



Structural Problems in the Development of Social Work in Central Europe under Transformation. The Case of Poland.

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Socio-economic transformation the countries of Central Europe are undergoing since 1989 has brought new developments in social welfare systems of this region. Social work, which was in the countries of the region during its communist past either non-existent or superficial activity, has become treated as an instrument of social welfare systems there. The collapse of authoritarian regimes in the region clearly inducted political leaderships there to opt for transition to Western style civil society. Hence an adoption of social work seemed to be natural choice for the countries in the region.

Just from the beginning of transformation along with the changes in social welfare regulations a drive for the development of social work education started there, be it building the systems anew like in Hungary, be it reforming them like in Czechoslovakia then or in Poland. It seems that in all these attempts the value base and methods of social work as well as its commitment to empowerment as they were developed in Western democracies have been ingrained into the curricula. But it seems also, that for post-authoritarian countries the transition to civil society is not an easy goal to reach for. Therefore a gap between educational model of social work and the practice may be wide there, at least in Poland such gap is observed.

At least three types of structural difficulties in the development of social work are encountered in Poland's process of transition from – as we could call it “socialist welfare state” to market economy and liberal democracy. There are problems in:

- relation of stated functions of social work to real functioning of social welfare system,
- relation of social work curriculum value base to base values in Polish society, and in
- relation of a class teaching to a practice training in social work education.

Before these problematic areas are to be subsequently discussed in following text, it has to be said that the suggestion put forward in the title of this text, namely that these Polish problems are similar to the problems in the development of social work in other countries of Central Europe may be too risky, as we do not have till now enough reliable comparative data on this matter.

The relation of stated function of social work to real functioning of social welfare system

However the history of social work in Poland can be traced back to 1925, when Helena Radlinska, a founder of social pedagogy there, established its first school which was affiliated with the Free University in Warsaw, its present revival can be ascribed to the transformation. I happened first time in a history of social work in Poland that in the Social Welfare Act of 1990 it acquired its legal definition as: “...a professional activity focused on assistance to individuals and families in strengthening or recuperating their ability to function in a society as well as on creating social conditions that facilitate this objective.”

This understanding of social work is coherent with philosophy of social welfare in Poland adopted at the beginning of transformation. According to the Act, provision of social welfare should be aimed at ensuring the self-dependence of individuals and families and their social integration. Individuals and families benefiting from the opportunities provided by social welfare system are obliged to co-operate in solving the life problems that they are facing.

The possibility to achieve stated function of social work is however quite limited. There are at least three structural reasons for this limitation:

1. The entitlement for statutory social welfare provision is in Poland based on income criterion. In its relatively poor society financial benefits have to be the main tool of statutory support. Especially in a situation of rising unemployment the country is experiencing (from ≈ 10 in 1998 to ≈ 19 % in 2003), there is social pressure for the distribution of financial support rather than for social work services. As social workers are also responsible for the distribution of benefits, the procedures involved with this task are their main concerns. It does leave them with too little time for social work.
2. In local social service agencies there is a formal norm of employing one social worker per 2,000 inhabitants. This norm does not take into account specific needs of different communities for social work. The same norm is to be maintained in a troubled community as well as in relatively well off one.
3. Public governance in Poland is supposed to be based on subsidiarity principle, which is also underlying principle for the state of art social work. In real policies, however, central government keeps a hold on most of public expenditures on local level. In a situation where local self-governments have very limited powers for decision-making, also social workers have limited possibilities to act according to their professional standards.

Finally it has to be said that our social workers feel themselves lost between all these pressures of their daily work. That famous divide between theory and practice, which seems to be immanent for the field everywhere is for them especially broad one.

The relation of social work curriculum value base to base values in Polish society,

As it has been stated before, the revival of social work can be ascribed to the transformation. Since the beginning of the nineties the re-development of social work education on tertiary level in both vocational and academic schools is taking place in Poland. Three kinds of programmes are at work there: 1) in oldest 2½ years vocational schools; 2) in 5 years university studies leading to M.A. in either education, or psychology, or sociology, or political science, each with specialisation in social work;¹ 3) in newly developed 3 years universities of applied science. It is envisaged that these 1st type programmes are to be gradually replaced by the programmes of this 3rd type. General value base for all of these programmes is consistent with the elements similar to these for which rather common consensus has been reached in international social work community. There are then:

- democracy accepted as the ground rule for societal interactions,
- the right of human beings to develop fully their potentials,
- the respect for dignity and uniqueness of the individual,

¹ Recently, in the process of implementation of the Bologna Agreement at some universities there are already introduced first degree, three years programmes which are equivalent to Bachelor degree. It has not been decided yet if Masters level social work qualification programmes will be continued in the future.

- the client's right for self-determination and for confidentiality,
- the tolerance for cultural diversity.

These values are backed by constitutional principle of subsidiarity to be employed for the strengthening the powers of citizens and their communities. The empowerment of clients is then both the method and aim of social work as it is taught in social work training courses.

The question is: How these values relate to corresponding values accepted in the society at large? The answer to that question here is based on sociological surveys. According to these, in Polish society there is rather broad acceptance for liberal democracy. There are, however, some elements of societal conscience, which are in discord with certain social work values. In comparison with Western societies, Poles are characterised with higher level of authoritarianism. They are less tolerant, more xenophobic, more demanding assistance from the state.² One more common trait in Polish society, especially in its low educated stratum, is egalitarianism understood as actual equality in material welfare. Following data from representative pools may be cited as the indicators for these traits in Polish society³:

Question:	<i>Who should take care about family and its financial security?</i>		
Answers:	1. <i>The state – 65 %</i>	2. <i>People themselves – 28 %</i>	3. <i>It is hard to say – 7 %</i>
Question:	<i>Should be the state obliged to support unprofitable workplaces for the sole reason to fight unemployment?</i>		
Answers:	1. <i>Yes – 62 %</i>	2. <i>No – 27 %</i>	3. <i>It is hard to say – 11 %</i>
Question:	<i>Should the incomes of the richest people be limited?</i>		
Answers:	1. <i>Yes – 85 %</i>	2. <i>No – 12 %</i>	3. <i>It is hard to say – 3 %</i>

These data coincide with the data from another recent opinion poll which shows that close to 90 % respondents think that central government is obliged to secure jobs for all people who want to work.⁴

The strategies people employ in solving their financial problems are also relevant to social work value base. Another representative opinion poll shows that there are three types of strategies⁵:

- Active (as re-training, changing qualifications, financial speculations, more intensive work, moonlighting, working abroad, taking in lodgers, and the like): between 37 - 11 % of population
- Moderately passive (as economising, saving, borrowing money, and asking support from relatives) – most popular strategy: reaches 80 % of population.
- Extremely passive (as selling out belongings, applying for welfare benefits): 9 - 5 % of population.

² Wnuk-Lipinski E., Ziolkowski M., *Pierwsza dekada niepodleglosci, Proba socjologicznej syntezy*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warszawa 2001.

³ OBOP 2002, Wprost 2 kwietnia 2003, s. 46.

⁴ CBOS, Polacy o przyczynach i skutkach bezrobocia, Komunikat z badan, BS/59/2003;

⁵ CBOS, Strategie radzenia sobie z problemami finansowymi, Komunikat z badan, BS/97/2002

The tendency there is – people with lower education and lower income declare higher passivity in relation to their own financial problems.

Taking into account all these indicators, we see that among the social welfare clients it is rather hard to implement social work based on an empowerment and subsidiarity principles. Moreover, it seems that social work practitioners are prone to misunderstand the subsidiarity principle as such. According to some research it appeared that a many social workers understood it as a sort of the state obligation to help people to solve their problems.⁶ No wonder how it could be: social workers are after all the members of their society sharing its belief and only later they become introduced to the principles of profession.

The relation of a class teaching to a field work training in social work education.

It is commonly accepted rule, that relation of class teaching to fieldwork training is a factor of a quality of education in social work. This general consensus has been recently outlined into concrete set of directives by the IASSW/IFSW Global Minimum Qualifying Standards Committee in section 3 of its proceedings under the title: *Standards with Regard To Programme Curricula Including Fieldwork*.⁷

While *directive 3.2* Clear plans for the organisation, implementation and evaluation of the theory and field education components of the programme seem to be rather obvious, there are several other directives on the following list, which are hard to implement in Poland's social work reality:

"3.5 *Field educational contexts that provide for clearly designed and purposeful learning experiences that contribute to the holistic development of student social workers.*

3.6 Planned co-ordination and co-operation between the school and agencies that are selected for fieldwork education.

3.7 The planning and implementation of orientation sessions for fieldwork supervisors or instructors.

3.8 Focused attention to educating non-social work fieldwork instructors or supervisors of the programme objectives and expected outcomes, and the ethical principles of the profession.

3.9 Provision for the inclusion and participation of field instructors in curriculum development, especially with regard to field education.

3.10 A partnership between the educational institution and the agency in decision-making regarding field education and the evaluation of student's fieldwork performance.

3.11 Making available, to fieldwork instructors or supervisors, a field instruction manual that details its fieldwork standards, procedures and expectations.

3.12 *Ensuring that adequate and appropriate resources, to meet the needs of the fieldwork component of the programme, are made available.*

We may see two major obstacles here. The first one is emerging in connection to *directive 3.5*. Why is that? Because social work is marginal activity in public social welfare agencies, therefore is hard to find the practice placements which would be able provide students with appropriate learning experience. Moreover, students often face there this difference between social work values and social welfare users' values. The latter expect rather financial support

⁶ Rutkowiak A., *Realizacja zasady subsydiarnosci i integracji sluzb a dzialania socjalne w srodowisku lokalnym*. w: Ciczkowski W. (red.) *Bezpieczenstwo czlowieka w srodowisku lokalnym*, Olsztyn 1999, s. 456.

The problem in question may be aggravated by the fact that the term subsidiarity in Polish (*pomocniczosc*) may be in common usage associated with the term assistance (*pomoc*).

⁷ Second Reviewed Discussion Document: Global Qualifying Standards For Social Work Education And Training - August 2002, www.iassw.soton.ac.uk Final version of this document has been approved by the general assemblies of IASSW and IFSW in October 2004 (see www.iassw.soton.ac.uk). The formulations of above cited part of the document has been partially changed, however the ideas underlying it seem to remain basically the same.

from the system then state of the art social work. There is a risk that the only lesson students may learn from their older colleagues quite often: "Forget all these academic theories, you are in real world now."

The second obstacle is emerging in connection with *directive 3.12*. It is simply lack of needed resources. Both the schools and agencies are not resourceful enough to maintain appropriate level of their basic operation, let alone investment in fieldwork training. In fact the rest of directives listed on above list are hard to fulfil because of this lack of resources. The paradox is that vocational schools of social work have developed more stabile and richer fieldwork programs then universities. So far we have in Poland a trade-off situation - either basic vocational training or better theoretically grounded however less practical university education. In spite of that the holders of diplomas of both kinds at the start to their professional career have equal chance for similar positions.

Taking into account all these problems described above it cannot be said that we do not try to solve all these dilemmas. We are trying to solve them outside the systemic structures i.e. in non-governmental organisations, voluntary projects, and small-scale agencies. It happens that social workers in public agencies run voluntary projects in their spare time; it happens also that social work students volunteer in order to enrich their professional experience.

At the closure of this presentation of problems social work in Poland is facing, it can be said that there are needed serious structural changes in both the social welfare and social work education systems. It can be said also, that probably in the rest of the region in question the problems in the field are of similar nature, as a consequence of social heritage left after collapse of "socialist welfare states".

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