
Social Workers as Community Social Service Managers in the Era of Sustainable Development

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Józef Młyński¹, Aneta Czechowska-Kosacka²

Abstract:

Purpose: The article outlines the role of social service managers - community social workers.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The authors conducted a scientific study, the purpose of which was to determine the role of social workers as coordinators and initiators of change during their work with clients especially in the area of sustainable development. The research conducted is quantitative. The respondents were employees of the Center for Social Services in Tarnow (CUS). The study was conducted, using the CAWI technique and a survey questionnaire (tool).

Findings: The results and analysis show that improvement of the effectiveness of social services requires collaboration with institutions, synergic organizational culture, and cooperation with NGOs. The research also shows how many gaps in the area of sustainability should be subjected to further expanded research.

Practical Implications: Distributed as a service, social work targets individuals and families in difficult life situations, especially in the era of sustainable development. Its goal is to strengthen and emancipate clients, using their personal and environmental resources to support this process.

Originality/Value: Today, sustainable development is, after all, intergenerational solidarity, which consists in finding such solutions to guarantee further growth that allow the active inclusion of all social groups in development processes.

Keywords: Management, social work, social services, manager, social policy.

JEL codes: M21, O32, Q51.

Paper type: Research article.

¹Prof. University, dr hab., University of the National Education Commission in Krakow, Poland, e-mail: jozef.mlynski@uken.krakow.pl;

²Prof. University, dr., Lublin University of Technology, Poland, e-mail: a.czechowska-kosacka@pollub.pl;

1. Introduction

Social work is a unique form of services targeted at individuals and families in difficult life circumstances. The result of these activities is the process of change in a client's life, determined by their relations with other people as well as their environment. The ultimate goal should be the client's empowerment and emancipation, using their personal and environmental resources to support this process.

In this context, two relevant models of social work should be mentioned, change-oriented model and problem-solving model focusing on the client's emancipation. Given the concept formulated by Helena Radlińska, the pioneer of the social work development, that social work is about highlighting and multiplying strengths (Radlińska, 1961; Szatur-Jaworska, 1995) in an individual, and using them to improve the quality of their life and functioning, then – as noticed by Szmagalski this process involves recognition and reinforcement of the individual's inner strengths, developing abilities to control their life, strengthening their self-esteem or awakening their human powers (Szmagalski, 1994; Wolfensberger, 2011).

Such individual self-determination (Rzepka, 2022) begins with “encouraging and empowering an individual to overcome their inner limitations and conditions not only to ensure a possibly wide participation in determining the course of their own life but also to enable them to contribute to social changes” (Granosik and Gulczyńska, 2014).

In the case of problems with social functioning, the process of change, gradual independence and empowerment is guided by social workers who act as social services managers³. According to Ricky W. Griffin, their role in social services area involves such activities as “planning and decision making, organizing, leading and controlling directed at an organization's resources (human, financial, physical and information), with the aim of achieving organizational goals in an efficient and effective manner” (Griffin, 2006).

In this context, it fits into constructive management goals as collaboration of individuals who strive to neutralize weaknesses and maximize the use of the client's talents and strengths, which will determine and contribute to expected changes in their social functioning. Thus, social workers are both coordinators and initiators of

³Definitions of social services in the literature are vague. According to M. Damaszkowa, service is “a useful intangible product generated as a result of human work (activity) in a production process through influence on the structure of a certain object (a person or a physical object) in order to meet human needs” (Damaszkowa, 1998:17). Assuming a multidimensional nature of social services, it should be said that they refer to “individuals and groups, lifestyles and individual choices. They are associated with institutions, social professions, public management, support systems as well as local conditions” (Grewiński, 2021: 28).

change. As noticed by E. Zdebska, this change occurs as a sequence of seven stages: generate the need for change; establish relations during the change process; research into and diagnose the client's problem; review alternative paths, goals, intentions that determine change; change generalization and stabilization; achieve new and lasting change (Chaczko, Klimek, and Zdebska, 2020) and independence.

This paper aims at presenting social workers as social services managers, based on a survey conducted among the social workers of the Social Services Centre in Tarnów. The focus of the survey was to characterize social workers as social services managers in the local community, whereas the primary goal of the study was to determine the role of social workers as coordinators and initiators of change during their work with the clients.

2. Methodology and Area of Research

The results presented herein were obtained from the study conducted in March 2024 among the staff members of the Social Services Centre in Tarnów. The focus of the survey was to characterize social workers as social services managers in a local community, whereas the primary goal of the study was to determine the role of social workers as coordinators and initiators of change during their work with the clients.

The research was quantitative as it was carried out among all the staff members of the Social Services Centre in Tarnów (CUS), using CAWI technique and a survey questionnaire (the tool). As for the sample, the majority of the group (the greatest share in a given category) were women (94.2%) aged 35 year or less (38.5%), with higher education, social work experience of up to 5 years (38.5%), married (65.4%), generally satisfied with their job as social workers (42.3%) and rather recommending working in CUS Tarnów to their family/friends if necessary (34.6%). The detailed characteristics of the sample is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Respondent profile*

Respondent profile		n	%
Gender	Women	49	94.2
	Men	3	5.8
Age	Up to 35 years	20	38.5
	36-45 years	17	32.7
	More than 45 years	15	28.8
Education	Secondary	9	17.3
	University degree	43	82.7
Professional experience	Up to 5 years	20	38.5
	6-20 years	19	36.5
	More than 20 years	13	25.0
Marital status	Married	34	65.4
	Not married	18	34.6

Satisfaction from work as social worker	Definitely not satisfied	3	5.8
	Rather not satisfied	4	7.7
	Hard to say	14	26.9
	Rather satisfied	22	42.3
	Definitely satisfied	9	17.3
Recommending work in CUS Tarnów to family/friends	Definitely not	4	7.7
	Rather not	10	19.2
	Hard to say	13	25.0
	Rather yes	18	34.6
	Definitely yes	7	13.5
Total		52	100.0

Source: Authors' own compilation based on survey among CUS Tarnów employees

Statistical calculations were carried out using SPSS Statistic software, while the Pearson's chi-square test of independence, Spearman's rho correlation coefficient, Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test were used to show the occurrence of statistically significant relations between the variables.

3. Results and Analysis

At the initial stage of the study, the staff members of the Social Services Center in Tarnów were asked to indicate characteristics they considered necessary for social workers (Table 2). Of 14 proposed characteristics, the most frequently indicated one was "patient" — declared by almost half of the respondents (46.2%).

Table 2. What do you think are the necessary characteristics of social worker? (%)

Social worker characteristics	Yes	No
Patient	46.2	53.8
Emotionally resilient	40.4	59.6
Empathetic	36.5	63.5
Communicative	34.6	65.4
Ethics-driven	30.8	69.2
Responsible	26.9	73.1
Discrete	13.5	86.5
Team worker	11.5	88.5
Reliable	11.5	88.5
Tolerant	11.5	88.5
Socially engaged	11.5	88.5
Able to take initiative	9.6	90.4
Understanding	7.7	92.3
Creative	1.9	98.1

Source: Authors' own compilation based on survey among CUS Tarnów employees.

Other features frequently chosen by the respondents were emotional resilience (40.4%) and empathy (36.5%). On the other hand, the respondents much less often

declared that social worker needs to show initiative (9.6%), be understanding (7.7%) and creative (1.9%). A comparison of the analyzed goals and the variables from the respondents' profile (gender, age, education, professional experience as social worker and marital status) revealed only one statistically significant correlation.

It turns out that respondents with secondary education significantly more often declared that social workers should be patient – 55.6% of answers compared to 20.9% of indications by respondents with higher education (chi-4.535, p=0.033). In case of other variables, there were no such relationships recorded (p>0.05).

In the next question, the respondents were asked to evaluate the usefulness of certain tools for the social services managers in the process of management/assisting the lost individuals (Table 3). They were asked to evaluate them using a 5-degree Likert scale where 1 meant 'definitely not useful' and 5 meant 'definitely useful'. According to the respondents, the most useful tool was 'consultations and psychological support through individual or group therapy or counselling' – the mean value was 4.27.

Other highly useful tool was 'creating and leading support groups the provide exchange of experience and mutual support' – with the mean value amounting up to 4.15. In the other side of the scale was 'development of educational materials for communities to raise awareness and understanding of specific social problems', evaluated as the least useful for social services managers in managing/assisting the lost persons – the mean value was 3.65.

Table 3. *Evaluate the following tools in terms of their usefulness for social services managers in the process of managing/assisting the lost persons (%).*

	Definitely useful	Rather not useful	Hard to say	Rather useful	Definitely useful	Mean
Providing consultations and psychological support through individual or group therapy or counselling	5.8	0.0	9.6	30.8	53.8	4.27
Creating and leading support groups that provide exchange of experience and mutual support	3.8	1.9	11.5	40.4	42.3	4.15
Organizing and conducting trainings and workshops on dealing with stress, time management or communication skills	1.9	7.7	13.5	36.5	40.4	4.06
Planning realistic goals, developing action plan and monitoring progress	1.9	3.8	19.2	38.5	36.5	4.04
Mentoring and coaching to provide	0.0	9.6	23.1	44.2	23.1	3.81

support and motivation to act						
Using communication technologies to maintain contact with clients	3.8	9.6	19.2	38.5	28.8	3.79
Developing educational materials for communities to raise awareness and understanding of specific social problems	5.8	7.7	25.0	38.5	23.1	3.65

Source: Authors' own compilation based on survey among CUS Tarnów employees.

When comparing the answers provided by different groups, one can notice that respondents with higher education pointed to the usefulness of mentoring and coaching significantly more frequently – the mean value was 3.95 compared to the respondents with secondary education (Mann-Whitney's $U=103.000$, $p=0.020$).

Individuals who had worked as social workers more than 20 years significantly more often declared the usefulness of developing educational materials for communities to raise awareness and understanding of specific social problems (Kruskal-Wallis $H=8.469$, $p=0.014$).

In addition, the higher general level of satisfaction from work in the Social Services Centre in Tarnów, the more frequently declared usefulness of such tools as providing consultations and psychological support through individual or group therapy or counselling (Spearman's $\rho=0.410$, $p=0.003$) and developing educational materials for communities to raise awareness and understanding of specific social problems (Spearman's $\rho=0.280$, $p=0.044$).

An important component of the study was determining the key benefits of management for emancipation of individuals using the services of social workers (Table 4). A frequency analysis revealed that almost two thirds of the respondents believes that one of these benefits is the development of life skills through dealing with everyday challenges without excessive dependence in social assistance – 65.4% answers.

More than half of the respondents also pointed to improved wellbeing and self-esteem – 51.9%. More than two fifths of the respondents also thought that the benefits include autonomy, independence and decisiveness achieved by the clients, as well as development of professional skills by finding permanent employment – 42.3% both. In this context, the respondents relatively rarely pointed out to such benefits as stable housing situation (19.2%) and acquisition of new competence and skills (15.4%).

The analysis of detailed comparisons of the key benefits for the clients receiving social services revealed that the respondents younger than 35 years old significantly more often pointed to the acquisition of new competences and skills (chi-square=6.421, $p=0.040$). Also, respondents who were not married significantly more

frequently chose achieving autonomy, independence and decisiveness by the client (chi-square=3.988, $p=0.046$). In case of other variables, there were no such relationships recorded ($p>0.05$).

Table 4. What are the key benefits of management for emancipation of individuals using the services of social workers? (%).

	Yes	No
Development of life skills through dealing with everyday challenges without excessive dependence in social assistance	65.4	34.6
Improved wellbeing and self-esteem – 51.9%	51.9	48.1
Achieving autonomy, independence and decisiveness by the client	42.3	57.7
Development of professional skills through permanent employment	42.3	57.7
Social integration through improved relations with and participation in the local community	32.7	67.3
Building or improving family relations	23.1	76.9
Achieving housing stability	19.2	80.8
Acquiring new competence and skills	15.4	84.6

Source: Authors' own compilation based on survey among CUS Tarnów employees.

Another important point of focus was identification of the key elements of social service management (Table 5). The respondents were given a set of twelve statements. Only in one case, the positive answer was provided by more than half of the group. It was about an effective coordination of activities of different teams and programs to integrate social services.

This answer was indicated by 53.8% of the respondents. Clear and open communication with both staff members and external stakeholders was also chosen by a high percentage of the social workers (42.3%). In this context, as little as 3.8% of the employees in the Social Services Center in Tarnów declared that the most important elements in social services management are building and maintaining partnerships with NGOs, public institutions and private sector, as well as preparing reliable reports on the organization's activities, results and effectiveness.

Table 5. What do you think is the most important in social services management? (%)

	Yes	No
Effective coordination of activities in different teams and programs to integrate social services	53.8	46.2
Clear and open communication with both staff members and external stakeholders	42.3	57.7
Ability to inspire others as a leader and motivate the team to achieve common social goals	30.8	69.2

Identifying and solving social problems in the community and adapting the activity strategy	30.8	69.2
Effective management of human, financial and technical resources to optimize provision of services	26.9	73.1
Maintaining high ethical standards and values regarding social work and promoting these values among coworkers	26.9	73.1
Development of long-term strategies and action plans in line with organization's mission and goals	19.2	80.8
Conducting regular assessments and monitoring effectiveness of social services provided, undertaking corrective actions	17.3	82.7
Developing work environment that favors innovations and modern solutions to provide social services	15.4	84.6
Commitment to achievement of lasting and positive social changes as the main organizational goal	11.5	88.5
Establishing and maintaining partnerships with NGOs, public institutions and private sector	3.8	96.2
Preparation of reliable reports on organization's activities, results and effectiveness	3.8	96.2

Source: Authors' own compilation based on survey among CUS Tarnów employees.

When compared the key activities of social workers as social services managers with the respondents' profile data, it can be observed that individuals aged 36-45 significantly more often indicated the competence of being an inspiring leader who motivates their team to achieve the shared social goals — 58.8% vs. 15% of younger respondents (chi-square=9.432, $p=0.009$).

The respondents younger than 35 years significantly more often declared the importance of commitment to achieving lasting and positive social changes as the main organizational goal — 25% of answers compared to 0% among the persons aged 45 and more (chi-square=6.040, $p=0.049$).

In addition, conducting regular assessments and monitoring effectiveness of social services provided, undertaking corrective actions was significantly more often indicated by the respondents with secondary education — 44.4% compared to 11.6% of indications among those with a university degree (chi-square=5.600, $p=0.018$). As for work experience, the respondents who had worked as social workers from 6 to 20 years significantly more frequently declared that being an inspiring leader who motivates the team to achieve shared social goals it the most important – 52.6% vs. 15.4% among the respondents with more than 20 years of professional experience (chi-square=6.796, $p=0.033$).

Finally, it is worth looking at the evaluation of statements regarding social workers as social services managers (Table 6). The respondents were asked to provide their opinions in a 5-degree Likert scale which indicated the level of agreement with the

statements. The analysis showed that the most frequently declared answer was that interpersonal competencies of social workers are necessary for effective management of social services – the mean value for this indication was 4.12.

It was the only statement which received the mean value above four points. Relatively less often, the respondents declared that as managers, social workers should be involved in decisions regrading social services and that communication level between social workers and clients in their workplace is adequate – 3.96 and 3.90, respectively. The respondents definitely less often believed that they act as effective social services managers (3.52) and that training programs available to them as social services managers are sufficient (3.12).

Table 6. *Indicate how much do you agree with the following statements (%)*

	Definitely disagree	Rather disagree	Hard to say	Rather agree	Definitely agree	Mean
Interpersonal competencies of social workers are necessary for effective management of social services.	5.8	0.0	13.5	38.5	42.3	4.12
As managers, social workers should be involved in decisions regrading social services.	5.8	1.9	15.4	44.2	32.7	3.96
Communication level between social workers and clients in our workplace is adequate.	1.9	7.7	19.2	40.4	30.8	3.90
As social worker, I act as an effective social services manager.	7.7	9.6	30.8	26.9	25.0	3.52
Training programs available to me as social service manager are sufficient.	9.6	15.4	38.5	26.9	9.6	3.12

Source: *Authors' own compilation based on survey among CUS Tarnów employees.*

When comparing different groups of respondents, one can notice that those with higher education significantly more often indicated that as managers, social workers should be involved in decisions regrading social services – the mean value of 4.09 compared to 3.33 among the persons with secondary education (Mann-Whitney's $U=107.000$, $p=0.025$).

Also, the respondents who were more willing to recommend employment in CUS Tarnów to family/friends, were more prone to agree that training programs available for social services managers are sufficient (Spearman's $\rho=0.304$, $p=0.028$).

4. Conclusions, Postulates and Recommendations

Management competencies (Rzepka el.,2024) of social workers are undoubtedly an important aspect of social work. Social workers are expected to be creative, innovative in their actions as well as to have certain traits and tools motivating to change. All the more so that “along with the introduction of social contract as a form of assistance, the role of social workers had changed significantly. They became the clients’ coworkers, partners in implementation of contractual tasks” (Cybulska, Żołnierczyk, 2010:53).

In this context, the following conclusions should be highlighted:

- The most important characteristics of social workers include: patience (46,2%), emotional resilience (40.4%) and empathy (36,5%).
- The most helpful tools used by social services managers are consultations and psychological support through individual or group therapy, or counselling (mean value 4.27 in 1-5 scale), and creating and leading support groups enabling exchange of experience and mutual support (mean value 4.15).
- As for benefits from management for emancipation of social assistance clients, the most popular answers were ‘development of life skills through dealing with everyday challenges without excessive dependence in social assistance’ and ‘improved wellbeing and self-esteem’ – 65.4% and 51.9%, respectively.
- The most important responsibilities of social workers as social services managers include effective coordination of activities in different teams and programs to integrate social services (53.8%) and clear and open communication with both staff members and external stakeholders (42.3%).
- In turn, as of the statements describing social workers as social services managers, the respondents agreed the most with the following: ‘interpersonal competencies of social workers are necessary for effective management of social services’ (mean value 4.12 in 1-5 scale) and ‘as managers, social workers should be involved in decisions regarding social services’ (mean value 3.96).

In the light of results presented above and the local environment of Tarnów facility, the following postulates and recommendations can be formulated:

- Improvement of the effectiveness of social services requires collaboration with institutions, synergic organizational culture and cooperation with NGOs. This includes organization of meetings with partners: associations and foundations – which will be an element of good practices influencing the work of social workers with their clients, which in turn will have a positive impact on effective emancipation of the latter.

- Another valuable aspect would be permanent professional training to improve soft skills which greatly improve the quality and effectiveness of work with the clients as interpersonal competencies are crucial for the effective management of social services.

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