

INTEGRATED POLITICS IN SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES STUDY CASE: THE PUBLIC SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The paper is focused on understanding the social assistance services after decades of dictatorship ending in 1989 in which Romania had no coherent specific services. This paper is a part of a large project still in progress; in this presentation, the information was obtained by applying several interviews in 21 different cities and villages from Romania and in identifying and assessing the social needs of individual, family and/or groups in a particular administrative area. Our results will underline the main social problems identified and highlight the need for improving the social services in Romania (and especially in Brasov County) and try to identify some solutions to the problems we face in Romania now after 29 years from the crash of the communist regime.*

Key-words: *social services, social assistance, social needs, family.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of social assistance services remains three decades after the removal of the communist regime, as it is known Romania did not have consistent social services before 1989.

This paper is a part of a broader project which is centered on the theme of which is called: Map of Social Issues and the Need for Social Services in Brasov County. Priority directions on development of social services in Brasov.

The team working on this project is coordinated by the Faculty of Sociology and Communication. The team is made up of seven people, all professors at Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania and are an interdisciplinary team specializing in the following fields: social work, sociology, political and legal sciences, and economics.

This project meets the needs of the local community by taking into account that the social level we assist is increasingly confronted with a diverse set of issues, those being a result of national politics in the social assistance services. The overall objectives of the project are: to identify the main social problems in the county of Brasov; identify the needs of social services in the county of Brasov; and, establishing priority decisions for the development of social services in Brasov County.

We will extrapolate upon the results recorded at the national level, considering that Brasov County is one of the largest in Romania and it can provide a consistent representativeness through the issues which arise.

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This project was necessary given the absence of data on local social problems as well as the needs of certain vulnerable groups and the availability of services. This scientific approach aims at mapping the social problems in the county of Braşov and, in order to be unitary, systemic, we will take into account the application of the methods and tools of research in both urban and rural areas, and as well the statistical data and new data of a qualitative nature, which also provides an interpretative perspective on the issues addressed. In the end, this map can be a useful tool for decision-makers of local and public authorities, and in establishing the priority decisions regarding the development of social services in Braşov County. As well, we ask: “why not rethink social policies at local and even national levels?” The need for local identification and assessment of social problems is mentioned in the National Strategy on Inclusion and Poverty Reduction (2015/2020), which is considered a problem that results in poor monitoring and adequacy of social services to the needs of the community. This project works to ameliorate this problem as well.

As we mentioned before, this paper is a part of a large project that is in progress. In this presentation, we'll use the information obtained by applying several interviews from 21 different cities and villages from Romania by identifying and assessing social needs of the individual, family or group in a particular administrative area. A semi-structured interview method was used and was applied with social workers of public institutions providing social services, those being located in both urban and rural areas.

2. THE PUBLIC SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES IN ROMANIA - DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Considering the theme of the project: “Social Issues Map and the Need for Social Services in Brasov County”. Our research focuses on a specific response to solving social problems and implicitly on "developing individual, group or collective capacities to meet social needs, the quality of life and the promotion of the principles of cohesion and social inclusion" [1, Article 3], namely that offered by the social assistance system as a subsidiary component of the social protection system.

The Romanian government oversees policies in the field of social protection and fulfils the following main duties: policy and legislative competences in the field of social policy (social protection and social security); evaluation and monitoring of policies in progress; coordination and monitoring of the implementation of social policies dealing with children's rights, family issues, people with disabilities, the elderly, victims of domestic violence, vulnerable groups, people at risk of poverty and social exclusion; organisation and coordination of the process of accreditation of social services; monitoring the work of the authorities and institutions with responsibilities in the area of social assistance; management of pensions and social insurance; management of State aid and so on [2].

In Romania, the social assistance system consists of the social assistance benefits system and the social services system and represents the "whole set of institutions, measures and actions by which the state, represented by the central and local public administration authorities, as well as the civil society, intervenes for preventing, limiting or removing the temporary or permanent effects of situations that may lead to marginalization or social exclusion of the person, family, groups or communities" [1, Article 2]. This last part of the definition clearly defines the category of social issues that we will focus on in our methodological approach.

Of the two components of the social assistance system, social services are those that can represent a specific, local (e.g. Brasov County) response to the existing problems, as they are "organized and given at the community level", responsibility for the organization, administration and granting of social services belonging to the local public administration authorities [3, Article 40]. Social services can be a specific/local response to social issues as long as they are based on identifying and assessing individual, family, or group social needs in a particular administrative area.

According to [1, art. 27], social services are understood to mean "the activity or the set of activities carried out in order to meet social, as well as special, individual, family or group needs in order to overcome difficulties, prevent and combat the risk of social exclusion, promote social inclusion and increasing the quality of life."

According to the Romanian legislation, the General Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection ensures at the county level the implementation of policies and strategies of social assistance in the field of child, family, lone, elderly, disabled and other persons in need. At the county level, the General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection is in charge of providing social services, this direction operates within the County Council. Knowing the specifics of social issues in a given area (e.g. the county) and implicitly knowing an assessment of social needs at a local level allow a clearer identification of the necessary social services, and the more appropriate use of existing resources or their more efficient distribution is favored.

Regarding the statistics, the city of Brasov occupies, according to the National Institute of Statistics, the fourth place in the top cities of Romania with the best standard of living, being one of the prosperous regions in Romania. Bucharest is in top and practically the most capable region to support a model service system where major social problems still faced by many of its inhabitants find solutions comparable to those in other European capitals. However, social issues do not know administrative boundaries, so collaboration between sectors in this area is very important [4].

The strategic planning of social services in Romania is based on the evaluation of the stage of social services development starting from three large categories of beneficiaries of social services: 1) children - according to the Romanian child legislation means the person who has not reached the age of 18 and has not acquired full exercise capacity, according to the law [5, art. 4]; 2) elderly persons, for the purposes of this law, persons who have reached the statutory retirement age [6]; and 3) adults in vulnerable situations defined according to OG 68/2003, other than those mentioned above, including among others: people with disabilities, drug addicts, alcohol or other toxic substances, people who have left penitentiaries, people affected by domestic violence, victims of trafficking in human beings, without income or low income, immigrants, homeless people, chronic ill people, people suffering from incurable diseases, as well as other people in situations of social need.

Changes in the social care system in Romania came as a necessity for the people as solving the social problems is a highly bureaucratic and institutionalized process. The field of social assistance, especially social services, is one in which the reform has penetrated rather heavily, is initially carried out in response to the need for deinstitutionalization, promoted both to respect the rights of individuals in institutions and to reduce costs and increase the quality of service [7, p. 8].

In the last decade, the system's evolution in Romania had been focused on the development of social services trying to respond to the needs of the beneficiaries and improve the specific services. Since 2001, Romanian reform in the field of social welfare services has focused on decentralization and the unified approach to social issues. The Social Assistance Framework Act of 2001 brought the focus on preventative services, organized at the community level, so as to allow the access of as many beneficiaries as possible. This was necessary for the absence of a primary social service network, although the specialized services had developed to a much greater extent. Changing the range of social services offered to beneficiaries by public institutions occurs in the conditions in which the NGO sector in Romania has developed a series of models in this respect that could be later taken over by the public sector. These models of social services developed by the NGO sector have led to the need to change existing services in the public sector. The most important area of social assistance where the reform was rapidly implemented was in services provided to children. Here the reform has evolved rapidly from the deinstitutionalization of children to the provision of alternative support services and the prevention of abandonment.

Through the decentralization process, local authorities received the entire responsibility to develop and provide community based services as they are closer to citizens and their needs. Nevertheless, the policy's implementation is done in partnership by the central and local governments. One example is the budgetary allocation from state budget of sums with special destination to authorities at the national level: the child protection system and the social assistance centers for persons with disabilities. Other financial support mechanisms, some of them mentioned before, are: state budget subsidies, national interest programmes, investment programmes, emergency aids. Beyond the financial aspect, in Romania there is a continuous collaboration, assignment of responsibilities and financial obligations between central government institutions and local authorities concerning social.

Changing the legal framework has allowed the creation of decentralized services and the start of the implementation of the concept of parental responsibility and the local community in raising and educating children, the state having a subsidiary role. Law 272/2004 aims to reinforce services to prevent child separation from its parents and to reorganize various childcare centers. Order no. 219 / 15.06.2006 is centered on the activities for identifying, intervening and monitoring the children who are deprived of the care of the parents while they are at work abroad.

Specific legislation in Romania is Social Assistance Law no. 292/2011 (amended by Government Ordinance no 30/2015) with subsequent amendments and completions; Government Ordinance no. 68 of 28 August 2003 on social services, as subsequently amended and supplemented; Law no. 17 / 03.03.2000, republished on social assistance for the elderly; Government Decision no. 886 of October 5, 2000 [8], for the approval of the National Grid for Assessing the Needs of the Elderly. Order no. 2126 / 05.11.2014 regarding the approval of minimum quality standards for the accreditation of social services for the elderly, the homeless, the young people who have left the child protection system and other categories of adult people in difficulty, as well as for the services rendered in the community, services provided in integrated system and social canteens [9].

In Romania, social services for adults are mainly offered to the people with disabilities and the elderly. Law 448/2006 (updated in 2008) [10] regulates the number of services and benefits provided to people with disabilities and for the elderly people, law 17/2000 (modified

successively in 2007 and 2018) defines the services and benefits granted to elderly people in need.

Returning to the project that is behind this article, this summer (2018) we conducted research of 21 interviews with social workers from 21 town halls of Brasov County, as well some questionnaires applied to the social services beneficiaries.

The interview guide used was focused on five major topics of discussion that took into account: 1) Problems city/town/village; 2) Currently existing solutions (services, projects, institutions); 3) Funding sources; 4) Unresolved issues - the proposed solutions; 5) Profiles of the social workers.

From the analysis of the 21 interviews offered by the practitioners, the most important problems faced by the towns of Brasov County are as follows: school dropout; disinterest towards education; the lack of jobs; disinterest in finding a job; domestic abuse and violence; lack of local infrastructure; increasing numbers of people with disabilities; the lack of social services in some cities (eg centers for the elderly and children); external migration (in countries such as England, Italy, Spain, France); internal migration (in other cities that provide social support); the lack of financial education (as a direct consequence of the lack of education, school abandonment); the level of education of family members (many illiterate families); poor education (many families do not consider important education); parent model (many disorganized families); the attitude towards work (the refusal of jobs from convenience, the lack of studies attesting the qualification in work); preference for social assistance (provides a minimum monthly financial income, medical insurance); staying in poverty (lack of studies, lack of jobs perpetuates poverty); social imbalances (parental model copying, illiteracy leads to school abandonment and other correlative issues, such as minor mothers without support, etc.); legislative changes are required (to make the beneficiaries responsible, to limit the period of social services, as the law now encourages laziness); increasing the involvement of the relevant institutions (local community, town hall, mayors, local councilors, school, church, family doctors, parents).

3. FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Again, regarding the statistics, the city of Brasov occupies the fourth place in Romanian cities with the best standard of living, being one of the most prosperous regions in Romania.

The map of the issues can be a useful tool for decision-makers at the local level and public authorities in establishing the priority directions regarding the development of social services in Braşov county and asking why to not rethink social policies at the local and even national level.

Undoubtedly, the social issues identified represent a significant discrepancy between the social norms and the actual social reality that require finding and implementing more efficient solutions.

We can prospect future solutions to conduct regular assessments of people's needs in order to identify social (as we succeed by this project at the county level of Brasov). Regular reviews of compliance with quality standards both to public entities providing social services, and as well as publicly funded private providers and the evaluation of the effects of social services so that they can be improved periodically.

In conclusion, we consider that in order to tackle the poverty and the risks of marginalisation and to improve the living conditions of the children and young, the elderly and disabled people it is important that the involvement of various actors, such as the central government and local government institutions, civil society representatives including advocacy or service provider NGOs, as well as citizens or beneficiaries associated in different types of representative organisations.

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