

## European Region

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### Background

The European Observatory is a regional arm of the Global Observatory, established by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The Observatory was set up to report activity under The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development<sup>1</sup> and to monitor its implementation. The European Observatory was launched on the 18 April in Istanbul at the conference of the European Network for Social Action in Istanbul by the European Association of Schools of Social Work, ICSW Europe and IFSW Europe).

The team that leads the Global Agenda for the European region is Sue Lawrence (European Association of Schools of Social Work), Christian Rollett (International Council on Social Welfare European Region) and Maria Moritz (International Federation of Social Workers European Region). David N. Jones was the link between the region and the Global Agenda Coordinating Group.

In a joint statement at the Istanbul conference, the European Presidents of the three Associations said:

We welcome the creation of this joint initiative to record and promote the social activities that address the major social problems facing Europe. In these times of social crisis and austerity in Europe, it is essential that social workers and social development professionals find effective ways to document what is happening in our continent. The Observatory will give us an opportunity to showcase what makes a positive difference and gather evidence to inform the United Nations, the European Union and other regional bodies and national governments.<sup>2</sup>

The European Observatory invited submissions that illustrated, recorded and documented the ways in which social work and social development are promoting social and economic equality in Europe. The framework for submitting evidence was made available to download on the websites of all three organizations.<sup>3</sup>

The deadline for submissions to the European Observatory was 31 August 2013. EASSW received a large and diverse variety of submissions incorporating many different media which gave testament to the creativity and innovation of social work and social development academics students, service users and practitioners in promoting of social and economic equality in practice, teaching, policy development and management.

The submissions to EASSW included written papers (15); PowerPoint presentations (four); posters (three); webpage links (two); films (two); podcasts (two); photographs (two) and one brochure. IFSW gathered information through a questionnaire and a Europe-wide workshop in Lisbon; this has been published in a separate report (IFSW Europe, 2014). ICSW provided background reports on European social policy relating to equalities.

This written report alone cannot do justice to the range and variety of those submissions, most of which are available on the website of the journal *International Social Work* (<http://isw.sagepub.com>). Examples of the submissions to EASSW, where authors had given their permission, are available on the EASSW website.<sup>4</sup>

## **Social and economic context**

Social work is recognized as an important public service in most European countries and can be said to be an element within the European Social Model (Jones, 2013; Lorenz, 1994); the development of social work in the Eastern European countries was a condition of accession to the European Union and attracted financial support from the EU. Social work has a legal status in many countries and is a protected title in some countries. The arrangements for regulation of the profession vary widely. The responsibility for organizing social services is devolved to the member states of the European Union but the EU has in practice extended its influence over social policy, for example by creating laws about contracting of public services (see for example, European Commission, 2013).

The social situation in Europe in 2013 was still deeply affected by the financial crises of the past five years and the austerity measures being imposed by most governments. This has been well documented elsewhere, including by the European Union (Bonesmo Fredriksen, 2012; European Commission, 2014; OECD, 2011, 2013; Social Platform, 2014; United Nations, 2013).

The specific impacts across Europe noted by social workers include: increasing family and child poverty, increasing homelessness – more people living on the streets, more people living in temporary accommodation, increase in begging in public places, increase in some criminal behaviour – including organized begging, increase in family violence including child abuse, increase in unemployment including increasing exploitation of adult and child labour, increase in people relying on temporary and transient work, increase in mental health problems and suicide, more difficult access to health services and early medical help. It is well documented that inequality within countries is increasing, with a growing divide between those with capital and employment and others, with the small wealthiest minority seeing a very significant increase in their incomes and standard of living at the same time as the worse off are becoming poorer. Social workers from all over Europe report that there must be a change of the rules in economics and politics. The measures that have been implemented have been counterproductive. The situation must be stabilized with support for the most endangered groups (IFSW, 2014).

Alongside this rising social pain and growing ‘demand’ for assistance, there has been a significant reduction in the number and quality of services available (Lavallette and Ioakimidis, 2011; Social Platform, 2014). Whilst the pattern of problems and the structure of and change in services differs significantly between European countries, the same general trends are observed by social work practitioners, as reported by the IFSW Europe seminar:

- People are seeking more support from social welfare and social work services. However, the support available is decreasing.
- Financial welfare support for older people, people with disabilities, families and those out of work is decreasing, in terms of both the amount available and the length of time the support can be claimed.
- Fewer services are available, both in terms of state services and those provided by NGOs.
- Many of those services which remain are levying charges or requiring financial contributions from service users.
- Financial support which has been available to support the development of services in poorer countries has been cut.

The impact on social workers personally has been severe, more so in some countries (especially in the South) than others. For example, the IFSW seminar identified that:

- Social workers have experienced significant cuts in pay and benefits (such as travel allowances).
- Social workers have experienced very significant rises in workload.
- Working conditions are deteriorating.
- Stress and burnout is increasing.
- When workers leave they are not being replaced and periods of maternity leave and prolonged sickness absence are not being covered.

In this context, it is to the credit of social workers around Europe that examples of positive and creative practice can be identified, frequently in projects managed jointly with service users and local communities.

## Examples of practice

Examples of social work practice submitted to the Observatory are summarized below:

1. ***Children and Families Across Borders (UK) and the State Children's Rights Protection and Adoption Service Lithuania*** examined the management of cases involving cross-border families where interventions must be coordinated in multiple countries. The most common motivation for migration is economic (seeking a better income, reflecting economic inequality), which frequently divides families across international borders. This should result in better-informed social work interventions and increased inter-country collaboration, leading to better outcomes for children and families (Wilson, 2013).
2. ***PowerUs – EU Leonardo funded project (UK, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany)*** is enhancing user involvement in planning and delivering services. The PowerUs network has recognized a gap between a service user perspective and professional social workers. PowerUs is therefore committed to develop sustainable methods where service user representatives, researchers, teachers and student groups develop new knowledge on how social work is best practised.

Teachers from the network have developed several methods in cooperation with service user organizations in teaching and research. The Shaping Our Lives organization has been developing many manuals for good practice. Many teachers give courses where service users study together with social work students. The project has led to a radical change in methods of how to develop service user influence and sustainable partnerships between the educational system and service user organizations and launch of an international network of social work teachers and researchers and representatives of service user organizations (Heule, 2013).

3. ***University of Tampere, Finland*** undertook research to examine the marginalization of people who should be entitled to social security, but who do not get it. Suggestions and arguments for the proposed changes in the social security system were sent to the social and health minister.
4. ***Bournemouth University, UK*** worked with South African colleagues to better understand the factors which influence the quality of care provided for children and young people whose biological parents are unable to care for them. The current workstreams include: a comparative study of kinship care in the UK and South Africa (Zululand), an evaluation of experiences of 'safeguarding' (protection) processes in child care, a co-production piece of

work with Bournemouth and Poole Local Authorities and the Local Safeguarding Children Board. Through partnership development further curricula dissemination will be explored with South African HEIs (Davey, 2013).

5. ***University of Coimbra, Portugal*** project aims to promote active aging, develop intergenerational solidarity and facilitate the democratic participation of all people who want to get involved, thereby expanding opportunities to reduce exclusion and negative stereotypes about aging. It aims to promote well-being by using small and beautiful artistic interventions involving the population in a situation of social vulnerability, collaborating in the aesthetic improvement of the city and their street. This project involved the senior residents of the Fernandes Tomás Street, neighbours, local businesses and local public institutions together with the students and their informal support networks. The formal partnership was with the City Hall of Coimbra, the village hall of Almedina and the University of Coimbra (FPCEUC). After a study of the local area and contact with dwellers, local authorities and marketers, the placement of crocheted umbrellas over the street was proposed. There was a positive response from the community. The umbrellas were created and strung over the street. The effect was cheerful, colourful and artistic, illustrating in a practical way the moments of sharing and warmth created by people of different generations involved in implementing this initiative. A common place was transformed into a special symbol of intergenerational solidarity. Residents, customers, tourists and passers-by now circulate through a street that previously was not part of the usual track, to the pride and satisfaction of the older residents and students (Guerra, 2013).
6. ***De Montfort University and Leicester City Council, Safeguarding Adults Team behalf of the Social Work and Health Inequalities Network (SWHIN)***<sup>5</sup> have developed a website (hosted by the Social Care Institute for Excellence) to provide a platform to disseminate practice examples showing how social work can address health inequalities. Reducing inequalities in health and well-being is a global objective, with 125 governments worldwide committed to implementing policies to address them. The case study highlights social work's key role in promoting social and health inequalities. The webpages went live at the beginning of July 2013 attracting positive feedback.<sup>6</sup> It is hoped that SWHIN will develop an international set of evidence and case studies for the website (Fish, 2013).
7. ***University of Bradford, Division of Social Work and Social Care with local partner agencies in social work and social care, UK*** supported social work students to organize a conference on tackling poverty, thereby aiming to help them understand and promote social and economic equality. Speakers from academic and practice settings highlighted the importance of understanding the impact of poverty on people using social work and social care services and possible social work strategies. Evidence from students' assessed work following the conference demonstrated that it had made a significant impact on their thinking and their practice on placement (Karban, 2013).<sup>7</sup>
8. ***Bosnia Herzegovina (BiH) and Croatia working with The Open University and The Open Society, UK*** examined the social inclusion of parents with children with disabilities in policies and practices that affect their children's lives in Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia. Evidence was gathered through qualitative data collection and analysis, workshops and round tables in Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia and an analysis of impact outcomes. Parents as service users participated in workshops to feedback on

the preliminary findings and a year later were present for the final round tables with policy-makers and professionals. A series of policy recommendations and practice outcomes were documented and circulated to professionals, policymakers and all the parents involved in the research (Dowling, 2013).

9. ***MOVISIE, Netherlands Centre for Social Development*** has been supporting four projects that contribute to creating a society for all.<sup>8</sup> The projects are different in aim and their approach. They focus respectively on national and international policy exchange and policy development; building professional competences; (youth) activism and enabling the use of effective social interventions (Meinema, 2013).
10. ***Odenore (Observatoire des non-recours aux droits et services) for European Union*** researched the lack of take-up of state financial benefits (Non Take Up – NTU) due to ignorance (non-knowledge), lack of relevance (non-demand) or administrative blocks (non-reception). NTU contributes to sustained social exclusion and increases social and economic inequality. A high level comparative study examining a series of typical explanations for each of these three forms of NTU was undertaken. The typology proposes a general analytical framework that is applicable to all situations of NTU and which can be used to direct policy and influence approaches to contact with those entitled to financial payments. NTU is seen to be not only a managerial issue – as originally thought – but also a political issue primarily associated with an issue of social cohesion. The report calls for more research into identifying the effects of the different regimes of conditionality (for receipt of financial support) on the behaviours of potential beneficiaries. This recommendation identifies a clear link with social work practice and experience (Hamel and Warin, 2011).
11. ***Centre for Continuing Training and Assessment of Social Work Competency, Romania and the Austrian Association of Social Workers (OBDS)*** implemented a project to change priorities in evaluating people with mental, physical or psychological handicaps, moving away from measuring limitations through medical examination and psychological tests in order to justify government aid, and instead identifying the abilities and talents of disabled persons. Austrian practitioners provided a number of study visits and seminars, emphasizing individualized planning of occupational orientation and personal development. A mix of training in professional skills and social competences combined with work placement and temporary employment in social workshops has been provided to more than 140 people. Seminars for social workers and other experts from public institutions and authorities complemented the new approach. An important part of public relations were regional and national conferences for potential employers and employment agencies. This resulted in fundamental changes in service organization and individual practice.
12. ***Austrian Association of Social Workers (OBDS) and Centre for Continuing Training and Assessment of Social Work Competency, Romania*** organized a project to support social reintegration of juvenile offenders by enhancing their access to the labour market. The Romanian prison system was based on a model of institutions mainly interested in punishment and repressing aggressiveness within the prison walls, with no vision for what happens after release. The team worked with two target groups: inmates and prison staff. For the staff, there was an intensive training program for 36 employees from two Romanian penitentiaries for juveniles and a number of study visits for directors and

head of departments. Between July 2009 and December 2010 each participant visited the equivalent institution in Austria three times and became part of the daily routine for one week. After the first visits to Austria, the Romanian colleagues started their experiments. With a minimum of resources they arranged a basic program for leisure time, development of social skills and conflict resolution. At the same time premises within the prison were renovated and equipped with machines and other devices in order to start occupational education. Some staff members qualified as instructors, others specialized in pedagogical assistance. By the end of 2010 the first workshops opened: a bakery, a training kitchen, a flour mill, a workshop for producing and imprinting cardboard boxes (serigrafie and cartonaage), a carpentry, a blacksmith's shop and a vegetable farm. A prison director commented, 'With this project humanity arrived in our prison!'

13. **Danish Council on Social Welfare (ICSW Denmark)** has promoted a range of activities to explore and promote the Global Agenda. Conferences have been organized to explore human rights and the working poor (involving around 150 people half of whom are service users), citizenship and solidarity in a globalized world, youth unemployment and other themes related to The Global Agenda. Those involved included, among others, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, universities, NGOs, politicians, youth organizations, trades unions and global organizations. These events have laid foundations for the next stage of The Agenda as well as focusing on local priorities.
14. **Consejo, (the General Council of Social Workers of Spain)** launched a campaign Marea Naranja (Orange Wave) in 2012,<sup>9</sup> bringing together citizens, social workers and other professionals (Consejo, 2013). Social workers wear the orange T-shirt to work every Friday and there is a nationwide programme of activities working with local communities and other professions, mobilizing thousands to challenge service reductions and support social rights. Consejo is also supporting the Alliance for the Defence of Public Social Services System – a network of representatives from different institutions and social entities (e.g. unions, third sector, universities) to develop a common platform relating to the Fourth Pillar of Social Welfare in Spain and to campaign to uphold the social rights of citizens and strengthen the social services system (Lima Fernandez, 2011).

## Commentary

This random sample of examples of social work and social development across Europe does not provide a systematic overview of the current state of social work in Europe. However, it does describe aspects of practice and activity and should be read alongside the substantial literature already published on social policy and social intervention. In that sense, the examples provide an informative perspective. Public agencies are frequently reluctant to allow social work and social development practitioners to describe their work and talk about their successes, often for political reasons; the Global Agenda process may encourage agencies to support more practitioners to speak out.

## Theories and approaches

The projects illustrate a number of theoretical approaches to research and practice, including theories on social learning, social enterprise, gender and social inclusion. Approaches include social development, empowerment, strengths-based perspective, human-rights, People Centred Development and psychosocial and client centred approaches.

### *Target populations and nature of activities*

The projects illustrate the breadth of social work activity, involving children and young people, families, people with mental health problems, people with learning difficulties, LGBT communities, offenders, older people, benefit recipients and local communities. The activities range from direct work with individuals through to group and community work and macro-policy work. This is typical of the range of social work and social development activity across the region.

### *Players involved*

Those involved in these projects included some or all of social workers and other professionals, social work students, service users including children and young people, carers, service managers, community members, academics and researchers and local and national politicians, again illustrating the diverse groups with which social workers cooperate.

### *Social and economic issues and rights influenced*

Social work practice almost always confronts social and economic inequality and seeks to support people to improve their circumstances and therefore to reduce their inequality. These examples illustrate this in respect of strengthening capacity for employment and earning income (including managing the consequences of economic migration and family breakdown); supporting people to challenge and overcome discrimination as a result of disability, sexual orientation, exclusion from health services, gender and aging; developing proposals to make financial benefit systems work more effectively so as to deliver financial support where it is needed; working to provide the best care and education for children who are not able to live with their natural parents.

### *Level of influence*

The activity illustrated in these examples aimed to influence individual behaviour and self-perceptions, community attitudes, organizational structures and government policies.

### *Impact on those involved*

The impact on those directly involved was both personal and structural. Social work and social development always works towards change of some kind, however small. This affects both the practitioners involved and those they are working with.

### *Success, innovations and lessons learnt*

It is frequently difficult to see the outcome of social work intervention and social development, especially in the short term. However, these projects highlight clear examples of success, such as changes in structures and attitudes within the prison system, changes in the approach of people working with those with learning difficulties, new information about comparative approaches to alternative child care which will provoke reflection about future policy and practice and changes in community perception of aging.

## **Conclusion**

This first collation of examples of social work from across Europe is set within the very difficult social and economic conditions resulting from the financial, political and Eurozone crises. The

projects illustrate the creative use of social work skills and knowledge to create change at personal, local, national and international levels.

## Notes

1. <http://www.globalsocialagenda.org>
2. EASSW: <http://www.eassw.org/news-archive/2013;IFSW-Europe> <http://ifsw.org/news/launch-of-european-observatory-for-social-work-and-social-development-a-new-outlook-on-social-action-in-europe>; ICSW Europe: [http://www.icsw.org/doc/2013-04-Global\\_Cooperation-Eng.pdf](http://www.icsw.org/doc/2013-04-Global_Cooperation-Eng.pdf)
3. See for example, <http://www.eassw.org/global-social-work/5/instructions-about-the-observatory-of-the-global-agenda.html>
4. <http://www.eassw.org/global-social-work/6/examples-of-submissions-to-the-global-observatory.html>
5. For more information, visit [www.warwick.ac.uk/go/swhin](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/swhin)
6. <http://www.scie.org.uk/workforce/socialcareandhealthinequalities/>
7. [https://www.dropbox.com/sh/yue7zdxjmvvg0ec/zWgYN\\_8PVw/Uncut\\_cinterview.m4v](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/yue7zdxjmvvg0ec/zWgYN_8PVw/Uncut_cinterview.m4v)
8. For details of each project visit, <http://www.eassw.org/global-social-work/6/examples-of-submissions-the-global-observatory.html>
9. [http://www.cgtrabajosocial.com/consejo/Marea\\_Naranja](http://www.cgtrabajosocial.com/consejo/Marea_Naranja)

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