

MAPPING THE SOCIAL NEEDS AND SOCIAL SERVICES OFFERED BY NGOs IN THE NORTH-EAST REGION OF ROMANIA

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Abstract: *The paper tackles the situation of the social services provided by the non-governmental organizations accredited at the level of the North-Eastern region of Romania. Starting from a diagnostic needs analysis, it presents the results and conclusions of a survey that aimed to study the contribution of north-eastern NGOs to the development of local and county-based social services. The recommendations advanced herein derive directly from these results and may be seen as prerequisites in the adaptation of public policies in the social field.*

Keywords: *social needs, social services, NGO.*

1. Introduction

Social services meet the social needs of people who are at risk or in a state of vulnerability, marginalisation, or social exclusion. Their main role is to help the people facing situations of vulnerability or exclusion to reach a decent standard of living, to provide solutions and concrete measures for their access to the services or resources of a community, and to secure the support needed for their socio-economic inclusion.

2. Context of the Needs Analysis Focusing on Social Services and Social Support Measures

Social diagnosis is a comprehensive assessment of the social issues faced by a community. Its purpose is to trace the causes of these issues, in a manner that is participatory and multi-disciplinary, as well as to highlight potential remedial measures

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together with the resources available and the actors who can effectively participate in their implementation and monitoring. In general, social diagnosis refers to the identification and quantification of a community's issues relative to health, education, housing, employment, social security, and independent living in decent conditions. The process falls into the European trend that sees the provision of social welfare as a mix of responsibility and action coming from both the state and citizen organisations, in order to create an inclusive society and secure equal and non-discriminatory access to community resources for all. From this perspective, social services clients are regarded as partners and are directly involved in the decisions that refer to the services they access, and sometimes even in their provision (Confederația Caritas România, 2015, p. 1).

The Law on the provision of social services in Romania (292/2011) defines the term 'social need' as the sum of all the requirements indispensable for a person to benefit from strictly necessary living conditions, to ensure their social participation or, as appropriate, their social integration. The process of assessing these needs still remains an innovative one because the mapping of needs and the elaboration of action plans in the field of social services are not generalized at the national level. Although Law 292/2011 refers to the obligation of local authorities to assess social needs (article 122) and to develop a local plan of action in the social field (art.112, paragraph 3), these measures are not regulated from a methodological viewpoint and are actually implemented only in a very small number of localities or counties. Assessing the social needs of the people who belong to vulnerable groups has an extremely important role because it provides a full-scale picture of the social intervention priorities needed in a community. It should always be accompanied by a medium- and long-term action plan able to warrant the mobilisation of local resources towards solving the problems identified.

The perspectives of the actors involved in the evaluation process are usually very different and should therefore be equally taken into account:

- For those involved in the planning of social services at the local level (decision makers), this type of activity is centred on the analysis of the resources required to cover these needs. Because in the past these resources were often allocated based on historical costs, relating them to the real needs of the population is currently an element of novelty for the decision makers.

- For those who provide these services (professionals), this assessment allows the identification of the support available (or required) at the local level so that people are able to live as independently as possible in their own community; in other words, emphasis is put on finding flexible and effective solutions to the people's need for autonomy, personal development, care, inclusion, and social participation in the community.

- For social services users (or beneficiaries) local planning means that they need to be responsible for the making of decisions that affect them directly in the care-giving

process; this also includes the people who pay to receive support services. A very important and widely acknowledged role in the decision-making process belongs to the family (informal network), who can provide useful information on the needs identified in order for care to continue. Due to the complexity, the wide range of needs and different situations related to various target groups, it is very important that the work of needs evaluation and analysis be carried out in partnership with local organisations and with the participation of all the actors directly involved, including the beneficiaries of future measures or social services.

The assessment of social needs and the solutions proposed to cover those needs are advanced at an important time for social inclusion policies in Romania.

On the one hand, the „Strategy for social inclusion and poverty reduction (2015-2020)” specifies unequivocally the need to carry out social diagnoses at the local level as soon as possible, in order to substantiate the efficient allocation of resources (including those represented by 2014-2020 European funds) and public spending in this sector. Moreover, this kind of diagnosis helps to identify the areas and sectors where social intervention and integrated support measures are most needed, so that the number of people who are at risk of social exclusion or poverty can decline significantly.

On the other hand, this process has been defined as an obligation for local authorities since 2011, being stipulated in the Law on the provision of social services (292/2011), but, due to the lack of a detailed methodology for the assessment of a population’s social needs, so far only five counties have produced comprehensive assessments at the local level: Alba (2008), Iaşi, Argeş and Tulcea (2011-2012), as pilot counties in a PODCA project initiated by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social and Senior Citizen Protection, and Sibiu in 2016. In 2008 a social diagnosis was conducted at the level of Timiş County, but it was based mainly on quantitative data and social services beneficiaries were not actively involved in the analysis of needs at the level of individual localities. The municipality of Satu Mare also conducted a comprehensive social needs assessment in 2015.

3. Provision of social Services by Non-Governmental Organisations in the North-East Region

In the context of the efforts made to secure Romania’s accession to the European Union, non-governmental organisations were actively involved in the reform of Romanian social services. Within this process, they contributed to improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people, developed new social services adapted to changing needs, trained human resources in the field of social care, got involved in the modernization of the legal framework, invested in the community by raising funds to ensure free social care services, secured jobs for specialists and contributed to state budgets.

The structural funds allotted for the period 2007-2014 were both unrealistically planned as far as the provision and development of social services was concerned and poorly managed. In this context, public authorities, finding themselves in an uncertain legislative framework, did not assume an active role in the contracting of social services, but, on the contrary, they strengthened their monopoly on the market, being the main beneficiaries of state and structural funds allotted for investment in the social sector.

My survey aimed to analyse the contribution of north-eastern NGOs to the development of local and county-based social services. The data gathered allow us to make some recommendations for the creation of a favourable framework that could meet the social services needs of a community and support the authorities in implementing their multi-annual priorities and objectives relative to social services support and funding.

The survey had a mixed design, involving a quantitative study (survey by questionnaire) focusing on the NGOs accredited to provide social services in each county in the North-East region and a qualitative analysis carried out by in-depth interviews with NGO leaders from each county in the region.

The entities involved in the research were selected from the lists of private social service providers accredited by AJPIS in each of the 6 counties in the north-eastern region of Romania. The questionnaire included 38 closed-ended and semi-closed-ended questions, and it was pre-tested on 10 non-governmental organisations. The final form of the questionnaire was submitted to a number of 124 NGOs accredited by the AJPIS as social services providers in the following counties: Iaşi, Vaslui, Botoşani, Suceava, Neamţ, Bacău. These organisations were subsequently contacted by telephone to ask their managers to fill in the forms. At the end of this process 33 organizations filled in the questionnaire.

4. Conclusions and Discussion

The survey involved a total number of 33 organisations accredited as social services providers in the North-East region of Romania. Out of these, 81.8% were established before 2005 and, as a result, had an experience of over 10 years in the social field.

According to their balance sheets, in 2014 these organizations had a total number of 703 employees, out of whom 554 were full-time workers. An estimate based on Romania's average wage shows that so far they have contributed to the state budget with an amount of 9,148,446 lei (2,055,830 Euro), represented by taxes on employee and employer salaries. Moreover, in 2014, these organizations involved in their activities a total number of 889 volunteers.

In the same year, the organisations at hand provided social services to mitigate the impact of the following categories of problems: poverty (72.7%), social isolation (45.5%), other difficult family situations (45.5%), dependency due to disability (39.4%).

Over the course of 2014, the 33 organizations involved in our research had a number of 15,900 regular beneficiaries and they provided occasional services to 2,166 vulnerable people.

The total budget managed for the year 2014 amounted to 27,447,477.83 lei (6,187,299.16 Euro), out of which 74.06% covered human resources expenses. On average, total expenditure per beneficiary added up to 1,519 lei (341 Euro). A total budget of 27,447,477.83 lei was spent on 18,066 social services beneficiaries.

48.5% of the organisations declared that they benefited from public funding (i.e. subsidies from the Ministry of Labour, funding under Law 350/2005) in 2014. 39.4% of the organisations participating in the research declared that the budgets they managed included neither national nor local public funds. 12.1% did not answer this question.

The organisations that took part in our survey recommended the following funding priorities for county councils over the next 3 years (2016 to 2018): rehabilitation and recovery services (48.5%), counselling (36.4%), emergency support (27.3%).

The organisations that took part in our survey recommended the following funding priorities for local councils over the next 3 years (2016 to 2018): rehabilitation and recovery services (45.5%), home care (33.3%), special education (27.3%), counselling (27.3%), career orientation (27.3%), identification and evaluation (27.3 per cent).

In 2014, the organisations involved in our research provided social services by means of projects carried out, most often, in partnership with municipalities (69.7%), directorates general of social services and child protection (57.6%), county police inspectorates and county school inspectorates (each with 39.4%).

In 2014, 54.5% of respondent organizations applied for funds from the local or county budget. Out of the total number of organizations who competed for local funds, 44.4% believe that all participants have equal chances in accessing a project. 22.2% consider that this type of competition is sometimes unfair, and 16.6% consider that this competition is never fair.

The NGOs specified the following reasons for their reluctance to apply for local budget funds (local councils, county councils): "Budgets are absolutely insufficient for a considerable number of NGOs"; "Inappropriate financing conditions, inadequate funding guide, excessive bureaucracy, the impossibility to spend the money in agreement with the beneficiaries' needs"; "Unclear application criteria or failure to meet the selection criteria"; "The amount of available funds is low, our own contribution is high"; "Lack of procedures"; "There were no funding programs for NGOs in 2014"; "We cannot hope to get a positive answer"; "There is no information on the projects that can be supported by the county council".

In over 90% of cases, the main sources of information used by NGOs to learn about the decisions made by local and county councils are represented by newspapers, radio or television programs that present such news. The sources of information on the decisions made by local authorities that are less accessed are: participation in the

meetings of local authorities, posters, flyers, discussions with councillors / local authorities, local information boards or verbal announcements by local authorities.

There seems to be an interest in gaining information on the decisions of local authorities through informal channels, i.e. through discussions with friends or relatives who find out this type of information (84.8%).

As far as actual proposals of non-profit projects are concerned, 42.5% of the organizations proposed often and very often various projects to the city hall and local council, while 18.2% of the organizations sent often and very often projects to the county council.

In 2014, 33.3% of NGOs participated in the public meetings/public events organised by the city hall or the city council and 24.2% participated in public meetings/public events organised by the county council.

In 2014, 36.4% of the organizations surveyed sent requests for information on a specific theme to the city hall/ local council, and 27.3% of these NGOs sent such requests to the county council.

Of the 33 respondent organizations, 15 NGOs submitted projects for non-profit activities of local interest to the city hall or the local council, and 11 received funding. As to funding requests addressed to the county council, 9 NGOs submitted projects, and out of these 5 were also funded.

In recent years, 60.6% of the organizations participating in our survey were asked to collaborate / provide expertise by a public institution in the community. As far as the relationship with local authorities is concerned, 45.5% of the surveyed NGOs think that it is good, 33.4% consider that it is a very good relationship, while 15.2% are of the opinion that this relationship is excellent.

The total funds contracted by NGOs from the local and county councils in the North-East Region in 2014 amounted to 4,345,866 lei, out of which 1,218,517 lei, i.e. 22% of the total, went into the funding of social services. According to the responses received from local authorities, the funds were granted exclusively based on Law 350/2005 on the regime of publicly funded grants for general interest non-profit activities. The funds received from local and county authorities represent 4.43% (273,824 Euro) of the budgets managed by the 33 NGOs in 2013 (6,187,299 Euro). This amount is very small compared with the sums attracted by these non-profit organizations in the community, with the number of jobs created (703) and with the fees and the taxes paid by these NGOs (an estimated 2,055,600 Euro annually).

The data provided upon request by the Romanian National Fiscal Administration (ANAF) shows that the taxes paid to the state budget by employers on whose payrolls people with disabilities represent less than 4% amounts to approximately 36,000,000 Euro, a potential source of funding for inclusion and employment services for people with disabilities.

Although the contracting of social services is present in various forms in Romania's national legislation: subsidies, funding, contracting, leasing, partnership, etc., some of these laws have no detailed methodological rules of application; in some cases, legal texts describe the contracting of social services as a possibility, not as an obligation (the verb used is "may"), and some laws stipulate no sanctions for the lack thereof. (Fundăția Alături de Voi, 2014, p. 8)

5. Recommendations

It is recommended that local and county authorities should:

- adjust the funding budget allotted to private social services according to the cost standards and the needs identified each year based on consultations with the providers accredited by social services;
- include counselling, vocational guidance, home care, recovery and rehabilitation services among the funding priorities of the North-East Region for the next 3 years;
- elaborate and publish within a reasonable deadline the terms of reference for the funding of social services, ensure media coverage for these documents in the target community and publish the results obtained following the implementation;
- fund social services from their own budget for a term of minimum 8 months and maximum 36 months, depending on the needs identified;
- increase the amounts allocated to social services in agreement with the cost and licensing standards of social services providers, align their practices with the European average funding percentage allotted to the field, i.e 10%.

As far as NGOs are concerned, it is recommended that they should:

- associate in formal/informal structures in order to improve social dialogue in the community and get involved in the decision-making organisations active in the field of social services.
- include in their dissemination activities information on their number of beneficiaries, the jobs created, the amount of fees and taxes paid to the state and the funds raised for the community.

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