

WP2. Social work in a Europe in crisis

D.2.1. Survey of social agencies

European Social Network

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Context

In response to the multifaceted challenges facing Europe amidst crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and significant migration, the project Strengthening the Skills of Social Workers in a Europe in Crisis (SISWEC) is a proactive initiative aimed at enhancing the expertise/skills of social services professionals to effectively navigate and respond to crisis situations.

Central to the mission of SISWEC is the update of curricula to equip social workers with the skills and knowledge necessary to support individuals in crises. This project brings together a consortium of eight organizations, encompassing academia, institutions, and practitioners engaged in social services.

Within this consortium, the European Social Network (ESN), as the leading network for social services across Europe, plays a critical role in supporting the development and implementation of SISWEC. Due to its extensive membership base, ESN undertook the task of identifying emerging professional challenges faced by social workers. These challenges, increased by the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, refugee crises, and climate migration, underscore the urgent need to strengthen the skills and capacities of social workers. Comprising representatives from public authorities at local, regional, and national levels, social services providers, and associations of social services professionals, ESN's members provided invaluable insights and perspectives to inform the development of this report.

This report, therefore, represents a collaborative effort between SISWEC and the European Social Network, aiming to explain the evolving landscape of social work in crisis situations and proposing actionable strategies to empower social workers in navigating these complex situations effectively.

Methodology

In order to assess the level of training and preparedness of Europe's social workers in addressing crisis situations, the SISWEC project developed a comprehensive questionnaire tailored for professionals in public social services, who are members of the European Social Network (ESN). This questionnaire was designed with the overarching goal of evaluating the current state of social workers' training within their respective countries, while also identifying key knowledge and training gaps essential for effective crisis management.

The social services workforce has been a theme of interest in ESN for years, and in 2016 we already launched a questionnaire that was the basis of a follow-up publication [Investing in the social services workforce](#). The 2016 questionnaire included questions on social services workforce roles and responsibilities, governance and regulation, education, and training, working conditions and job quality, recruitment and retention, migrant workers, and mobility, as well as

workforce planning and future needs. Building upon this work, a subsequent questionnaire was launched in 2023 to capture updated information, specifically incorporating questions related to crisis management.

Furthermore, ESN's recent briefing on [Building Resilience in Social Services](#) introduced a framework centered around five pillars: person-centered design, prevention and early intervention, partnerships, data-driven services, and the workforce. Recognizing the critical role of a well-prepared and supported workforce in delivering person-centered and proactive care and support, this framework provided valuable insights to guide the questionnaire's methodology.

The questionnaire integrated both the overarching themes covered in the 2016 one and questions tailored to training and management of professionals in crisis situations, developed specifically to contribute to the objectives of the SISWEC project. Through a joint effort, the questionnaire was disseminated to ESN members through a series of communications during the first half of 2023. The survey collected 34 complete answers from professionals in 11 countries, providing a good overview of the realities concerning social work training and crisis management across Europe. This robust dataset serves as a foundational basis for the subsequent analysis and insights presented in this report.

Respondents' profile

The geographical distribution of responses shows a higher number from Western European countries. In general, countries with a large number of members, such as Spain or Malta had on average a higher response rate. It is worth noting that some countries with high ESN membership like Italy and Belgium had a low response rate, but their responses came from national federations or associations, which represent a larger number of individual organisations.

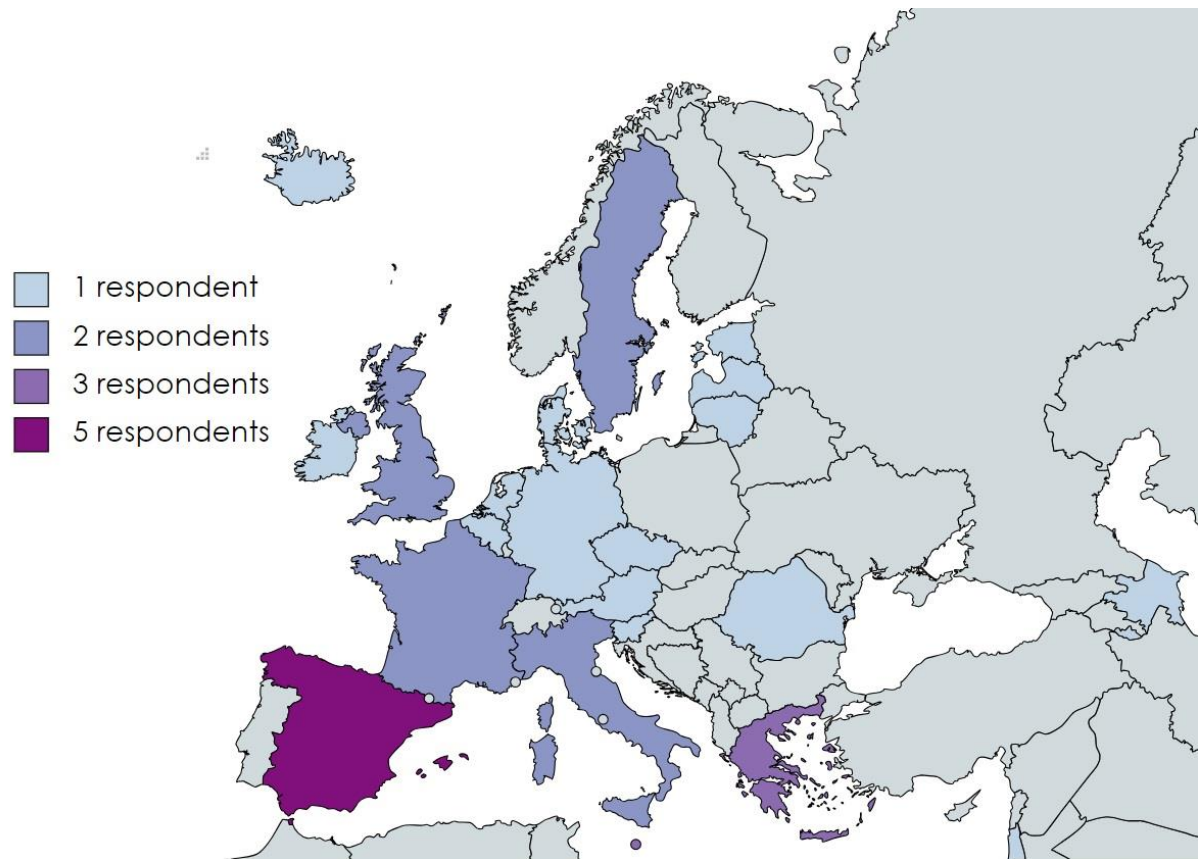


Figure 1. Survey responses by country

Fifteen respondents were from local authorities while nineteen answered on behalf of national associations, federations, or ministries. All respondents had managing responsibilities; for example, three said “CEO” and 8 “Director”. This fits with the profile of ESN members, which has as core members associations or federations of social service directors.

Workforce roles and responsibilities

Part of SISWEC's purpose is to identify where social workers might be experiencing difficulties in fulfilling their roles, particularly in the case of situations worsened by the recent accumulation of crises. Some difficulties may be linked to the increasing requirements put on social workers as first contact points for people experiencing serious social issues, or may be linked to lack of training, lack of funding or general management.

To collect an accurate picture of areas our members think should be prioritised to help professionals fulfil their roles properly, we framed this issue in terms of obstacles and opportunities.

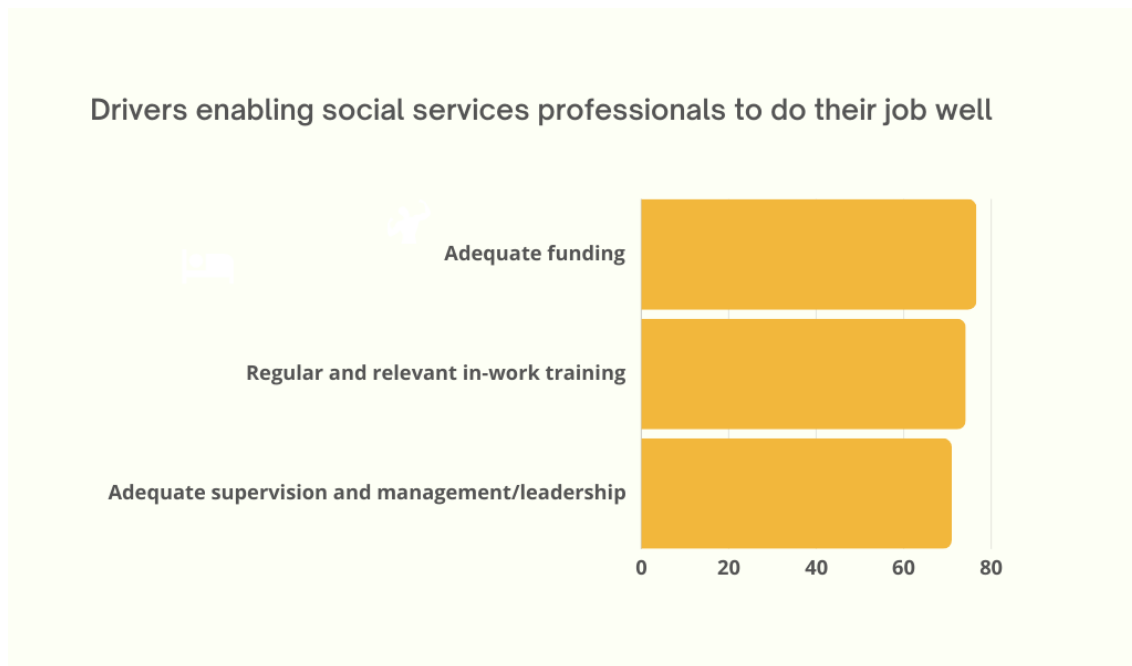


Figure 2 What are the drivers that enable social service professionals to do their job well?

We asked our members about the drivers that enabled qualified social and care workers to fulfil their roles effectively, and 75% of respondents said that regular and relevant in-work training was either the highest or a very high priority. This has been previously recognized by other studies¹ and is fully aligned with the thematic focus of SISWEC.

The second most relevant issue was adequate supervision and management/leadership. Given that all respondents had some level of management responsibilities, it is of course expected that they are very much aware of the importance of quality management to help social workers perform their duties as well as possible.

This was closely followed by lack of adequate funding, which had been also highlighted² in the past. Whilst aspects related to registration, accreditation, training, and development are important, lack of funding to be able to do their job properly will always impact the quality of the work of social workers.

As for obstacles that hinder the ability of qualified social workers to fulfil their roles effectively, a high level of bureaucracy had the highest score. Research suggests that the core reason why social workers enter the profession is to work directly with people in need of support, and when social workers are able to do this, their job satisfaction increases³. However, there has been an increase in the

¹ According to *Social Employers Report: The Social Services Workforce in Europe, Current State of Play and Challenges (2019)*., up to ¼ of employees do not feel sufficiently trained.

² « Underfunding » identified as a structural weakness affecting the sector by Eurofound. See *Social services in Europe: Adapting to a new reality (2023)*.

³ Stalker, C., Mandell, D., Frensch, K., Harvey, C. and Wright, M. (2007). Child welfare workers

administrative tasks that social workers have been requested to perform, which may lead to preventing them from working effectively and therefore their job satisfaction decreases.

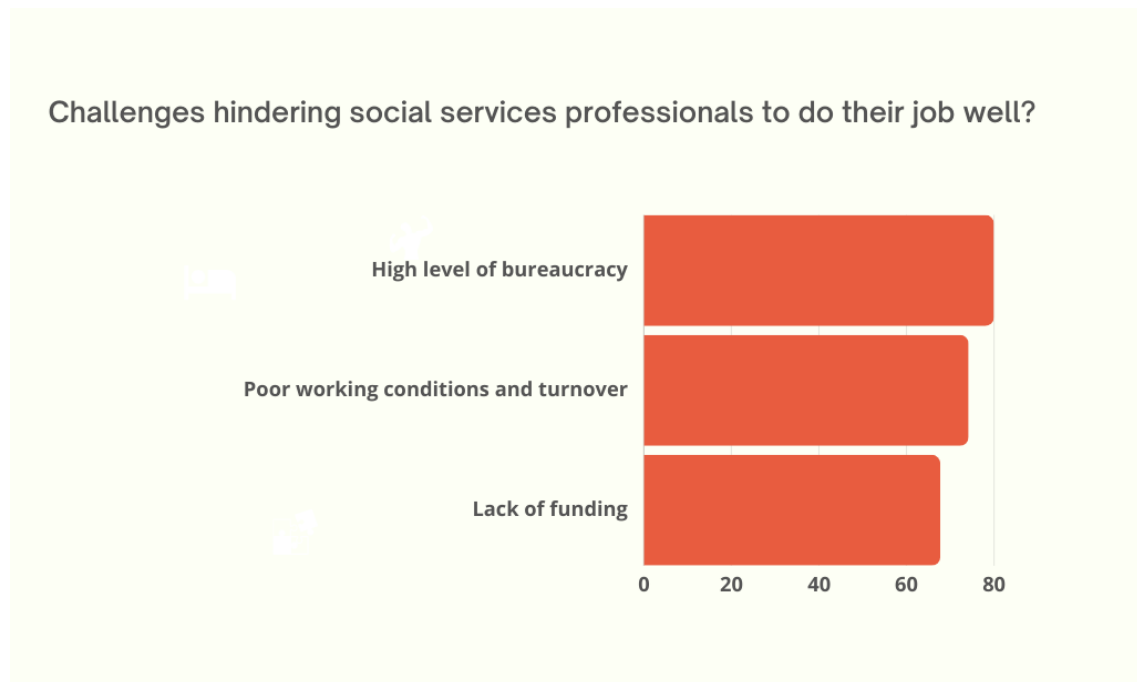


Figure 3 What are the challenges that hinder the ability of qualified social and care workers in your country to fulfil their roles effectively, including in crisis situations?

The second highest rated obstacle was ‘poor working conditions (including low wages and weak contracts) and turnover’. This is related to the need to have adequate funding, which was mentioned as a key driver. Most research on the topic, including ESN’s, highlight the difficult working conditions social workers have, with high stress levels, turnover and difficult work-life balance⁴⁵⁶.

It is worth noticing that the lowest-rated obstacle was the ‘lack of geographical accessibility (e.g. lack of public transportation in rural areas)’. This may be due to an over-representation of respondents from urban areas or lack of awareness of the lack of resources in rural areas.

Training and resources

who are exhausted yet satisfied with their jobs: How do they do it? Child and Family Social Work, 12, 182 – 191

⁴ ESN, *Investing in the Social Services Workforce*, 2016.

⁵ Federation of European Social Employers, *Social services workforce in Europe: state of play and challenges*, 2019.

⁶ Eurofound, *Social services in Europe: Adapting to a new reality (2023)*

A continuous issue in social work training and accreditation, as already outlined in ESN's 'Investing in the social services workforce' report and regularly stated as part of our work on the topic, is the lack of cross-EU accreditation and recognition of skills and qualifications for social workers. The following questions from the questionnaire highlight the variety in training and recognition across the EU.

85% of respondents answered that their country had a nationally recognized social work training programme, or at least were aware of such a programme.

74% of respondents said that social workers require an undergraduate qualification or above to be able to work in social work, while 11% indicated that vocational training or basic skills were enough to practice as a social worker in their country.

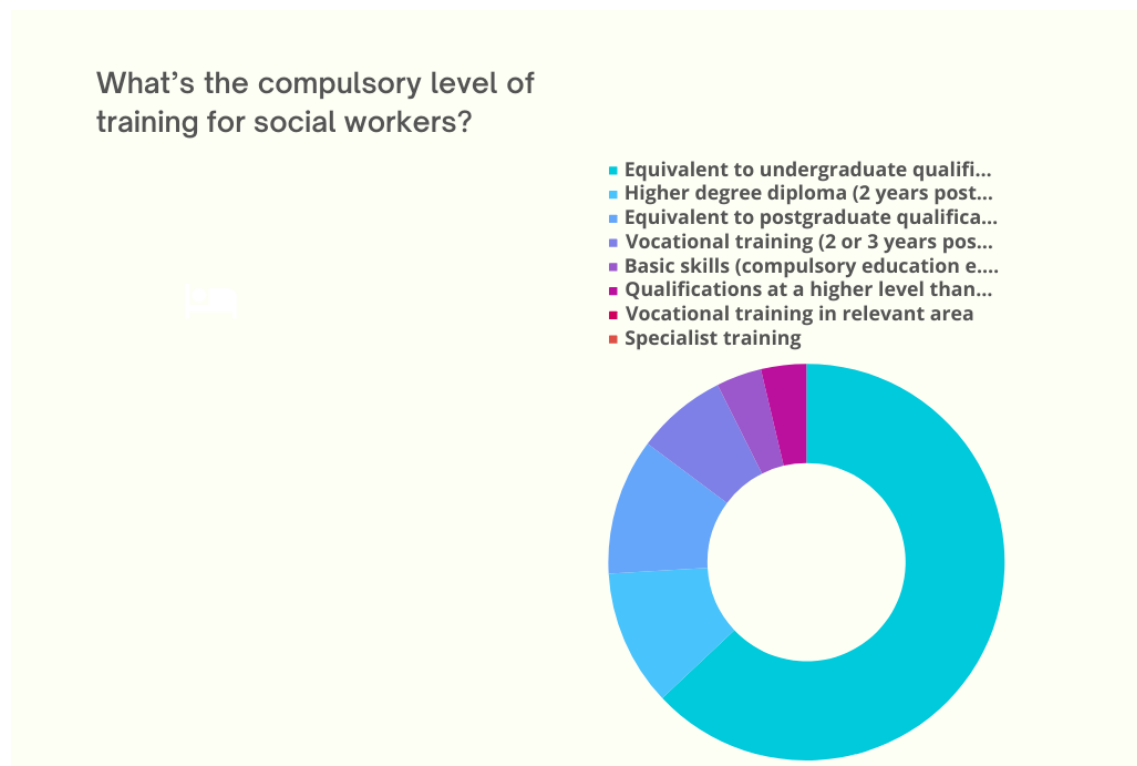


Figure 4 What's the compulsory level of training for social workers?

We asked respondents the areas they were being trained in. More than 80% answered case management or counselling, which did not come as a surprise. However, these were closely followed by working in partnership with other professionals in health, education, police, or housing, which seems to show there is an increasing focus on integrated work training, something that did not happen when we enquired in our 2016 questionnaire.

On the opposite end, only one respondent based in Israel said that 'Post natural disasters management' was part of their regular training. This shows the need to raise awareness of this type of training in light of the impact of climate change on the most vulnerable and the focus of the SISWEC project. 'Crisis management' and 'How to work with refugees and asylum seekers (e.g. in relation to trauma management and promoting resilience)', were mentioned as being part of social

workers' training by 52% and 44% of respondents, respectively. Both are relevant for the SISWEC project as they represent addressing the situations of persons in vulnerable and often crisis situations.

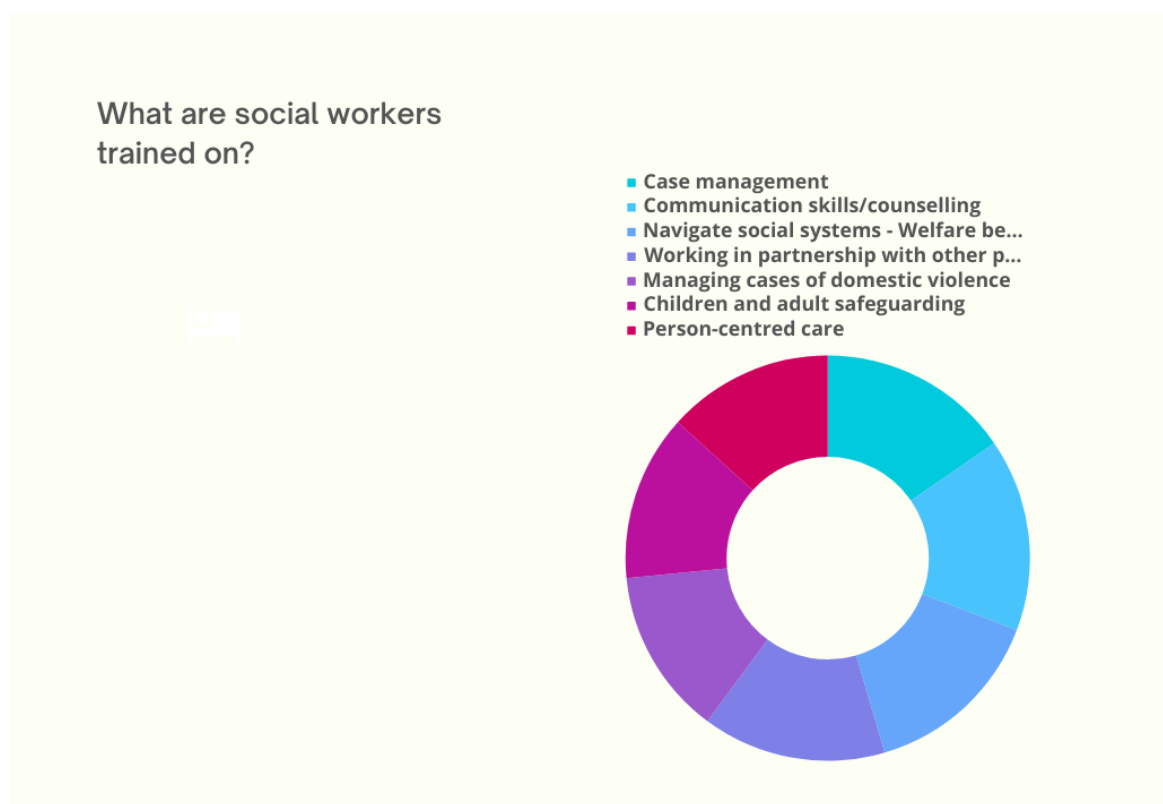


Figure 5 Areas that social workers have received training.

Asked about training gaps, almost 50% of respondents would like to see in their training 'Knowledge and understanding regarding 'what works' and 'what does not work"' and 44% highlighted 'Opportunities for knowledge, experience, and expertise sharing between different practitioners'. In comments, the respondents highlighted the need for training in welfare technology and IT for social support and social services. All in all, there is a strong interest in sharing and learning, something that is aligned with the identification, assessment, and dissemination of good practice in managing crisis situations, which is an objective of SISWEC.



Figure 6 Answers to "If you received training what competencies were not included in your own personal training that you would like to be included?"

Assessment of Organisational Responses to Crisis Situation

The SISWEC partnership outlined five types of crises that have affected European populations in the past years:

- Covid-19;
- Increase in poverty due to cost of living;
- Arrival of large number of refugees;
- Increase in unemployment;
- Increase in antisocial behaviour.

We asked respondents to rank how effectively their organizations had been responding to demands related to those crises on a scale from 1 (very ineffectively) to 5 (very effectively).

With a score of 4.3, most respondents felt their organizations' answer to the Covid-19 health crisis was deemed most effective. This assessment may be linked to the levels of funding that were made available by governments to help services cope

with the crisis caused by Covid-19. It will be interesting to observe how answers evolve over several years once the impact of the crisis has subsided.

The second-highest ranked issue with a score of 3.7 was the increase in poverty due to the cost-of-living crisis. Most ESN members have been pointing out recently that the amount of people suffering from reduced income and standards of living has been rising in recent years, and the high score given to the increase in poverty is possibly a reflection on this. Likewise, supporting people in difficult social and economic situations is at the heart of social work, what may explain why our respondents feel confident in their organization's capacity to answer effectively to these issues.

On the opposite end, addressing 'Growth in anti-social behaviour/gang crime' was rated most ineffectively reflecting that respondents felt social workers did not have the skills to address anti-social behaviour in neighborhoods coupled with increasing reports of beneficiaries behaving aggressively towards practitioners.

All in all, the resources made available to respond to crisis situations were considered adequate or very adequate by 74% of the respondents but looking at the comments, they mostly seemed to focus on the resources made available after Covid-19.

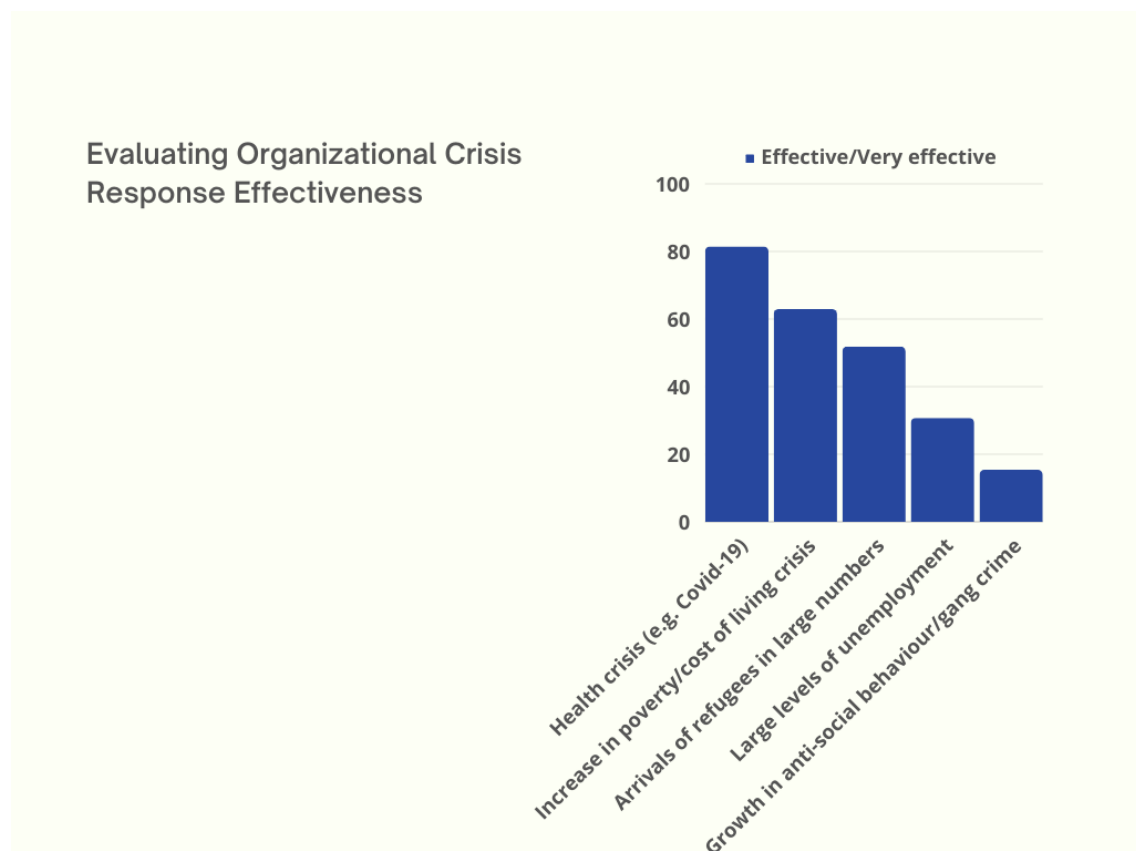


Figure 7 Answers to the question "Over the past years, we have experienced a succession of crises. Looking at the following crises, please assess how effective your organisation was in responding to the demands created by these crises."

Looking at specific comments there were more critical perceptions as we can see below.

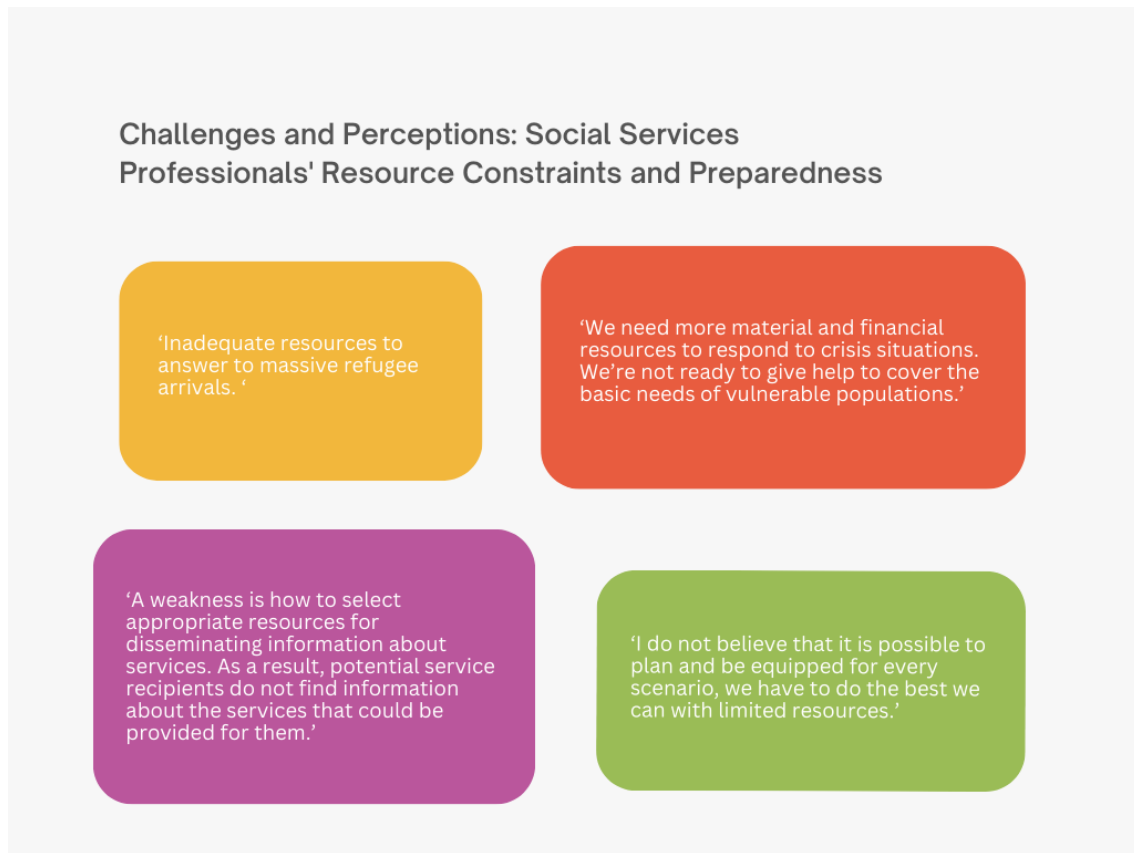


Figure 8 Comments on Challenges and Perceptions: Social Services Professionals' Resource Constraints and Preparedness

These comments highlight that social services professionals vary in their level of preparedness and the resources they have available to address specific or individual issues faced by their clients or the communities they serve. This inequality in preparedness and resources could potentially hinder the quality of care or support provided to those seeking assistance from social services.

We also wanted to ask our members how they assessed partnerships across professional sectors, particularly in relation to crisis situations.

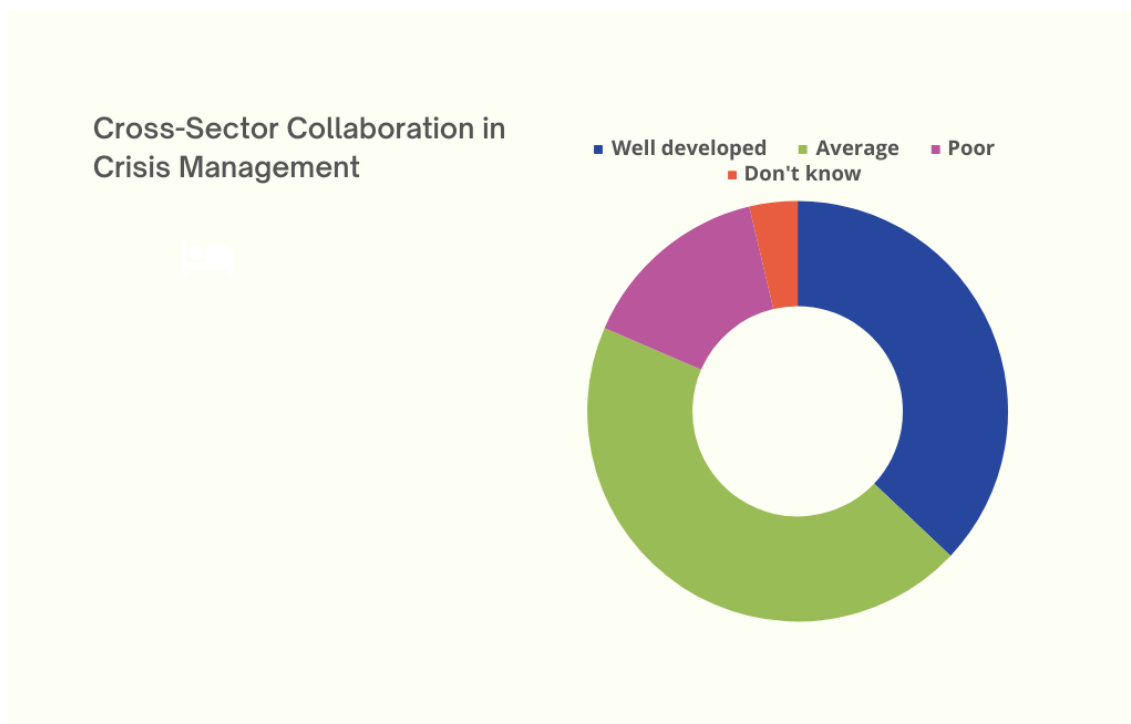


Figure 9 Answers to the question "Working with professionals across sectors is usually required, particularly to manage crisis situations. To which extent is work in partnership developed in your country?"

For 81% of respondents, working in partnership is either well or averagely developed. This is encouraging as traditionally the tendency has been to work in silos whilst one-stop shops, or integrated approaches are not yet commonplace. It also seems to show that our members are aware of the need to work in an integrated manner to respond holistically to people's social needs. The comments provided also reinforce this perception since several respondents mentioned initiatives and approaches in favour of working in partnership with other services. There was also an acknowledgement in comments of different levels of integration depending on types of services; where they are located, how willing management is to improve cross-sector collaboration, different organisational cultures, and the local institutional context.

The final question related to crisis situations was about social services' capacity for improvement when addressing those crises. When asked what the main challenges were, most said that professionals lacked standardised procedures they could follow. Indeed, considering crisis situations may be new, professionals may not have the skills or clear guidelines on how they can respond to them.



Figure 10 What are the main challenges for social services professionals to improve their capacity to respond to current crises?

Similarly, respondents also referred to lack of training or skills to deal with specific crises or respond to the needs of people in crisis. These answers seem to imply that professionals think that training and resources are the most important factors to be able to respond effectively to crisis situations.

Conclusion

The questionnaire reveals crucial findings that illustrate the challenges and priorities facing social services professionals. Notably, the emphasis on in-work training, supportive management, and adequate funding underscores the pivotal role these factors play in enhancing the effectiveness of social work. The answers to the questions about professional training in relation to crisis management appear to be highly influenced by the recent Covid-19 crisis, which in general respondents felt was well managed after the authorities had understood the extent of it. But there seemed to be a different view in relation to others, particularly the refugees, cost of living and climate change crises, where the responses imply the need to improve preparedness, training, and resources.

Moving forward, the continuation of this report entails an assessment of the practices identified through the open-ended question that concluded the questionnaire. These insights will serve as a foundation for the upcoming SISWEC

deliverable, conducted in collaboration with the University of Bolzano, offering further ways for exploration and action.



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Strengthening the skills of social workers.