Social work in Europe

Reflections and challenges

Dorota Tomalak
Policy & Development Officer, ESN
European Social Network
Who are we?

ESN is the independent network for directors of public social services, health, education and employment in Europe.

ESN has Members in 28 countries:

Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium (2), Bulgaria (2), Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark (4), Faroe Islands, Finland (4), France (2), Germany (4), Greece (3), Hungary, Iceland, Ireland (3), Italy (7), Netherlands (2), Norway, Poland (2), Portugal, Romania (4), Serbia (4), Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain (7), Sweden (3), Switzerland, UK (14), Turkey.
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Social work definition (IFSW)

- The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being.

- It enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction.

- It is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve.

- Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice
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Historical context

- Religion has played a significant role in development of ‘social work’ as a profession, e.g.
  - Provide care for those in need (orphans, poor, sick and imprisoned)
  - Support poor financially
  - Welcome strangers
- Religious ideas and teachings inspired formation of social work values
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Long-established values of social work with vulnerable people:
- protection and care for vulnerable people
- respect of dignity of service users in care
- excellence in social care practice
- listening to service users and responding to their needs
- solidarity with disadvantaged people and communities
- equality and non-discrimination

Leading to modern, inclusive and person-centred services
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Religion and spirituality affect people’s individual choices…

- Workplace requirements
- Dietary restrictions
- Position of women
- Sexuality and reproduction

… and whole communities

- Role of close and extended family
- Issues of honour and shame
- Collective vs. individual values
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Challenges for social workers

1. Inadequate preparation
2. Religious beliefs of the frontline staff
3. Secularism of social workers
4. Religious attitudes of users
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Challenges for social work directors:

- Planning services for local community or communities
- Supporting frontline staff dealing with most difficult cases
- Liaising with spiritual and religious leaders
- Commissioning social services taking into account religious composition of the community
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Spirituality and religion as a resource:

- Sense of belonging to something larger
- Powerful social network
- Source of strength
- Lesson in empathy
- Invitation to reflection, assessment and self-improvement
- Accountability
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Social services organisation and funding

❖ Organisation:
  o On its own, e.g. UK
  o With others, e.g. NL (with income), IE (with health)

❖ Funding:
  o General taxation
  o Specialised insurance schemes
  o Co-payments (means-tested)
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Social services planning and delivery:

- centralised (IE)
- mainly local authorities (HU)
- mainly regional authorities (IT)
- mainly large non-profit organisations (DE)
- mainly contracted out to a range of organisations (UK)
- mainly private providers
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Social services workforce

- University graduates in most countries
- Mostly female (up to 90%)
- Physically and emotionally stressed
- Often employed on part-time and short-term contracts
- Unpopular
- Relatively low paid
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Starting salary in social profession in EUR (2009)

Pillars:
- Everyone has a right to live in a community
- User’s needs are at the heart of each intervention
- Users are co-producers of their care, not the passive recipients
- Tailor-made solutions to remove barriers to participation rather than barrier-free but segregated communities
- Conviction that no one is too ‘difficult’ or ‘too frail’ to be cared for in a community
- Support must enhance users independence rather than making them dependent
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Social services – facing important challenges

- Facing greater demand with lesser resources
- Universal services vs. individual responsibility
- Renewed demand for evidence-based policy and practice
- Demographic challenge
- How much market in social services?