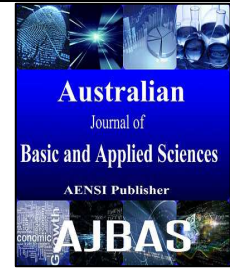




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Present State of Quality Management of Social Services in the Czech Republic

Markéta Elichová and Anna Sýkorová

University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Department of ethics, psychology and charity work, Faculty of Theology, Kněžská 8. České Budějovice. Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT

The present quality management in social services in the Czech Republic is almost exclusively realized by implementing state-defined quality criteria that have certain shortcomings. Other problems in the implementation of quality management in social work organizations are the insufficient professionalism of social workers, deficiencies in education, the impact of uncertain identity of social work itself, as well as the context of the second wave of modernity in society. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is now changing its strategy and provides a solution in a form of innovation of quality criteria and measures to strengthen the position and prestige of social work as a discipline. The question is whether MLSA is motivated by economic interests, or increasing the quality of life.

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INTRODUCTION

On January 1, 2007 Act 108/2006 Coll. on Social Services came into force in the Czech Republic, it brought newly the definition of social worker, social services, types of services, a new way of their funding - the service is "purchased" by client from his/her care allowance, and also the requirements for service provider. This Act by changing the value basis meant a departure from a paternalistic conception of social services (Sládek, 2010: 110) as a residue of former communist regime, when the state was an exclusive provider and donator of social care (Šiklová, 2001), and newly the life quality of care receivers gets under the spotlight as an overall indicator of adequate social service (Matoušek, 2007).

The Act introduced quality standards (SQSS) already known in social services since 2002, now reformulated as a norm whose implementation is at the same time a precondition for the provision of social services (Act 108/2006 Coll. § 82, 88).

In social work practice thus the quality of social services has become a 'redoubtable norm' and is perceived only as more paperwork hindering social workers' performance and distracting them from direct work with clients (Quality in Social Services, 2011, Hanzl, 2011). This leads to misunderstanding of the sense of SQSS that are the product of the quality policy of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (MLSA), which tries to guarantee optimal

setting of social services towards recipients, maintaining their dignity and keeping and strengthening their social inclusion (Act 108/2006 Coll.).

Regarding the ambiguity in meaning of SQSS, the fulfillment of certain criteria and sub-criteria of SQSS from the side of service providers is problematic (Sládek, 2010: 116). Social workers are not able to take advantage of freedom given to them through a high degree of generality of the definition of SQSS criteria (Čermáková, Johnová, 2002) and often produce written materials eg. methodologies that are not effective, e.i. they do not correspond with theoretical bases used in daily practice of an organization, but they represent an image of social workers how to fulfill SQSS. There are also many cases when some organizations copy methodologies of other organizations that have passed inspection without adapting them to their own specifics.

Social workers behave contrary to the ideals of social work as a discipline that seeks to maintain or develop social functioning of individuals, families, groups, communities and society while building on the value of each human being and human rights (IFSW, 2012, Navrátil, 2001: 11-12, Matoušek, 2011: 15-16). Yet SQSS focusing on personal goals of service recipients enable providers to concretize these abstract ideals such as human dignity, autonomy, etc. (Sládek, 2010: 115). Furthermore, university education in social work in CR is largely determined by experts in social work (Accreditation

requirements of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports are based on the Minimum Standard of Education in Social Work passed by the Association of Educators in Social Work (see Ministry of Education, ASVSP, 2011)) who require minimum knowledge and skills in accordance with the above given definition of social work.

This leads to a question whether the reasons for this situation can be found in the wording of SQSS, in the field of quality management, on the side of social workers in their own way of processing conceptual apparatus for social work practice and their attitude to social work profession, or in a broader context, which then affects the work of social workers - specifically, I mean the ambiguity of social work position, the institutionalization and perspectives of social work.

1. Musil (2013: 2-3) defines the consequences of the concept ambiguity of social work in CR as follows:

- reducing the quality of social work due to workers who lack professional qualification to help in dealing with problems in the interactions between them and their social environment,
- reducing the availability and quality of professional help of social workers due to the policy of contracting authorities (legislators or employers) when they neglect difficulties of citizens struggling with social environment and delegate this task to help those struggling citizens exclusively or unwittingly to the hands of other helping professionals who are not well qualified to provide professional social work,
- reducing the availability of professional help of social workers to citizens whose living difficulties result from problematic interactions between them and their social environment.

The ambiguity of the social work concept does not just bring the above mentioned barriers of good practice, they themselves reproduce other problems.

2. Social service providers, as well as inspectors, agree on the following main shortcomings of SQSS - the quality standards of social services are complicated and involve themes that are repeated and overlap several standards, hence the providers propose rearranging the standards themes to form thematic areas (Kocman, Paleček, 2012: 12). Further, the providers criticize the specification of responsibilities and their connection to the standards, these are not always perceived as consistent and clear. In case of responsibilities there also are evident inaccurate definitions which evoke in providers subjective interpretation, which is problematic especially in case of controls (Capicarová, Holečková, 2014: 5). SQSS "are perceived as insufficiently specified, and their content is often ambiguous (Kocman, Paleček, 2012: 15)," although this generality should have opened space for quality setting tailored to the specifics of a particular service, however, in words of Musil "too general setting of

standards did not bring along enough pressure for changes and many organizations feel tempted to adapt the standards to their accustomed routine or look for ways how to avoid them or just report them in papers without meeting the real mission towards their clients (Mátl, Jabůrková, 2007: 45)."

The incomprehensibility and vast space for subjective interpretation of responsibilities and standards negatively reflected in quality control - during inspections. In control regime the standards are measurable criteria, but according to Čáslava (2003), Dvořáková (2004), Musil *et al.* (2007) in Mátl, Jabůrková (2007: 46) and Paleček and Kocman (2012: 8) "criteria can never achieve a degree of schematisation required for measuring because they are qualitative and open to interpretation. Thus the measurability of criteria is not based on a firmly established metric, but on their interpretation. There is no stable inspector interpretation though." Moreover, "in connection with the inspections the standards are an ambivalent instrument that on the one hand says that experts in meeting the standards are the providers, on the other hand, however, when inspecting this role of providers it is fundamentally challenged. Therefore, the inspections lead to a confrontation of two expert interpretations of the standards (Kocman, Paleček, 2012: 9)."

3. The investigations showed that workers do not trust in the development of the quality as such (Malík Holasová, 2014: 113). According to Musil "they are more concerned with what they themselves expect from the standards, e.i. their pre-conception, than what the text of the standards requires (Mátl, Jabůrková, 2007: 46)." The arguments of professionals and caregivers on the administrative burden can thus be viewed according to Miler "as a misunderstanding of having written policies as an outcome of the process, which according to Sýkorová ultimately leads to a formal introduction of standards in organizations (Mátl, Jabůrková, 2007: 46)." On the other hand: it is perceived as particularly problematic wording of the first criteria of the many standards: "it has a methodology and follows it," it is true, however, that this change in 2006 compared to the original wording of the criteria in 2002 connected and developed the quality management (Mlejnková, Holečková, 2013: 2). However, the survey of Musil *et al.* (2011: 367, 375, 394) shows that in practice there is no interconnection between objectives and the way of social services provision.

4. MLSA is aware of this state of social work and social services, as well as the shortcomings in SQSS and the support of introducing SQSS into practice. Therefore, it tries to respond both by innovating SQSS and the whole system of services quality. The described and examined experience of providers, inspectors and other people involved in the field of social services with the meeting the obligations of § 88 and the introduction and the

control of quality standards of the Act 108 / 2006 Coll. on Social Services (valid for nearly nine years) are in addition to other incentives related to the implementation of quality management of MLSA the main impetus for this shift. (MLSA also responds by preparing a new law on social workers and the self-governing professional organization anchoring social work as a discipline.)

The 2012 survey showed that "the standards are useful for the service, if providers are able to work with them according to their needs: the providers will interpret their meaning, translate their wording onto their own situation and use them as a tool for quality management of the service. Thanks to the introduction of the standards the providers themselves set a concrete framework for their service (Kocman, Paleček, 2012: 6)." MLSA tries to support this effort and listen to providers' proposals to simplify and concise the standards and enable providers to interpret the standards with respect to their own practice (Kocman, Paleček, 2012: 6). MLSA promotes the reformulation of interrelated obligations and standards and wants through accentuating of measurability to prevent several phenomena that were described as very problematic in the current version of responsibilities and standards. "Legal obligations of providers and quality standards do not work separately but they are a part of the system of social services quality, hence it is necessary to make changes with an emphasis on the whole system (Capicarová, Holečková, 2014: 4)."

MLSA implements the innovation of SQSS by means of a project called "Innovation of the Quality of Social Services" that responds to the demands of social authorities and tries to bring a greater degree of objectivity and measurability (Capicarová, Holečková, 2014: 3) into the system of quality of social services while maintaining the continuity of the existing standards and framework securing the quality of social services (Změny povinností..., 2013: 1). Currently parameters and quality criteria for the provision of social services are being formulated, and MLSA designs a proposal of their objective evaluation in connection with the preparation of an amendment to the Social Services Act. The objective is to set such system of quality that would eliminate subjective interpretations and practices of evaluators, establish transparent and clear rules for providers corresponding with practice. Therefore, the parameters and quality criteria are related to the fundamental areas of quality, which are as follows:

The first area is a **guarantee of social services** focusing to the very essence of social services – to give a clear purpose to what is done, for whom and how; provider will specify an unfavorable social situation and define the overall framework of a provided service. It connects here the image and vision of organization, its resources and objectives, also its strategy is created. The correctness of this shift is confirmed by the experience with the current

setting of quality policy: "the standards are useful for the service, if providers are able to work with them according to their needs: the providers will interpret their meaning, translate their wording onto their situation and use them as a tool for the quality management of the service. Thanks to the introduction of the standards the providers themselves set a concrete framework for their service (Kocman, Paleček, 2012: 6)."

The second area is a **process of social services provision**. Mutual interdependence leads to the interconnection of negotiations with a potential client, concluding a contract and the subsequent provision of social services to a specific person. The criteria related to this new requirement should not be the same for all types of social services, taking into account the diversity of individual services, the individuality of people interested in the service, and the acceptance of the service. Newly introduced term is the "goal of cooperation" which is based on personal goals of person, common assessment of their needs arising from a described difficult social situation and identified possibilities and resources of the person.

The third area is the area of **human rights** in social services, because the sensitivity and limits of help and support to others with regard to their difficult social situation can create situations that need to be treated with respect to their impact on the area of human rights. The new wording of the requirement covers all this area (including the obligation to receive and handle complaints) and sets general, yet understandable and measurable criteria. Specific rights would be newly elaborated by provider in individual criteria and they would be related to a particular social service.

The fourth area is **keeping documentation**. The current version of the standards criteria, which often contain only an obligation to prepare rules and follow them, creates in practice problems with the effect of their achievement toward quality maintenance and reasonable control of given areas e.g. during inspections. The documentation and its management formulated by the internal rules are very important for providers of social services because documentation identifies the best practice, it documents a specific method even for evaluation, maintains provider's know-how, it is important for the substitutability of employees (Veber, 2007: 79) and for provision of social services to people. The wording of the new obligation contains two basic optics - documentation of service and documentation resulting from the provision of the service to people. The first one is to guarantee an increase in the quality of service, since the good quality services of social work must be consistent with the overall management of organization, the second one is to guarantee the quality of service provision to people and enable continuing growth of the service through documentation evaluation.

The fifth area is a **cooperation**. The new wording of the obligation and related criteria tries to bring social services providers to active support of persons in maintaining their social contacts and relationship to the natural environment from which they come. Next, to use other services that are locally available. The purpose of this obligation is to guide providers to a more active solution to the difficult social situation of persons, sharing their needs, and meeting them by means of other external resources, to prevent the formation of persons' dependence on the service by holding them in the social service, vice versa to use and promote persons' own resources and other services to improve or mitigate their actual unfavorable social situation.

Prospects For The Future:

Social work as a professional discipline because of its fundamental link with the development of modernism finds itself in a kind of crisis. As described by Chytil (2007: 64-66), social work was created as a "working tool" of institutions of secondary sociability, whose task is to solve problems of modern society generated by the process of modernization, which destroyed people's traditional social pillars, but in the current second phase of modernity it requires a reduction of institutions of secondary sociability and organization of social work on the principles of market economy, since economics acts as a paradigm common to all humanities and social sciences. As a result of mutual competition for funding, other subsystems behave competitively towards social area. Some authors see a resignation of the theoretical development of social work (Lorenz, 2005), others even predict the end of social work (Stoesze, 1997). According to Chytil (2007: 70), modernization does not ruin social work, but social work becomes a service on the services market, and as other services it is profit-oriented. The categorization of social services brought by the new law can be seen as an action in accordance with the above mentioned tendencies. Another element of the economic discourse can just be seen in the required quality of social services when the client becomes a "customer" who buys services and requires their reasonable level.

MLSA behaves in accordance with the current tendencies and aware of the fact, as Elichová (2011: 30) states, that it forms social organizations by setting social policy. As described above, however, its efforts are not entirely successful on practical level. Based on many analyses that MLSA initiated, it was found that in the current uncertain identity of social work it is necessary to focus on this area, which is related to quality management, since it directly influences the thinking and behavior of direct participants of social work in social services - social workers who determine the final form of social work, as confirmed by Elichová (2011: 30) who states that in general we can say that a helping

organization is shaped by helping workers who shape it, both by formulating organization's mission and instituting and methodology documents, but also by their performance in helping profession. Therefore, MLSA also initiates creating an act on social workers and self-governing professional organization whose purpose should be according to Musil (2013) the support and regulation of the professional quality of social work profession. The object of this act is mainly to regulate the performance of social work profession, prerequisites and conditions for the performance of social work profession and the status of social worker. Most viewed and most discussed part of the act is the effort to establish a self-governing professional organization that would oversee the professional level of social work, compliance with binding legal regulations and internal regulations of professional organization (Pilát, 2004). In the opinion of the Scientific Council of the MLSA this act should clarify the ambiguity of social work conception (Musil, 2013).

Another area where it is necessary to make changes is the education in social work, since it does not reflect the modernizing tendencies (Chytil, 2007: 66). So the question is whether social workers themselves are adequately educated and ready to manage in current practice and respond to rapidly changing conditions in society. Musil (2011) states that the current methods of teaching social work do not allow social workers to get social recognition, because the education does not pay enough attention to problems in the interaction (the only exclusive competence of social work) and so there is also a bad conception of the themes of discipline identity and the role of social work. And not only that, setting a methodological anchoring for the social services are mostly realized just by social workers, who, however, are not equipped with sufficient powers in this area. Only some of the providers use methods and tools of quality management such as ISO, elements of TQM, EFQM, benchmarking, etc.

As for direct management activities, there is a paradox: the Association of Educators in Social Work (AESW) presents this requirement in the profile of bachelor's degree graduate as a skill after two years of work experience, but courses in organization management are not listed among theoretical and practical disciplines that are mandatory for schools educating in social work. This area of education is neglected in some schools and the graduate might not be adequately equipped in this area. The standard leaves responsibility in this area purely on schools, although this knowledge and skill is so important for future social workers, not only because it is definitely beneficial to combine professional social work and management techniques in organizations (Malík Holasová, Musil, 2013: 247), but it is also about teamwork and interdisciplinary collaboration, organization management and self-management of workers who typically have to handle

a wide range of activities. The management is also related to the quality of social work services. According to Malík Holasová (2014: 127), quality services of social work must be consistent with the overall management of the organization. The workers of the organization must take into account that social facilities are not just institutions providing help but they are companies whose business functions must be kept running in order to fulfill the purpose of providing assistance. The organization must be managed and the management must implement specific management tasks to meet this purpose.

As reported by Elichová and Sýkorová (2015: 92) management skills are required by employers when they seek new workers on labor market for the position of social worker, and graduates admit they lack developed skills and knowledge of that kind (as confirmed by data from the current nationwide survey) and workers in practice do as well (Elichová, 2015). AESW plans in this field to update minimum standard and MLSA and Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports started to enhance significantly the quality and development of lifelong learning by changing the method of funding higher education, as well as by progressive changes in education of social workers in the upcoming act that would "create legal conditions to focus the content of lifelong learning of social workers on the knowledge and skills in the field of social work and create legal conditions for specialization/qualification training of social workers and its effect on the career advancement of social workers (Musil, 2013: 5)."

For these above mentioned reasons MLSA was forced to form legal requirements responding to the quality of social services through the obligations of providers and SQSS that cover both the process of cooperation with clients and the personnel and operational aspects of social services. But thanks to the "unprofessionalism" of social workers and workers in social services this intent did not achieve sufficient success and therefore it is necessary to begin more comprehensive changes - in social work education to increase the professionalism of social workers and workers in social services, to work on the definition and prestige of social work as a discipline, and of course, modify the "tailor-made" practice and wording of SQSS, which is the easiest task. New legislation should assist real introduction of quality management and its control in social services, (on the other hand, this point is strongly linked to political powers). The amendment to the Social Services Act and the new Act on Social Workers and self-governing professional organization should be applicable from 2017, we have to wait for some time to see their effect and evaluation on both macro, meso and micro levels of social work.

Conclusion:

It can be stated that today there are many social

services providers who have not proactive but reactive approach to change management and the aspect that often fails is the primarily administrative process of implementation of quality management at all stages. We also find here three main obstacles differentiated by Bruhn (2011) (Malík Holasová, 2014: 125): content-conceptual, organizational and structural, personnel, and barriers at the level of organizational culture that complicate the process of introducing quality management. But what is important now the attitude of MLSA as a guarantor of social work and social services in the country is changing. It is possible that MLSA is aware that according to Assmann (Seithe, 2010) quality management enables social work to develop and gain a better recognition in public. If social work will present itself through professional services with high quality, it can be expected to gain public trust and contribute to the growth of the prestige of the field (Malík Holasová, 2014: 129). MLSA would kill two birds with one stone - it would have a quality social services, more satisfied clients and employees, and according to Staub - Bernasconiová (Seithe, 2010) it would minimize direct and indirect state spendings and increase the efficiency of public and private services for the same or a greater number of tasks. In addition, according Malík Holasová (2014: 130) improving the quality will improve life at the most fundamental level.

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