

Implementing social policy – social workers' experience from Estonia and Norway

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Abstract

In this explorative article the relationship between social policy and social work will be in focus. The article discusses similarities and differences between Estonia and Norway.

The empirical material consists of eight focus group interviews with social workers in the two countries. The aim of the study was to investigate to what extent the social work profession represents change agents in the social policy framework. The article looks at the differences and communalities in different years in the two countries. The authors conclude that social workers are important actors in implementing changes at the local level. They seem, however, to be more concerned about the daily encounters with the individual users than about the general policy framework.

The main findings suggested that social workers in both countries see themselves as spokespersons for respect for and cooperation with the users while simultaneously arguing that social workers only to a very limited extent see the implementation of social policies as a part of their roles.

Implementing social policy –social workers' experience from Estonia and Norway

“The social work profession promote social change, problem solving in human relationships, and empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing” (Hare 2004) This statement from the international definition of social work illustrates the interconnection between the societal and structural aspects of social work and the relational aspects of the work of the social work profession. The main question under discussion in this article is to what extent the social work profession represents change agents in the social policy framework, in Estonia and Norway

The article starts with presenting some basic information about social work as a profession in the two countries, as well as theories about the relation between social policy and social work. Thereafter we will present empirical findings from eight focus group interviews in Estonia and Norway conducted in two different years; and discuss differences and communalities.

Background

The social work profession in Estonia and Norway

Education in social work was available in Estonia already at the beginning of the 20th century. The Institute of Home-economy, established in 1935, educated social assistants. The training lasted for three years and its emphasis was on the social-pedagogical line that was widespread in Central Europe at the time (Kiik and Sirotkina 2005). The need for social work was not recognised during the Soviet era. The department that provided training in social work was, therefore, closed in 1950 (Tulva 1996). During the Soviet era social work and social workers were ignored. Denialism reigned supreme. Severe social problems were denied and kept hidden as according to the governing (communist) ideology. There was no special education for social workers. Instead their tasks were to be carried out by the functionaries of the trade unions and the party, by teachers and by the workers of the personnel departments (Kiik and Sirotkina 2005).

When Estonia regained its independence in 1991, it was soon understood that social policy and social work needed reforms. The extensive changes Estonian society underwent during the 1990s also had an effect on the understanding of social problems. The concepts of *social work* and *social worker* were rediscovered. It became clear that the country urgently

needed to establish a system of social assistance. The tasks of organizing this system of social assistance was again delegated to local governments.

In order to improve the quality of social work the relevant educational structures had to be established quickly. Social workers have been educated at the Tallinn University since 1991 and at the University of Tartu since 1992. Today there are bachelor, master and PhD programmes, and research in social work is an established academic field.

The concept of social work as a profession has been used since 1995, which is when the new Estonian Social Welfare Act came into force. In the Social Welfare Act (1995) a social worker is defined as a person who has obtained specialised higher education within this field. Since 2004 Estonia has its own association for social workers.

In such an environment of reforms and change, social workers need to know the ways in which they can influence legislation; they need to know strategies for changing agency policies, and knowledge of the skills and tasks that are needed in policy reform work. Social policy-making is a creature of the new political systems, closely connected to the ideology, goals, role models and principles of the government and its bureaucratic proceedings. Leppik (1999) has noted that social policy making at state level includes a conscious taking of position on social issues.

The Norwegian social work professions were established as a result of the need for professionalising and quality improvements in the established services apparatus. The Norwegian Social Service Act (1991)¹, along with the Child Protection Act (1992), form the most important legal framework for social work practice. These laws have a direct historical link to the previous Social Aid Act (1967). Reforms in the care for the poor were perhaps the most important motive for establishing social work education in the 50s and 60s. There was a political demand for people who were qualified for working with the new aims of “help to self help”. In this sense the professionalization of social work can be seen as a social democratic reform project.

Norwegian social workers execute their profession within a framework created by the social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990). The social workers have a strong professional association² (with approximately 25.000 members.³). They also have a relatively clearly defined labour market with what amounts to an almost monopoly on positions. This implies that there is a demand for the skills of the profession. On the other hand social workers are often the victims of prejudice and negative attitudes. Levin (2001 and 2004) for instance, finds negative attitudes in her comparison of discourses in and about social work.

The Norwegian social work profession is under rapid development in terms of education, research, and demand for social work skills.

The ethical statement of the Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers (FO 2000) emphasises the social worker’s responsibility for mediating to the public their knowledge of social problems. Compared to most professional groups in society social workers are more often confronted with the negative aspect of the society they live in. Social workers consequently have a mandate to relate their work to social policy development.

Social work in the municipalities

In the Norwegian environment the municipalities are the main providers of social services and means tested social assistance benefits. The Norwegian social service act from the 60s was based on the principle of “help to self-help”. From the late 60es social workers have been the main profession in the local social service departments (Hutchinson and Oltedal 2006). The municipalities in Norway have a high level of freedom when it comes to policy

¹ This was the situation at the time of the data collection. A welfare management reform was implemented from 2006 to 2009, and a new law of social services was adopted in 2009.

² The Norwegian Union of Social Educators and Social Workers – Norwegian name: “Fellesorganisasjonen” (FO)

³ see www.fo.no

implementation. The legislation gives the municipalities an obligation to provide a set of services, but only to a limited degree does it give individual rights to the users. The users' rights are limited to an assessment of their needs. This gives the local social service department, and their employees, an important role in implementing national legislation and social welfare programmes. Several processes of decentralisation, e.g. the closure of central institutions for persons with learning disabilities, and psychiatric patients, have made the municipal social services more important in local societies. There is also a growing emphasis on basing child protection measures in local communities. The so called "work line" which emphasises labour market inclusion, has likewise led to an increase in locally based methods for job creation and means for training and capacity development.

The relation between the state and the municipalities has consequently been under change during the last years. There seems to be two parallel tendencies. On the one hand there has been a tendency towards centralisation. Through several major reforms the state has taken over more of the responsibility for service provision. On the other hand we have seen a major growth in municipal services and an increasing demand that measures and services should be based locally. This has led to discussions, including among social workers, on how much difference – in terms of measures and services offered -- is acceptable in the name of diversity and how much inequality should be accepted in the name of local self government (Hansen and Grønningsæter 2010). These developments and tensions in the relation between the state and the municipalities have made it increasingly important to understand the role of social workers as implementers of social policies on the local level.

The role of the municipalities is to a large extent similar in Estonia as in Norway. When Estonia developed a new social and welfare policy in the 90s, they were able to pick up knowledge from the Scandinavian countries and especially from Finland. The division of responsibility between the state and the municipalities in Estonia is therefore close to the Norwegian system of divided responsibilities. It seems, however, that the central authorities in Estonia established a stricter framework for the municipalities than did the Norwegian (Grønningsæter 2003, Kiik and Grønningsæter 2009). The similar characteristics of the two social service systems lead to similar frames for the development of the roles of social workers.

Social policy and social work

Social workers are expected to sense the problems of society more keenly than people in other professions (Haaland, Njå & Montgomery 1999). They meet users who reflect society's problems, and represent a link between the individual user or group of users and the environment with various institutions. Social workers could be messengers who keep institutions and politicians informed of the situation in society and offer suggestions for solutions for improvements. Social workers have been given a mandate by society to take decisions that have an impact on the lives of those who need help.

According to Walker & Walker (2002) social policy provides the context within which both social work professionals and their service users live and work. Social workers therefore, need to understand and analyze the social policies that are relevant to their practice. According to Heinonen & Spearman (2001:12), the social work/social policy equation involves knowing how to facilitate social change. Consequently, as practitioners in the welfare state, social workers need to be keenly aware of the process of policy development, and be prepared to shape as well as carry out the social policies which define their work (Wormer, K. Van 1997: 37).

Although the framework set by laws and policies is a strong one, laws and policies still have to be interpreted. Individual social workers, as well as the institutions and organisations they represent, have to take responsibility for their actions. It is the decisions and actions of the practitioners that form the basis of actual practice. It is the practitioners that render the social work accountable, and provide the different ways to solve the problems.

The relationship between social work and social policy has been termed a point of integration or tangent by several authors (Reamer 1993; Fjortoft & Skorstad 1998; Kokkinn 1998;

Villadsen, Gruber & Bengtsson 1998; Hegland 2000). No social worker can avoid drawing a connection between users' needs and publicly sponsored programs, regulations, or benefits.

According to Doel and Shardlow (2005), the organizations in which social work is practiced have a significant impact on the shape of that practice. At present, these organizations are experiencing a rate of change, and fluid and unpredictable contexts of organizations can sap practitioners' and managers' energies. If there is a culture of defensiveness, it follows that policies will be implemented defensively (Thompson 2000).

“[...]Social work is one of the most political of all professions. Indeed, it has virtually no role, no identity outside the welfare institutions where it is located. These in turn are shaped and developed by government policies. [...] Social workers' daily activities reflect political intentions and are largely defined by them.” (Yelloly and Henkel 2005:24)

It was axiomatic to Jane Addams and some other founders of the social work profession that its members would prioritize policy-changing work, (Jansson, Dempsey, McCroskey & Schneider, 2005:319). The IFSW's definition of social work (IFSW 2000) also contains the words social change and social justice that (????) covers policy-changing work.

When we compare social work across national borders it is necessary to ask what are the common features and what are the differences. It looks as if the content of the education and the identity of the profession to a large extent is common. But there is also a large difference linked to actual social problems, level of resources, political framework and professional traditions (Huchinson et. al. 2001, Oltedal 2003, Grønningsæter/Kiik 2009). It follows that it is not possible to understand social work without setting the social policy framework.

Figure 1 Welfare state under quadruple pressure (source: Fløtten 2006)

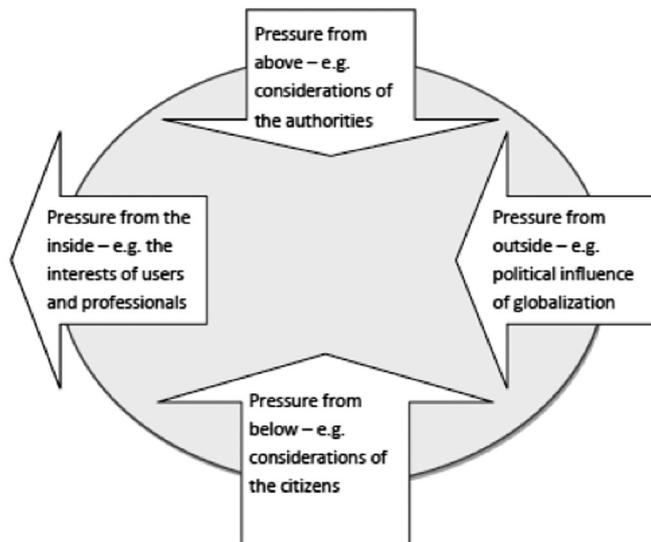


Figure 1 illustrates the concept “Welfare states under quadruple pressure”⁴. The use of the word pressure is based on the idea that there is pressure on the welfare state, but not a crisis in welfare delivery. Theories about “race to the bottom” (see e.g. Yeates 2001) has emphasised that the consequences of globalisation, increased market orientation as well as increased international competition, is a downward spiral of cutbacks in welfare delivery. Several scholars have in the last years questioned this development, for instance Castles (2004), and Ginsburg (2006). Dølvik et al (2007) have pointed to the fact that the Norwegian welfare state is still growing.

⁴ The concept “quadruple pressure” was developed by Tone Fløtten together with other members of the “Baltso II” project team. The Baltso II project is a joint research project involving Tartu University, University of Latvia and Fafo 2003 – 2006. The data collection from 2005, used in this article was an integrated part of this project. See; <http://www.fafo.no/BalticWelfare/index.htm>

It is, however, an aim to be able to investigate the distinctive pressures that must be dealt with. Different actors will be concerned about different forms of pressure. Pressure from above mainly concerns the considerations from politicians and authorities (example: growing expenses). Pressure from below consists for the main part of the views of the population and their considerations about how the welfare state is able to handle the challenges and problems it promises to solve. Pressure from outside is to a large extent linked to globalisation, European integration, and e.g. migration. The pressure from inside is linked to how the people employed by welfare institutions as well as the users of welfare institutions experience the relevance of the measures and the organisational framework (Fløtten 2006). A substantial part of the population depend – in both countries -- in one way or another on the welfare state for their income, either by wages or by benefits or services. Their views are not necessarily identical in the two countries, but they all have a basic interest in keeping up the system. To sustain, the welfare system must be considered legitimate, both by those who receive some kind of support and those who provide the support. In this article we investigate one aspect of this pressure from the inside; the perspectives of one of the professions of the welfare state. One basic question is consequently how and if social workers exert a pressure on the development of the welfare state.

Methods

The main data source is a series of focus group interviews. In 2001 we organised two focus groups in Estonia and one in Norway. (see Grønningsæter and Kiik 2009). In 2005 we organised three focus groups in Estonia and two in Norway. The focus groups of 2005 were found in the same geographical area as the groups from 2001; in addition we added one focus group in each of the two countries. Some of the participants in the focus groups were invited to concluding seminars where the findings were presented, and in this way they were also invited to comment on the analyses.

Each group consisted of five social workers from municipalities in one county. The Estonian social workers were recruited through local social service departments, while the Norwegian participants were recruited through the local branch of the social workers' association. In each of the Norwegian focus groups one participant was recruited because he/she represented the social workers' association.

The theme guides for the focus groups were almost the same in the two rounds. The focus groups in 2001 were organised mainly to discuss how social policy was implemented at the local level. When we decided to repeat the data collection in 2005, we focussed more explicitly on how social workers saw their own role as implementers of social policy. The focus groups in 2005 were also asked to comment on changes since 2001. The 2005 interviews are the main data source for this article, but the discussions cannot be understood without having the findings from 2001 as a starting point.

The reason for choosing a qualitative methodological approach was to identify strategies and processes, and to investigate how these strategies are related to social policy changes and as well as the development of the profession. Qualitative data give us the opportunity to investigate in depth. As a method, the main strength of focus groups is that it is based on a participant-defined group interaction and at the same time covers issues defined by the researchers (Morgan 1988). The same theme guide was used in both countries, but the lack of statistical representativeness limits the possibility for generalising the results when it comes to comparative analyses. We have nonetheless used a comparative approach, in the sense that we discuss similarities and differences between the participants' responses in the two countries. So far no representative comparative research has been done on these issues. The data are rich in the sense that the participants represent different ages and diverse experiences and we believe we have managed to catch some important aspects of the social workers' understanding of their situation.

Results

We have divided the description of the findings into two parts. First we refer to how the social workers describe the vulnerable groups and the social policy response, and secondly we refer their descriptions of social work and the profession.

Vulnerable groups and social policy response

Estonia

The 2005 focus groups described the users as becoming more informed, compared to the previous years. The following situation seems to have been quite usual; the user comes to the social worker with his/her needs and refer to newspaper articles or to legislation. He/she seems to know what he/she can get or at least have right to demand. The user often compares his/her needs with other users from other communities, and has an understanding of what the social worker should do. The social workers saw this as positive, because they do not have to spend so much time to inform and explain. They can start a dialogue and work towards solving the problem directly. The relationship between the social workers and users has become more like a partnership.

The Estonian social workers have registered an increase in the numbers of unemployed as well as an increase in the number of young people with little education. The problem seems to be that the cooperation between the state and the local community is relatively limited when it comes to dealing with the needs of the unemployed. Assisting unemployed people is the responsibility of Estonian state agencies and they usually have contact with case manager from the Regional Labour Market Board. The users complain that they are getting little help and support. As a result, this particular group has started to ask for help from social workers. More or less the same problems seem to be affecting young people. This group of users have no jobs, they are not attending school, and they lack motivation to continue their education. This is especially the case in the countryside.

Single mothers is another group of users that is described as relatively big. This group struggles with coping in their everyday lives.. And we are not talking only about economic difficulties, a major problem for single mothers is time: you cannot always be there when the kids need it. In some cases single mothers have very limited social network, or none at all, and social support is missing.

When the Estonian social workers discussed the social policy response to different problems, they mentioned mostly two kinds of response: one that have had a positive influence on their daily professional work and the other one that have had what we can call negative influence. The social workers appreciate that they have more time to do *real social work* - counselling and empowerment and not only paper work as before. In some communities the number of social workers has actually increased and the agencies have had the opportunity to employ social workers with specialist' knowledge – e.g. a social worker responsible for children or a social worker responsible for the old and disabled. This means that the local politicians have confidence in the social work profession and that they have seen positive social changes as a result of this work. The social workers mentioned that it is increasingly necessary to keep their knowledge up to standard and therefore to do much more reading. This includes the reading of surveys, policy documents, reports, project proposals etc, and sometime it is hard for the social workers to find enough time to do all that is needed. On the positive side, the social workers experience a much stronger focus on rehabilitation in their work with clients. They wish this focus will create more hope among their clients and help the clients to become more active subjects in their own lives and thus create a more meaningful daily life. The negative influences on social work were connected to a decline in services, a decline in benefits, in state transfers etc. The social workers also concluded that it is absolutely impossible to develop social work and local social policies without a regional policy. The different levels of policy developments must be co-ordinated, they must go hand in hand. A lot of criticism was levelled at the address of the Ministry

of Social Affairs: According to our social workers the Ministry cannot plan and implement social policy because the politicians or the officials there do not know the local needs and the local problems. Social workers are need policy support from the state level and at the moment they are missing out on that support.

The social workers were not well informed about the national plans for the development of social policies (e.g. the National Plan for Social Inclusion). Very few of them saw themselves as implementers of social policy at the local level, or that this can be done through social work practice. It was surprising how little they knew and how they failed to see the connection and relation between social policy and social work. On the other hand, they described their role as mediators. Good contacts with different institutions and agencies and with different kinds of other professions were decisive in terms of being able to solve the users' problems. It is interesting that "personal contacts" was mentioned more often than "official contacts".

Norway

The Norwegian social workers also experience increased expectations from the 'users' side. The users tend to come with the attitude "*I have the right to ...*". The Norwegian social workers mention that especially young people represent these trends toward increased expectations. This can easily result in tensions between what the users expect and what they actually get. More empowered users can, however, also create the opportunity for a better dialogue and cooperation between the social worker and the user.

The Norwegian social workers point to changes in the composition of the user groups. There is an increase in the numbers of people representing ethnic minorities. This mirrors the fact that ethnic minorities are overrepresented among poor people in the country (Fløtten et al.2001) Some groups have problems getting – especially skilled – jobs, and many people from ethnic minorities are either unemployed or have low paid jobs. This is combined with especially first generation immigrants often living in households with one breadwinner and many children. There is a new system in place in how to handle new immigrants, whether they are asylum seekers or quota refugees. These immigrants are offered training and are paid an integration benefit. However, according to the Norwegian social workers, many representative from this group fall outside the integration benefit, and are forced to come to the social service office.

Another group with growing significance among the users of social services are the users with multiple problems. They might e.g. be drug users, have mental illnesses and be homeless at the same time. This is a group that previously often was sent from one institution/office to the other.

Over time, the general social policy focus in Norway has changed from focus on income maintenance to labour market inclusion. This policy development has been called "the work line". The Norwegian social workers describe, as a third kind of change, how an increasingly demanding labour market leads to the exclusion of new groups. They see challenges on two levels: firstly the changes in composition of the users, secondly in finding methods for helping people back to work. The social workers experience growing demands from the authorities and claim that the municipalities get new tasks without been given the necessary resources.

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on poverty issues in social policy discussions on one hand and active measures aimed at labour market inclusion on the other. This focus is forming an important part of the description of the social policy response from the social workers' side.

If we go back to the concept "welfare states under quadruple pressure", one of the main pressures from above is the concern of the politicians when it comes to the costs of the welfare services. Demands for cutbacks and the sober use of money follow as a consequence. This is keenly felt by the social workers, but they seem to a large extent to accept this as a necessity. It is, however, at the same time important for them to work for adequate resources that will make them able to do a good job with the users.

Another trend that is described by the social workers is linked to an increased demand on the rights of the individual. The so-called “individual plan” is being used more and more. This goes hand in hand with a stronger emphasis on users’ participation and user influence.

The member states in the European Union have an obligation to develop a National Plan for Social Inclusion. Norway is not a member of the EU, and the Norwegian Authorities have chosen a slightly different path. There is no national inclusion plan, but the government has developed a plan for fighting poverty. The Norwegian social workers tell us that they do not actively relate to these kinds of documents. They have not read the plan and hardly know its content. They also inform us that they do not discuss the concept of “poverty” is. The social workers seem to relate more readily to the daily needs presented to them by their clients than to national priorities.

Despite this lack of consciousness about national policies, the social workers are aware of their role as implementers of national policies. They feel that there is a ambiguity in the way the national authorities see this aspect of their role. The expectations are on one side linked to nationally or locally developed norms. On the other hand, when issues become too complicated for the political authorities, they tend to push the responsibility down to the local and individual level.

This ambiguity in policies is obvious when it comes to the relation between acute help and “normal” social assistance. Some users are not able to survive on what they get from the social service department, and when the money is spent; what options do they have, but to ask for acute help? It is difficult to say no to acute help in these situations. In conclusion we can say there is an increased focus on users’ participation. But, paradoxically there is at the same time a growing demand for control. The social workers find it difficult to handle these conflicting expectations.

The social work profession

Estonia

The Estonian social workers pointed out that the development of a profession is important for their daily work and for their ability to act professionally in the workplace. The culture, colleagues, attitudes, possibilities, tradition that are present at the agency level are highly valued.

Just like doctors and nurses, social workers come into contact with decisions taken by politicians and bureaucrats or officials, these are decisions that express society’s attitudes and development with regard to users. Public decisions can have a positive or negative impact on the individuals’ or groups’ coping abilities and on social workers’ treatment of them.

There is a public debate about where the bottlenecks of the system are, whether it is the long queues for medical care, the low wages for nurses or doctors, or health/social workers leaving for jobs abroad. Public funding is distributed through the political system, both in the health care and the social sphere. Health care is more the responsibility of state-level officials, it is therefore easier to control both in the sense of supervision and influence. The social work sphere is for the most part in the area of administration of local governments and it is much more complicated to direct and control it. There are many local governments and just as many solutions to the same problems. And that makes work sometimes difficult.

The personality of the social worker is important, since it is the primary instrument used in the work. We found Estonian social workers to be open to new challenges from the institutional side but they were also keen to take up personal challenges and develop their professional identity through courses, through cooperation with other colleagues, including in neighbouring countries, through supervision, through evaluation etc. They actually want to do more lobbying and to be more visible and to get more influence in Estonian society, and they look to the medical profession for inspiration.

Norway

The Norwegian social workers experience a need for the development of new methods in their work. They link this need partly to the changes in composition of the user groups, partly to the social policy development and partly to organisational changes.

Professionalising often result in fragmentation; each profession and speciality has only its own field of work in sight. For the users this can lead to a limited view of him/her as a whole person. The social workers say that cooperation across professional and institutional borders is more an ideal than a reality, and they see this as a problem. The municipal social services are today – in 2012 - reorganised and coordinated with the state welfare services (mainly income maintenance and labour market services). But the concerns about working across professional and institutional borders go further than this. They are also questioning the relation to other parts of the welfare system, such as health services and child protection.

The paradox in this situation is that the understanding of the need for a generalist and holistic approach goes hand in hand with internal specialisation among the social workers themselves. In the municipal social services there are more and more positions with a specialised responsibility. The integration of municipal social assistance with the state income maintenance system can paradoxically have as a consequence that income maintenance is divided from other kinds of social services assistance, and reduce the possibility for a holistic approach.

We asked the social workers about their views on the need for capacity development. Their first concern was about the improvement of practical administrative tools. This reflects the experience that the administrative part of their work becomes more and more complex.

The second concern was about the need for skills related to the fact that people from foreign ethnic groups form an increased part of their user groups. They feel that they need both to know more about the cultures that their user come from, but also that they need to be more conscious about their own culture and their own basis.

The third issue they mention is the need for better knowledge on how to find new knowledge. This again reflects their feeling that the changes in the environment make it necessary to constantly update their skill and knowledge.

The last demand from the Norwegian social workers was on having forums where they could discuss issues of principle. This might partly reflect the fact that they were in a challenging situation, but it is also an attitude in line with what they said about their relation with the users. There seems to be a need for more time and space for slowing down the processes, whether this concerns the relationships among colleagues or it concerns the relationship between the social workers and the users.

Differences, communalities and convergence

In 2005 there seemed to be several commonalities when it comes to the environment. Both countries experience increased internationalisation. We have also seen that several of the tensions that the social workers experience are common across the national borders.

Social workers in both countries talk about the need for more resources. The perspectives on this issue are different, however. The number of social workers is very different and consequently the municipal social services in Norway have to their disposal many times the resources that the Estonian have. There is an understanding among the Norwegians that their challenge is as much to use what is available in a good way as it is to demand more resources. The Estonians naturally have a different approach. They are still in the process of building up, both the profession and the municipal social services.

Both in Estonia and Norway the social workers are concerned about the acknowledgment of social work as a profession. And they both maintain that the situation is improving. Also in this field we see that they share their optimism, but from a very different point of view.

There are common points in their views of the users. In both countries they talk about the users as more informed and resourceful. The users know more about their rights and about

what the social services can provide. Consequently the users are more demanding. But at the same time the social workers say that some of the users are almost invisible.

The way they describe the social work profession and the profession's challenges has also a lot in common. Firstly we hear their demand for and need for supervision. This is mainly a reflex of the fact that their working day is complex and challenging. Consequently there is also a need for further education and professionalising. Although they seem to a very limited degree to relate actively to national white papers and plans, they see social policy as an important part of their working day and they see an obligation to inform the local political system about professional needs and social problems.

The fact that we have interviewed social workers both in 2001 and in 2005 makes it possible to ask whether there is convergence in relation to how municipal social workers in the two countries perceive their situation.

During the last years there has been a change in the social problems in Estonia. In the first years of transition poverty was fluctuating, but now we see a process towards a more stable situation (Trumm 2006). Poverty and social problems in Norway represents a more stable situation. This indicates that we could expect convergence. From 2001 to 2005 the focus group discussions became more similar. They share a limited interest in or awareness of the plan for fighting poverty (Norway) or the plan for social inclusion (Estonia). They all point to the fact that the users have become more conscious about their rights and needs. The discussions also have in common a focus on the need for enough time to talk to and listen to the users.

There are, however also clear differences. In Estonia social workers say there is a need for more specialists. In Norway the specialisation has been developed much further and the concern is more about how to maintain a holistic approach. The biggest difference that we see in the discussions in 2005 is the way they describe the process of professionalising and the need for capacity development and new knowledge. This reflects the differences in social problems, the composition of the user groups and the level of professional development.

The Estonian social workers lack a strong national association. Their professional association is established only quite recently. Due to their limited numbers, the Estonian social workers do not dominate their segment of the labour market. Those with social work qualifications have a higher level of education than their Norwegian colleagues (relatively more people with master level education), but at the same time there are more people in social work without a diploma. Social workers' influence in local municipalities is due to their professional entrepreneurship.

The Norwegian social workers are better organised in the sense that they have a strong association. They are able to dominate their segment of the labour market. The level of education among social workers in Norway is increasing (from bachelor to master level; and specialising education). They have influence on national level due to their being strong profession, but locally their main approach is on methodological development.

It is also a common feature among social workers in the two countries that the social workers to a limited extent are concerned about national plans and programmes. They seem to leave this to the politicians and instead mostly relate to the problems that come into their offices.

There seems to be a convergence from 2001 to 2005. The social workers in the two countries describe their relation to national plans and policies in very much the same way. Secondly the same words occur when they describe their users. In both countries they talk about the users being more empowered in the sense that they are more informed about their rights and possibilities.

Summary of findings.

The main research question has been to what extent the social work profession represents change agents in the social policy framework, in Estonia and Norway. Differences and changes have been highlighted. Our discussion about the relationship between social policy and social work pointed to six aspects of this relationship. Social workers (1) see the problems of society and (2) need to understand and analyse the policies, changes and development. In their daily work (3) they also need to draw the connections between the users' needs and the social policy measures. (4) The organizations have significant impact on the shape of that practice. (5) Policy changing work is also seen as an ethical obligation and urges the last dimension, the question about how social workers (6) represent a "pressure from the in-side"

In their daily work social workers seem to be most concerned about the encounter with the users, whether they are individuals, families or communities. It is difficult to have a conscious approach towards national policies; the persons you meet in your daily work become the most important.

The Norwegian social workers seem, at least on the intellectual level, to be more concerned about social policy issues than their Estonian colleagues. This might be linked to the fact that they have a longer history and has been more exposed to how social policy influence their everyday work. On the other hand in the Estonian environment, the individual actions seem to be more important, they are innovators and implementers of changing policies on the local level. They are fewer and the system is less settled. On a national level the Norwegians plays another role – not least because of the strength of the professional organisation. We do see a kind of convergence, mainly due to changes in the Estonian situation.

To what extent do the social workers act as change agents? Do the social workers represent a pressure on the welfare state? The preliminary answer to that is yes. Despite the to some extent alienated attitudes towards social policy issues, the social workers have in common that they are spokespersons for respect for, and cooperation with the users. They demand time and resources in this matter. As one could expect, they also seem to represent a pressure towards maintaining and strengthening social services.

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