

“COVERED IN PAPERWORK”- SOCIAL WORKERS’ PERSPECTIVES ON BUREAUCRACY

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Abstract: *This paper presents a qualitative study that highlights the effects of bureaucracy on social workers and beneficiaries as well as the support factors that help social workers cope with bureaucratic demands. The focus on administrative tasks and the large volume of paperwork hinders the work of social workers, reduce the time dedicated to beneficiaries, delay their access to resources and services and decrease trust in the system. Digitalization, simplification of procedures, and coordination between institutions can help reduce bureaucracy in social work.*

Key words: *social workers, bureaucracy, paperwork, effects, beneficiaries.*

1. Introduction

Social work is a complex profession “human and creative, based on imagination, empathy and commitment” (Buzducea, 2017, p.18) which supports beneficiaries in the process of change and requires organization, involvement and responsibility. In carrying out their activities social workers in Romania encounter various difficulties and limitations at the institutional, procedural and financial level or those arising from the legislative framework, public policies and internal institutional regulations (Lazăr et al., 2020). The underfunding of social services in Romania and legislation are critical aspects often highlighted in the specialized literature (Zamfir, 2020; Marc, Bacter & Timofte, 2018).

In the workplace, social workers fill out specific documents. In their work, they comply with the provisions of legislation, regulations and procedures, conduct social surveys, draw up intervention plans and prepare case files, write reports, minutes, complete service contracts, forms, registers and software applications.

This paper presents a qualitative study that explores social workers' perceptions and attitudes toward bureaucracy and aims to answer the following research questions: What are the effects of bureaucracy on social workers' activities? And what are the consequences of bureaucracy on beneficiaries? What are the resources and support factors of the social worker in the face of bureaucratic demands?

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2. Bureaucracy in Social Work

Social work is a practice-based profession and co-creation the solutions to clients' main problems is one of its intrinsic core values (López de Aguilera & Munté-Pascual, 2024). Nevertheless, studies highlight the expansion of bureaucracy in social services (Pascoe, Waterhouse-Bradley & McGinn, 2023; Liodden, 2020). In Romania, the specialized literature indicates excessive bureaucracy as the emphasis on the administrative aspect is a major problem that social workers face in their activities (Gotea, 2020; Faludi & Neamţu, 2020; Lazăr et al., 2020; Zamfir, 2020; Csesznek & Simon, 2019; Bodi, 2016).

Dysfunctions of bureaucratic structures include: formalism, rigidity, inertia, resistance to change, demotivation, the 'passing around' of paperwork, lack of communication between institutions, loss of documents (Toth, 2007; Anastasiu, 1998). Newman, Mintrom and O'Neill (2022) consider that technological advances may further increase bureaucracy rather than eliminate it.

A recent systematic literature synthesis (Pascoe, Waterhouse-Bradley & McGinn, 2023) indicates the negative effects of bureaucracy on social workers and the profession: bureaucratic demands increased through technology; deskilling the work force; consequences on personal well-being and heightened frustration. The analysis also mentions the increase in risks for social service users through: losing sight of the client and their needs; prioritizing outputs and focusing on cost reduction; the increased difficulty for clients to access benefits and social services.

Wastell and White's (2014) study include examples of information technology systems that serve the interests of bureaucracies rather than supporting professional practice, streamlining work and improving social services.

In Romania, in a nationally representative survey, responding social workers indicated as a negative aspect of the practice: the increased concern for administrative activities (filling in forms, applying legislation) "to the detriment of specialized intervention in which the skills and competencies specifically acquired during initial and ongoing training are used" (Lazăr, Dégi & Iovu, 2016, p.89).

The results of more recent studies (Lazăr et al. 2020; Iovu, Lazăr & Cristea, 2020) reveal the same situation: social workers are required to complete a large amount of paperwork; coupled with the high number of cases, cumbersome bureaucracy reduces the time dedicated to beneficiaries, causes dysfunctional relationships and lowers the quality of services; overregulation and the existence of purely bureaucratic aspects in working methodologies that only limit social workers' decision-making.

3. Social workers' perceptions and attitudes

Research objectives. The qualitative study aimed to highlight the effects of bureaucracy on social workers and beneficiaries as well as the support factors and resources of social workers in the face of bureaucratic demands.

Research methodology. The method used was an interview-based survey and data collection was conducted through structured individual interviews between November 8 and

December 6, 2024. The interview guide was structured on two dimensions: bureaucracy and its effects and social workers' support factors and resources. The guide includes questions on: bureaucracy in the workplace, its causes, its positive and negative effects, how social workers deal with it, resources, support, the role of technology, what should be changed.

Study participants. The study involved 14 social workers from public institutions in Bihor County, 7 social workers from urban areas and 7 from rural areas with professional experience ranging from 7 to 34 years.

Study results. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the results.

Bureaucracy and its effects. The social workers interviewed associated bureaucracy with negative terms that reflect a critical attitude: cumbersome legislation, excessive documentation, "buried in paperwork"; "passing papers from one department or institution to another"; rigid system; formal and complicated process; burden; extra work; redundancy; reduced efficiency; loss of documents; beneficiaries being shuffled from one place to another and stress. "Cumbersome legislation, rules, a lot of paperwork and formalities, many documents to complete or present, waiting in line, many trips to make..." (I8). "I associate it with extra work, required by those who place an exaggerated importance on forms that often repeat themselves" (I7). "Bureaucracy, for me, means norms, standardized procedures, completing documents and approvals. I sometimes associate it with a burden" (I6).

Five respondents consider that the bureaucracy in the workplace is "excessive and unnecessary", "a burden", four social workers believe it is necessary, while the rest nuanced their response: "necessary in certain cases, sometimes exaggerated". Excessive bureaucracy is primarily caused by legislation, interpretations of legal provisions and the lack of coordination between institutions. It is highly time and energy consuming and can lead to delays in accessing resources and services. "I see bureaucracy as a mixture of necessity and obstacle. On the one hand, it is useful to ensure transparency and legality of activities. On the other hand, it sometimes becomes excessive and burdensome, with time-consuming processes and paperwork, instead of directly contributing to supporting the beneficiaries" (I10). "Communication with institutions, authorities to obtain approvals is cumbersome, we receive official answers later" (I12).

In the opinion of nine respondents, bureaucracy has increased in the last five years, while the other five respondents believe it has remained the same. "Bureaucracy has increased, often through legislation and sometimes due to the emergence of specific situations, with documents being introduced through working procedures" (I4).

The main causes of increasing bureaucracy are: legislative provisions (frequent changes, gaps) and the introduction of new documents for certain situations not regulated by law; the necessity of printed documents in addition to electronic ones; periodic reporting requirements imposed by central institutions. "The main cause could be the legislation which in Romania is constantly changing (...). Although recently there has been an effort to digitalize public institutions, the programs/applications are not always functional from the start, they are often modified and sometimes more work is required (the physical file is also maintained alongside the electronic one because you cannot afford to lose data) and beneficiaries do not (at the moment) have direct access to these IT applications to be able to apply online themselves" (I8).

Five social workers also referred to the benefits of bureaucracy in social work, namely: a good organization of activities, case monitoring and transparency; legitimacy provided by strict procedures; documentation of interventions and justification of decisions; ensuring evidence of compliance with the law in case of audits or litigation; up-to-date knowledge of legislative provisions; streamlining the assessment, obtaining necessary and complete information about the beneficiary. Four social workers associated bureaucracy with responsibility and the professionalism of the social worker. "The bureaucratic structure supports professional activity by providing a legal and standardized framework for granting social benefits, protecting the rights of beneficiaries and ensuring the correct evaluation of each case" (I10). "Bureaucracy is also an advantage in my work, as it allows me to prove any intervention in my activity, the documents from each case being kept" (I6).

Additionally, six social workers mentioned that administrative procedures and documents protect the rights of beneficiaries, support social equity, ensure the correct evaluation of each case, access to social assistance and the fair distribution of resources. Two social workers added that beneficiaries "are aware of every legislative change" (I1, I3) regarding the benefits or services they are interested in. "Standardized procedures ensure a fair process for all beneficiaries. Beneficiaries can benefit from a regulated system where their rights are respected, and resources are distributed transparently" (I10). "(...) it also offers them security because they could prove it much more easily when they are wronged" (I13).

However, the negative effects of excessive bureaucracy on social workers are significant, as indicated by all respondents, namely: making work more difficult, postponing other tasks and activities; reducing time for direct work with beneficiaries; delays, inefficiency; overburdening, fatigue, stress, mistakes, frustration and burnout; stagnation, routine in professional tasks; "beneficiaries become files, whether filled in correctly or not, complete or incomplete" (I13); decreased job satisfaction; increasingly difficult to track documents; disruption of personal life. "Most of a social worker's job should be fieldwork, being close to beneficiaries of social benefits or services, observing, counselling, and providing support to these individuals (...). Not all social cases follow the same pattern, and not all are resolved in the same way and sometimes procedures are cumbersome and inefficient." (I8). "Excessive bureaucracy leads to a significant waste of time (...), creates an emotional and mental burden, and causes stress due to the large workload" (I10).

From the perspective of the social workers interviewed, the negative effects of bureaucracy on the beneficiaries are the following: delayed access to benefits or social services or even loss or withdrawal; unnecessary trips from one institution to another; insecurity, a sense of control, stress, fatigue, irritability, frustration, lack of trust in the social worker and a negative perception of the system and reluctance towards social assistance and public institutions. Administrative procedures, multiple requirements and complicated forms can be discouraging, and some beneficiaries may abandon the process of requesting social assistance. "The beneficiary wastes precious time before accessing services and resources and sometimes they may even lose them (for example, a spot in a residential center that gets filled in the meantime)" (I5). "Considering that in

the field of social work beneficiaries are most often socially marginalized persons with low education, a disability, or elderly, bureaucracy is perceived as a hindrance and makes them lose trust in the social worker, the public institution and the authorities in general" (I8). "... it feels ignored, stops reaching out to the social worker, remains in a state of vulnerability" (I9).

Support factors and resources of social workers. The factors that support social workers in the face of bureaucratic pressure are both individual and organizational. They help reduce the negative impact of excessive bureaucracy on the professional effectiveness and well-being of social workers.

To cope with bureaucratic demands, social workers rely on the following: overtime work (five respondents); collaboration with colleagues and those from other institutions; efficient time management; technology; professional experience. Commitment to beneficiaries, responsibility and dedication prevent social workers from being discouraged by the sheer volume of paperwork to be completed. "I try to organize and prioritize urgent and important tasks. Collaborating with colleagues and using technology are solutions that help reduce bureaucratic stress" (I10). "I stay focused on the idea that behind all these papers there are individuals in need and the support and professionalism I demonstrate are essential for them" (I13).

Thus, the main support factors and resources mentioned are: collaboration with office colleagues; the multidisciplinary team; the hierarchical supervisor; colleagues from other institutions; experience and continuous professional training; the information system and technology and volunteers. "The experience gained and the collaboration with familiar individuals from other institutions, with whom I have developed relationships of understanding, cooperation, and even friendship throughout my career" (I5). "Discussions and consultations with the hierarchical supervisor, case manager, multidisciplinary team, colleagues involved in the case. Training courses, experience exchanges, conferences, meetings, team building" (I7).

Nine respondents believe that management plays a significant role in reducing administrative tasks by: simplifying internal procedures; promoting an organizational climate based on collaboration; representing employees' needs to higher institutions; ensuring good collaboration with other institutions. "Management plays an important role in trying to support employees by reducing bureaucratic aspects that may be considered unnecessary" (I11). "It can play a very significant role because by understanding what this work entails it can offer or facilitate new support resources or avoid overloading the social worker with additional duties, providing instead an adequate environment..." (I13).

Regarding the role of technology, only five social workers claim that it makes their work easier and more efficient and can reduce bureaucracy. All respondents mentioned various difficulties (old computers, programs that do not work well, too many/different applications) and the risks associated with digitalization (delayed data entry, loss of electronic documents), emphasizing the "doubling" of work (documents in both electronic and paper format). "Especially important, we have some standardized forms and templates for various documents, which make filling them out easier, more manageable and easier to store, find, and communicate quickly and efficiently via email,

WhatsApp, various groups with other institutions, etc.” (I7). “Technology makes our work easier in a way as certain forms can be stored more easily but it also carries the risk that if a malfunction occurs, all the data is lost” (I9). “Technology makes things much more difficult because the applications are different and complex, they don’t work all the time, and they are overloaded” (I14).

The responses of social workers reveal their need and hope for a reduction in bureaucracy in the coming years because of the digitalization of the social assistance system. “In the future I would hope that administrative processes will be simplified, and digitization will become a priority” (I11).

To reduce bureaucracy, respondents believe the following are necessary: clear legislation without room for interpretation; simplification of procedures; improvement of the IT system and high-performance equipment; a unified registry; a digital file for beneficiaries and the depoliticization of the system. “More investment should be made in digital solutions, forms should be simplified, and the number of required documents should be reduced. Uploading all documents into a digital file for each beneficiary would significantly ease the work of specialists” (I10). “It depends on the legislation, as we tend to “complicate our work” “(...) I hope the legislation will be more stable without frequent and untimely changes” (I7).

4. Discussions and Conclusions

Although bureaucracy is important for system organization, equity and transparency, its amplification affects both social workers and beneficiaries. Social workers included in the research advocate for a balance between the administrative side of their work and the time dedicated to beneficiaries.

Excessive bureaucracy mainly stems from legislation and the requirements of central institutions. The lack of clarity in certain legal acts, which allow for different interpretations, leads to excessive bureaucratization of procedures, with documents also serving to protect social workers from any audits or legal actions. Social workers emphasized their responsibility and the importance of obtaining evidence to justify the legality of their interventions.

Excessive bureaucracy hinders the work of social workers, increases the administrative burden and limits the time available for direct interactions with beneficiaries. Instead of providing personalized support, social workers are forced to focus on activities that do not directly contribute to improving the beneficiaries' situation which can lead to a decrease in the quality of services.

Reducing administrative requirements is also important for preventing professional burnout and increasing job satisfaction as excessive bureaucracy generates stress, burnout and lowers social workers' job satisfaction, results confirmed by other studies (Bódi, 2016; Arches, 1991).

The rigidity of the system, the rules and standardized procedures that regulate every aspect of the activity reduce the social worker's ability to make decisions based on the specific needs of each beneficiary. The creativity of social workers is inhibited in social work practice, which prioritizes “ticking the boxes” in forms and completing reports.

Excessive bureaucracy can be a threat to the professional identity of the social worker. The sense of professional autonomy and identity is strong when the social worker can effectively use their skills and experience to justify their decisions and protect the beneficiary's interest (Ellis, Davis & Rummery, 1999), not "to bury themselves in paperwork" to justify anything. Reducing the time dedicated to direct interaction with beneficiaries and the lack of professional flexibility caused by the rigidity of procedures alienates the social worker of their role as a professional dedicated to personalized intervention and change.

The commitment to beneficiaries makes social workers "resist" and overcome bureaucracy by finding appropriate solutions and interventions to improve the situation of those in need, an aspect supported by other studies (López de Aguilera & Munté-Pascual, 2024; Liodden, 2020). To effectively manage the challenges of bureaucracy, social workers are primarily helped by their professional experience, continuous training, colleagues, collaborators from other institutions and technology. Management can be an important support factor that sustains and represents employees to eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy. Reducing administrative tasks, allocating adequate resources, ensuring a supportive work environment and promoting collaboration both within the institution and with other institutions are some of the ways in which management can help reduce bureaucratic pressure.

For beneficiaries, excessive bureaucracy creates obstacles in accessing benefits and services and may lead to the abandonment of social assistance requests. This phenomenon can ultimately reduce the system's efficiency and undermine its purpose of supporting people in need.

Social workers expect digitalization to reduce bureaucracy and to eliminate the repetitive filling in of the same basic information about beneficiaries, but technology alone cannot solve the problem. At the core of a social worker's activity must be the beneficiary, prioritizing the accessibility and quality of the services provided. Changing regulations that cause unnecessary bureaucracy, simplification of procedures, coordination between institutions and the continuous training of social workers are necessary to ensure a more efficient social assistance system that is better aligned with the needs of beneficiaries.

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