

Recommendations to the European policy makers and the tool kit for the social service providers

Recommendations to the European policy makers

After thorough desk analysis of the social services sector attractiveness in Europe, presented in section 3 “An overview of the social services sector in Europe” and the field research with a number of organizations involved in the provision of services to the people with disabilities, it is concluded that European Commission needs to prepare an initiative to unlock the job creation potential of the Social Services sector structured around the following actions:

- allocate funding for personnel training programs;
- conduct a comprehensive research of the Social Services sector in the European Union;
- strengthen exchange programs for internships in the social services sector;
- develop a Social Services online portal;
- improve and further promote a single standard Qualification Certificate;
- develop and launch European marketing campaign targeted at improving attractiveness of the Social Services sector;
- develop social dialogue;
- publish a policy paper collecting models of good practices on how to enhance working conditions and the sector’s attractiveness;
- support Social Service workers willing to relocate within European Union.

A more detailed description of these recommendations and specific actions within each recommendation are suggested below.

Funding for personnel training programs

The interviews with the organizations providing social services to people with disabilities confirmed that trainings play a highly important role in the processes of personnel attraction and retention. The interviews also confirmed that the austerity measures and consequent downward pressure on the organisations’ budgets lead to the reduction or total termination of trainings’ funding. It negatively affects not only sector’s attractiveness for those who consider joining it, but also turnover rate due to diminishing career advancement opportunities associated with trainings for professional development. In practice, potential employees who do not have the required qualification but intended to obtain it on-the-job, are forced to abandon the aspiration to join a social service organization. The fact that now social services workers have to fund trainings with their own savings and attend them on their own time, further decreases the attractiveness of this profession for potential and current employees.

As a further matter, a lack of funding for training has a negative impact on the quantity of trained staff, and the quality of provided services. In the end, it affects the quality of life of social services’ recipients. “This only goes to confirm that it is those weakest in society who are suffering most from the austerity measures imposed throughout Europe” (EASPD, 2013).

If this issue is not addressed in the short-term perspective, the problems of staff shortage and the quality of services will become even more critical in the longer run.

Comprehensive research of the Social Services Sector in European Union

A significant obstacle to understanding the problems of the Social Services Sector across Europe is the unavailability of complete and comparable European-wide data about the social services workforce. This lack of facts and figures makes it difficult to draw comprehensive conclusions about the problems of the sector in different member states and consequently to pursue effective solutions.

In this context, we would advise the European Commission to initiate and coordinate a research that will cover all the 28 member states of the EU. So far, the European Commission has published two comprehensive reports regarding the human health and social sectors (1st and 2nd Biennial Reports on Social Services of General Interest in 2008 and 2010 respectively). Still, as grouping together these two sectors might give misleading results regarding the issues and the trends faced by the social service providers, we would suggest a similar report to be created focusing exclusively on the social services sector.

More specifically, we would suggest to the EU institutions to carry out a research in the 28 member states that would shed light on:

- The types of professions under the social services sector separated from healthcare – where this is feasible - as they have very different characteristics (age, education level, gender, etc.).
- The share of employees:
 - Per sector (private/ public/ non-for-profit or institutional care /home care)
 - Per service recipients (elderly people, disabled, adults, children, disadvantaged groups)
 - Per type of contracts (part-time, full-time, fixed term, temporary, internship contracts or volunteering)
- Future workforce needs in the sector: number of employees, types of professions, education required.
- The profile of the workforce:
 - age
 - gender
 - qualifications
 - migration trends
 - compensation & benefits packages
 - working hours
- Qualitative data:
 - Research on the issues faced by the employees of the sector (working conditions)
 - Research on what attracted the employees to the sector and what satisfies them
 - Research to assess the reasons of the (un)attractiveness of the sector to school / college / university graduates

- Data clarifying which ministries bear the responsibility for the social services sector at the national level (Wolfmayr, 2013).

Strengthening of exchange programs for internships in the social services sector

The research that has been conducted by the project team indicates that in several countries the free movement of people within the European Union and immigration from outside the European Union are important factors to solving the issue of staff shortage in the social services sector. Expecting a future strengthening of the economy in the European Union and consequential decrease of unemployment - movement of social workers will become even more important. At the same time, the movement of social services workers is likely to decrease, because of the increased job opportunities in their own country.

One of the problems connected to this issue that the social services sector faces at the present, is that the movement of potential social care workers is very unstructured, and that there is no guarantee on the training level of immigrants in the social services sector, depending on the country in question.

Therefore, such initiatives as the European Voluntary Service (EVS) and the Leonardo da Vinci programme are very important. These initiatives could be developed into a separate initiative for internships, apprenticeships and trainings in the social services sector in the European Union. Qualitative information from our interviews shows that people who participate in the above initiatives regularly keep on working in the same country for the same organisation after their project.

As a conclusion, we would advise the EU to set up a structure to regulate and promote the cross border internships, apprenticeships and trainings in the social services sector. This initiative should be mainly geared towards students in their last year of education destined for the social services sector. Students tend to be more mobile, with less personal attachments in their home country, increasing the chances of them staying in the country and organisation where they performed their internship. This structure should be promoted in the schools, colleges and universities, encouraging the educational institutions to make cross border agreements with NGOs in the social services sector. It is important however, that the EU monitors the impact of this initiative on the social services sector in the country of the departing workers, and that the EU takes measures to stimulate the movement from countries with a high unemployment rate to countries with a shortage of these workers.

Social Services portal

Today, when an increasing number of people have access to the internet, we suggest creating a Social Services Portal. This portal might be linked with the website of DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion (<http://ec.europa.eu/social/home.jsp>) and would bring all the information from the organisations in social services sector to one place and provide potential employees with access to it. There are a number of purposes for the development of such portal: improving public awareness about the social services sector; explaining how worthwhile and honourable a career in the social services sector is; and promoting career opportunities available in the social services sector.

It is recommended that the Social Services Portal consist of the following elements:

What is the social services sector and how to build a career in it?

The main objective of this part is to introduce the social services sector to those who are considering entering it. The portal will provide an overview of what a career in the social services sector may look like. This could be backed up with the testimonials and case studies (both video and written) from current employees. It also can be helpful to provide samples of various job descriptions, so that the potential candidates can familiarise themselves with the responsibilities and requirements for all the positions they would like to consider. A comprehensive example of how it could be implemented is provided on Skills for Care website (<http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk>).

Information on qualifications and training programs

As an integral part of a recruitment process, it is important for potential employees to know what qualifications are required for specific positions. It could be also valuable to connect this part of the portal with PLOTEUS (Portal on Learning Opportunities throughout the European Space) (http://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/home_en.htm). This website contains links to websites of universities and higher education institutions, databases of schools, vocational trainings and adult education courses, however, it is still necessary to do filtering if only social services information is required. The Social Services Portal could also provide basic introduction trainings for those who have just joined the sector. This area could also provide access to recent research done related to this area to provide workers with sources of additional reading and “on-their-own” continued education.

Legal and administrative information

For those who consider entering the sector or relocating from another country, it could be a good idea to provide a wide range of information on practical, legal and administrative matters. There is already a good example implemented by EURES - European Employment Services (<https://ec.europa.eu/eures/>). However, this needs to be more focused on the social services sector. As a part of this section, Social Services Portal may also provide legal advice to the employees (e.g. those who need to apply for a work permit or who were abused during their work).

Job opportunities

The ‘Job opportunities’ section of the Social Services Portal would provide an opportunity for potential candidates to apply for a specific position, apprenticeship, or volunteering project, which would be available from the members of umbrella social service providers organisations. The maximum beneficial effect can be achieved by building a database of potential employees within the sector and providing organisations with an opportunity to recruit personnel in a simple manner. Similar initiative has been already introduced by EURES - European Employment Services - and could be used as a benchmark (<https://ec.europa.eu/eures/>).

Improvement and further promotion of a single standard Qualification certificate

The European Care Certificate (ECC) was developed in 2006 as in the framework of the Leonardo Da Vinci project, financed by the Lifelong Learning Programme. “The main idea behind the ECC was to create and promote an “award” for entry level staff in the care sector which will be recognized

anywhere in the EU and which has a place on the European Qualification Framework and in the National Qualification Frameworks of Member States” (European Care Certificate – Europe, 2012).

The following limitations of ECC were identified in the course of the research:

- the ECC is currently used only in 18 countries of the European Union;
- it has not been acknowledged by relevant governmental bodies in those countries;
- it tests only basic knowledge of social workers and the values of social care;
- some organisations consider the certificate as insufficient prove of worker’s capabilities;

In order to address these limitations it is recommended to the European Commission to support improvement and further promotion of the European Care Certificate. In order to ensure ECC’s wide adoption throughout Europe its introduction and acknowledgement by relevant governmental bodies need to be facilitated in all member states. To guarantee the acceptance of ECC by the organisations-employers, it must test not only basic knowledge and values of a candidate but also advanced skills and competences, which are specific for the professions in social care sector.

Development and launch of European marketing campaign targeted at improving attractiveness of the Social Services sector

The interviews conducted with the social services organisations and potential employees confirmed the hypothesis that Social Services sector has a somewhat negative image for potential employees. This perception is driven by low wages, often poor working conditions, lack of career advancement opportunities and potential accidents involving employees’ abuse by their service users which receive a great coverage in mass media. On the other hand, it is rare to find an article about how meaningful and fulfilling a job of a social care worker can be or a testimonial of a happy and proud employee about his or her job. This imbalance can be addressed through a dedicated marketing campaign aimed at improving attractiveness of the Social Services sector. It should be targeted at potential employees and convey the values and benefits of a job in the social services sector. Therefore it is recommended to the European Commission to develop and launch such campaign across the member states.

Development of Social Dialogue

As explained in detail, a legal framework that allows social dialogue at the European level exists since 1998. Given that the social sector in most of the EU member states is facing similar types of problems (e.g. tough working conditions, limited funding, ageing population, etc.) we would encourage the creation of a committee within the framework of the European Social Dialogue. The support of the European Commission on the creation of such a committee and, later, on chairing the meetings as a mediator is important (Lethbridge, 2012). This Committee will enable the exchange of ideas, best practices and experiences between the different member-states. Moreover, the creation of such a committee can serve as a catalyst for triggering the social dialogue at the national level. So far there is no formal input from the employers of the sector on EU-policy making. In this context, we would encourage the European institutions to create dialogue structures that will allow the employers to have a formal say in key-EU policy making processes that affect the future of the sector.

Support Social Services workers' desire to relocate within European Union

Despite the numerous attempts to monitor the flow and movement of migrant workers inside the EU, the employment of these people still remains a grey zone. Driven by the need for higher salaries and a better quality of life, people from countries outside or inside the European zone, choose to immigrate to the more developed countries which absorb them in order to fill staff and skill shortages in the low-wage sectors, such as social services. Even though, this movement has been decreased after the economic recession due to the increase of the national unemployment rates and thus the number of native workers who are willing to accept low wage jobs, it is fair to say that migrant workers still consist a significant part of the workforce in the social services sector. As discussed in the report, the employment of foreign carers comes with some significant advantages such as skills, willingness and cultural diversity. Nevertheless, the difficulties observed during the integration of these people in the society and moreover the uncontrolled skills drain in the countries of origin, underline the importance of a carefully designed, implemented and monitored migration policy.

Therefore, we would like to suggest that the European Commission should guide the migration policy of the Member states to two main axes. First of all the designing of an adequate and legitimate framework which will allow migrants to work under a transparent working regime, avoiding this way any grey zones which can only lead to unethical recruitment tactics, poor working conditions and to the continuous misunderstanding of the positive role that migrants have for the society. Secondly, we recommend that emphasis should be put on the bilateral agreements between the receiving and the sending countries, so as to ensure the sustainability of migration and to support circular migration. The establishment of this kind of agreements should be acknowledged as the only sustainable way for the receiving countries to cover their needs in cheap and skilled workers in the social services sector, without causing staff shortages in the sender countries and therefore creating a gap in the provision of the most vulnerable members of the society.

Suggestions to EASPD

Given that the EASPD considers the problem of staff shortages in the sector to be crucial, the project team would like suggest to the organization to take some actions in order to support its members in this area. Most of these ideas are already used in multinational organizations mainly in the private sector, to stimulate the exchange of ideas and best practices between their local branches or member firms in different countries. As the EASPD is an umbrella organization that represents more than 10,000 service providers it is important to facilitate the communication between the different organizations. Of course, the ideas that the team has developed take into consideration the restricted human and financial resources of the organization.

Creation of a European – wide discussion group regarding this issue.

This group could meet remotely and/or physically to exchange ideas and share developments. This is an idea that has been widely used in the corporate world, such as the multinational consulting firms that offer a variety of services to different industries and geographies. More specifically, these firms

develop internal groups regarding, for example, the “Banking Industry” or the “Telecommunications Industry” that arrange meetings or conference calls to share ideas and developments throughout the world. The participants in these virtual or physical meetings are senior or junior executives of the firm that are exposed to these industries.

Similarly, EASPD can initiate the launch of a “Group” about the staff shortages problem consisting of representatives from various EASPD member organizations that deal with this problem in different countries. EASPD, will play a coordinating role ensuring that the calls or the events would be organized regularly and that different aspects of this issue would be covered. Our suggestion is to organize 1 conference call every two months and, ideally, 1 event every year to bring together all the members of the group. Of course the frequency of the physical events might vary depending on the availability of funding. The conference calls or the meetings should give a global understanding of the issue and ideas on how to overcome the problem. Some ideas regarding the topics of meetings are the following: best practices in different countries, “success and failure stories”, policy developments in the area (national or European), presentation of research findings, the impact of the financial crisis on the sector, trends in non-European countries, discussion on the working conditions, exchange of management techniques, etc. The main speaker can be a representative of a different organization each time, a member of the management team of EASPD or a researcher depending on the topic.

Data collection

As mentioned in detail in this report a significant problem that the sector faces is the lack of valid data regarding the sector. One of the suggestions of the project team to EU policy-makers was to coordinate a European-wide data collection regarding the sector. Given that this might take time and that it is vital for the EASPD to understand the magnitude of the problem in order to develop its lobbying strategy, we would suggest to the organization to gather data from its members. A short online questionnaire can be created and distributed to EASPD members to collect information regarding the profile of the workforce and the working conditions. As the EASPD represent numerous organizations throughout Europe the outcome of this survey will be illustrative of the situation in Europe.

In the same context, the project team would encourage the EASPD to coordinate a research to collect the views of the front-line employees about their jobs. More specifically, we suggest to EASPD to manage a research that resembles to the employee satisfaction surveys that are widely used in the private sector. Still, we would suggest that this research should focus more on the problems faced and on any possible ideas for improvement. As explained earlier in this report a survey was conducted by the British Association of Social Work in 2012 to gather comments from social workers. Some of the questions asked in this survey were the following:

- What single thing would most improve your working life?
- Do you feel you are well supported and supervised by your manager in your work?
- How have cuts to back office staff impacted upon your own role?
- Which changes to your pay or allowances have made you less well off financially?

The comments gathered from this survey are very revealing as they shed light on the real problems of the front-line workers. As it is very difficult for the EASPD members (especially for the smaller ones) to gather valid comments from their own employees who might not be willing to open up, EASPD can play a vital role in coordinating such a survey. Given that such a research might require a team of people to run the project we would suggest EASPD to outsource this research either to professional researchers or to a group of students depending on the availability of funding.