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SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN THE RURAL AREA – BETWEEN DESIDERATUM AND REALITY

ABSTRACT

Social assistance is the main mechanism by which the society intervenes in order to prevent, limit or remove the negative effect of certain events that could affect vulnerable persons or groups, without their will. Because 45% of the whole country's population lives in the rural area, the rural poor people represent two-thirds of the total Romanian population. Family plays the most important role in their support. The persons in difficulty benefit from the services provided by the local authorities representatives, as well as from the services of non-governmental organizations in the social sector involved in the development of some projects and programs in the rural area – the Regional Operational Program (ROP), the Sectoral Operational Program –Human Resources Development (SOP-HRD), etc.

At present, the social assistance services in the rural area are also affected by the socio-economic context and by the general poverty both of the local budgets, which continue to remain the finance source for the social aid, and of the State budget, which represents the main source of finance for the allowances and other social aids for the population; it is the development of the non-governmental sector that represents the only viable way by which we could cover the vacuum represented by the need for specialized social services at rural community level.

Key words: rural environment, social assistance, social aid.

JEL Classification: H75, I30, R51.

1. INTRODUCTION

At world level, the European Union represents a model in social protection systems. Unemployment, the precarious health condition, invalidity, difficult family situation and old age are some of the risks for which these systems were designed, which guarantee the access to a series of services indispensable for maintaining the human dignity.

At the same time, the protection of the population of a given country from inflation, the maintaining of a certain price for the basic products through state subsidies, ensuring a minimum family income, criminality diminution measures, measures to prevent the impact of natural disasters and the spreading of certain diseases, national programs to fight against corruption or national plans for labour employment, of for fight against poverty are all examples of social protection at the level of the whole society.

One of the social protection objectives has in view the reintegration into normal life of the persons benefiting from assistance through: the activation of own resources, identification of the optimum modalities to face the problems, promoting certain solutions to reduce the time marked by the risk situation. In view of the social integration, the social need represents the totality of requirements indispensable to each person for ensuring the life conditions.

Although the organization and financing of the social protection systems are in the Member States' competence, the European Union has a special role in this respect, by introducing the legislation on the coordination of the national social security systems, mainly as regards the mobility inside the European Union. The European Union also committed itself to promote a closer cooperation among the Member States for the modernization of their social protection systems, which are facing similar challenges.

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The social protection concept was first introduced by John K. Galbraith and it defines the protection policy for the less-favoured population categories, through measures that target a decent life standard for these population categories. He considers that the most urgent measure is "providing the right to have a guaranteed or an alternative income for those who cannot find a job".

As international law element, in the year 1952, the International Labour Organization adopted, by Convention no.102, the "social security" concept that comprised the social security and the social assistance as complementary elements.

At present, the social protection actions are designed for ensuring a basic living standard for all people, regardless of the means they have at their disposal and they target several areas in which collective efforts are necessary, namely: health, education and training, culture, recreation and leisure conditions, social political environment, in a word, the social living conditions.

The main categories of persons who ask for social protection are the following: the unemployed, the disabled people, the children and the young people. The complementary social protection refers to: death, incapacity for work and vocational disease.

In Romania, the social policy is a concerted policy, coordinated by the *Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly People* supported by the activity of other Ministries such as the *Ministry of Health and the Ministry of National Education*.¹

The activity fields of the national social policy are the following:

- the labour force market (including unemployment) and the wage policies;
- pensions and other social security rights;

¹ <http://www.mmuncii.ro>

- social assistance and family policies;
- working relations, job security and health.

To these four areas of which mainly the Labour Ministry is responsible, the following are added: health insurance; dwelling and habitation policies; education policies; social policies in the field of probation/social reinsertion of criminal people and other social policies of which other ministries are responsible .

Each of these areas has its own legal and institutional framework, its specific problems and priorities of action.

In the field “*social assistance and family policies*” there are three sub-areas:

- social assistance services,
- social assistance for elderly people and
- fight against social exclusion.

For each of these sub-areas there is an adequate legislative framework and responsible institutions for its implementation.

The concerted coordination of social assistance was accomplished by the passing (starting with the year 2003) of the *National Authority for the Disabled Persons*, of the *National Authority for Child Protection and Adoption*, of the *National Agency for Family Protection*, of the *National Agency for Equal Opportunities for Men and Women* into the subordination of the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Protection and Elderly People.

At local (county and locality) level, the social assistance system is integrated and unitary. The local authorities get well-defined responsibilities both in establishing the social assistance rights and for providing financial support and services.

The child and disabled people protection activity is the responsibility of the general directorates for social assistance and child protection under the subordination of the county councils.

From the point of view of the activities carried out, social assistance is organized into: social assistance payments (family allowances, aids and indemnities) and social services.

The social assistance payments represent financial transfers that can be granted on a determined period and comprise:

- family allowances,
- social aids,
- indemnities.

Family allowances are given to the families with children and have mainly in view birth, education and children care, under the following forms:

- the child benefit, foreseen by Law no. 61/1993;
- the complementary family allowance, foreseen by Government’s Emergency Ordinance (GEO) no. 105/2003;
- the support allowance for mono-parental family, foreseen by GEO no. 105/2003;
- the newborn benefit, foreseen by Law no. 416/2001;

– the monthly foster care benefit, foreseen by GEO no. 26/1997 and Law no. 272/2004;

– child-raising allowance for children up to 2 (3) years old;

– a monthly incentive pay for child raising for children up to 2 (3) years old.

The aids are payments in cash and in kind to persons or families whose incomes are not sufficient for meeting the minimum basic needs and take the following forms:

– social aid granted on the basis of Law no. 416/2001 on the minimum guaranteed income;

– aid for dwelling heating granted on the basis of Government's Emergency Ordinance no. 5/2003 on granting aids for heating the dwelling, as well as certain facilities for thermal energy payment, subsequently modified and completed;

– aid in cash for the purchase of an individual central-heating plant or of an automatic gas burner, on the basis of GEO no. 91/2005 on the setting up of the program for granting certain money aids to the population with low incomes who use natural gases for heating the dwelling;

– aid on reimbursable basis for refugees.

The indemnities are granted to eligible persons for favouring social inclusion and ensuring an autonomous life under the following forms:

– the social benefit for the blind adults with a severe or strong handicap;

– the indemnity for the person accompanying the blind adult with severe handicap;

– the indemnity for the blind adults with severe handicap who are wage workers;

– the indemnity for the adults with severe or strong handicap, other than the blind;

– the monthly food benefit for the children and adults with HIV/AIDS.

The funding of social assistance payments mainly come from the state budget and from the local budgets, in conformity with the special laws that regulate these payments.

The **social services** represent the complex aggregate of measures and actions used to address the social needs of persons, families, groups or communities in order to prevent and surmount certain difficult, vulnerability or dependency situations for increasing life quality and promoting social cohesion.

The social services, together with the social payments, as well as other social security systems, intervene for solving up certain problems that potentially can generate social exclusion.

The social services are ensured by the authorities of the local public administration, as well as by natural persons or legal entities, both public and private.

The supply of social services is based on principles such as: social solidarity, focus on family and community, global approach, community organization, partnership, complementarity and team work.

As great types of services these are:

- services with primary character that have as goal the prevention or the limitation of certain difficulty or vulnerability situations that could lead to social marginalization or exclusion;
- specialized services aiming at maintaining or developing of the individual capacities to overcome a difficult social situation.

The funding of social services mainly comes from the local budgets, state budget, beneficiaries' contributions, sponsorships and donations.

The social services are strongly affected by the socio-economic context, by the general poverty of the local budgets that must contribute to financing part of these social services. The external financial resources are ensured through structural funds and the cohesion fund (Regional Operational Program – ROP – Priority Axis 3, POS-DRU etc.).

The local public administrative authorities can establish, by local council decision, social protection measures from the local budgets. The local context regarding the social assistance system and child protection has two components:

- protection and promotion of children's rights;
- protection, integration and social inclusion of the disabled adult persons.

The strategy regarding the "protection and promotion of children's rights" component has the following target groups:

- children in their own family having in view the elimination of the risk and difficulty situation;
- children Romanian citizens who are abroad;
- children who benefit from a form of protection under the conditions of legal regulations;
- children at risk (abandoned, abused, neglected, consumers of drugs);
- children/young people under high marginalization and social exclusion risk (children who committed an illegal action and do not bear the sanction stipulated by law, homeless children, children who are victims of kidnapping or any exploitation form and of the traffic with human beings, roma children, etc., children/young people consumers of psychotropic substances, teens and young people who benefited from a protection measure, including the disabled ones);
- families in difficulty;
- community;
- institutions, local authorities, NGOs;
- professionals in the field.

The strategy on the "protection, integration and social inclusion of the adult disabled persons" component has the following target groups:

- disabled – institutionalized persons;
- disabled persons – not institutionalized;
- their families;
- homeless persons;

- elderly people in a difficult situation;
- community;
- local authorities, NGOs;
- associations of disabled persons;
- specialists in the field.

The responsibility for the implementation of the strategy on the social protection of the unemployed rural population (children and adults in difficulty) equally belongs to:

- the General Social Assistance and Child Protection Directorate,
- the Local Public Services for Social Assistance,
- the Local Councils,
- the County School Inspectorate,
- the Public Health Directorate,
- the Labour, Social Solidarity and Family Directorate,
- the County Police Inspectorate,
- the Public Prosecutor's Office and the law courts.

The General Social Assistance and Child Protection Directorate has the responsibility to promote the rights of all children, to monitor their observance, to promote the equal access to health care, education, vocational and social assistance services for the persons in difficulty, so as to eliminate the risk of their marginalization and social exclusion, to mobilize the community resources having in view to maintain/rehabilitate/the social functionality of the person/family/community in difficulty.

The services and institutions mentioned above have the responsibility to integrate into their own strategies and directions for action the goals specific to the area of activity mentioned in the county strategy on the children's rights and the adult rights.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The citizens protection system represents the set of actions, decisions and measures at society level for the prevention, diminution or removal of the consequences of certain events considered as social risks linked to the population's living conditions. In conformity with the standards of the international organizations (UN, UNESCO, ELO), the following parameters are measured in establishing the living standard: the material living conditions (employment, incomes, working conditions, dwelling, clothing etc.) and the social conditions (health, education, culture etc.).

According to the EUROSTAT methodology, the social protection expenditures must cover risks such as: diseases/health insurances, disabilities, old age, family/children, unemployment, dwellings and social exclusion.

The impact of the social programs is assessed on the basis of three dimensions: the target of the allocation or the share of social assistance funds

benefiting the poor population; effectiveness or share of allocations in the poor population's average consumption and the coverage degree or the share of the poor population receiving the respective allocation.

Social assistance operates according to another principle different from the social security: it is based only on funds coming from the state budget or from donations of volunteers and of international institutions. The assistance does not presuppose a previous financial contribution on behalf of the socially assisted person; it is based on the solidarity principle and presupposes the evaluation of the assisted person's needs.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The socio-economic transformations in the last decade resulted in several evolution patterns for the Romanian rural space, going from *the form of the developed rural area* – of the peri-urban area around the cities, to the *traditional rural area* – where large-scale subsistence farming prevails.

Through its almost 10 million people with their domicile in the rural area, representing 45% of the total population (NIS, 2010), Romania is the state with the highest share of the rural population in the European Union, being followed by Poland and Bulgaria (EUROSTAT, 2009). This population is living in almost 13,000 villages, which belong to 2,700 communes from the administrative point of view. The communes are small, most of them having less than 3,000 inhabitants.

In the period 1990-2010, the rural population decreased by over one million, from 10.8 million persons to 9.6 million. This decrease can be explained both by the two demographic processes resulting in the population change (natural movement and migration), and by declaring certain rural localities as towns (Law no. 83/2004).

At the level of the economically active rural population, the share of the workers in agriculture, according to the official statistics, is about 60% of total population in this category (NIS, 2010). In this respect, the World Bank studies in the year 2005 showed that about one-third of the EU farmers were found in Romania, yet the total farm production obtained represented only one-tenth of that at Community level, in that period. After Romania's accession to the EU, this ratio remained the same.

The land restitution process has placed the agricultural land into the ownership of the small-sized households. A great part of those who received land through the land restitution process do not have the necessary skills and experience, do not have enough money and even the physical capacity to practice commercial farming.

With all these, the farm income (both in cash and in kind) is the most important income source for the rural households, followed by wages, social security transfers (mainly pensions) and social assistance payments (family allowances, aids and indemnities).

In general, the rural population has worse living conditions than the population living in towns. Poverty is a critical problem in the rural communities. In the last years, the relative poverty risk in the rural areas was higher than the poverty risk in the urban areas.

Many of the self-employed workers in agriculture are members of agricultural subsistence holdings, and many holdings from this group have a pensioner as farm head, benefiting from a certain protection from social security programs, which are relatively well targeted.

Due to the high self-employment level in agriculture, the official nominal unemployment rate in the countryside is much lower than in the case of the urban population. Long-term unemployment is firstly an urban problem, while in the rural area the major issue is underemployment combined with the low productivity of the present agricultural jobs.

A special category of population under high poverty risk is represented by the farmers living on a small pension. Although the value of the farmers' pensions doubled, their purchasing power significantly deteriorated and currently the pensions are insufficient for the elderly rural population.

The dwelling comfort is much lower in the rural areas compared to urban areas: most peasant houses are built from adobe ("the building material of the poor"); they do not have running water, they do not have bathrooms/shower or toilet inside the house. The rural households have a much poorer endowment in durable goods (e.g. washing machine, refrigerator, TV set, automobile) compared to the households in towns.

The social assistance activity at the level of the rural communes most often consists only in the work of the *social worker employed by the local council*. The social workers' activity is extremely important, as the other forms of support provided by the community or by the Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) sector are almost non-existent in most rural areas.

Besides the services provided by the representatives of the local authorities and of the non-governmental sector, the most important role in supporting the persons in difficulty comes to the *family* and, to a significantly lower extent, to the *religious institutions*.

The support provided by the family in the social cases is very important but it is neither sufficient nor specialized and most often alternative forms are necessary, as well as services supplied by the institutions with attributions in this field, so as to provide an efficient support to the persons in difficulty.

Neither the religious institutions with a role in delivering social services at community level can cover the lack of the institutionalized forms of support as those offered through the state bodies or the non-governmental organizations. At the same time, the activities of the religious bodies in the social field are far from the standards developed by institutions such as the *Catholic Church* in Italy, for example.²

² Mihalache, Flavius, Croitoru, Alin, *The Romanian rural area: evolutions and involutions. Social change and entrepreneurship*, Expert Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011.

The implication of the *non-governmental organizations* from the social sector in *the development of projects and programs in the rural area* is quite sporadic, even though in the last years, with the beginning of European financing through the Sectoral Operational Program *Human Resources Development*, the number of such types of organizations increased, which develop activities in the rural communities.

At the same time, we cannot speak yet about the existence of an important social role that NGOs may systematically have at the level of rural communities. The steps that have been made in this respect so far are not sufficient and there are many rural areas that remained with deficient social services.

The non-governmental sector development represent in this respect, the only viable modality by which we could cover the vacuum represented by the need for specialized social services at rural community level. The barriers to such a development can be identified both at the level of the rural communities and at the level of public policies in the field and of the access to finance.

The infrastructure problems and the relation with the local authorities are the main obstacles at community level, but these seem easily surmountable by comparison with the major problems in relation to the ensurance of the necessary finance for projects development.

The actions of the NGOs that activate in the social sector in the rural area are addressed to some specific target groups (unemployment, persons employed in the subsistence agriculture, roma population, young people and disabled persons) and consist of the following:

- providing support and guidance for the integration on the labour market;
- training courses free of charge to people from vulnerable groups;
- organizing mediatization and information campaigns at the level of communities and public opinion;
- establishment of certain social economy entities and providing support to their activities;
- realization of studies and elaboration of strategies on the situation of vulnerable groups and intervention modalities at community level;
- supply of social services.

The implication of the non-governmental organizations in the rural communities consists of:

- supply of information and guidance services to the beneficiaries coming from the socially disadvantaged groups;
- supply of vocational guidance services and of vocational training courses to the unemployed and to persons looking for a job.

Thus, the actions of the NGOs with social activity in the rural area generally cover a small area of activities, and we can speak about the existence of a *niche* specific for them. The NGOs involvement increase can be achieved only through the development of the funding schemes to support their activities or through the creation of organizations inside the community, which develop activities mainly at community level.

Referring to the social services that can be provided to elderly people in difficulty, the aspects of interest are the existence and functioning of the social canteens, “*economat*” shops, home care services or care services in specialized institutions.

The presence of the social canteens in the rural area is quite sporadic; such suppliers in the rural area exist in only 24.1% of the counties under investigation, and *economat* shops at commune level are found only in two counties (Ilfov and Vâlcea). An explanation for this situation might be that in the rural area, the local people obtain their food from their own household, which should not justify the establishment of such units in the villages. Nevertheless, there are also processed food products that the villagers “import” from the urban area, and their presence at accessible prices (in the *economat* shops, where prices are lower) or even free of charge from the social canteens would be a welcome support for the elderly people.

At the level of the rural communities, within the local councils, the activity object of the social *protection activity* consists of the achievement of a whole set of measures, programs, professional activities, specialized protection services for persons, families, groups and communities with special problems, in difficulty and under high social risk, who are not able to attain a normal and decent way of life through their own means and efforts.

Village development depends on the economic progress of the whole society, and that is why any sectoral approach must take into account the larger framework represented by the general economic context. We cannot speak about the diminution of subsistence farming practice, for example, in the absence of the development of lucrative opportunities in other activity sectors, which could increase labour demand. From this perspective, the overcoming of economic problems at society level represents the only viable way through which a transformation of the economic profile of villages can take place. All the other measures that support the development of human capital, through the increase of the vocational training of individuals, represent only secondary measures, which, in the absence of the labour demand increase, cannot prove their efficiency.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the last decades, the Romanian village world was under a continuous transformation process, which led to the modification of the specificity of the rural localities, as well as of the demographic, occupational and value coordinates of the population.

An important part of the employed population has insecure jobs, seasonal or even occasional jobs, from which they get low incomes (mostly in kind), uncovered by the social security, health care and unemployment system.

Social assistance should ensure the respect of the people’ rights as they are regulated in the international treaties and conventions that Romania ratified and

through which Romania committed itself to promote, either directly or through cooperation with the non-governmental organizations, adequate measures for people (young, old or with problems) in order make it possible for them to remain full members of the society, to dispose of sufficient resources for a decent existence, to be able to actively participate in the public, social and cultural life, to decide upon their own life, to live an independent existence, as long as possible in the usual environment; to get the necessary care services according to the individual needs, and to provide an appropriate existence for the institutionalized persons.

In this framework, the social assistance, as component of the social protection system, has in view the whole set of institutions and measures through which the State, the public authorities of the local public administration and the civil society ensure the prevention, limitation or removal of the temporary or permanent effects of certain situations that could generate the marginalization or social exclusion of certain persons. It has as main objective the protection of those persons, who, out of certain reasons of economic, physical, psychic or social nature, do not have the possibility to meet their social needs, to develop their own capacities or skills for social integration.

The social need with an economic etiology can be addressed by interventions, in which the social benefits cover the desired necessary for a minimum living standard.

The services in the field of social assistance are tailored to the needs induced by personal incapacity or dependency. When there is not a tight relationship established between the social assistance and the social change, serious problems may emerge from the part of the users, from those providing support, from the practitioners, from the managers and the organizations supplying social services.

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