

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN CREATING A SUPPORT NETWORK FOR SOCIAL WORKERS IN RURAL AREAS IN ROMANIA

Lucia Neagoe

University of Pitești, Romania

Abstract: This report presents the results of a research on the availability of involvement of community actors in Arges county, Romania, in the operation of a support network for PSW. The purpose of this network is to empower social workers from rural areas by developing their abilities to better manage the challenges of their professional activities.

The research is based on the information we collected through focus groups attended by social workers from rural areas in Arges county, but also other members of the community, local private or public representative institutions (schools, local authorities, NGOs). The results of the study showed that, although they face many financial, organizational, logistical, but also cultural difficulties, the participants consider it necessary and are willing to participate in this support network. Their strengths are the availability to help the beneficiaries, the social solidarity and the support they receive from the authorities and volunteers.

Keywords: networking, community social work, rural areas

INTRODUCTION

Networking is currently one of the most important skills required in almost all areas of activity, due to its potential to solve a variety of problems in a much more efficient way than individually or institutionally.

The network is not only a structure where social workers can find support, but also "a fundamental basic attitude of professional action." (Bienzle, Gelabert, Jütte, Kolyva, Meyer, & Tilkin, 2007, p. 17). We cannot speak today of a professional approach in any field without referring to networking.

In Romania, the issue of the need for a support network for social workers in rural areas is a very topical one and has its roots in the real needs they face. For example, as we showed in a previous study conducted within the EPSWRA project, social workers in rural areas of Arges County face a lack of professional satisfaction that has several sources: salary, opportunities for professional training and career development, additional financial reward, material and logistic resources. also, the main sources of professional stress are workload, bureaucracy and lack of professional tools. The study showed that not only in Romania, but in all seven European countries where the research was conducted (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Slovenia, Italy, Bulgaria), social workers use communication with other colleagues as the main way to be more efficient in their work, along with reading about the latest developments in the field of social work. Regarding the need for different ways to improve professional activity, the respondents say they need more than they use: exchange of experience with other professionals in their field (from their country or from abroad) and professional training. (Neagoe, & Ionescu, 2019, pp. 40-41).

Based on these considerations, the creation of a support network for them would be particularly useful to provide them with the necessary resources to overcome problems related to stress and job dissatisfaction. The purpose of this network would be to empower social workers from rural areas by developing their abilities to better manage the challenges of their professional activities.

EXPOSITION

I. THE NETWORK AS A RESOURCE FOR SOCIAL WORKER AND COMMUNITY

Networks are “specific structures of inter-relationship, interaction and cooperation between individual actors, initiated and developed by people, based on a common interest” (Răduț Seliște, 2016, p. 64), from finding a job to building connections, expanding knowledge, and sharing resources.

It is the place where social workers can find support, feel encouraged, exchange experiences and feel solidarity. In addition, these networks provide a framework for professional identity and can help create increased credibility and a positive, strong image of the social worker profession in the community. All of these will contribute to a better collaboration with all the interested community factors and to an increased efficiency of the support and intervention actions for vulnerable people.

A network is a social structure, made up of individuals or organizations, called nodes, that are linked or connected by one or more interdependent links, such as friendship, kinship, common interest, financial exchanges, common faith and values, knowledge, or even prestige, spatial proximity, occupation, offering or receiving services or various combinations of these (Gotea, 2010).

From the point of view of the advantages they offer for the members of the network, professional networks can be of two types: closed networks and open networks (Șoflău, 2007):

- Closed networks, in which the social relations between members are very close, characterized by a high degree of communication, closeness, familiarity, intimacy, frequency of meetings, trust and cooperation. In such networks, with strong links between its nodes, it is very difficult to disregard the established rules and common norms, without being excluded, which also allows social control by applying sanctions.
- Open networks, in which social relations are weak, there is less communication and cooperation, reduced frequency of meetings, less privacy and closeness. The possibilities to leave the network are quite easy and multiple and the sanctions are difficult to apply.

The network must consist not only of social workers, but also of other members of the community, local private or public representative institutions (schools, local authorities, NGOs), in order to develop the community. Community development is an essential ingredient in the success of democratic societies. An essential component of the social work role is to promote the participation of individuals, families and communities, to improving the community's capacity to respond to different collective challenges, for which it is necessary to use both formal and informal network to support people (Rodríguez Alvarez, 2019, pp. 35-49).

Support networks, whether formal or informal, can be virtual or real. “Today two models of communities can exist in the social space: the virtual communities defined by digital networks, and the territorial communities delimited by social networks (professional), in addition to a mixed model that offers great potential for contemporary social services.” (Rodríguez Alvarez, & Ferreira, 2018, p. 872). Technology now makes it possible to network effectively online. Even digitally, however, it's important to maintain a personal connection who builds relationships of trust and emotional support.

The interpersonal relationships are the basis of social network (Ennis, & West, 2010, pp. 404-417), and these relationships are influenced by certain personality traits of social workers as well as their emotional intelligence. That is why it is extremely important for social workers to learn various techniques to improve their emotional intelligence and their psychosocial skills, to develop their level of trust, involvement, sincerity, compassion, teamwork, cooperation instead of competition.

On the other hand, the network fulfills a series of emotional / social functions including the following: emotional support, social companionship, cognitive guidance and advice, social

regulation, material support and services. Other authors mention: exchange of information, supplying power to network members, political mobilization, encouragement of interpersonal solidarity, conducting comparative analyzes, personal support and assistance in situations of professional crisis, etc. (Răduț Seliște, 2016).

It is very important that, within social networks, there are specific rules and forms of interaction and cooperation between its members. These rules and regulations, in their entirety, represent the culture of the network and successful participation in a network requires, as a precondition, acceptance and contribution to shaping its culture. (Răduț Seliște, 2016).

To conclude, the networks that connect individuals and different sectors of the local community are very important resources for both social workers and community development. It will encourage citizen participation in solving social problems and the construction of a civil society.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Objectives

This study aims to assess the potential for involving members of rural communities in Arges county in a regional network to support PSW in carrying out their work for the benefit of vulnerable groups.

This study is conducted in the framework of the Erasmus+ Project "Empowering practitioners in social work from rural communities - EPSWRA" (No: 2018-1-RO01-KA204-049515) and is based on information gathered through focus groups with members of local communities, conducted between September and November 2020.

B. Participants

This study was attended by social workers and people who have responsibilities in the field of social work, but without a diploma attesting to this fact, bearing the generic name of "practitioners in social work" (PSW) from disadvantaged areas of Arges county, Romania (rural areas and even small towns). Also other members of communities, local private or public representative institutions (schools, local authorities, NGOs, etc.) participated. The study took place in 12 localities, 11 rural communities (Bascov, Vulturești, Berevoești, Buzoiești, Merișani, Micești, Lerești, Albota, Rucăr, Budeasa, Bârla) and a small town (Mioveni) in Argeș county.

The people participating in this study were: 16 social workers, 39 municipality employees (inspectors, local councilors etc.), nine representatives of educational institutions (school principals, teachers, educators, school psychologists), five doctors and community nurses, four representatives of the mayor's office (mayor, vice-mayor), two priests, two NGO representatives, 25 volunteers.

C. Method and measure

We used the method of the structured interview within the focus groups organized with PSW participants in the project and with the representatives of the local institutions from each community. The focus group interview guide included 13 questions grouped in five dimensions related to the following aspects:

- Data about the community in which PSW works
- The image and needs of the PSW in the community
- The need to set up a PSW support network
- Availability of involvement and participation of community actors in the operation of the network
- Prospects for community involvement in network sustainability.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

We performed the qualitative analysis of the information gathered within these focus groups, following each question from the five dimensions. Next, we selected information on the most relevant issues related to the concrete conditions of setting up a PSW support network.

Table. 1. Data about the community in which PSW works

	The most common social problems	No. of indications
1.	Problems of the Roma population, school dropout of the Roma children	4
2.	People don't want to work	4
3.	Lack of material and financial resources	3
4.	Bureaucracy	2

In regards to the existence of non-governmental organizations or other support networks operating within the community, seven of the 12 communities investigated answered that they do not exist, in four communities there are 1-2 associations, while in Mioveni, small town there are at least eight and they successfully ensure the coverage of the diverse needs of all disadvantaged categories of people. Concerning the image and needs of PSW in the community, things are as follows:

Table. 2. The image and needs of PSW in the community

	The challenges that PSW faces at work	No. of indications
1.	Legislation, difficult procedures, bureaucracy	4
2.	Lots of documents to fill out, little field work	4
3.	Difficult communication with beneficiaries	4
4.	A lot of work	2
5.	Lack of psychological support	1
6.	Lack of professional supervision	1

Regarding the need to set up a support network for PSW, 11 of the 12 communities supported the idea of its need, and one of them considered it somewhat necessary to set up this network. The benefits of the community network, which the focus group participants indicated, were as follows:

Table. 3. The need to set up a support network for PSW

	The benefits of the community support network	No. of indications
1.	Learning, exchange of experience	5
2.	Fast problem solving, efficient solutions	5
3.	Legislative support, legal advice	3
4.	Connection, collaboration	1
5.	Emotional support	1
6.	Support, the power to demand their rights	1

The availability of involvement and participation of community actors in the operation of the network is proving to be a great one, with interest and desire to be part of such a network.

Table. 4. Availability of involvement and participation of community actors in the operation of the network

	The way of involvement at institution level	No. of indications
1.	By providing information	6
2.	Through expertise and experience	3
3.	Through human resources and volunteering	3
4.	By providing places to carry out their activity	1
5.	Through promotion and popularization	1
	Public and private institutions that can support the operation of the network	
1.	The church	8
2.	Schools	7
3.	The police	7
4.	Community nurses, medical offices, family planning	5
6.	Firms	3
7.	NGOs	2
8.	The Community Advisory Council	2
9.	The Municipality	1

Concerning the potential involvement of institutions and people from the commune in supporting the network after its establishment, eight of the 12 communities stated that both institutions and people will be involved to a large extent, while four of them have stated that they will probably get involved, provided that in today's times there are no material resources and people are interested in personal gains and benefits, not volunteering.

Table. 5. Prospects for community involvement in network sustainability

	Involvement in supporting the network after the establishment will be done through:	No. of indications
1.	Voluntary work	6
2.	Support from the authorities	3
3.	NGO support	1
	Factors that would encourage participation in network support:	
1.	Information and popularization	5
2.	Recognition of volunteering as professional experience	3
3.	Motivating and empowering young people	2
4.	Awareness of the need for the network to make work more efficient	2

B. Discussion

Following the analysis of the data above, we found that, despite the multiple social problems of the communities they belong to and the various challenges they face in their professional activity, people are eager to participate in a PSW support network.

The most important social problems are those due to the non-integration of Roma population in society, the fact that they do not want to work, but only to benefit from social

help. Another problem of Roma communities is the high school dropout rate, especially among girls, who from the age of 12 must get married and are not allowed to continue their studies. The lack of education, the mentality, both of the Roma and of the Romanians, of not wanting to work, even when they are offered a job, or the mentality of preferring to find a job abroad, represents a serious problem of the community, which leads to other problems such as the abandonment of children or the elderly in need of care.

With these problems in the community, social workers have a hard time. Although in general their activity is well regarded, in some cases there are people in the community who are upset that they do not receive help from the state, because they want undeserved benefits, as they consider that they deserve everything, without working. The main challenges social workers face in rural areas are: legislation, difficult procedures, bureaucracy, difficult communication with beneficiaries, a lot of work, many documents to complete and not enough fieldwork. "The social worker must be in the middle of the community, not at the office completing the papers," say the social workers from Bascov Municipality.

Also, among the challenges social workers face are the lack of psychological support and lack of professional supervision, needs that could be met within a support network for PSW. All participants in focus groups spoke in favor of setting up the support network for PSW, the most important benefits listed being learning, exchange of experience, quick problem solving, streamlining solutions. In addition, they say that through this network, PSW could support each other and have more power to claim their rights. For example, "pressure must be put on the ministry to hire people, the law stating that a social worker must be provided for 300 beneficiaries is not respected, we have too much work", say the social workers from Bascov Municipality.

Two of the communities already have support ties with social workers in the country and abroad. For example, PSW from Berevoești are part of a Whatsapp group together with other colleagues of theirs from other municipalities in Arges county, and Mioveni Municipality has collaborations with NGOs from France and Denmark.

Community actors from the investigated localities expressed their interest in participating and getting involved in a PSW support network in rural areas, wanting to get involved mainly by providing information, expertise and experience, human resources and volunteering, providing places for PSW to carry out their activity, promotion and popularization of this network. The public and private institutions that can support the functioning of the network are in most cases the Church, the School, the Police, the medical and family planning offices, the community nurses, NGOs, firms. For example, in the city of Mioveni, there are a number of restaurants and pubs that provide a hot meal for vulnerable people in the community.

There are also participants who express doubts about the participation of too many institutions and companies in such a network. "Probably some do, some don't. Some have started to become very reluctant these days", say the representatives of Lerești Municipality. There are no financial resources and people are interested in personal gains and benefits, not volunteering: "We don't have volunteers, many want to earn something from it."

Involvement in supporting the network after its establishment will be done mainly through: voluntary work, especially by young people, support from the authorities, support from NGOs. But for that, "guidance and an organized framework are needed", say the representatives of Micești Municipality.

Regarding the factors that would encourage participation in supporting the network, local community representatives listed: informing and popularizing, motivating and empowering young people, recognizing volunteering as professional experience, awareness of the need for the network to make work more efficient. "Let's show young people what the responsibility of some actions means, the value of the help offered unconditionally." say PSW from Berevoești commune.

CONCLUSION

The support network for PSW represents a very useful tool in the practice of social work and its existence represents a professional attitude without which we cannot speak about social intervention at a professional level.

PSW in rural areas of Arges county faces a number of difficulties and professional dissatisfaction related to excess of documents, a lot of work, difficult communication with beneficiaries, difficult legislation, bureaucracy. Setting up a support network could address these needs and other issues that could lead to job dissatisfaction and burnout.

The participants in this study expressed their interest and desire to be part of a professional network, wanting to get involved mainly by providing information, expertise and experience, human resources and volunteering. They are aware of the need for such a network and, despite financial, organizational, logistical, but also cultural difficulties, they are confident in the collaboration of all social actors for better solutions to social problems of the community.

REFERENCES:

Bienzle, H, Gelabert, E, Jütte, W, Kolyva, K, Meyer, N & Tilkin, G 2007, *The Art of Networking. European Networks in Education*, “die Berater” Unternehmensberatungsgesellschaft mbH, Wien

Ennis, G & West, D 2010, ‘Exploring the potential of social network. Analysis in asset-based community development practice and research’, *Australian Social Work*, vol. 63, no. 4, pp. 404-417.

Gotea, M 2010, ‘Social networks and their importance in social work’, *Revista de Asistență Socială*, no. 2/2010, p. 38. (in Romanian)

Răduț Seliște, D V 2016, *The church and the development of social capital in rural communities*, Beladi, Craiova. (in Romanian)

Rodríguez Alvarez, M D 2019, ‘Social workers use social networks in their practice in community social work’, *Relational Social Work*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 35-49

Rodríguez Alvarez, M.D. & Ferreira, J M L 2018, ‘The contribution of the intervention in social networks and community social work at the local level to social and human development’, *European Journal of Social Work*, no. 21, pp. 863 – 875

Neagoe, L & Ionescu M C 2019, ‘Survey on the perceptions and the needs of the practitioners in social work from the rural regions in addressing the “burn-out” phenomenon’, in Nunev, S, *Good educational and professional practices in social work – knowledge and experience for growth and development*, Publishing House Guyana Book and Art, pp. 40-41

Șoflău, V 2007, ‘Community development in the Romanian space’, in Sandu, D, Câmpean, C, Marina, L, Peter, M & Șoflău, V, *Community Development Practice*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, pp. 19-52. (in Romanian).

Contacts:

Lucia Neagoe

Lecturer Ph.D.

Office address: Țirgu din Vale street, no. 1, Pitești, Argeș, Romania

Email: lucia.neagoe@upit.ro