



PROFESSIONALIZATION OF ROMANIAN PUBLIC SOCIAL WORK SERVICES: AN IMPOSSIBLE CHALLENGE?¹

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Abstract: *The article aims at analysing the state of the professionalization in social work system, identifying the main factors of the low share of specialists, particularly social workers, in public social work services. Successive surveys investigating the professionalization of social work in Romania show that the share of specialised social workers in total of staff in public social services is increasing very slow, while the gap between the total of graduates in social work and employed social workers in public and private social services providers is increasing. The article tries to explain the main reasons of the lack of professionals in public social services, particularly at primary level. Another objectives is to analyse the main strategic documents that aims to increase the share of the specialised professionals at community level and to contribute to the development of public services, particularly in rural area. The article ends with an analyse of the main weakness and risks of these strategic plans.*

Keywords: *social assistance services, social work professionalization, social inclusion, social workers*

Introduction

The social work professionalization in Romania was one of the main challenge after the communism's fall, moment when the reborn of the social services system was supposed to be based on a high infusion with specialists delivered by the new created graduate domains. They would have to provide the social services with specialists for modern and efficient services and reborn the social work tradition interrupted by the communist regime.

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Just in 1990, the social work education was re-established in a context that was seen as favourable for a fast recovery of the profession. The demand of the specialized social workers and other relevant key professionals related to the social services was seen as enormous. The oversized and overcrowded institutions for people with disabilities, the institutions for people with chronic diseases or institutionalized children (both orphans or abandoned by their families) have had to be replaced with adequate social services and adapted to the beneficiaries needs. Other specialized services for various vulnerable categories, particularly in the context of a painful social and economic transition reform, were needed. The primary services, inexistent during the communist period, were another sector with a significant potential for absorbing social work graduates. However, the main concern at that moment was the period needed for full professionalization of the sector, and the low capacity of the universities to provide specialized social workers.

Unfortunately, 25 years later, the social work system, despite of some structural changes, still remains low professionalized, a tendency that marked its evolution from its reborn, despite that the universities have provided throughout last over two decades more than 30. 000 graduates in social work. What factors are influencing the professionalization of social work system in Romania, why the system still show a strong resistance for professionalization and what can be done for improving the absorption of specialists, particularly in primary services developed at local level, are the main questions for which the article will try to answer.

The current state of professionalization in Romanian social work system

Although the first generation of social workers has graduated more than two decades ago, and there are over 30. 000 graduates to the date, a recent report shows an alarming low level of professionalization in social services. Only about 4,600 social workers (both in public and non-governmental sectors) were identified by Romanian National College of Social workers from which about 4. 000 being registered as employed in public and non-governmental sector (Lazăr, 2015:16). The National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2014-2020 shows that only 31% of the Public Services for Social Work¹ from rural localities and have a specialised social worker. The proportion increases for small cities (up to 10. 000 inhabitants) to 49%, and is 60% for cities between 10 – 19. 000 inhabitants, and 88% for cities between 20 – 50. 000 inhabitants. The National Strategy on Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction 2014-2020 estimates that the deficit of specialised social workers in small and medium size cities is between 2. 300 and 3. 600. The same document estimates at national level that the deficit for in all type of services at 11. 000 social workers, while the total of graduates in social work is about 30. 000.

Although there is a slightly improvement of the occupation with social workers compared with the results of previous evaluations (Arpinte, 2002, Arpinte, 2006,

¹Public Service for Social Work (Serviciul Public de Asistență Socială - SPAS) is organised in each locality accordingly to the Law of Social Work no 292/2011.

Cojocaru and Cojocaru, 2008), particularly in medium and big size cities, still the professionalization remains modest compared with the available human resources. The main concern is related to the discrepancies between rural and urban, and also between public and private sectors. Most of the social workers are employed in big cities, particularly those where are the universities with social work faculties or are employed by General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection with operates in each county, but which have limited responsibilities and resources to substitute the public social assistance providers from local level. The last evaluation of the distribution of the professionals at national level (Lazăr, 2015) confirm that the most of the social workers are employed in the General Directorates for Social work and Child Protection but also in NGO providing services for children, while at local level there is an important deficit of specialists, although there are sufficient graduates for a competitive selection.

The lack of professionalization should be analysed in a broader context. The social work as profession had a sinuous evolution, even in European countries with a long tradition being in a process of de-professionalisation and distancing from its fundamental values by excessive standardisation and bureaucratisation and marketization of social services (Rogowski, 2010, Bönker and Wollmann, 2000, Harris, 2003, Ferguson, 2004). Therefore, the social services providers are rather interested in following their development needs and gaining efficiency than providing adequate services for those vulnerable. Such tendency is observed in UK or Germany, but might become common for those countries that experienced long term cuts on expenditure for social programs as a consequence of economic crisis. In Romania, the budget for main social assistance benefits and the resources for financing the public social assistance providers have been significantly reduces in the last years. The additional personnel policies for public administration, based on freezing of hiring new people and staff cuts have contributed also to keeping a low professionalization of public social services providers.

Another key aspect is related to the specific context of former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. All those countries have faced an interruption of the social work tradition, even ruthless in Romania. If in Poland or Hungary some types of social services have been accepted (Hering and Waaldijk, 2003), even provided by the church, in Romania the social work education was totally abolished and the social services have been suppressed. The communist regime denied any social work need and have replaced the specialised services with care in institutions for the most disadvantaged groups (abandoned children, orphans, elderly people without support, disabled people or chronically ill people). Therefore, Romania, compared to the other former socialist countries, started the reconstruction of social work with significant lower opportunities. Also, the process of social work reconstruction in Romania after the communism fall was slower and more difficult that was initially expected. Although the tertiary education was rapidly developing and expanding, supplying the social services providers with sufficient social work graduates for a competitive selection in less than 10 years from re-establishing the social work education at university level, an evaluation from 2002 has revealed a surprising low share of social graduates in total of social services personnel. At that moment, less than 5% of rural localities had a social

worker, and in local social services from urban were only 249 social workers, with a polarised distribution by distance to the universities centres with social work faculties (Arpinte, 2002). Further evaluations (Cojocaru and Cojocaru, 2008, Lazăr, 2015, Ministry of Labour Family Social Protection and Elderly, 2014) has confirmed the tendency of low professionalization in public system and unequal distribution of the social worker, the most in need areas (rural localities, small and medium urban with a high proportion of disadvantaged people) have the fewest specialists in social services.

Obstacles to the professionalization of the Romanian social work services public sector

he low level of the specialists in public social assistance services, mainly at local level, is reflected in a weak capacity of the social protection system to respond to the needs of the main socially vulnerable groups. In such circumstances, the social diagnose and prevention functions cannot be fulfilled, being obvious that will be reflected in growing and persistent social problems.

For instance, the children left home by parents working abroad was reported as critical only after mass media identified a few dramatic cases of such children. At short time, two evaluations, one conducted by Agency for Child Protection, the other by Soros Foundation (Toth et al., 2007) have identified a significant number of children left home, many of them exposed to various risks (Irimescu and Lupu, 2006, Toth et al., 2007, TOTH et al., 2008): emotional disorders, risk of school abandonment, lower educational results, or drug consumption.

Another example is provided by UNICEF evaluation (Stănculescu and Marin, 2012) which found that in 64 rural localities from Moldova region about 11% children out from total were at risk (without access to medical services, exposed to domestic violence, without identity papers, minors being parents, children left home by parents working abroad or children in risk to be abandoned by their families). These children are named by the report as invisible, due the fact that previously to the UNICEF project intervention they were not identified at risk by any social assistance providers, both public or non-governmental.

The income-earning people living in concentrated poverty areas are also identified as a category not reached by public social services (Briciu, 2014:14-15), being estimated that 17.7% adult population (18-64 years) being poor. Another critical category is the population living in marginalised areas, without access to basic utilities or social services, about 3,2% of urban households and 2.5% from rural belonging to such communities in 2012, accordingly to World Bank (Briciu, 2014:15). However, the same author shows the highest rates of poverty are registered for children, although the most and generous social benefits are targeted for families with children.

Such development of social problems might be exemplified for various vulnerable groups, and the main cause of lack of public institutions reaction is the precariousness of social assistance services from local level. Therefore, the support for those eligible for social assistance is provided mainly as a financial or in kind benefits, Romania having a higher proportion of the passive support compared to the other EU countries

(Popescu, 2014: 103-104). For the most of rural localities, the highest share of expenditures for social assistance is for guaranteed minimum income and benefits for disabled people (Mihalache, 2013:138).

Designed by the law (Law no 292 / 2011) as a first level for social diagnose and intervention, these primary services (Public Service for Social Work / Serviciul Public de Asistență Socială) are still underdeveloped, mainly in rural area. As consequence, the public sector became incapable to identify and react timely in case of rising risks for vulnerable categories. The lack of specialised intervention at this level has also an economic dimension, being estimated that the cost of prevention for 200 children is equal with the cost of care for one child in a specialised institution.

In this context the main question is why still there are more than 30. 000 social work graduates and only about 800 rural localities have a specialised social worker in their social assistance services department. A main reason resides in the confused identity of the profession and its role in tackling the social problems. The social worker is often confusedly perceived even by those entitled with responsibilities in organising and delivering social assistance services, as is the case of the local authorities. All mentioned above evaluation of the professionalization of social assistance services faced with the issue of confusing perception of the respondents from local authorities of what means "social worker". Rarely associated with a specialised employee, graduated of a social work faculty, is the "social worker" category were included all range of personnel that are involved in delivering social services, from the personal assistant for disabled people to the employee in charge with the administration of mean tested benefits, although, in most of the cases, they have no specialisation in social work. Therefore, the social worker is low valorised and is not seen as helpful for supporting those in needs, at local level being rather preferred more electorally rewarding tools on short term, as in kind benefits or any other facility that might bring from beneficiaries a positive return in future electoral confrontations. A functional social assistance service at local level means a long-term investment without the guarantee for any returns that might be translated in electoral capital for local authorities.

The lack of the resources is another key factor that impede the professionalization of social work area and social assistance services development. Data show (Ministry of Labour Family Social Protection and Elderly, 2014, Stănculescu and Marin, 2012) that there is strong correlation between the lack of the resources and low share of the professionals among the total of social services personal. In other words, the poorest localities, and therefore the most in need, have the lowest rates of social workers, with the exception of those regions that are in the proximity of the universities with social work faculties.

Strategic approaches for increasing professionalization in social work services

One of the most important aspects of the low professionalization is the lack of specific action plans and this is reflected particularly in the low share of social workers in public services from local level. Even in the case of General Directorate of Social Assistance

and Child Protection, which have a high share of professionals in total of personnel, the achievements are rather results of the support from European Commission and other international donors to comply the EU accession condition, than of systematic and rigorously planned investments.

A milestone for the public social work sector was National Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Promotion Plan (2002) that aimed at providing equal access to social assistance services for all citizens. Some key initiatives have been developed, including a Law of social work and few other subsequent legislative provisions, some as the Law regarding the status of social worker. Although they were essential for a functional social work system, these key initiatives have been insufficiently exploited during the next years. Also, the strategic strands related to the professionalization and development of social work system were abandoned in incipient stages. Overall, the achievements of the initiatives relate to social work and developed under the National Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Promotion Plan have been abandoned after governance changing.

Later on, the main strategies from social inclusion area for the period 2014 – 2020 have included some objectives in area of professionalization, the most important ones in National Strategy on social inclusion and poverty reduction (2014-2020) and National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights 2014 – 2020.

National strategy for social inclusion and poverty reduction (2014-2020) has a few strands for development of social services, increasing capacity of social work at community level, development and reform of specialised social services and the development of services for vulnerable groups. Overall, the strategy emphasises the development of the primary services (Public Service for Social Work), the interdisciplinary approach and professionalization of the services by assuring at least one social work employee in each locality. A few other specific objectives are dedicated to the reform of the social work system at local and county level with some proposal for improving the collaboration between the main actors at these two levels.

National Strategy for the Protection and Promotion of Child Rights 2014 – 2020 is more focused on professionalization within one of its general objective "Improving access of children to quality services" and with two specific measures targeting the development of professional services. A specific objective, "Assuring a social work public service in each territorial- administrative unit" has assigned three actions (fulfilling all vacancies in social services for children, assuring specialised personnel, respectively at least one social worker, in each Public Services for Social Work, encouraging the association of two or more rural localities for developing a functional Public Services for Social Work where the scarcity of the resources does not allow to develop independent services). Although the strategy is focused on child protection, these specific measures are focused on structural needs of the social work system, with long-term positive impact. One of the most important aspects is that the strategy aims at developing the primary services, which have an essential role in prevention and early intervention. It became obviously that the most of the specialised services could not be effective without a well-developed primary social services network. UNICEF report shows that in 64 rural localities, about 11% children did not receive adequate social or

medical service for their needs (Stănculescu and Marin, 2012). In fact, they are named "invisible" since they are not identified as vulnerable by social services. These localities, without a functional and effective public social service, which should diagnose for vulnerable and prevent in early stages, are exposed to the risk for an uncontrolled development of various social problems. A representative example is the case of children left home by parents working abroad. Almost an unknown problem for authorities and representative of social services for children, these children came into attention after mass media revealed a few dramatic cases of some children in 2006. Afterwards, a survey at national level estimated about (Toth et al., 2007) 400.000 children left home, while the public authorities have identified about 82.000 in the same year. Both data are arguable but, however, they show significant amplitude of a social problem that could not be revealed in time at local level by primary social services.

Overall, both strategies propose ambitious aims that address essential needs and critical problems in public social work system related to the professionalization and increasing the share of professionals in public local services. One of the most important in both strategies is the specific objective related to assuring at least one professional in social work (specifically a social worker in Strategy for Child protection, and assuring at least one full-time employee in social work, without being clear about their specialisation in Strategy for social inclusion).

Another common aspect identified in related to the Public Service for Social Work, both strategies planning actions that would develop the primary level of public social system. Although some proposed actions are similar, there is a clear complementarity of their specific objectives. While Strategy for Child Protection is oriented to basic investments in development of primary services and assuring a minimal staff at this level, the Strategy for social inclusion goes beyond with a few additional actions both for the development of primary and specialised services, improving their collaboration and enhancing their capacity for addressing certain vulnerable groups.

Although the current strategies identify the key development aspects of the professionalization in social work and address the development of the public primary social service level, there are some critical aspects that might hinder the achievement of their objectives and targets.

One of the most important is related to the lack of capacity of the public institutions to implement strategic action plans on medium and long term. At least in the social inclusion field cannot be identified any example of a strategic action plan in public sector that have been successfully implemented. The previous strategies plans from social inclusion area, including the sectorial ones, failed in implementation phase, without any exception. The difficulty to follow a strategic direction can be explained by the lack of the resources specifically dedicated to the implementation of the plans, but also by instability of the decision makers positions which have to decide for the resources allocation.

An additional risk for Strategy for Child Protection and Strategy for Social Inclusion is the difficulty to set up the institutional arrangements and financial mechanism, and to

make the legislative changes necessary to achieve their results and objectives during the implementation period (2014 – 2020). As main strands are related to the local level, which are autonomously financed and administrated, will be difficult to enforce standards related to the staff, particularly for those poor localities, which are facing with budget constrains and difficulties to pay the salaries for current staff.

Another reason is related to needed changes in legislation, a process that might take a few years, considering that significant changes are needed in various laws. For instance, according to the Law of Social Work (Law 292/2011), if the social service providers, including local authorities in charge with the development of Public Service for Social Work, are not able to employ a social worker for "objectives reasons", then they may hire staff with any kind of professional background for fulfilling the social work activities. However, the law does not provide further details about what means "objectives reasons" and how long is valid the exception. Such legislative provision should be replaced with new ones in line with the specific strands related to the professionalization since is foreseen for 2020 that each Public Service for Social Work to have at least one social worker, the alternative for the localities without budgetary resources being the association with other localities for development of a social work public service. These changes need time to be operated and gradually implemented, without any guarantee that will be reached the expected results.

Another risk is the lack of provisions for encouraging the coordination for similar or complementary specific objectives. Although in both strategies are mentioned in charge institutions for implementation, the subsequent action and measures need detailed plans of the involved ministries. For instance, the Strategy for social inclusion provides only some indicative actions, which might be carried out but all actions and measures needs to be adequately developed and matched with similar or complementary actions from other strategies. Specific task groups should do this effort and to develop specific plans and project to be implemented, which needs a significant amount of time and staff to be dedicated, resources that are not easy to be identified by the ministries involved in the implementation.

Conclusions

The lack of the professionalization of the public social work is one of the main factors that keep the sector underdeveloped and does not allow using its potential contribution for social inclusion. The sector remains surprisingly low professionalised although there are significant underused resources, as the available graduates in social work. The economic crises and the public personal policies (freezing the hiring of additional personnel, cutting salaries for current staff in public institutions) have negatively impacted the social work sector, one dominated by a modest staff cost policy and with a low professional prestige.

The recent strategies in social inclusion and the strategy for child protection bring a significant change in public social work system by emphasising the importance of specialists in public primary services. Although the achievement of the results in the field of professionalization and development of functional public services at community level does not require significant resources, there are some significant risks

that might hinder the implementation. The lack of strategic planning culture in public sector and the structural difficulties and risks in implementing medium and long-term action plans (lack of the dedicated financial and staff resources, absence of coordination between responsible ministries or difficulties in favourable changing of legislation) might hinder the achievement of the planned results. The opportunity of using European Social Fund that has an allocation of about 777 milion Euro (about 348 million for marginalised communities, including Roma and about 489 million for enhancing access to affordable, sustainable and high-quality services, including health care and social services of general interest) might be the key for a successfully implementation of these two strategies.

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