SOCIAL PROBLEMS IN BRAȘOV CITY.
THE PERPECTIVE OF SOCIAL WORKERS
FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR

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Abstract: *The paper presents the results of research conducted with social workers from the private sector in Brasov city. Data was collected using the focus-group method. The participants were social workers who work with different vulnerable groups and in different non-governmental organizations. Data obtained were analysed using thematic coding, which resulted in four main categories, each with a variety of sub-categories For example, the fourth category, the social workers' visions regarding the most efficient solutions of current social problems, has different subcategories, which were : changes of national strategy, changes in the human resource in the system, and development of new social services. Solving social problems can be done either from the outside (inducing a point of view that is identified with the official policy of state institutions) or from the inside (identifiable with the vision of the minority groups involved in these social problems).*

Key words: *social problems, community problems, social assistance system.*

1. Introduction

An unwelcome or harmful situation is, in general, regarded as a problem. The identification of a problem, as well as the detailed and objective description of it, are the obligatory conditions for a person, a group or a community to be able to start the long and complex process of dealing with and overcoming it.

The term of social problem is usually used to refer to social conditions that disrupt or damage society—crime, poverty, racism, and the like. Although a huge amount of papers were written on this topic, there is no universal definition of social problem. In academic literature, many definitions include the requirement that the public or some segment of the public perceive the condition as problem before we can justly say that a social problem exists (Lauer, 1976, p. 125).

A social problem represents a significant discrepancy between social norms and

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factual social reality (Merton and Nisbet, 1976). These types of problems are 'social' in the sense that they capture public attention, and they demand a public response and finding remedies. They are more than private troubles, because they affect a large number of people and interfere with or generate other public issues. In a democratic country, interventions are intended to remedy or improve the circumstances or social conditions that cause problems – bringing about greater social justice, enhancing social welfare, or providing a degree of social protection.

A social problem has also been defined as a situation that is widely regarded as undesirable or as a source of difficulties; it is caused by the actions or inactions of people or of society; it affects or is thought to affect a large number of people (Farley, 1987).

Social problems are complex, and the very definition of a "social problem" can be difficult to articulate. Sociologists see a social problem as a dual phenomenon with its objective and subjective components. As an objective reality, a social problem is real and it possesses a harmful characteristic that can be verified by the experience of some people. Human trafficking, poverty, violence, alcoholism and many other examples of social problems are harmful wherever they take place. However, social problems have a subjective dimension. They depend on how people perceive thoseconditions: the same thing can be seen as a social problem or the exact opposite. For example, abortion can be perceived as a murder, and thereby it becomes a social problem; but others can consider abortion as a solution to being pregnant with an unwanted child for whom the pregnant person cannot provide care.

2. Theoretical Background

I noted that social problems exist when there is a certain objective condition and the public define it problematic. In other words, a social problem exists when people think it does. If there is no perception of a particular social situation as problematic, then it does not exist as a social problem. In addition, a social problem affects a large part of the members of a community/ society in a negative way, requiring collective action.

Jamrozik and Nocella (1998) consider that the problem itself has to have societal origin. To qualify as a problem there needs to be a threat to certain values, but in the modern-day world values are fluid and ever changing. Connor (2013) underlines that there must be a general consensus for the problem to be truly a problem. Dolch, Deutschmann and Wise (2007, p. 2) suggest that: "A popular approach is asking the public for their opinion on the most important problem facing the country". But there is another approach that considers that the public cannot see problems amongst themselves, only people above in positions of power can view the negative aspects of the society. Zastrow (1996, p. 3) sees social problems as "when an influential group asserts that a certain social condition affecting a large number of people is a problem", not when the people decide there is a problem.

Social reality can be analysed and explained from different perspectives. In the case of social problems, the main frameworks of theoretical analysis on the basis of which they can be defined and explained are symbolic interactionism, functionalism and conflict theory.

For adherents of symbolic interactionism, the focus is on the negative interactions between individuals. These theoreticians consider that social problems result from associating violators with the law to a greater extent than abiders and from being labelled as unsavoury characters. In addition, social constructionism approach, which has been rooted in symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, defines social problem in terms of a process, rather than a type of condition. It focuses on how and why people come to understand that some conditions ought to be viewed as a social problem, that is, how they socially construct social problems (Best, 2013).

In explaining social problems, the functionalist theory concentrates on threat to social order. Social problems arise from the failure of social institutions, groups and other parts of society to perform their functions properly. This failure generates negative, unintended consequences.

Conflict theory considers that social problems originate from the exploitative nature of capitalism along with class, racial, ethnic, gender, and other inequalities. It focuses on the contribution of social problems to social conflict.

By the assumptions and definitions depicted from the above theoretical approaches, some characteristics of social problems can be synthetized:

•Social problems have harmful consequences for the society, they generate negative consequences.

•They are deviations from the normal, "ideal" situation.

•Social problems are issues that affect large numbers of people.

•Almost all of the problems are caused by many factors and these factors are social in origin. They are caused by pathological social conditions and often political ones.

•Social problems are interconnected and contagious.

•They are social in their results – they affect all sections of society.

•Social problems have different impact on different individuals.

•They have both an objective and a subjective nature.

•The responsibility for social problems is social – they require a collective approach for their solution.

•They occur in all societies – they are ubiquitous and inevitable.

Different people within a society or group react differently to social problems. The differences may be explained in terms of various attitudes towards social problems. Agabrian (2001) identifies the following negative attitudes to social problems: indifference, passive acceptance of troubles, cynicism, and divine punishment.

Another classification of the attitudes towards social problems includes both negative and positive ones and was synthetized by Akujobi and Jack (2017, pp. 508-509):

•An attitude of concern: social problems as mentioned earlier must be a condition regarded by the majority of the social system as a problem which requires collective remedy. In this sense, those who define a condition as a social problem tend to react in ways seeking to proffering panaceas to such problems by the generality of the population that hereby shows an attitude of concern for not just the existence of the problem but its possible solutions.

•An attitude of unconcern: many people and the state at times remain indifferent to a problem thinking that it does not affect them. At times their own individual

problems like family tensions and job pressures keep them so engaged that they do not find time to be interested in what affects others. It is only when their own interests are involved that they become agitated and start taking interest in the problem. The indifference and passivity of the State only adds to the problem further.

• Fatalism: some people are so fatalistic that they attribute everything to destiny. Issues like poverty and unemployment are also explained in terms of misfortune and religious retribution. They, therefore, suffer the misfortune quietly and wait for some miracle to happen.

• Vested interests: some people take no interest in the existing problems because they stand to gain so long as the problem exists. Motivated by self-interest, they describe the problem as insoluble and talk about its eradication as a waste of time.

• Absence of expert knowledge: Some people, though deeply concerned about the problem, do not take much interest in it believing that its solution is impossible unless people change their attitudes and values. As the changes must be initiated by a change in outlook, they remain unconcerned about finding alternative possibilities of treatment.

Analyses of the social problem process allow social workers to consider how power, politics, fears, prejudices, and values create what is problematic about a variety of social conditions.

3. Methodology

The present study is part of a larger project, entitled *The map of social problems and the need for social services in Braşov County. Priority directions regarding the development of social services in Braşov County*. I was a member of this project team. The project was won in a competition launched by Transilvania University of Braşov - "Grants for interdisciplinary teams" and took place between 15.02.2018-15.02.2019.

The mapping of social problems at the level of Braşov County was carried out in both urban and rural areas.

The general objectives of the project were aimed at identifying the main social problems from Braşov County; identifying the needs of social services at the level of Braşov County and establishing the priority directions for the development of social services in Braşov County.

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, a mixed methodology was used (secondary data analysis, semi-structure interviews, and focus-groups). In this paper I will present in detail the data obtained through the focus group with social workers from the private sector.

3.1. Study design – focus group with social workers from the private sector
The data, generated by the focus-group method, completed the information obtained through individual interviews with varied ideas, opinions and experiences on the topics discussed.

For the selection of the investigated subjects I resorted to theoretical sampling, which

allowed me to simultaneously respect the criterion of homogeneity (social workers from private sector) and heterogeneity (social workers working with different vulnerable groups). There were 9 participants, social workers from different domains, 8 employed in NGOs and 1 from a private social assistance office.

The focus-group was designed to last approximatively one hour and a half, but the actual discussions lasted about three hours and a half. The discussions were recorded using a tape recorder, and their analysis was done through coding techniques, using the software NVivo.

4. Results

Following the thematic coding of the data obtained from the discussion with the social workers participating in the focus group, four main categories were discovered, each with a diversity of related sub-categories.
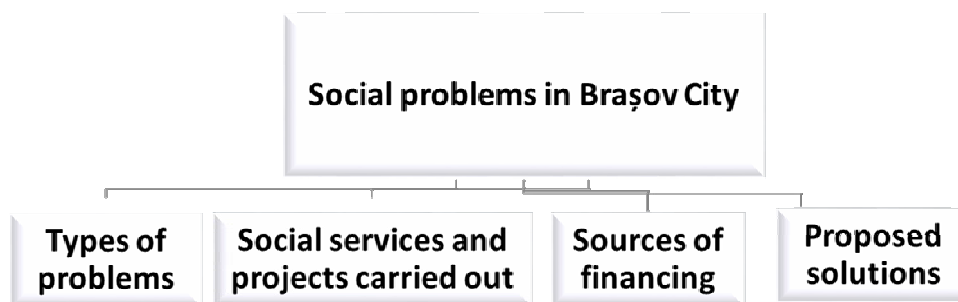

Fig. 1. *Main categories*

4.1. Types of problems
Among the main social problems, which the Brasov community is facing, are the following:
- poverty,
- school dropout,
- lack of education,
- worrying illiteracy in certain risk groups,
- institutional discrimination of children from underprivileged groups (both by some principals and some teachers),
- negative attitude towards work or personal hygiene,
- juvenile delinquency,
- domestic violence,
- single chronic patients who can no longer work and have no income,
- socio-medical services inaccessible in terms of costs (nursing homes are very expensive and few can access them),

• blockages at the educational and medical system level (lack of interest of teachers, lack of preparation for working with children from risk groups),
• a large number of abandoned children,
• some laws are not enforced (for example, there are no access ramps to the buses from the public transport),
• the prejudices of potential employers towards the candidates who are part of vulnerable or risk groups.

From the data analysis, it emerged that, in addition to the social problems of the beneficiaries, social workers also mention the problems of social assistance system. This type of problems often function as drivers of social problems or as bottlenecks in alleviating clients' difficulties and are found both on nationally and locally level. Thus, social workers mentioned dysfunctions related to legislation, general strategy, the nature of social services, material and financial resources, and quality and quantity of human resource in the field.

Some examples of these dysfunctions are the following:
• There is no coherence between social policies; laws are not really grounded, they seem to be created in an office.
• The prevention part in social assistance is almost absent.
• There is no real complementarity in offering social services.
• Different organizations offer the same social services to the same client, which determines the client to not want to become an active part in his change process (e.g. to hire).
• An insufficient palette of social services is reported in relation to the complexity of social problems, the social assistance system does not evolve at the same rate as the dynamics of current social problems.
• The social services offered at one point do not have continuity due to changing standards for accreditation and licensing.
• The lack of logistics prevents social workers from carrying out their professional activity efficiently: the lack of an adequate office (especially in the rural area), the lack of a car for the field work, and the lack of space for individual counselling.
• The number of specialists is insufficient, and also the physical time required to solve cases. Given the legislative framework, the social worker is overloaded by the number of cases.
• The relational skills of the staff in the placement centres are poor.

Particularly in the rural area, the respondents underline that there are employed persons with attributions in social assistance (graduates of other specializations), not social workers. This fact leads to the inability of these employees to convey to the mayor what needs are specific to the community and to argue why social services are needed.

The social workers, which participated in the present study, consider that the reports of social inquiries used in court are sometimes prepared by persons with attributions in social assistance; and these documents contain extremely little information and they are presented in an amateurish way, with dramatic consequences for those involved.

The participants in the research also mention that there is a vassal relationship between public and private institutions; the attitude of superiority of some employees in the state sector to those of NGOs; the existing bureaucracy at the level of public institutions.

4.2. The causes of social problems

Analysing the data collected, the social workers' vision regarding the causes of these social problems and dysfunctionalities emerged. I grouped these results into the following subcategories: macrosocial causes (position of social worker, lack of values in society, educational system), causes on mezzo level (lack of interest of local decision makers), and microsocial causes (apathy, individual incompetence of some social workers).

Some examples of macrosocial causes presented by the respondents are:

> *There is no correct media coverage of the role of the social worker with recognised competence;*
> *The lack of specialized staff in rural areas is caused by the salary level of this occupation, as well as the lack of motivation of graduates of this specialization to work in the field;*
> *There is no constantly updated and efficiently publicized centralizer regarding the services provided by DGASPC, DAS, and NGOs in the local community;*
> *There are no longer values in society, in the family.*

Causes on mezzo level the following were exemplified by social workers:

> *There is no interest of decision makers at national, county, and local level. In addition, the money needed for social services is not well managed, because no social assistance expenditures are introduced in rural development strategies. Decision-makers at the level of UATs are not informed by the higher authorities with authority (such as the County Council, DGASPC, DAS) that when designing the development strategy they must allocate resources for social services;*
> *There are no family planning services in rural areas, which is reflected in the high number of minor mothers;*
> *There is no cohesion, not even between social workers.*

Among the microsocial causes the following could be mentioned:

> *There is an attitude of indifference, apathy, lack of motivation and involvement of some social workers;*
> *Insufficient development of personal skills such as tolerant spirit, empathy, acceptance of diversity.*

4.3. Effects of social problems

What effects have these problems produced or are they still producing? The responses of social workers were generally related to the negative consequences for people in risk

situation, but also to how the social worker profession is viewed and how the social assistance system is affected. In more detail, these effects are:

•The clients for the social assistance system are generated continuously.

•There are many social cases.

•There are children who have lost their start, whose right to education is violated, parents who clash in the face of the marginalization of their children.

•Institutionalized children remain in the system and experience traumas that no longer heal, very little work is done with them in individual settings. Families who want to adopt accumulate frustrations because they wait for years and almost give up the idea. And the specialists live the feeling of futility, of the uselessness of the work they have carried out.

•Post-institutionalization carries with it the risk of marginalizing these young people. They often become people in difficult situations, experiencing homelessness, unemployment, unscheduled pregnancy, and crime.

•The nature of the social services system creates dependence, perpetuates the mentality of being helped, of not making efforts, of not being productive.

•At the level of the public opinion there is confusion about the specific of the profession of social worker (it is confused with the personal assistant, with the nurses). People are not informed and do not understand precisely what a social worker does.

4.4. Present and future solutions for social problems

Social services (primary or specialized) can be a local response to community-specific social problems, as long as they are based on the identification and assessment of individual, family or group needs in a given administrative area.

The analysis of the efficiency of current social services showed that progress is being made by most of the clients social workers have worked with.

The situation presented by the social workers participating in this study indicates a number of difficulties and obstacles in accessing current social services by the potential beneficiaries. These difficulties are related, in particular, to the economic factor. Depending on the number of specialists employed, organizations establish a limited number of beneficiaries, but the need in the community is much higher. Thus, there are waiting lists for social services, in which approximately the same number of people appear as the selected beneficiaries that will actually have access to those services. In addition, some social services are provided for a fee (e.g. therapies for children with autism), which can be a problem in terms of the accessibility of these services.

The promotion of social services that can be provided has an ambivalent effect from the perspective of a respondent: on the one hand the organization is known in Braşov community, on the other hand these services are requested by too many potential beneficiaries, which exceeds the real capacity of the organization. This leads to frustration, disappointment on both sides, and the organization has to build restrictive eligibility criteria for their future clients.

The basic idea that emerged from the discussions with the participants, regarding the currently financial resources for social services, is that the general trend of potential sources of funding is decreasing. The financial resources are insufficient for the

sustainability of some services offered or to cover the real need for social services at the level of the Brașov community. This has led to the dissolution of some NGOs in recent years, the inclusion of potential beneficiaries on waiting lists, the dramatic decrease in the chances of social reintegration of people at social risk.

The respondents' suggestions regarding the most efficient new solutions for the current social problems were grouped into three classes: suggestions involving changes in the national strategy, changes in the human resource from the system, and development of new social services.

a) Changes in national strategy: A change of priorities regarding the provision of social services and material/financial benefits is proposed. Thus, the idea of building and offering social services is first supported, using the resources currently being provided on social benefits. Only after going through counselling, prevention, information, if no solutions are found can the client receive material/financial benefits.

b) Changes in the human resource from the social assistance system: In order to diminish the lack of professionalism, especially in the rural area, it is proposed to legitimize the professional social worker by using the seal and drawing up social inquiries only by them. The need to diversify the continuous training courses and to specialize in a certain field of social assistance was also mentioned. Another suggestion to improve the quality in human resource consists in the idea that the specialists have to give up the humble, submissive attitude and to argue their requests with consistent information and with reference to the current legislative framework. It is also necessary to supplement the posts in the field of social assistance, to offer an appropriate remuneration to social workers and to provide a longer vacation to avoid occupational burnout.

c) Development of new social services are detailed in the following proposals:

• Outsourcing of social services under the responsibility of public institutions.

• The establishment in each neighbourhood of a zonal social assistance office, as well as a social assistance office in each school and in each hospital.

• The establishment, in each neighbourhood (and in each commune), of a day centre for vulnerable persons, as well as the opening of a socio-medical centre for the clients without families.

• Opening and functioning of a centre for preventing and combating domestic violence (counsellors for both victims and aggressors).

• Opening and functioning of night shelters for the homeless, of the Social Ambulance, of the home care units and of a mobile canteen service for the elderly and for the disabled (also in urban and rural areas), of centres information and advice.

• Development of the network of maternal assistants and placement families, which will benefit from a consistent training process.

From the perspective of the social workers who participated in the present study, the social assistance system would need changes in legislation (legislation to emphasize not only the rights but also the obligations of beneficiaries, less bureaucracy), more qualified staff, and better working conditions for social workers, in order to increase the efficiency of the social services provided.

5. Conclusions

A common feature of social problems is that their consequences are negative for many people. In addition, social problems are often interrelated. They are issues that affect large numbers of people and originate in society's institutional arrangements. Many policies exist for addressing social problems, but they may be more or less successful in reducing or eliminating social problems. An evaluation of social problems and social services from Braşov community was generated by the social workers from the private sector. This perspective, presented in the present paper, can be useful for adjusting the current legislative framework, as well as for adjusting the social services offered to their clients.

NGOs are valuable resources for communities, because they offer social services which are implemented in small communities. The activities carried out by NGOs have beneficial results for the members of the community, regarding the integration and reintegration of clients. Also, the NGOs bring creative and innovative ways to solve social problems.

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