

## CRITICAL ISSUES OF THE ROMANIAN SOCIAL ASSISTANCE SYSTEM

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**Abstract:** *The paper presents the results of a qualitative study on the current situation of the Social Assistance system as it is seen by interviewed Bihor county social workers. The problems mentioned include a shortage of social workers in the system, lack of coherence in legislation, low level of social services coverage, especially in rural areas, clients' dependency on the system. In order to improve the situation, the people included in the study mentioned the following solutions: identifying the true needs of the vulnerable groups, developing prevention in social work, clients' true involvement in the assistance process, promoting clients' labour market and societal integration.*

**Key words:** *benefits, dependency, social assistance system, social services, social workers.*

### 1. Introduction

The current situation in Romania is presented in the Social Report of The Research Institute for the Quality of Life published in February 2017: impoverishment of the population (which has reached the alarming level of 40%) and a huge social inequality; one of the lowest employment rates in the European Union; a significant percentage of people working in rural areas are household farmers or are subsistence farmers; informal work represents 32-36% of the total work in economy; deterioration of wages; a minimalist social policy and funding social protection at half the level in the developed European countries; limited effectiveness of the antipoverty policy (social assistance benefits contribute much less to getting people out of poverty as compared to the European average); excessive bureaucracy (Zamfir et al., 2017).

The issue of being on welfare has been constantly brought to the attention of the general public, all that taking place in the context of a general government

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budget facing low revenues and increasing spending and decreasing labour pool. In the media, people on welfare are presented as a large category interested only in social assistance benefits not looking for employment and not trying to overcome the harsh situation they face. Beyond the for and against arguments, informed or not, expressed during political debates, and not only, experts in the field still have to work on reaching the goal of social assistance: developing individuals' capacity to reduce poverty, increasing life quality and promoting social inclusion.

In 2016, the budget of welfare benefits managed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice was 11.7 billion lei (1.54% of the GDP) of which 815 million lei was spent on income support for 244,814 families, 526 million lei on allowances to support 273,366 families with children and low income, and 148.3 million lei was given to 569,600 families to help them with heating expenses during the cold season (MMJS, 2017). In September 2017, according to data provided by the National Payment Agency and Social Inspection, 218,856 people benefited from benefits, with the highest number of clients in Dolj and Buzău counties. 245,107 families were provided with allowance, most of them in Bacău and Suceava counties. In Bihor county, 5,224 people benefited from income support and 4,666 received allowance for family support (ANPIS, 2017).

The paper presents a qualitative study which is looking for answers to the following research questions: *Which are the main difficulties faced by the social assistance system? How can the clients' dependency on the system be avoided? What changes would be required for a better operation of the system?* The sample of the study consisted of 27 social workers, employed by public institutions or NGOs from Bihor county.

## **2. The social Assistance Law Has Been Changed, the Problems Remained ...**

In an article from 2008, Doru Buzducea's opinion was that the limits of the social assistance system were: insufficient development of the services; focus on intervention in crisis situations and less on prevention; prevalence of benefits, consisting of small amounts of money; institutional fragmentation of the system at central level; a neglected rural social assistance network; shortage of professionals; insufficient funds at local level for the development of services and professional institutions (Buzducea, 2008).

At the end of 2017, after almost six years from the coming into force of Law 292/2011 on social assistance, the system still faces just as many problems as before and solutions are still to be found.

From the very moment the law was enacted, Elena Zamfir pointed to the fact that it lacked "the pragmatic implementation component, with precise action tools" (Zamfir, 2015, p. 92), while mentioning some other shortcomings of the law as well, such as: deskilling of the system; the lack of an integrative aspect of the national social services system and the disregard of the public community-based social services; issues concerning the outsourcing of services (Zamfir, 2015).

The 2015-2020 National Strategy on social inclusion and poverty reduction highlights the need for developing social services and shows that “whilst about half of the country’s population lives in rural areas, only 24% of the social services centres are in rural areas” (MMFPSPV, 2015, p. 50). The Strategy also points to some other shortcomings of the system, such as: a considerable shortage of human resources in the field of public social assistance services in rural areas and in small towns; low wages; the lack of methodologies for assessing or monitoring the situation of various local vulnerable groups or for the early identification of people in situations of social risk; fragmentation and lack of coordination of specialized services, mainly in rural areas in the case of services for adults; the lack of a specific instrument for the evaluation of social services.

According to Romania's development strategy for 2018-2038, developed by the Romanian Academy, the current situation of the social services system “is characterised by a rather confused strategy and a chronic underdevelopment” (Zamfir et al., 2016, p. 23). The priority objectives suggested for the development of the social assistance system are: increasing the coverage of the needs faced by people in difficulty with specialized community-based services; increasing funding of community-based social services and developing a minimum set of services; professionalization of the public social assistance system; major changes in the staff policy and an adequate pay system for social workers; a better focus of social services and of income support types on needs, by assessing in a responsible way the clients' social situation; developing new community-based services, adjusted to the needs created by the new major social risks (children left behind by parents who work abroad, waves of migrants etc); expanding the scope of structured social assistance intervention into fields with major social impact (labour, school, violence, housing, family problems, juvenile delinquency etc) and staffing new social services with professionals (Zamfir et al., 2016).

Understaffing and the shortage of professionals, low wages and the shortage of social workers in rural areas were also mentioned during the public debate “Social Assistance. Past, present, future” held on 11 November 2015. The recommendations included: creating a coherent legislative framework, which appreciates the social worker status; creating a social assistance system which is managed in a unified way and based on reciprocity; a much better monitoring of the expenses, but also of those on welfare; the need for the involvement of the academia in decision making (ICCV, 2015).

The literature points to the fact that welfare benefits are small amounts and their provision has proven ineffective in the long term but it also shows that there is no complementarity between benefits and social services (Zamfir, 2012), and emphasizes the need for monitoring and evaluating benefits as a whole, also including the impact of each individually granted benefit (Stănescu, Dragotoiu and Marinoiu, 2012).

The challenges faced by social workers, such as case-overload, excessive bureaucracy, the time consumed with providing benefits, as well as with administrative work, to the detriment of specialized interventions, non-provision

of the material resources needed to carry out the activities, misrecognition of the importance of the profession, inadequate working conditions, poor remuneration (wages and complementary benefits), reduced availability of supervision, shortcomings in the existing legislation are all aspects mentioned in the literature (MMFPSPV and SERA, 2013; Marc and Oşvat, 2013; Bădărău and Robu, 2013; Bădărău and Teodorescu, 2014; Arpinte, 2015; Bacter and Marc, 2017). The authors' suggestions focused on: increasing the number of social workers working in the field; ensuring professional supervision; observing the standards regarding a social worker's case-overload; providing the resources required to carry out the activities; investing in continued training; supporting encouraging and valorizing social workers in their communities; updating the Social Work faculties/departments' offer of courses in order to meet the training needs identified in practice (Marc and Oşvat, 2013; Bădărău and Teodorescu, 2014; Lazăr, 2015).

At national level, the first representative research (Lazăr, Dégi and Iovu, 2016) was carried out in 2015, with a sample of 1057 social workers. Besides the aspects mentioned above, it showed the following: personal safety at work is a matter of concern for a significant number of the social workers (42.2%); a small number of social workers are employed at the level of the central administration and they are also poorly represented among those involved in policy making, which means that they have little influence over social policies; more than 75% of the respondents are interested in training courses on good practices, program development and case management; poor receptiveness of decision-makers to the problems of social workers.

### **3. Organization and Operation of the Social Assistance System. A Case Study from Bihor County**

#### **3.1. Objectives and Methodology**

The study was a qualitative one and its main objectives were to highlight the critical issues of the social assistance system and to identify some measures for improving the current situation, from the perspective of the social workers from Bihor county included in the research.

The method used was the interview-based survey, and the data was collected by semi-structured individual interviews. The interview questions referred to: the effects of implementing Law no 292/2011; the current problems of the social assistance system; social assistance benefits (amounts, accessibility etc); social services (coverage, accessibility, quality etc); preventing the clients' dependency on the system and improving the situation of the system.

The data was collected between July-September 2017. A number of 27 social workers from Bihor county were interviewed, 13 employed by public institutions and 14 by NGOs, 17 from rural areas and 10 from urban areas, 7 with senior positions and 20 with entry-level ones.

### 3.2. Data Analyses

**The problems of the social assistance system.** Regarding the difficulties of the social assistance system, the respondents mentioned the following ones: issues concerning human resources and their activity (shortage of human resources, a small number of professionals in the system, work overload, small, demotivating wages, insufficient training courses for professionals); problems concerning system organization (insufficient interinstitutional cooperation, deficiencies of the legislative and institutional framework, miscorrelation of the legislation in force with the reality on the ground, huge bureaucracy, the lack of a global and unified approach to the problems faced by those in difficulty), issues concerning the effectiveness of the use of funds (the clients' dependency on the system, the clients' poor involvement during the assistance process). The following aspects were also mentioned: underfunding of social assistance, the low level of social services coverage, especially in rural areas, politicization of the system, the shortage of social workers in the central administration, the lack of programs aimed at facilitating the integration on the labour market of the clients' of social assistance system.

*“The problems are: there are few public social services for some categories of vulnerable people, sometimes they are even missing, and the private providers of services have to take over those categories; funding of the private social services is not continuous and secure; contradictions between various legal norms concerning the social assistance system, so we cannot talk about coherence and uniformity at the level of the whole country”.*

*“The politicization of the system and the policy makers' inconsistency, miscorrelation of the legislation in force with respect to the reality on the ground, the shortage of social work professionals (with respect to training and experience) in the ministry/its subordinate institutions, the small and demotivating wages of the people working in the social assistance system”.*

*“The social assistance system is unable to cover the needs, to address the problems of all disadvantaged categories, especially those of people with addiction problems. There is no effective communication between state institutions active in the field of social assistance and NGOs ... The inflexible state imposes requirements which make accreditation of services very difficult”.*

According to several professionals working for private organizations, the main problems of the social assistance system result from the state's wrong approach to the system of social services.

*“The lack of strategies for developing social services aimed at helping social inclusion; there are no funds earmarked in the public budgets to provide social services for the general public (apart from the services for*

*children separated from their parents and post-institutionalized people); Social services are provided by the same authorities that develop strategies for creating/providing social services (hence the risk of trying to maintain in the long term the dependency of certain categories of people on the services provided by these authorities, as well as the inability to receive feedback on performance)".*

While arguing that the responsibility is shared between the authorities and the person in difficulty, a professional from the child protection system brought up some aspects connected with the lives and attitudes of some of the clients of the system, such as *"their relative isolation/self-isolation, that is, their refusal to cooperate with the authorities, to change undesirable or harmful behaviour. Some children's families refuse to cooperate, the parents/relatives are verbally aggressive, sometimes even physically, they confront the social workers and refuse to communicate or to sign documents. The shortage of jobs in rural areas and the parents' disinterest in finding employment hinder the change of the situation of families, as well as the education of children in the spirit of seeking social integration and of valuing work"*.

The respondents' opinions are divided regarding the current legislation. While some believe that the legislation is good, but the problem is the lack of funds and of professionals, others consider that *"the major problem is the legislation itself"* or that *"there are too many changes in the legislation on the social system whenever those holding the political power are replaced"*.

Regarding the social assistance benefits the majority of the interviewed social workers believe that: the amounts are low; those who receive them often feel encouraged not to work and thus their dependency on the system goes on; the system focuses on giving benefits to the detriment of providing social services.

*"The benefits take only partly into account the needs of the clients. They depend on the country's economic performance and are not adjusted to the true needs of the clients ... whenever there are funds, benefits are provided, but that does not lead to changes of the situation, to the improvement of the clients' situation. Instead of contributing to development, to the limiting of dependency, they create dependency on the aid provided ..."*

*"In my opinion, social assistance benefits are a waste of money. There are people who need indeed these benefits, but I think that as many as 75% of the benefits are provided to people who could earn money and who do not do that because they are complacent with their situation. Attempts have been made to condition the receipt of benefits by community service. The clients have found ways to dodge the service, sometimes by presenting medical certificates to show they were unfit for work. In some places in the country the provision of benefits is actually encouraged, as the clients are an easy to manipulate mass of people when elections come"*.

There were respondents who pointed to some difficulties in accessing the benefits and in checking their provision.

*“Accessibility is difficult in the case of atypical situations or in that of dysfunctional families”.*

*“I think that the forms used are too complicated, they are not adjusted to the segment of the population concerned, taking into account that those who apply for these benefits are less educated, illiterate, lack vocational qualifications ...”*

*“It would be good to have a unified client database, to see the clients involved in their local communities, to have monitoring schemes in place”.*

*“In most cases those who truly need them do not have access to the benefits”.*

Regarding the social services, the people involved in the study spoke mainly about the accreditation difficulties, the shortage of service coverage in rural areas, the insufficient development of prevention services.

*“In Oradea the situation is fairly good with respect to social services, but things are different in rural areas”.*

*“The specialized social services created by the county authorities (DGASPC) are provided mainly in two particularly important fields: long-term care and the rehabilitation of formerly institutionalized children/youths/adults (post-institutionalized people)”.*

*“A map of the social needs at national level is nonexistent, as the methodology for creating it has not been developed; there are social services that cannot be accredited, as they have not been included in the classification of social services; contracting of social services is overregulated, which leads to confusion and dysfunctionality”.*

The shortage of funds for social services was mentioned both by social workers working for public institutions and by those employed by NGOs.

*“There are not enough social services and where they have been created, they are unable to cover the needs of the communities. They are based on public funding; the state does not provide money and is not involved in their development. In rural areas social services are almost nonexistent; the few ones which can be found there have been created by churches or NGOs”.*

*“Primary social services funded from public budgets are virtually nonexistent. It is still a common belief that social services are rather the appanage of some voluntary choices of the private sector made in order to do good”.*

*“Decentralization had negative effects in rural areas, as the local budgets are small ... The NGOs face financial instabilities and cannot provide services in the long run”.*

Some respondents consider that *“one of the problems is that the private providers of services are not sufficiently monitored with respect to the provision of services”*, bringing to the fore the poor quality of some social services.

*“Even if there are quality standards and the providers are accredited, quality compromises are often made in the case of some services. These compromises are the result of the high number of clients registered for the services (probably for financial advantages) and of the shortage of caregivers. When I mentioned the later one, I meant mainly the residential care units for elderly or disabled people”.*

The outsourcing of social services is seen as a necessity, but some social workers have pointed to some procedural issues.

*“... there are no methodological norms, there is no correlation between Law 292 and the other laws in force on various segments. Outsourcing is done as professionals see it appropriate ... There is not a unified approach to the outsourcing procedure of the DGASPC and it is very hard to reach a consensus in the relation with AJPIS. There are no clear responsibilities set for each institution, they are set internally”.*

*“Outsourcing is an extremely beneficial undertaking for the county or local public authorities, which are relieved of tasks they were not prepared to face. However, the providers who have taken over the services complain later, saying that although during the contract the legislation is changed and this affects the expenses (the minimum wage is increased, the average cost per client goes up etc.) the value of the contract remains unchanged”.*

Some respondents consider that due to the human resource shortage, or without the required qualifications, the local public administration authorities cannot carry out the duties laid down in the law with respect to organizing, managing and providing social services.

*“The outsourcing of services is beneficial, but due to the shortage of qualified staff, the local public administration authorities do not have the capacity to achieve the objectives as they are laid down in Article 140 (1) (a-j) of the law. The action plans laid down in Article 112 (3) (b), which are drawn up by the local public authorities, are made only “on paper”, often by dilettantes. The duties laid down in the law cannot be carried out, as the social care facilities in the country face staff shortage or the staff is not properly qualified”.*

#### 4. Suggestions as to how to Improve the Current Situation

Asked about concrete measures to prevent the dependency of a high number of clients on the system, the interviewed social workers mentioned: limiting the benefit provision period, greater involvement of the community, developing the social services and developing prevention in social work, helping clients' labour market and societal integration, clients' true involvement in the assistance process.

*“Developing services/measures from other fields in order to prevent in this way the deterioration of the clients' situation, better focus on prevention and proactivity; changing the approach to the clients' self-determination, clients' true involvement, not just on paper, in the identification of their needs and in the measures/interventions needed, their direct involvement in the decisions taken to benefit them”.*

*“Strategic investment in getting people out of social exclusion and in preventing the latter's persistence from one generation to another. Concretely, prioritization of some social services, provision of funds, hiring human resources, standardization of interventions and of the objectives that will be achieved, evaluation of the results and of the impact”.*

*“Capping the right to welfare benefits... Creating conditions for deinstitutionalization and for clients' care within their community”.*

*“Creating and supporting sheltered workshops where disadvantaged people can do a productive activity, as in this way each individual can become useful for the community they belong to”.*

A solution mentioned by one of the social workers was the outsourcing of the assessment of those who apply for social assistance benefits, so the assessment would not be performed any more by the local authorities.

*“I think benefits should be granted after a much stricter assessment (performed not by the local authorities, but perhaps by an outsourced service) and the provision of social services should take priority and they should be set up after an objective assessment of the need in the community”.*

In order to avoid dependency on the system, those interviewed feel that it is essential to also take some steps to stimulate employment, to provide counselling for the clients and vocational training, taking into account the labour market needs.

*“Professionals who can provide counselling to people who are unable to find their place on the labour market, who are unable to discover their*

*vocation ... Creating opportunities for vocational training and retraining, always following the needs of the labour market ...”.*

The majority of the answers focus on the importance of the human resources in the system, both with respect to having the number of people needed for an effective operation of the system and with respect to these people's adequate professional training.

*“In my opinion the following things are needed: promotion and support of the social work profession, continued training of the social work staff, promotion of the public – private partnership in order to develop the social services and to improve the quality of services, a greater emphasis should be placed on prevention in social work, developing some real practice/training/internship programs in the social care facilities, social services should be developed by social care facilities in the country, taking into account the needs identified in the local community, based on the needs strategy/analysis”.*

*“Opening of a budget line for continued training of the social services staff”.*

Another suggestion for improving the current situation concerns the adjustment of legislation to the reality on the ground, to the real needs of the clients.

*“I believe that the situation will improve only when the legislation will follows the real needs ... Reality should be studied before laws are enacted”.*

*“A clearer legislation. The emphasis should be placed on creating services adjusted to the needs of the community”.*

Here are some other measures mentioned by more than one of the respondents: conducting specific research for different categories of clients and regions of the country in order to identify the causes which lead to dependency; placing greater emphasis on the real evaluation of the effectiveness of the services, as well as on local strategies correlated with the local needs and possibilities; supporting the public-private partnership and the need for a simplified funding system; greater involvement of the local community; promotion of community responsibility, of social solidarity, of volunteering; improving interinstitutional cooperation; reducing bureaucracy; accessing non-repayable funds; exchange of experience with countries in which the social services are more developed and adopting good practices.

*“A new county social diagnosis would be required to identify the true needs”.*

*“NGO representatives' participation in making decisions on how public funds for the social field are spent, creating direct funding lines in the state budget for small communities, as local budgets are too small to support social assistance activities; significant funding for the prevention services addressed to all categories of clients”.*

*“I think the provision of social assistance benefits should be limited to a period of time. Concerning the provision of social services, and that of benefits too, I think that greater emphasis should be placed on identifying the causes which generate the problem and then focus on solving them first”.*

## **5. Conclusions**

The results confirm and enrich the information provided by previous studies, showing a social assistance system with many neuralgic issues, which affect all of its components. The benefits prove ineffective, there is a shortage of services, a shortage of social workers, so an urgent and realistic intervention is required.

An idea which occurs both in the literature and in the answers of the Bihor county social workers is the importance of diagnosis and of monitoring, of knowing the real needs of the clients of the system so that adequate measures are adopted and truly implemented within the communities and then, their impact upon the clients is evaluated. In order to do that, the involvement of professionals in formulating social policies is of the utmost importance. However, all these things cannot be achieved in a system that faces underfunding, which results in fewer social workers for the services, but also in fewer community-based services (consolidation, termination), something that could be seen in recent years.

Regarding the clients' dependency on the system, one of the shortcomings of this field is that there is not enough emphasis placed on increasing the clients' motivation for change, on empowering them to manage their own affairs. The suggestions of the social workers who took part in the study include limiting the benefit provision period, developing the prevention services, emphasis on education and counselling, support for the clients' labour market and societal integration, for vocational training taking into account the market supply of labour.

Another conclusion is that intervention in the case of this category of clients should be an integrative one, given the complexity of the issues they face. In most cases, intervention at the level of the individual is not enough, it is important to expand it upon the entire family and the community. It is important that the responsibility of the state is accompanied by that of the local communities, as an effective social protection system can be achieved only by involving all the relevant factors – from public institutions, to the NGOs, to the civil society etc.

Practitioners and researchers have suggested solutions, what is missing is the interest of the authorised parties to implement them. Fragmented measures, the lack of a unified view and the disregard of the reality on the ground have worsened the situation of a social assistance system that has already been suffering for far too long.

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