). In the context analysed in the MIA charity case the aspect involved is the one about the assistance of poor people, realised, in particular, by regular distribution of food, as will be shown later in this paper.

Our analysis - which refers to a charity, named MIA, located in Bergamo, a town of north Italy dominated by the Venetian Republic – will entail what Dean has named 'police of the Poor' (Dean, 1992: 223-224), that as matter of governance,

is not an institution or a technique, but a condition to be achieved – good police being akin to the good order of a community – and regulations by which this condition is attained.

When considering this archaic notion of police, different agencies could be identified (Minson, 1985: 102-106). The MIA case will show the role of this charity as an agency of 'police of poor', intending this latter as the way in which the conduct of life of poor people is directed, within the wider discourse of poor.

Within the analytics of government the identification of a 'problematization' sphere, i.e.

the identification and examination of specific situations in which the activity of governing comes to be called into question (Dean, 2010: 38)

is essential in order to understand the context where government, in its 'conduct of conduct', is called into question (Sargiacomo, (2008)). As pointed out again by Dean (2010: 38), 'problematizations'

have particular dates and places, and occur at particular locales or within specific institutions or organizations.

Considering the case presented in this paper this 'problematization' sphere is linked to difficult situations in particular due to famines that lead people of Bergamo and its territory to starve, during the period considered, leading to a demand for governing large *strata* of poor.

According to the idea of government, within the Foucauldian theory, which also involves adverse situations which require a government of

men in their relation to that other kind of things, accidents and misfortune such as famine, epidemics, death, etc. (Foucault, 1991: 93),

the MIA role was fundamental during the emergency conditions which determined diffuse poverty in the town and its territories.

Within an identified discourse a fundamental link between the study of 'forms of knowledge' and 'regimes of practices' of different kinds, such as punishing, curing, assisting, schooling etc., is represented by 'technologies of government' which they emerge from, are applied in and express their effects on (Dean, 1996: 52).

The existence of 'technologies of government' represented by those mechanisms

through which authorities of various sorts have sought to shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others in order to achieve the objectives they consider desirable (Miller & Rose, 1990: 8)

can be investigated considering, in particular, 'technological thresholds' for a government intended as the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1982: 220-221).

In addition, 'practical rationalities' and 'specialist knowledge' characterise technology of government. These rationalities are represented by programmes, policies and plans that reflect on technology, defining its acting

in relation to defined aims. In this context the role of knowledge is not simply in the sense of

'ideas', but refers to the vast assemblage of persons, theories, projects, experiments and techniques that has become such a central component of government. Theories from philosophy to medicine. Schemes from town planning to social insurance. Techniques from double entry book-keeping to compulsory medical inspection of schoolchildren. Knowledgeable persons from generals to architects and accountants. Our concern, that is to say, is with 'the know how' that has promised to make government possible (Rose & Miller, 1992: 177-178).

Within the history of human science for an understanding of government as the 'conduct of conduct', a series of technological thresholds have been identified. In particular, these indicators - which are not exhaustive or all necessary, but which represents signs of the technology of the government - are thresholds of assemblage, of system, of force and of orientation of government (Dean, 1996: 63-65).

Considering the threshold of assemblage a government can be considered technological when there is an assemblage of different elements linked by heteromorphic relations referred to the direction of conduct. This means an involvement not only of techniques of governing the body or self, but also different kinds of inscription devices for production and use of information, means for creations of forms of authority, mechanisms for a space/time coordination, physical forms of divisions, and 'practical rationalities' expressed by specific policies investing technologies, and requesting specialist knowledge.

The threshold of system refers to the necessary link of technology of government with other kinds of technologies (production, consumption, communication etc.) in order to have complex technological systems involving objects, people, capabilities, sources, communication networks etc.

The threshold of force indicates that from a qualitative point of view forces and capabilities are not merely the result of an additive process. In this sense a technology of government constitutes sites as 'power containers', i.e. places for the independent generation of goods, energy, information and services,

and forms of social authority, regulation and control (Dean, 1996: 64).

These sites as well as 'power containers' are also 'power storers' and 'power generators' and realise a coordination of activities across these different places in a space/time dimension, acquiring features of 'infrastructural powers', because of their capability to penetrate civil society and to allow a logistic implementation of political decisions (Mann, 1988: 113)

The threshold of the 'orientation of government' refers to the feature of a technology of government to consider forces and capabilities of subjects, groups or populations, as elements to improve and optimize.

In the MIA case analysis the technologies of government involved will be considered within these multi-tier features.

### **3. Scenario for investigation**

#### **3.1 Social and economic environment**

Considering the issue of this paper involving a charity organisation (MIA) strongly embedded in the socioeconomic environment involved, a premise about the scenario of the investigation is necessary to understand the role of this charity inside the town.

During the period considered in the paper, Bergamo, a town in the north of Italy, was dominated by the Venetian Republic, that nevertheless left to the Municipality some autonomy. On this subject, it must be underlined that Bergamo was able to keep the co-option privilege about members of the Municipality Board (*Consiglio Maggiore*), avoiding the control of Venice on these appointments (Belotti, 1989: 3).

Bergamo, passed from Milan to Venice domination in 1427. In this new condition it was in an eccentric geographic position in regard to Venice. In particular, it was an extremely important border area for military and commercial reasons. In fact, it had a strategic military role as the last western defence of the Venetian Republic and at the same time it represented the only

passage for commercial movements towards western Europe.

Some data coming from a report sent to Venice by one of its Rectors named Da Lezze (Da Lezze, 1596) represented a town composed of 12 neighbourhoods (Vicinie), 17 'Holy bodies' (Corpi santi), surrounded by villages and small villages. The town, in a strict sense, just considering the 12 neighbourhoods, had about 1300 fireplaces (*fuochi*) - unit used to count families - with about 6400 persons (*anime*), 1.353 of them considered 'useful persons' (*anime utili*), i.e. able to work. This part of the town, surrounded by fortified walls, was the residence of political and religious power and aristocracy, while the main part of the population was seated in villages (2.700 fireplaces, with more than 10.000 persons), small villages (500 fireplaces, with 1200 persons) and 'holy bodies' (1300 fireplaces, with 5000 persons) (Cattini & Romani, 1998: 32-34).

Geographically, Bergamo was a fortified town seated on a hill, with a plain at its feet and mountain valleys at its back. Its territory was characterised by a three-tier economy which reflected its geography: flat country with an agricultural economy, supplying wheat to town and valleys, mountain valleys with a long woolen textile manufacturing tradition, and town with a commercial economy (Cattini & Romani, 1998: 5).

This peculiar political and economic geography of the area was often at the origin of situations which led to a diffuse poverty. The political geography of Bergamo, as a border town within the Venetian Republic, made its territories often crossed by troops fighting in frequent conflicts in north Italy where Venice was involved in. While the features of its economic geography, with a limited agricultural area able to produce food for the population, frequently generated food crises which exploded when there were famines.

In such a context where the population was often strongly tried by hunger, the activity of charity organisations became essential for supporting poor people. Concerning this, if the town had many different kinds of small charity organisations, the most important for role, dimension and with a history going back to 13<sup>th</sup> century was MIA, that we will consider in our case.



In broad terms, within the Italian contest, starting from Modern Ages assistance to poor - that since Middle Ages was lead by Church structures - assumed new features, becoming in large part governed by charities not necessarily lead by religious people.

In the history of pauperism, 16<sup>th</sup> century represents a fundamental period considering the large presence of poor in towns and States in all Europe, whose consistency was considered as an element of social danger (Pegrari, 2000: 254).

In all Europe, during this century 'Poor Laws' were a pretty common instrument used to assist the poor. These laws were characterized by the role of the State in its central and local bodies, in assisting the poor, that in this sense was substituting a function previously afforded by religious authorities. All these dispositions aimed to introduce criteria in distinguishing categories of poor, to a functional distribution of alms and food, to eliminate social parasitism (Pullan, 1982: 259-260).

A significant view of the situation of the poor in the Venetian Republic is present in these words of Marino Sanudo, the most important Venetian chronicler of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, cited by Botelho (2004: 1)

Impossible to listen to mass in peace, for at least a dozen beggars will surround you; impossible to open your purse without an immediate plea for money. They are still there late in the evening, knocking on doors and crying "I'm dying of hunger".

In such a context a relief system emerged where the poor had a fundamental role as a pivotal element in the 'art of governance' and where charities acted within the wider aims of the good order of a community.

Dealing with charities Pullan expressly refers to MIA (here quoted with its full name Misericordia) in its wide and social role within the town of Bergamo:

The larger, outward-looking organizations, such as the Misericordie of Arezzo in Tuscany and Bergamo in Lombardy, became general almonries that served whole cities, not just their own members (Pullan, 2005: 446).

### 3.2 Local dispositions for poor relief

Situations such as wars, that involved Venice and its lands, plagues and, in particular, famines, contributing to a diffuse poverty in Bergamo represented elements able to alter social equilibrium. This presence of diffuse pauperism induced local (Bergamo Municipality) and central government (Venetian Republic) to a more rigid control of the poor.

Regarding the local level, the Municipality introduced specific Deputies for Almsgivings (*Deputati alle elemosine*). Even if it is not possible to define the precise moment of the introduction of these specific authorities, within the Bergamo Municipality Historical Archive (BMHA) the presence of these Deputies is documented by primary sources represented by registers dated to 1560 and 1591<sup>i</sup>.

The activity of these Deputies was linked to the collection of the number of poor present in Bergamo and its lands that they collected in 'lists of poor' considering single neighbourhoods and villages, indicating persons of each poor family that needed to be supported (*bocche*), i.e. mouths to feed (AD, 1560, 1591).

Primary sources show the presence of a team of Deputies for Almsgiving, operating on the base of a division of the town that considers its neighbourhoods. The registrations indicate the taxation applied to citizens of the neighbourhood to collect money to feed the poor and its correspondence to the number of loaves of bread (AD, 1560).

In this process of poor relief by the Bergamo Municipality the involvement of MIA was emphasised. In particular, Registers of Deputies to Almsgiving expose the amount of loaves for listed poor, expressly indicated "however including three loaves distributed each week by MIA to each poor" (AD, 1560), that was, in this way, considered within the mechanism of poor relief.

The frequent famines that there were in Bergamo and its lands determined the need of a more systematic poor relief action, especially in situations of emergency when strong famines reduced people in desperate conditions. In fact, towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century there were two particularly strong famines, in 1570 and in 1574, that required legislative measures by the Municipality on the one hand in order to increase and rationalise distribution of alms, on the other to repress vagabondage, considered as a source of social disorder (CA, 1570, 1574).

The need to restrict the distributions to specific typologies of poor emerged, avoiding unconditioned forms of relief. In fact, these dispositions defined the distribution of a loaf a day to those persons that within the 'discourse of Poor' are defined 'impotent poor' (Dean, 1992: 220), here named 'miserable poor', i.e. persons without any property or activity, that because of their old or very young age, or because of their health conditions cannot have means of subsistence (art. 1, CA, 1570). The same kind of definition of poor to relief is also present in Deputies to Almsgiving activities which referred to a Municipality disposition defining 'miserable poor' in their poor listing (MPDC, 1591).

In relation to the aim to repress vagabondage the Municipality in its 1570 Action (here CA, for Council Action) explicitly indicates that begging was punished by lashing (art. 11, CA, 1570)<sup>ii</sup>. Poor foreigners begging in town had to receive two loaves by MIA just once and were then moved away from the town (art. 9, CA, 1570), while poor from Bergamo lands found in town could receive four loaves from MIA, but they had to leave the town too (art. 10, CA, 1570).

This aim to correct the conduct of poor begging, excluding from relief and punishing them, is constantly present in dispositions about the poor, such for example also in 1591 Municipality Orders (here COBD, for Council Orders Bread Distribution) (COBD, 1591). A list of wandering poor of Bergamo is in 1591 Deputies to Almsgivings sources, attesting the presence of 24 poor identified and classified as 'wandering poor' (AD, 1591).

In general, a technology emerged that contributed to the 'social construction' of stigmas (Dovidio *et al.*, 2000: 3) creating a classification which identifies what Spicker (1984: 64-65), considers 'physical' and 'poverty stigmas'. It was a classification based on physical features, such as sickness, (old and young) age and on insufficiency of resources, such as the absence of any property or activity, as exposed in analyzing MIA actions (art. 1, CA, 1570).

The distribution to miserable poor figured out a loaf a day for each listed poor (9 ounce weight for wheat loaves/12 ounce weight for rye-millet loaf) made directly by MIA (CA, 1570, 1574). The MIA Board, recognising the importance of acting in accordance with Municipality dispositions due to the dramatic situation of the poor, who were greatly increased, order the distribution of a loaf a day for the 'miserable poor' listed by the Municipality (MIABA, 1570, 1574).

In order to understand the role of MIA in poor relief inside Bergamo, section 4 will deal with the organisation of this charity in its multi-faceted aspects, while section 5 will consider MIA's relief activities and its control on poor, showing its role as an 'agency of police' (Dean, 1992: 223-224, Minson, 1985: 102-106) within the government of the poor in the sense of the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1982: 220-221).

#### 4. Organisation and administration of MIA

MIA, acronym for Misericordia (Mercy) is a still existing charity, whose origins date back to XIII century, when, in 1265 it was founded in Bergamo by a group of people, lead by Pinamonte da Brembate, a Domenican preacher, with the aim to help poor people (Benaglio, (1620: 1), Roncalli, A. (1912: 18)).

All actions of MIA were based on an Act, named *Regula* (Rule), where access to the congregation, its features and activities were defined in ten chapters (MIAR, 1265). To be part of the congregation it was necessary to be honest. Within the Rule it was specified that heretics, usurers, alcoholics and prostitutes cannot joint. The access to MIA was not immediate, but was required a year “to evaluate suitability and opportunity of their admittance” (MIAR, 1265: ch. 1).

Twice a month, members of MIA were requested to go to hear a sermon in the main church of the town and give alms in the same occasion in order to give a ‘good example’ in front of the local community (MIAR, 1265: ch. 2).

As specified in chapter 3 of the Rule the aim of MIA was to use the money collected to give alms to “poor, religious, hospitals, invalids, widows and orphans ... and other poor” (MIAR, 1265: ch. 2).

During the centuries thanks to donations, legacies, inheritances, MIA became the most important charity of the town, managing a wide complex of assets represented not only by money, but also by lands and buildings. This increase and diversification of assets, as new functions, such as the management of the S. Maria Maggiore Church and the institution of an Academy, which were added to almsgiving - that always represented its core activity – determined a reorganization of MIA, whose main features are exposed in the next paragraphs.

##### *The Magnificent Board: composition, elections and governance*

The MIA was governed by *Magnifico Consiglio* (Magnificent Board), composed by fourteen members: a *Patrono* (Patron), a *Ministro* (Minister),

and twelve *Presidenti* or *Consiglieri* (Presidents or Councillors), that all together were named *Reggenti* (Rectors). Successively a *Tesoriere* (Treasurer) was added to the Board. They were appointed annually and after another eventual re-election, they had to respect a cooling off period of five years.

The Magnificent Board was elected on 25<sup>th</sup> January, the day of Saint Paul's Conversion, starting their appointment from the first Sunday in Lent. The election, with different steps, was realised with a secret ballot in Santa Maria Maggiore Church. First of all the Patron was elected, who had to be a canon of San Vincenzo Cathedral, chosen among persons suggested by the outgoing Counsellors. In order to have a regular meeting for voting, at least ten members of the previous Council, the Minister and the Treasurer had to be present. Later on the Minister was elected with the same procedure and in the presence of eleven Councillors at least.

After the Minister's election, who had to be prudent, diligent and well informed about the functioning of the Magnificent Board, twelve Presidents were elected. In particular, those who had received more votes in previous elections were confirmed, with an upper bound of three Counsellors. In order to guarantee a fair composition of the Magnificent Board, seven of the twelve Counsellors had to be habitants of the town, two of San Leonardo Borgo, two of Sant'Antonio and one of Canale Borgo.

At the end the Treasurer was designated, who, in order to have a person with adequate administrative capabilities and availability in a short time, was chosen among merchants living inside the walls of the town (Benaglio, 1620:27-28).

The Magnificent Board met two times a week, deliberating with secret ballots. At least eight members had to be present in order to have a regular vote. Eleven members was requested for particularly important decisions, such as the ones referred to sales, exchanges of properties, creations of census and in general each reform.

### *Patron, Minister, Presidents and Treasurer*

The Patron was the guarantor of the regular functioning of MIA. He had to defend the organisation and preserve in good conditions MIA possessions. In particular, the Patron took care of Santa Maria Maggiore Church and Accademia, school instituted in 1506, which were part of MIA. The Minister was the President of the Magnificent Board. One of his most important responsibilities was the nomination of Presidents for general and particular "Deputations" (*Deputazioni*). He yearly visited possessions and houses owned by MIA, noting possible improvements and preservation interventions. Among his duties there was a control over the financial situation of MIA in order to verify that the organisation didn't run into inopportune debts. In this sense each document and bill prepared by *Notari* had to be certified by the Minister (Benaglio, 1620: 24-25).

Twelve Presidents (or *Consiglieri* or *Reggenti*) had to attend Board meetings and conscientiously deal with *Deputazioni* they were charged with.

The Treasurer was charged to manage all the money of MIA, seeing to collections and payments. In fact MIA Rule didn't allowed Presidents to keep any money of the organisation and the Treasurer was entrusted with all the money. He accounted cash movements in a specific Register, specifying all collections and payments, showing names of debtors and creditors, amounts and dates.

### *Chancellery*

MIA Chancellery included Notaries that prepared each kind of private and public paper, arranging all the copies required considering different operations and keeping original papers in the archive.

Among the Chancellery's duties there were preparation of payment bills for MIA workers and summary tables referring to the situation of poor people in Bergamo. The process of collection of information about the poor will be analysed in section 5, dealing with MIA poor relief activities.

MIA Chancellery was composed by four Notaries:

- *Deputato alle azioni del Consiglio: Cancelliere* or *Primo Notaio* (Deputy to Board actions: Chancellor or First Notary)
- *Deputato alla cura delle possessioni: Secondo Notaio* (Deputy to properties: Second Notary)
- *Deputato alla scrittura doppia: Ragionato* (Deputy to double entry bookkeeping: Accountant)
- *Deputato alle liti ed alle esecuzioni: Sindico* (Deputy to lawsuits and executions: Inspector)

Chancellor attended to all Board meetings writing deliberations on a specific Register (*Libro delle Terminazioni*). In general, among his duties he had to take care of archive, to measure periodically all the properties of MIA (useful operation in order to prepare the inventory and to control the situation of properties), to do sales and leases, always acting in the MIA's interest (Benaglio, 1620: 81-82).

Second Notary was charged with the administration of MIA properties, the control of Deputies assigned to single properties. He had also to prepare bills for payments of creditors and for distribution of alms, considering Board dispositions and writing amounts on a specific register.

Accountant was a person with good accounting capability that had to register operations. Starting from 1601 operations were registered with a double-entry bookkeeping system involving Journal and Ledger (*Giornale* and *Libro Maestro*). He had to check all the accounts of the Treasurer, comparing papers with amounts in registrations, collections and payments with credits and debits. All the operations of MIA were accounted in order to prepare at the end of the year the Financial statement (*Bilancio intiero del Libro Maestro*).

The Deputy to lawsuits and executions had to press for payments and find a remedy for litigations, if necessary resorting to lawyers. Monthly he had to read to the Board the list of debtors, starting from the oldest ones.

### *Deputations*

The wideness of MIA activities implied an organisational system involving a series of Deputations whose persons in charge were members of MIA board,



chosen by the Minister each year during the first Board meeting. There were:

- Deputation about business administration, accounting and normal businesses,
- Deputation about Santa Maria Maggiore Church,
- Deputation about the Academy,
- Deputation about the House and the Family of Bergamo<sup>iii</sup>,
- Deputation about single Properties.

Considering the above illustrated organisational structure of MIA, it's possible to outline the organisation chart in Figure 1.

Within the multi-faceted activities of MIA, in the light of the topic of this paper, the next section will consider MIA poor relief and the control on poor underpinning this activity.

## **5. MIA relief activities and control on poor: an 'agency of police'**

Considering the core activity of MIA, represented by poor relief, the charity had specific persons, named *Canevari*, chosen among members of most important occupations in town charged to distribute alms. Each *Canevaro* was responsible for a neighborhood. They regularly prepared lists of poor of their area, representing the basis for regular distributions, which were completely reviewed each two years.

The regularity of distributions was guaranteed attributing to specific Deputies the power to authorize distributions. The list of poor prepared by each *Canevaro* was signed by these Deputies and after this authorization the *Canevaro* received vouchers (*bollettini*) to distribute to the poor. These vouchers were given to the *Canevaro* by a MIA Deputy to prepare them. They had the MIA stamp and were signed by the MIA Chancellor and by the involved *Canevaro*. This loaf-voucher was distributed to the poor who reached MIA to receive food (Benaglio, 1620: 43-44).

There were different kinds of distributions to the poor: general distributions and particular/accidental distributions. The general distributions occurred for the miserable poor once a month (8 loaves) and for all the poor three times a year, i.e. Christmas, Easter and wheat harvest. Particular/accidental distributions were given to poor women in childbirth and sick poor during their sickness (6 loaves a week).

To realise these very detailed distributions each *Canevaro* weekly visited the poor of his area and in the case of contingent situations as the ones just described (sickness, pregnancy) he was allowed to add these new names to the lists (Benaglio, 1620: 44).

The Deputies that authorized distributions also had to overview all distributions in order to avoid

negligence, or fraud, to support the poor accurately, in accordance with MIA Board decisions (Benaglio, 1620: 45).

In particular, regarding sick poor added to the list by the *Canevaro*, these Deputies personally visited these persons to check their situations, to cancel names added with fraud, and to add persons not included. An example in this sense is represented by dispositions to suspend distributions to people whose cause of indigence had ceased (MIAM, 1508-1554).

The described system adopted by MIA to relieve the poor clearly shows the realization of a strict control on the territory by the charity. These words from MIA *Institutioni et Ordini* (Institutions and Orders) are plain in this sense:

The reason why among Presidents must always be habitants from each part of town and village,..., is principally to make the poor easily found, their needs known, and remembered (Benaglio, 1620: 44, chapter XXI).

Who were the poor? which kind of poor were they? where were the poor? are the governing statements within the 'Discourse of Poor' that MIA information collection for distribution mechanism was able to answer, using technologies represented by accounting registrations.

These registrations include poor lists, collected and periodically checked as illustrated above, and distribution of food too. An example of a poor list is in Figure 2, where all the poor of a neighborhood collected by MIA for food distributions are listed, while Figure 3 and Table 1 represent distribution of food, specifically referred to different kinds of flour.

For a comprehension of the MIA poor relief activity within the government of poor, we can observe the signs of the technology of this government. In particular, considering what Dean has identified as the technological thresholds, i.e. the thresholds of assemblage, of system, of force and of orientation of government (Dean, 1996: 63-65), it is possible to observe what follows.

The threshold of assemblage figures out that a government assembles different elements referred to the aspired direction of conduct. In the MIA case this means an involvement of different kinds of inscription devices (poor lists, reports, registers etc.) to produce and use information about people and sources (poor, loaves, money etc.), forms of divisions of the town based on neighbourhoods and mechanisms of collection and use of information founded on this division which involved a space/time coordination (distinct neighbourhoods, defined moments/places for distributions).

In realising this assemblage MIA also introduces the new technology of double entry bookkeeping, defined not only as a useful instrument, but also a necessary one, it being impossible to have a well done registration using another method (MIARE, 1601, p.1r). In particular, it is underlined that, as the experience of public offices of Bergamo showed, the double entry bookkeeping allowed to reach the knowledge of the condition of an organisation (MIARE, 1601, p.1r).

A specialist knowledge emerged, able to help the realisation of the MIA purposes, within the wider 'discourse of Poor' in Bergamo, which, at the beginning, requested the intervention of a specialist in accounting, specifically

called to introduce the new method (MIAL: 1r., MIAD: 82, 84).

Considering the threshold of system, the government of poor by MIA required a link of government technologies with other kinds of technologies. In particular, in the MIA case the main links were with acquisition/production of resources for food distribution and their consumption due to poor relief. In this sense during periods particularly difficult due to the large number of poor to relieve, MIA sold some of its properties. Concerning this the Venetian Rector of Bergamo, Alvise Foscari, 23 June 1570 after a visit to MIA wrote to Venice in his Report about the “excellent government of MIA Board” underlying the great contribution of MIA activities in supporting

poor, mendicants, religious, widows, orphans, invalids, families of poor soldiers, prisoners, mountain dwellers and diggers and many other numberless poor of the town and its territory, especially in this so unhappy and calamitous year (Tagliaferri, 1978)

and he also pointed out that because of this situation that made difficult to afford the large number of poor, MIA had to sell properties and buy wheat on credit for very large amounts, concluding that

without MIA, in common judgment, a lot of people would have died of hunger and many poor girls should have come to a bad end (Tagliaferri, 1978).

Detailed inventories with indication of the MIA properties allowed to know the amount of these fixed assets, useful information for the aim of this charity that collected resources, often by bequests represented by lands and buildings, and which used these properties for sales for poor relief needs in case of emergency. In particular, with the introduction of double-entry bookkeeping in 1601 MIA adopted an accounting system including also fixed assets. In this sense it represented an advanced system, considering that the main accounting theory of that period did not include fixed assets within the accounting system of non profit organisations (Pietra, 1586).

In relation to the threshold of force MIA was a ‘power container’ (Mann, 1988: 113), intended as a place for an independent generation of goods (food and/or money), information, represented by lists of poor, registrations of distributions, financial information (expressed by double entry bookkeeping since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) and services for poor relief realised

within the aims of a relief of people that for age and physical condition were not able to maintain themselves.

MIA represented a fundamental social agency within the relief system of the town, with internal (*Institutioni et Ordini*) and external (Local and Central dispositions) forms of regulation defining its actions, which contributed to realise the control on poor.

At the same time MIA corresponded to a 'power storer/generator' (Mann, 1988:113), able to coordinate several activities, such as the identification of poor, the examination used to classify them and a distribution of resources coherent with the government of poor purposes, realised across different places in a space/time dimension. In this sense an 'infrastructural power' (Mann, 1988: 113) was also embedded in MIA activity, as expressed by its capability to penetrate the local community of Bergamo and to allow logistic implementation of political decisions taken by Municipality/Central Government of Venice.

The threshold of the 'orientation of government' emerges in MIA embedding within the wider public mechanism (e.g. Poor Laws) able to consider resources (public and private money, food) and conditions of a group of people composing the community of Bergamo (miserable poor) as elements to improve and optimize in order to keep a social equilibrium (Figure 4).

Within the 'discourse of poor' the 'conduct of conduct' (Foucault, 1982: 220-221) of poor involved the central and the local government in defining social policies for supporting poor people. In a broad territory, like the one of the Dry Land Domination of the Venetian Republic, a wide delegation to local authorities was applied.

Local dispositions for the poor, as like Poor Laws of 1570 and 1574 illustrated above, were based on a taxation of citizens of the different neighbourhoods of the town. However the need to reach the aims underlying these Laws required a deep involvement of MIA both for its resources, coming from bequests and

increased during the times by a wise administration, and its interconnection capabilities within the town and its territories.

With its action MIA realised discriminatory and organised methods in poor relief, where public authority and the MIA charity, operated synchronically towards the governance of poor aims, adopting a series of technologies involving laws, reports to the central authorities by Venetians Rectors and, at the level of MIA, detailed non financial qualitative/quantitative information about the Poor, about distributions of food and financial information, represented by registers about financial transactions, and since 1601 a complete double-entry bookkeeping accounting system.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

The paper has shown the role of the MIA charity within the 'discourse of poor', i.e. within the wider activities regarding the practical form of knowledge about qualitative and quantitative composition of the poor in Bergamo.

The need of a 'conduct of conduct' of the poor, in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1982: 220-221) induced the central authority, the Venetian Republic, in defining social policies for supporting poor people, that however, because of the large territorial extension of its domination, involved a delegation to local authorities, as in our case to Bergamo Municipality.

As shown, within the wide context of Dry Land Dominations of the Venetian Republic in the town of Bergamo the action of control on poor was obtained by a leading role of MIA charity that in realising its poor relief aims represented an agency of 'police of poor'. Its role in contributing to a good order of the town is evident in its actions about a regular control on number, type and name of poor in the town realised using a precise division of the town itself that permitted a detailed control on poor (12 neighbourhoods (Vicinie), 17 'Holy bodies' (Corpi santi)).

The collection of data and their continuous updating allowed to have a regular 'practical knowledge' of the condition of the poverty and operate an appropriate action in accordance with it. A very precise system of loaves

distribution linked to this collection of data permitted to avoid both overlapping distributions, with a consequent waste of resources, and unconditioned distributions, that were considered dangerous for social equilibrium, because of the impossibility to know who were the people relieved and if they were in the condition to be relieved (i.e. miserable poor of the town).

In fact, the poor relief activity of MIA was supported by detailed qualitative/quantitative information about the poor, involving an effective mapping of the poor of the town, with mechanisms of check and periodical review. In this acting MIA contributed to a 'hierarchical observation' of the town (Foucault, 1979) defining a division of the town itself in distinct areas.

Using Foucault 's words MIA was an operator in transforming individuals, i.e. the poor, acting on them and on their conduct, re-conducting till them the effects of the power, represented by the government decisions/dispositions (Poor Laws), offering them to a knowledge, modifying them (Foucault, 1979: 172), avoiding begging behaviours, considered dangerous for the social equilibrium and punished by lashing (art. 11, CA, 1570).

If the analysed discipline of the poor is normative defining behaviour on the basis of standard for good (conditions to be considerate as a miserable poor) and evil (vagrancy/begging), at the same time it operates as a normalising activity, identifying conditions of 'normality' towards which individuals were pushed to conform to receive a relief realised by regular food distributions. In this sense MIA operated both a differentiation and an individualisation of the poor (Cliffort, 2001:50), measuring and hierarchising the poor on their 'nature' (Foucault, 1979: 183).

In fact, the poor lists represented a way to differentiate poor suitable to be relieved from the other, e.g. begging poor, not only not supported but also subjected to forms of punishment by specific disposition included in the Poor Laws. At the same time MIA, continuously mapping the poor, allowed to reach an individualisation of poor, a knowledge about individuals and their

conditions (who are they? in which condition are they?).

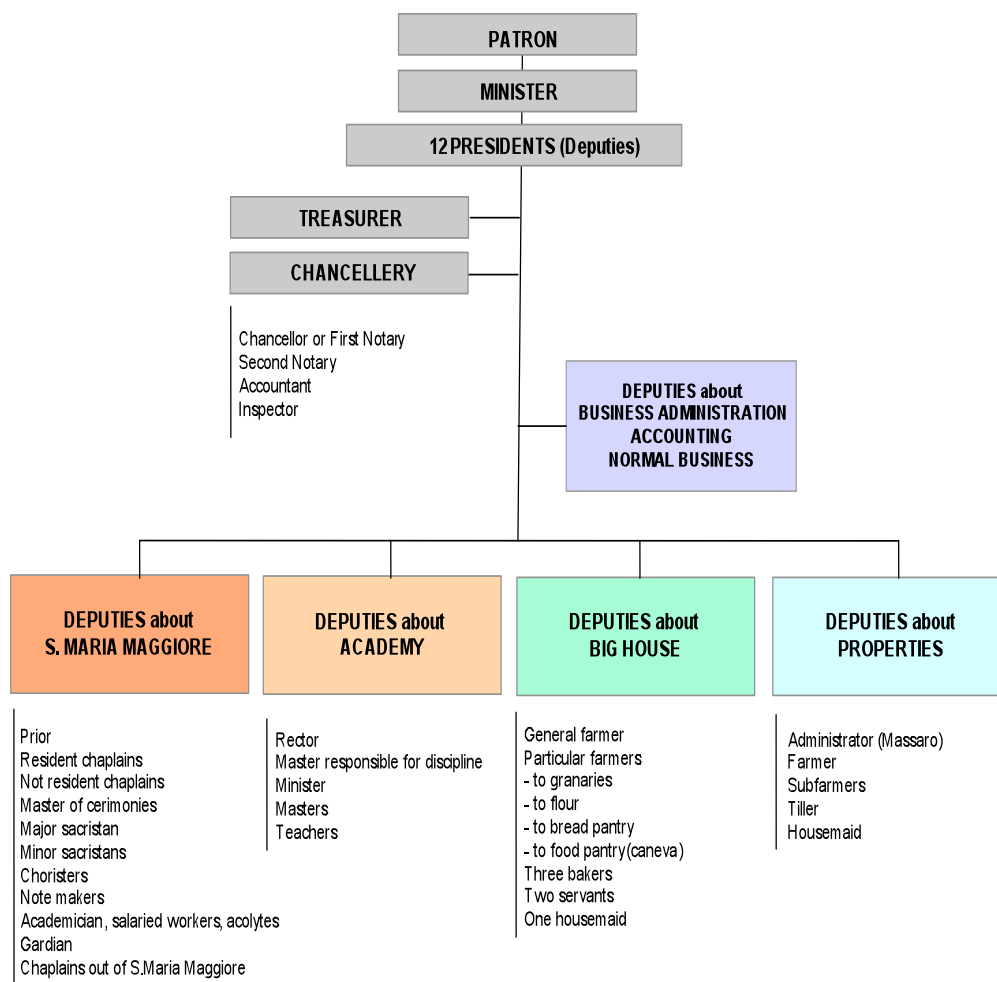
The identification of poor, the individuation of sick persons and the control of the evolution of their illness, due to the link between the bad physical condition and the food distributions, realised by continuously updated poor lists and personal checks on their state of health done by the MIA Deputies, represented a 'traditional method' used for the 'examination' (Foucault, 1979:184). This kind of qualitative and quantitative information collected by MIA allowed to make the poor a 'describable identity'. If by one side the single poor becomes a 'case' (individualisation), the whole registrations and their embedment in a network system of writings permitted a knowledge of the poverty phenomenon within the Bergamo community (how many are poor?, in which part of the town are they?) (homogenisation).

Technological complex systems emerged, involving goods (food), people (poor, different kinds of MIA internal actors and local and central public authorities), organizational, managerial and accounting capabilities<sup>iv</sup>, sources (collection of money by donations/legacies realised by MIA and taxation of citizens of different neighborhoods by the Municipality) and a network that linked the different levels involved in the 'discourse of poor'.

These levels included Venice with its controls on the charity, represented by the Reports of Venetian Rectors, the Municipality that defined the rules of the poor relief and the MIA charity which acted as an agency of police, actively contributing to the realization of Poor Laws aims to support 'miserable poor', to eliminate begging, to preserve the public health, to keep class distinctions and, in general, to keep the public order. In this sense MIA operated shaping, normalising and instrumentalising the conduct (Miller & Rose, 1990:8) of poor in order to achieve these desired purposes.



Figure 1 - MIA organisation chart



Source: Author



Figure 3 – Example of registration of MIA flour distributions

1560-1560  
MTA  
25  
1

Distribuzione fatta g<sup>o</sup> lo Venerando-contrao della città di Legnano

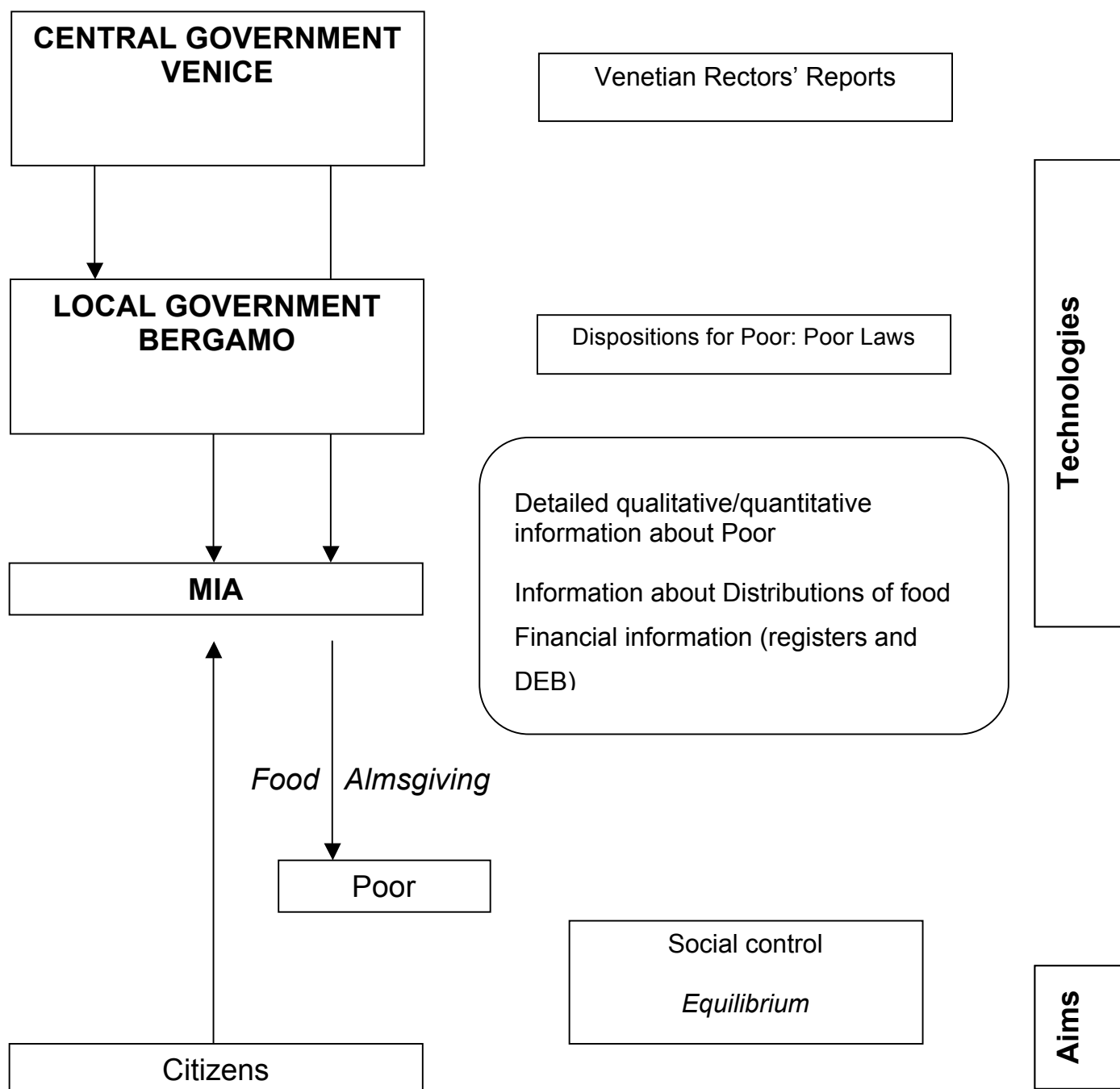
Year	Description	Unit	Value
1560	formento <sup>et formentato</sup> fatto uca in pan e in forma	co	710
	formento dispensato in grano	§	95 183 4/2
	segale	§	199 1/2 - 4/12
	Spelta	§	26 1/2
	Scandella	§	3 1/2 3
	Miglio	§	469 1/2
	Mellega	§	32 1/2
			103 1/2
			<u>2057 1/2 6/12</u>
1561	formento et formentata macinati	§	701 1/2
	formento et formentata dispensato in grano	§	1148 7/2
	segale	§	1548 1/2
	Spelta	§	35 1/2
	Legummi	§	50 1/2
	Mellega	§	308 7/2
	Miglio	§	504 1/2
			93 1/2
			<u>8168 3/2</u>
1562	formento o formentata macinati	§	752
	formento o formentata in grano	§	1023 3/3
	segale	§	234 4/4
	Spelta	§	10
	Legummi	§	40
	Mellega	§	777
	Miglio	§	21
			41
			<u>81977 5/3</u>
1563	formento in tutto macinato a d'alto in grano	§	1181 6/6
	segale	§	174
	Spelta	§	52
	Legummi	§	31
	Mellega	§	1533
	Miglio	§	243
	Mellega	§	32
			<u>82266 5/6</u>

Table 1 – MIA flour distributions 1560 - 1586

<b>Years</b>	<b>Lire</b>	<b>Soldi</b>	<b>Denari</b>
<b>1560</b>	2057	6	3
<b>1561</b>	1683		
<b>1562</b>	1977	7	3
<b>1563</b>	2266	6	
<b>1564</b>	2810		
<b>1565</b>	1336		
<b>1566</b>	2165		
<b>1567</b>	1390	2	
<b>1568</b>	1765	6	
<b>1569</b>	2194		
<b>1570</b>	1066		
<b>1571</b>	1505	4	3
<b>1572</b>	1560		
<b>1573</b>	3341	5	
<b>1574</b>	952		
<b>1575</b>	1158	1	
<b>1576</b>	1784		
<b>1577</b>	1400	5	3
<b>1578</b>	1416	5	
<b>1579</b>	1469	5	
<b>1580</b>	1255		
<b>1581</b>	1449	5	
<b>1582</b>	1507		
<b>1583</b>	1367		
<b>1584</b>	989	6	3
<b>1585</b>	1475	1	2
<b>1586</b>	1978		

Source: Author on primary sources base (MIADI, [MIA Distributions], cc. 18r – 20v).

Figure 4 – MIA within the Discourse of Poor: technologies and aims



Source: Author

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> In Bergamo Municipality Historical Archive, the survived primary sources about Deputies to Almsgiving refer to 1560 and 1591, even if it likely that their existence was not only related to these two years.

<sup>ii</sup> Similar punishments were also figured out in England during the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Chambliss (1964)).

<sup>iii</sup> The House or Big House (Casa Grande) was a building with a flat for MIA Board and a flat for a large number of workers, involved in MIA activities, known as the Family. In this building were also included cellars, granaries and warehouses to preserve food to be distributed to poor (AML, MIAA, b. 563, f. 2).

<sup>iv</sup> For example it is worth to remember that the MIA Rule requested that the Treasurer should have administrative capabilities and he was chosen among merchants living inside the walls of the town (Benaglio, 1620: 27-28).