

Zane Loža and Aadne Aasland

**From a Local Perspective:
Social Assistance and Social Work in Latvia**

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Introduction

In February and June 2000 a dozen of semi-structured interviews were carried out with politicians, ministry officials and representatives of a variety of relevant organisations and institutions (Grønningsæter *et al.*, 2001). These interviews and document analysis of legislation and regulations as well as previous research analysed some of the problems and dilemmas facing the districts and local municipalities in carrying out the social policies as outlined in Latvian legislation.

To sum up the findings from these analyses, the local municipalities, to varying degree, face severe budgetary constraints in the sphere of social services. The budgetary constraints are associated with a general reduction of resources used on social assistance over the last five years, at the same time as the needs for such assistance have not been reduced and are far greater than the possibilities to provide it. In this situation the social workers have the role of providing social assistance to those experiencing hardships, but with limited resources to meet the needs. The social workers were said to have a high degree of discretion in the provision of assistance, in setting the priorities and distributing the limited resources. This could be considered a burden as well, however, since they are unable to help all they would like to. In addition, many of the informants gave the impression that social workers at the local level lack the professionalism that are required in dealing with social problems. This was said to be more of a problem the further away from Riga one goes, and in the rural municipalities it is more common than in towns and cities.

However, these preliminary findings were generated from data collected at the central level, from informants in the capital and policy documents. In order to see how the dilemmas are felt and dealt with in practice, more information was needed as to how central guidelines are implemented and how decisions are made at the local level. We considered it as likely that the situation looks rather different a bit further away from the centre. Very little previous work has been carried out on the implementation of social policies at the local level in Latvia (Gassmann 2000). Such information could only be achieved through a thorough investigation at the local level.

The aim of this report is not to give a representative description of how implementation of social assistance takes place in Latvia as a whole. Rather, it is to highlight some aspects that are faced by one individual Latvian district and municipalities within this district. Since the system is the same in the whole country, it is our aim to shed light on some of the mechanisms that are likely to be experienced in this area also in other Latvian districts, but it is important to stress that the particular set-up of problems and how they are solved is not likely to be shared by all Latvian district.

Background: The set-up of the social assistance system in Latvia

The key players

To fully understand how social assistance is organised within in one particular district or municipality, it is necessary to know the framework within which those dealing with social assistance at the local level operate. In this section, therefore, we outline the role of some of the key players in Latvia's social assistance system. More detailed information can be found in the social reports that have been published annually since 1998 (Ministry of Welfare 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001).

The Ministry of Welfare

The Ministry of Welfare (MoW) is a key player in Latvia's social assistance system. The MoW's role is to develop coordinated and responsive social security legislation that ensures a well-functioning social security net for the inhabitants. Social assistance is an important part of the social security system.

MoW's involvement in provision of social assistance is on the policy development level. Linking the social policy development at the central level with the actual provision of social assistance is the role of the Social Assistance Fund.

The Social Assistance Fund

The Social Assistance Fund (SAF) is a state institution and is subordinated to the Ministry of Welfare. The goal of the fund is to optimize the administration of the state functions in social assistance. The main directions of activity are a) quality assessment of the social assistance services, b) provision of information in the social assistance system, c) provision of methodological assistance and training of the people employed in the system; d) financial management of social assistance events and the state-owned social assistance institutions.

The tasks of the SAF can be summarized as follows: a) to ensure the state participation in social assistance provision in municipalities; b) to monitor the use of state resources for social assistance; c) to provide the data necessary for implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the social assistance policy; d) to establish and up-date a data base about social assistance providers and receivers, and the provided social assistance services.

Since 1997, the SAF has been administering around one quarter of the state finance for social assistance. The rest is administered by the State Social Insurance Agency as state social benefits.

The Equalization Fund

The idea of the Equalization Fund (EF) is to collect money from richer municipalities and redistribute it to the poorer ones. There are four criteria that are used in classifying the municipalities:

- the proportion of children below school age
- the proportion of children in school age
- the proportion of population of working age

- the proportion of population above working age

Thus, only demographic criteria influence the transfers that go through the equalisation fund. Unemployment levels and the economic structure of the municipalities might have a strong impact on the municipal economy, but do not have an influence on the distribution of funds from the equalisation fund.

Municipalities

Presently there are 23 districts in Latvia. These districts are further divided into 567 municipalities, of which seven are the big cities in Latvia¹. The municipalities in Latvia are of two kinds: local municipalities of cities/towns or parishes, and regional municipalities.

A local municipality is a local authority where representation takes place through a municipality council, voted for by the citizens of the municipality. A regional municipality is a similar body that is responsible for any regional tasks. A regional municipality is a governing body composed of delegates from local municipalities. The municipal council is chaired by a council head. The deputies of the council furthermore form financial, social, educational and cultural committees, or any other committee that the municipality finds it necessary to establish. The tasks of the committees are to monitor the social situation, prepare questions for discussion during the council meetings, provide professional insights into the raised questions as well as control operations of any municipal institutions or enterprises that operate within the territory of the municipality and fall within the competence of the given committee. The committees may invite any other professionals to take the role as advisors to their meetings.

The responsibilities and conditions of municipalities in general are set out in the “Law on Municipalities”. The municipalities are required to organize a range of activities that are part of local everyday life such as education, local entrepreneurship, cultural activities, social assistance, communal services, and others. Within the framework set forth by any applicable legislation, the municipalities are free to organize the above-mentioned activities independently. They may also agree to delegate the organization or provision of some of the activities to regional municipalities, and the other way around. Activities are to be financed from the local budgets. The municipalities are furthermore free to organize any other activity or service as long as it does not contradict national legislation.

The “Law on Municipalities” contains a provision that has an important role in the present distribution of responsibilities system between the state and the municipalities. Namely, the law provides that the state institutions may not require the municipalities to fulfill tasks, for which the finance is not secured. That is, for each activity that the municipalities perform, a clear source of finance needs to be identified. With regard to activities that are not necessarily financed from the municipal budget (temporary activities or events), the municipalities may claim refunding of the finance used, and the invalidation of the respective legislation².

¹ The territorial reform is, however, on-going. The reform aims at substantially reducing the number of municipalities by uniting the smaller ones

² “Law on Municipalities”, paragraph 13.

With regard to *social assistance*, the municipalities are to “ensure social assistance (social care) to inhabitants of the municipality”. A more detailed account of the responsibilities is provided by the “Law on Social Assistance”.

According to the “Law on Social Assistance”, each local municipality is to set up a social assistance office. The organization of such an office is left to the municipality. All the persons who reside within the territory of the local municipality are eligible to social assistance³. In urgent cases, the municipality is responsible for provision of assistance to persons who live in other municipalities. In this case, the municipality should be reimbursed by the municipality where the person actually resides.

Provision of social assistance: the role of the state and the municipalities

Social assistance in Latvia is interpreted as consisting of 1) social benefits, 2) social care, and 3) social rehabilitation. Social work is connected to provision of social assistance, as the aim of it is to increase the social assistance receiver’s participation in self-improvement and re-integration into the society. Mostly, social work is applied to receivers of social benefits.

The policy over the last years has been to decentralize provision of public services, including social assistance. Moving of social assistance provision down to the local level applies both to social assistance previously provided by the state as well as the regional municipalities. Nevertheless, the state has retained provision of some types of the social assistance, which will be discussed shortly.

Municipal responsibilities in provision of social assistance

The “Law on Social Assistance” sets out the following responsibilities of the local municipalities with respect to social assistance:

- evaluation of financial and material means of a family;
- payment of municipal social assistance benefits;
- social assistance to orphans and children without parental care; if necessary, their placement in educational institutions;
- possibility for disabled children to receive social care and rehabilitation services;
- home care or care in a social care institution for persons of pension age;
- possibility for persons of pension age to receive day care centre services;

³ In case the person has changed the place of the residence during the last 12 months, it is eligible for social assistance in the municipality of the longest residence period during the 12 months; military service, medical treatment in institutions, education in institutions, residence in prison are counted as if the person was residing in the last municipality of residence

- home care to mentally or physically disabled persons;
- possibility for physically disabled persons to receive day care centre services;
- possibility for mentally disabled persons to receive day care centre services;
- possibility for mentally disabled persons as well as persons with eyesight disabilities to work in specialized workshops;
- service flats to persons with a need for special social care;
- social rehabilitation to persons who have been released from prisons, and whose last place of residence has been within the territory of the municipality;
- social rehabilitation to persons who are dependent on drugs of alcohol;
- social assistance to the homeless – possibility of their placement in a night shelter.

The law also says that municipalities not in a position to fulfill all the above-mentioned responsibilities locally should ensure that the missing services are provided by other municipalities or other bodies. The payment mechanism applied is that the money follows the client.

Benefits

The goal of the municipal benefits is to support inhabitants whose income level is insufficient to meet the basic needs. The municipal benefits are means-tested. There are the following municipal social assistance benefits according to the law “On Social Assistance”: 1) social assistance benefit to needy families; 2) benefit for apartment; 3) benefit for care; 4) funeral benefit. The social assistance benefit to needy families is meant to provide a minimum income level to any family who is unable to secure such an income by own sources. In general, the benefit does not apply to families where the member(s) are of working age and considered fit for working, or take insufficient responsibility for own social or medical rehabilitation⁴.

The above-mentioned benefits are compulsory in a sense that they should be provided to all who are entitled to them⁵ and should not, according to the law, be substituted by any local variations of social assistance benefits. The local social assistance benefits may be provided in addition to the compulsory municipal social assistance benefits, and the municipalities are supposed to finance these benefits from their local budget.

Social care

With regard to social care, the division is between social care in institutions and alternative social care. The municipalities provide both types of social care. The municipalities run social care institutions for children and the elderly⁶. Alternative social care provided by the

⁴ The benefit is to be granted for a period of 3 months in case any of the family members are/will be in condition to work, or for 6 months in other cases (for more detail, see the “Law on Social Assistance”).

⁵ There are detailed rules regarding the entitlement and the amount of the benefit

⁶ Social care institutions run by the municipalities: a) shelters for orphans; b) elderly homes

municipalities⁷ includes home help, guardianship, foster families, adoption, day centres, crises centres and night shelters. The aim of the alternative social care is to provide services close to one's place of residence.

Social rehabilitation

The goal of social rehabilitation activities is reintegration of people into society. Social rehabilitation provided by the municipalities is rehabilitation of: a) mentally disabled persons; b) persons with eyesight disabilities at specialized workshops; c) alcoholics and drug addicts; d) ex-convicts; e) provision of service flats for persons who are in need of special social care.

State responsibilities in provision of social assistance

Benefits

The state benefits aim at supporting certain groups of inhabitants in certain situations (categorical benefits). The goals of state social benefits and the municipal social benefits are different because municipal benefits are means-tested.

The state benefits are: 1) state social insurance benefit; 2) child care benefit; 3) state family benefit; 3) an addition to the family benefit for a disabled child; 4) transportation benefit for participants during the Chernobyl accident; 5) child birth benefit; 6) funeral benefit; 7) benefit to guardian for taking care of a child; 8) benefit to a guardian for coverage of the expenses of the child; 9) transportation benefit to the disabled people who have difficulties to move; 10) benefit to foster families for taking care of a child. The first six of the benefits are administered by the State Social Insurance Agency while the remaining four are administered by the Social Assistance Fund.

Social care and social rehabilitation

The state is involved only in provision of care in social care institutions. It runs a number of institutions both for children and the elderly⁸. Social rehabilitation provided by the state includes: a) professional rehabilitation and re-qualification of the disabled; b) provision of technical devices; c) social rehabilitation in institutions⁹; d) alternative social rehabilitation of: persons with severe hearing and eyesight disabilities, politically repressed persons, mentally disabled persons' rehabilitation in day centres, rehabilitation of children who have suffered from violence at their place of residence, coverage of credit percent used for adjustment of a flat of a disabled person and support to development of alternative social assistance services in municipalities.

⁷ State support to guardianship and foster families is financial (see state benefits). There has also been state project money for establishment of day centres in municipalities

⁸ Social care institutions run by the state are a) social care centres for orphans; b) specialized social care centres for children; c) specialized social care centres for mentally disabled persons.

⁹ rehabilitation of the disabled, of persons previously repressed, of people who were participating in mitigating consequences at Chernobyl, rehabilitation of non-working pensioners and rehabilitation of children who have suffered from violence

Public work

One of the components of the state social policy is public work. The public work is required from those who are able to work but receive social assistance. The aim of the work is to integrate the client into the society. According to statistics, the public work in 1999 was less widespread than in 1998 in the 7 big cities, but had become more common in the other municipalities. However, in both cases more public work placements are offered than undertaken. The difference is on average around 25%, but in the cities, the work is slightly more often refused (around 28%).

Final comment

As a final remark in this subsection, one should note that with regard to certain social assistance, provision and finance are not united. Finance comes from the state, while provision of it is the responsibility of the municipality. This is the case with benefits for guardianship and foster families. There are state benefits for foster families, guardians and children under the guardianship, but the provision of the foster families and the guardianship are the responsibility of the municipalities. A similar case is state finance for establishment of the day care centres at the municipalities. In this, case, however, the support is temporary and awarded through project competition.

Finance of the system

In 1999, around LVL 1,01 2,357,706 were spent on social assistance in Latvia in total. From 1997 the spending has in nominal prices been increasing by around 10% annually. More than 70% of the total spending comes from the state budget. The state spending on social assistance since 1997 has been increasing more than spending from municipal budgets (average of 11% vs. average of 7%).

The largest part or more than 75% of the state finance for social assistance in 1998 and 1999 has been spent on state social benefits. The municipal social benefits were reduced in the same period.

Finance available to the municipalities (taxes)

From all the taxes and fees officially collected in Latvia, a fraction remains in the municipalities. Namely, the municipalities keep:

71.6% of the inhabitants' income tax. The municipality also keeps taxes paid by foreign taxpayers who during the taxation period have earned an income in the given municipality. The income tax is 25% of ones base salary;

60% of the environment tax for activities carried out in the territory of the municipality. The amount of the tax is officially determined, and varies according to activities;

The municipality may introduce a fee for certain services delivered by the municipality (such as access to municipal documentation) or certain activities carried out in the territory of the municipality (such as organization of entertainment). The types of the fees applicable are determined by the rules of the Cabinet of Ministers. The municipality may not

introduce additional fees. It may not introduce additional fees of its own, or collect fees for activities that are subject to state fees. There are also certain state fees that are administered by the municipality, and the municipality can keep the income from these.

Social workers in Latvia

As has been shown, social workers have an important task in providing social services in Latvia. However, out of 567 municipalities¹⁰, 262 (46.8%) had no social assistance employee. A total of 818 people are social workers working at a social assistance office or performing the tasks of a municipal social assistance worker. According to the most recent data that we have been able to obtain, from 1998 to 1999 the number of the workers increased slightly – there were 16 more social workers at the end of 1999 than in the previous year. Also in terms of inhabitants per social worker, there were more social workers available (2,973 inhabitants/worker). The availability of the social workers, however, is dependent on the district of residence. In eastern parts of Latvia, the inhabitants/worker ratio is considerably higher (7,233 in one of the eastern districts, Gulbene).

In 1999 only 6.8 % (56) social workers had a higher social work education, while 2.1% (17) have vocational social work education. The rest have no formal social work education at all. Most of the people with education are employed at offices in the 7 biggest Latvian cities (45 workers out of 73). Still, many of the social workers without professional education are currently either studying in a higher social work education institution (8% or 62 of all the workers), or undergoing a social work training (29% or 232 of the social workers). Only 11% (101) of the municipalities in Latvia store their client data in a PC, and only 2% (19) of the municipalities have special software installed for this purpose¹¹.

¹⁰ Excluding the 7 big cities of Latvia

¹¹ Excluding the 7 big cities of Latvia

The Case

Methodological note

As a part of a larger project on social policy in Estonia and Latvia, we decided to use a case study as our main method of collection of information for this part of the project. In parallel with the Latvian case study two case studies were carried out in Estonia. As a reference focus group discussions were also carried out in Norway. Comparative findings from these cases studies have already been presented (Grønningsæter & Kiik, 2001), and a more thorough analysis will also be published. The common interview guide for all focus group discussions and interviews can be found on the project web page¹².

The fieldwork in Latvia took place in the month of June 2000. Fafo researcher Aadne Aasland and Latvian research assistant Zane Loza carried out focus group interviews with social workers in one district (*rajons*) in Latvia and interviews with heads of the local administration and social workers in two municipalities in this district (here called municipality D and municipality A). The selection of the district was made out of several considerations, but cannot be considered to be representative of Latvia as such. However, the municipality is not an extreme case in terms of socio-economic or demographic characteristics. A group of social workers from various parts of the district was selected, and therefore districts containing municipalities with too long distances from the centre of the *rajons* were excluded. Furthermore, we selected this particular district because of some previous knowledge of the social assistance office there and since they agreed to facilitate the focus group meeting.

The focus group interviews took place from 10 am to 3 pm on an ordinary workday. We came back a few days later to carry out semi-structured interviews in two selected municipalities. One was selected because it was the only urban-type municipality covered in the focus group interview. We chose also to select a rural municipality, and the third social worker who was asked agreed to assist us in the local municipality (the first two that were asked had other commitments on that particular day).

The focus group interviews and the semi-structured interviews took place in accordance with a prepared list of topics to be covered, which were common to both Estonia and Latvia. All the interviews were recorded on tape. The motivation among those interviewed was quite high, although the intensity of the work made the respondents somewhat tired and less concentrated towards the very end of the focus group discussions.

¹² www.fafo.no/baltsoc.

Description of the district

The district chosen for the study contains around 20 municipalities, including town municipalities. Area-wise, it is among the smallest in Latvia. In many other respects it has characteristics typical for an average district in Latvia.

The number of inhabitants residing in the district¹³ and the distribution of urban and rural population are close to the Latvian average. The demographic burden – people under or over the working age per one person in the working age – in the selected district is somewhat lighter than the average for districts¹⁴, but heavier than for the country as a whole¹⁵. The countrywide statistics are influenced by the younger population who reside in the largest cities. Around 18% of the district's population are above, and around 23% below, the working age.

Around 70% of the district's residents are ethnic Latvians. Such an ethnographic mixture is close to the average¹⁶. The population that resides outside the big cities is more ethnically Latvian than one finds in the big cities of Latvia.

According to officially available statistics, wages of the people employed in the national economy in 1998 were below the average for the country as a whole¹⁷. They were, however, higher than the average for Latvian districts, excluding the seven largest cities¹⁸. The national average is sustained by the big cities such as Riga and Ventspils. On the other side of the spectra there are districts where the average net monthly wage does not exceed LVL 61 – 65. Compared to the year 1996, the wages for cities and districts of Latvia on average, districts of Latvia as well as our district have increased by close to 25%.

In 1998, around 47% of the district's population were economically active. Around 17% of the economically active were considered non-working job seekers by official criteria, but only around 10% qualified as officially unemployed. The official number of registered unemployed of around 10% is higher than the average in the country as a whole (7.6%), but lower than the average unemployment level in the districts of Latvia (11.5%). It should be noted that registered unemployment is different from unemployment as measured by ILO, and that the unemployment level was 12% according to Norbalt data (Aasland and Tyldum, 2000)¹⁹. Around 34% of the registered unemployed in the district were the long-term unemployed. The depth of the unemployment in Latvia varies heavily with around 8% long-term unemployed in Ventspils city and Saldus district, for example, to 55.3% in Preiļi district. In our district, it is somewhat higher than for the average district and stands at around 28%. As is the case in the country, the official unemployment level is higher for women than

¹³ Omitting the very densely populated Riga region

¹⁴ 717 people under or over the working age per 1000 of the working age population on average

¹⁵ 695 people per 1000 inhabitants on average in Latvia

¹⁶ 73.9% on average for regions

¹⁷ national average is LVL97 net

¹⁸ regional average is LVL78.4 net

¹⁹ Norbalt data give unemployment for the country as a whole and different regions in Latvia, but the sample size from the selected district is too small to yield results that can be used in these analyses.

for men²⁰. Only around 34% of the officially unemployed in our district received unemployment benefits in 1998²¹. This is a typical situation in all of Latvia. Around 24% of the resident population is pensioners.

The dwelling stock resembles an average situation in Latvia and is 22.0 m² per resident. The district is placed in a part of Latvia where land for agricultural use is considered among the most productive. Also the income from industrial production of the district is better than the average situation in the districts. It is a reasonably active district with more than 760 registered enterprises. In terms of industrial production per capita, the district occupies a place around the middle among the 26 districts of Latvia.

Most of the income in our district in 1998 comes from taxes and target subsidies. Expenditures stayed constant at around LVL140 per inhabitant. Most of it is spent on administration and financing of the economy, but a significant proportion goes to social security as well. Except for a few richer cities such as Ventspils where earnings are close to LVL300, and spendings more than LVL200 per inhabitant, income and expenditure in Latvia are reasonably equal.

In sum, according to the official statistics it is a typical Latvian district along a number of parameters. The number of inhabitants; their distribution across rural and urban areas; their wages and income of the municipalities come close to what one would expect to find in a Latvian district on average. The district does not include any big cities or any other obvious factors that would significantly influence the regional characteristics. It has a little less unemployment and a little less demographic burden than the average.

Social Assistance in local municipalities: local legislation

Given the “umbrella” character of the existing social assistance law, and the disputable argument concerning compliance to the national legislation due to financial reasons, the municipalities in our study had developed more detailed and functional local social assistance regulations.

In all of the municipalities, the broad aim of social assistance and the social assistance office is to provide social assistance to needy persons and persons from social risk groups who reside in the municipality. Social assistance is understood as social benefits and social care. The social rehabilitation component is not explicitly defined.

The local regulations – or conditions of social assistance organization and provision – in each of the municipalities are different. First, the types of social assistance are different. In particular, this applies to the types of social benefits. A benefit available in one municipality is not necessarily available in another.

Secondly, the eligibility criteria for seemingly the same types of benefits differ. The criteria vary along such parameters as target audience (to whom?) and extent of expense contribution (how much?). While in one municipality a benefit is universal for a certain group of inhabitants, it is dependent on income in another. While in one municipality there is a maximum benefit ceiling available to a recipient, the benefit amount is constant in another.

²⁰ However, when it comes to unemployment as defined by ILO and measured in the Norbalt project, there is no big difference between the sexes in terms of unemployment rates.

²¹ End of 1998. Data from *Administrative districts and major cities of Latvia; Statistical Yearbook 1999*

In some of the municipalities, some benefits are conditional upon the recipient fulfilling certain agreed-upon obligations in his daily life or participation in public work²². The possibilities to receive social assistance in the municipalities of the district are thereby not equal.

A more detailed description of the local regulations follows. However, it is in this connection necessary to point out that the style in which the local regulations are written vary from one municipality to another. Some are more detailed than others. For example, only one of the municipalities had defined the terms that it was operating with – lonely pensioners, unemployed, and other social groups. In addition, it should be noted that the employees of the social assistance office have a lot of operating information in their heads that is not available on paper. It is therefore possible that the account below is not complete and that there are additional assistance or additional criteria that guide the provision of assistance.

The regulations deal mostly with social benefits. As regards social care the regulations suffice by saying that such support should be provided. Support is understood as moral or practical advice provided either by social workers, or professionals in the field. Only in one case are the regulations more explicit and provide for organization of support groups for young people from social risk families.

Municipalities provide multiple benefits that relate to a particular need of the client. That is, the benefits serve certain needs rather than ensure a standard minimum income level to all the residents.

A benefit typical for all of the municipalities in the focus group is free lunch for children in secondary schools. The benefit constitutes a significant proportion of the social assistance budget – from more than 15% to 25% of the budget. Children from social risk and needy families are eligible for the benefit²³. In addition, eligibility in municipality D is extended to all those families with an income less than LVL32 per month, but in municipality A – to all those families where the parents or the children themselves have been participating in public works²⁴. The amount of the public works is 8 days. In municipality B, in contrast, eligible for free lunches are exclusively children with reasonable grades at the school. The amount of the benefit is 100% of the lunch costs. In a third municipality²⁵, the benefit applies not only to children at school, but also *free lunch for children in kindergarten*. The benefit is 50% of the lunch cost. The benefits are transferred to schools and kindergartens directly.

Another typical social benefit is benefits that can be labeled *benefit for medical care*. The meaning of the benefit is to help people cover hospital, dentistry, and in some cases sanatorium and medicine expenses. In the rural municipalities, the benefit constitutes around one quarter of the total social assistance budgets, and is thereby a very commonly used benefit type. In the town, in contrast, it accounts for 4% of the social assistance budget only.

²² More about the organization of public work can be found in section “Provision of local social assistance”

²³ A needy family is officially a family where the income per person is less than 26.67 lats per month

²⁴ Until the 7th grade, the social works could only be performed by the parents. In later grades, they could also be performed by the child him/herself.

²⁵ We received the regulations from this municipality and the social worker took part in the focus group discussion, but we did not visit the municipality.

Benefit to cover hospital expenses is available in all municipalities; two municipalities even have a benefit for dentistry expenses. One municipality has introduced a benefit for sanatorium while another has a benefit for medicine. Because of the large number of applicants and difficulties in administering the benefit(s), two of the municipalities have introduced a *benefit for purchase of health insurance*. The intention is to simplify the administration of the various benefits for medical expenses. It is also hoped that purchasing health insurance would be cheaper than covering medical treatment expenses. In one of the municipalities, the benefit it is available to all of the inhabitants while in the other, only to elderly and the disabled.

Indeed, the eligibility criteria and the amount of the various health expense benefits are not similar. As a rule elderly and disabled people are eligible. With only a few exceptions (dentistry expenses in one of the municipalities), children up to 15 years of age (or up to 18 if they study) are also eligible. Two municipalities in addition include families with many children and the needy families among those who are eligible. It is worth noting that in one of the municipalities, the regulations provided that any medical expenses incurred as a result of alcoholism are not reimbursed.

With regard to the benefits for medical care, the rural municipalities have a system where the municipality covers a certain percentage of the expense, usually 50%. There are exceptions when children are eligible to a full coverage, but the benefit for dentistry covers only 25%. In the town municipality, in contrast, one could claim the expenses up to a certain benefit ceiling (LVL24 per person per year). Benefit ceilings are introduced in two of the rural municipalities as well.

A benefit common to all municipalities but one is the *benefit for heating*. The benefit is among the most expensive benefits in these municipalities' budgets. In the town municipality, it comprised more than half of the budget. Usually, the benefit means firewood and is, thus, in-kind. But it can also mean cash (or transfer) for those with other types of heating systems. As a rule, the benefit is only available to lonely elderly people and the disabled. Only in the town municipality, it includes the elderly living in a family and the needy families. In the rural municipalities, the benefit is provided up to a certain threshold, and does not depend on one's income. This contrasts with the town, where income is the first step to determine eligibility.

According to the regulations, all of the represented municipalities provide a *home care benefit* to lonely elderly people and mentally or physically handicapped persons who have objective difficulties to take care of themselves. In the town, the target group is extended to "other groups who may need assistance". The amount of the benefit varies, but is on average around LVL8 per month. The amount depends on whether the municipality differentiates between minimal care and full time care or there is only a single standard home care benefit. The full time home-helpers receive more than the part-time ones. The benefit is always paid directly to the home-helpers.

Funeral benefit is available in all of the respondent municipalities. The amount of the benefit, differs, but is no less than LVL10. The maximum amount observed among the focus group was LVL30.

As regards the *benefit for needy families*, the municipalities seem to interpret and apply the legislation differently. To begin with, there may be no such thing as a specific and separate "benefit for needy families" available to all the families that qualify as needy according to the formal, or national, eligibility criteria. It is understood that the goal of the benefit

– minimum income to the needy families – is already served by the other available benefits. In municipalities that do have a separate benefit for needy families, the amount of the benefit differs. The town municipality is the only one that has attached a certain amount to the benefit. Others have set a maximum ceiling²⁶ and left the final decision up to each individual case and the budgetary possibilities of the municipality. The benefit is either in cash or, most often, in-kind. The status of a needy may be granted for one or three months at a time.

Apart from these typically available benefits, there are benefits unique to each of the municipalities: *benefit for education* aimed at supporting successful students; *benefit for transportation of schoolchildren to school*; *benefits in emergency cases*; *a partial contribution of the kindergarten cost*; and others. Benefits provided by more than one municipality are a *Christmas benefit* in form of sweets for the elderly and children and a *benefit for people released from prisons*.

A part of the social assistance budget is furthermore devoted to separate events such as pensioners' gatherings or primary and high school graduation events. In one of the municipalities, such activities consumed as much as one quarter of the social budget. However, this was not a typical situation.

In two cases, the regulations provided for placement in appropriate *social care institutions*.

As mentioned in the section on the state's responsibilities, the state cannot require the municipalities to comply with those requirements set out in the "Law on Social Assistance" for which it does not ensure sufficient financing. In the present system, the regulations guiding the social workers in provision of the social assistance are the local ones.

Social Assistance finance in local municipalities

The municipalities do not receive any earmarked funds for provision of local social assistance from the state. Apart from regulations regarding payment and amount for compulsory social benefits, the present law provides no benchmark for how much a municipality should spend on social assistance. As were the types of assistance and the eligibility criteria, the finance of social assistance is locally determined.

As an illustration, let us consider the spending on social assistance in the municipalities about which more detailed information was gathered. The data are for two rural municipalities and one town municipality. In one of the rural municipalities, 5.4% of the total budget was spent on social assistance. In absolute numbers, the spending amounted to LVL 6 304 per year. The social budget in the other municipality was set at LVL 12 000 per year. In the town, of the LVL 2 million total municipal budget, 5.4% or LVL 108 000 was spent on social assistance. Although in this particular case, the share of the municipal budget spent on social assistance is equal in the town and the rural municipality, should be seen rather as a coincidence than as a rule. Other studies (by the World Bank; Norbalt) show that the finance available to the municipalities – both as a share of the budget and in terms of amount – varies very much (Milanovic 1999; Grønningstær et al., 2001).

According to the local regulations, the municipal social assistance office can use money both from the state, the municipality or any other sources.

²⁶ 10 – 20 LVL

Policies and change

As regards the information collected during the focus group meetings and the interviews with the heads of the municipalities, not all relevant issues related to political change were discussed. Instead we decided to focus on some central topics in more depth. In this presentation we have divided them into four. First, we discuss *the role of social assistance* in Latvia and how the administration and social workers themselves perceive the goal and purpose of such assistance. The *budgetary hardships* that are experienced by local governments were very present in the minds of all our informants, and this is the second topic discussed below. The third topic relates to the level of *decentralization* of social assistance benefits and services and the implementation of the policy. Finally, and unavoidably, quite a lot of discussion centred around the possibility of introduction of a *Guaranteed Minimum Income* and some of the perceived implications of such a reform.

The role of social assistance

The social workers were asked by us what they themselves see as the goals of social assistance, and they offered no conflicting views on this issue. The overall goal was said to be to assist those people who cannot function independently. It was recognized that social assistance includes both social benefits and social care. According to one of the social workers from the focus group:

Social assistance is not simply a question of money. Very often it is to give advice, help to solve day-to-day questions.

It is worth mentioning that the concept of social assistance as aid to the needy groups of society in Latvia was introduced only in 1994 with the first social law, the “Law on Social Assistance”. This law is in effect also at present. Before that, the concept of social assistance did not exist. The first law that tried to address social assistance, the “Law on state and municipal assistance in solving apartment-related issues” was passed in 1993. The intention of the law was to deal with the increasing inequality in incomes due to market economy and a consequent inability of some groups of people to cover the apartment costs. As a follow-up of the law, the Cabinet of Ministers passed regulations that defined needy persons for the purpose of the law; recommendations of the Cabinet of Ministers that suggested the amount of the apartment benefit were also developed. Financial support to cover the apartment expenses was the only type of social assistance until the “Law on Social Assistance”. Before 1993, there were in theory no unemployed and no people in need. Understanding and interpretation of social assistance as such is therefore a challenge both for the social workers and the society.

Furthermore, over the last years the focus within social assistance has moved from social benefits to social care. The change towards more alternative forms of assistance was seen as a positive trend by the social workers. As it will become clear later in the report, it takes time for policy makers as well as social workers and inhabitants to adjust to the new concept and focus of social assistance.

In the beginning of the 1990s, when social assistance budgets were generous, the main aim was simply to distribute money. None of the social workers spoke out against the increasing importance of social care.

The two-way communication between the social worker and the client is regarded as an important component should the social assistance become more effective. According to one of the social workers from the focus group:

It is necessary to put right the mistakes that were done in the beginning – only hand out. Everything is dependent on people themselves. The clients themselves should be involved in solving their own problems. This is the only way they can be solved.

The head of the urban municipality gave the following aim of social assistance:

The main aim is that all people should be able to live a decent life even in situations where a person cannot manage either financially or physically. Secondly, the social assistance should help people to return to their usual environment. However, it does not work like this at present. Rather, the tendency has become permanent social assistance. People are born receivers and will die as such.

As we see, there is a general recognition that social assistance involves more than just distributing money and that, ideally, it should involve short-term relief in a period of special hardship. The gap between the aim and the real situation was, however, stressed by many of the informants.

Resources

Since the beginning of development of social assistance system at the beginning of 1990s, state financial support for provision of social assistance in municipalities has not been constant.

Presently, there are no permanent transfers from the state to the municipalities for development or provision of social assistance²⁷. The municipalities point to a gap between the intended policies and the means available for their implementation on the local level. The head of the rural municipality says:

Until now, I think that no law has taken into account the real life experience.

“There is just a game”, said the head of the town municipality. He believes the state is well aware of the lack of possibilities for the municipalities to fulfill their tasks in accordance with the law, and continues:

The state is well aware of the possibilities of the municipalities. There are constantly lies. If we ask the state to announce the cost of each service, which the municipalities are supposed to provide, they are not willing to do so.

(...) If we compose the budget according to the amount of money needed for each of the tasks of the municipality, the budget for our municipality would increase by around 70 million. The state cannot do it, because then it would realize that it could only ensure the functions of the municipality by 20%. So when the state complains about the municipalities not fulfilling the law, our counterargument is that only 20% of the needed finances are present. The state has no resources to accomplish its own programs.

²⁷ With an exception of benefits for guardianship and foster care that are among the state benefits

There have been no explicit calculations that would determine the amount of money necessary for the types of social assistance expected from the municipalities according to the national legislation. That is, it has not been said explicitly what kind of social assistance a municipality is able to, and therefore required to, provide. It cannot be expected due to insufficient financial resources.

Local finance to the social assistance system in municipalities of our focus group has not been constant either.

Not unexpectedly, the reduction in financial resources available to the social assistance offices was seen as a negative development by the social workers in the focus group. Several of the social workers referred to the lower share of the national and the local budgets that were allocated to social assistance benefits and services. Not only is the number of recipients of social assistance benefits reduced in the district, but also the municipalities have had to cut back on services or need to buy them from neighboring municipalities. At the same time the number of poor people has increased. According to one of the social workers from the focus group:

There simply is not enough money to distribute to those who are in need of help.

Insufficient financial resources were a current concern in all of the municipalities in our study. However, the problem was on two levels: Namely, development or daily provision of social assistance. In the town municipality, the problem was finance for social assistance development projects, such as a day care centre. Implementation of the project depended on priorities within the municipality. With regard to benefits, as a result of state co-finance of social benefits at the beginning of 1990, which was later withdrawn, it was hard for the municipality to keep up the previously high benefit levels. The issue was the amount of the benefit, not provision of the benefit per se.

The rural municipalities in our study were dealing with the latter issue. That is, their concerns were often on the level of everyday provision of the benefits. The budget for social assistance constituted a significant part of the total municipal budget. In addition, the social workers of our focus group commented that the percentage of the poor people among the total population is higher in the rural municipalities than in the town.

Considering the differences in available resources among the municipalities, it is not a surprise that the social workers of our focus group did not think that experience from building a social assistance system in one of the richest municipalities, Riga, could provide useful input to development of activities in their local municipalities. Especially, the social workers from rural municipalities regarded the social assistance in Riga as having access to resources and being in a state of development that could be matched in the countryside.

Centralisation/decentralisation

The policy of the state regarding the social assistance provision in municipalities has been to decentralise the system and move the responsibility for provision down to the local level. The intention is to cut administration cost. Being sole receivers and spenders of the money, it is expected that the municipalities will become more active in development of alternative and cheaper social assistance solutions.

Presently, implementation of the decentralization policy in municipalities is facing a serious challenge. The requirements put on municipalities by the central level in the

municipalities of our focus group were not fully implemented. The rural head of municipality admitted that

(...we) break the rules of the Cabinet of Ministers. (...) We do not apply these rules. We have our own rules, and we have our own benefits.

The main reason for this is lack of relevant financial resources to back up the provision of social assistance at the local level.

The tendency to decentralize the system is observed not only within the field of social assistance, but also other policy areas. The different ministries are, in the opinion of the head of one of the municipalities, not able to coordinate their work, expecting all the municipalities to give priority to their field. The result is that the municipalities are not able to fulfill their duties in accordance with the legislation. The local administration has no other choice but try to find alternative solutions as to how to cope with the many responsibilities that the municipality cannot afford to finance.

The social workers who mentioned the issue were all concerned with the lower priority given to social assistance over the past years. However, according to the head of the town municipality social assistance and education are highest on the list of priorities for the town council, as they have always been. The head of the municipality argued that one could not simply solve problems by increasing the social assistance budget, since this would affect the overall economy of the municipality and would stop development:

This means that we have to look after the interests of the working people, the taxpayers, as we cannot afford to lose them. We have to ensure reasonable living conditions and a good living environment for all those living here in the municipality.

Several of the interviewed believed that more decisions should be made at the local level and favored a decentralized system. Head of municipality B put it like this:

In general, if the municipality has its own money, why should the people at the central level know more about our needs than we do?

Guaranteed minimum income

Very present in the minds of the informants, both the social workers and the heads of the administration, was the introduction of a guaranteed minimum income²⁸. This issue was mentioned on their own accord without the introduction by us. The district we visited did not take part in the pilot of the implementation of this reform. During all our interviews we did not encounter anyone who spoke favorably about a possible introduction of a guaranteed minimum income.

The heads of both municipalities were mostly concerned with the possibility of implementing the reform without sufficient resources. The head of the municipality in the town municipality A believed it will lead to chaos when it is implemented:

It is not clear to me how to carry out the (GMI) reform. One thing is clear, however, it will end in chaos. There are not enough resources.

²⁸ For more on this reform, see Grønningsæter, Aasland and Loza, 2001.

The GMI is interpreted as another area where the ministries prepare laws without taking into account the real situation in other parts of the country outside the capital Riga. As stated by the head of the rural municipality B:

It is easy to write laws. We were considering, for example, participating in GMI, but then decided that it is not possible. It is only possible if the state participates financially.

The GMI is therefore seen as yet another reform which it is not possible to implement in practice:

It is impossible with the current budget. The state should come and participate financially.

Problems related to the GMI that came up in the focus group discussions were the fear that there would be no clear rules, not enough money to support the reform, difficulties with finding the criteria for the evaluation of the income, difficulties for the general public in understanding the rules and regulations, and even that it could lead to a negative personal attitude towards the social worker.

National organizations: their role in provision of local social assistance

The key national players connected to social assistance in the municipalities are the Ministry of Welfare, the Social Assistance Fund and the Equalization Fund. Their roles and responsibilities are described earlier in this report.

Based on our interviews we can conclude that cooperation and coordination with these organizations at the local level is poor. There is no factual evidence of cooperation or coordination activities neither on the level of the heads of the municipalities that were interviewed, nor on the level of social workers from the focus group.

The opinion held among the municipal heads as well as the social workers regarding the Ministry of Welfare (MoW) is that the decision makers (MoW and Saeima) are disconnected from the real situation. One of the social workers said:

In Saeima, the Riga “lords” are far from the life on the countryside.

Legislation provided by the Ministry of Welfare is not being implemented and the social assistance works according to local regulations.

Experience with the Social Assistance Fund (SAF) is limited. The majority of the municipalities had not received a visit from SAF at all. Those who had were confused about the Fund’s role and commented that the employees of the Fund “do not understand anything”. Another social assistance office employee said that the Fund “should get to know the local situation” and it suggests that also the Fund, not only the Ministry, is perceived as having no connection to the local situation.

The employees on the local level lack information about SAF’s role. According to one of the social workers from the focus group:

What it (the Fund) does, I do not know...

The employees do not see how the Fund could help to improve the social assistance provision on the local level and, therefore, think that the Fund is an unprofessional and a useless institution.

One of the social workers would not comply with the requirements made on social assistance administration in local municipalities by the SAF about recoding and storing the client information. In the social worker's opinion, these requirements were not progressive, but on the contrary not fit for use:

I will not go 5 steps back to implement the requirements of the Fund.

The third body related to provision of social assistance is the Equalization fund (EF). It is recognized as a good idea to make a more equal distribution of funding for social assistance among the municipalities, but is criticized for functioning poorly. The mechanism used by EF does not ensure a more equal funding for social assistance, because the funding is not earmarked. Instead, the money is being transferred to the total municipal budget. Depending on local priorities, social assistance may or may not benefit from it. The social workers in the study said that it was impossible to get it. Secondly, EF is criticized for working with old and irrelevant data that provide a false insight into the municipal needs and resources.

Networking with any other organizations outside the local community is also poor. Except for a few study visits to other local assistance offices the social workers had no connection to any professional organizations in the field.

Local politicians: their role in provision of local social assistance

Due to limited connections to institutions outside the local municipality and the ability of the local policy makers to decide on the social assistance forms and financing, the local situation is an important factor that guides behavior and decisions of the social assistance employees.

The two key local political players, who influence the provision of social assistance, are the Municipal Council and the Social Issues Committee. The Social Issues Committee (SIC) is the first higher standing institution after the social assistance office in the decision-making chain regarding social assistance-related questions.. All of the sampled municipalities had established a SIC, and SICs are typical for municipalities all over Latvia.

The role of the SIC is to review provision of the social assistance to the inhabitants. The local regulations require that the SIC approves each individual case of social assistance recipients. In our district the SICs typically met twice a month. The applications for the social assistance were to be accumulated until the meeting.

The employees of the social assistance office cooperate and coordinate with the committee through presenting the information and their ideas in the committee's meetings. In all cases the social workers prepared material for discussion. Our investigation, however, revealed that the approach to decision making used by the SICs in the municipalities varied from a detailed review of the presented information to relying on suggestions made by the social workers.

A social worker who had previous experience in local politics said she had a significant influence on the decisions of the local SIC:

After three years of work together with the social commission, the deputies have “grown” in their knowledge, they have been educated (by the social worker). It is a pity that new deputies will come and the (educating) work will need to be started over again”.

Other social workers had more limited influence:

Should the social worker wait for the meeting to take place, or could she (they were all women) make an independent decision? The members of the focus group agreed that the social worker should make independent decisions in emergency situations. In some municipalities, the freedom to act in emergency situations was already provided for by local regulations. At the same time, the workers were expected to contact the local SIC or the city council in case of larger and more costly emergencies.

All of the social workers interviewed tried to influence the debate of the commission by “pointing to questions more important for discussion” among the other ones on the agenda. A typical opinion among the social workers of the focus group was that more authority should be delegated to them.

If the deputy does not trust his or her own employee, well, then we have a problem, said one of the social workers.

The relationships with the committee were in all of the cases from our study either good or reasonable.

Involvement of the Municipal Council in decision-making among the represented municipalities was even more varied. In the town municipality the council was not dealing with individual cases, but with questions on a strategic level, such as social assistance norms, types and defining benefit thresholds. In the rural municipalities, on the contrary, the Municipal Councils were involved with individual cases much more frequently. The head of the town municipality commented on the situation in the following way:

We have the privilege here in the town that we have resources enough to afford some planning... In rural municipalities the system is crippled... The municipal councils may take individual decisions there, because there is not enough money to help everyone who needs it.

Indeed, the head of the rural municipality B referred to social assistance applicants as “coming to us” and it was “we” who make the decision, thereby indicating the council’s close involvement in everyday provision of social assistance.

Local politics are recognized as a very important force that have a large influence on the development of social assistance. The social workers think that the politicians often do not bother to obtain a thorough understanding of the issues, but wish only to execute power. The head of the town council’s attitude is the following:

I do not think that our social workers have great big ideas, but, of course, they are the ones who know the needs.

Yet the discussion was ongoing and there were constant disagreements. According to one of the social workers from the focus group:

They (the deputies) say: “he is driving a car, he does not need any social assistance.

On a more strategic level in case of the town municipality:

How can the deputies say that we do not need a night shelter when people sleep in the street?

The examples show that opinions are varied and that debating them requires a considerable effort from the side of the social workers:

There are issues (social assistance), which the social workers agree should be implemented, but we (the social workers) are neither voters nor decision makers, we provide only ideas...

All of the social workers agreed that the people involved in the decision-making (both the committee representatives and the council) are not always proficient enough in social issues. The social workers claim, however, that the deputies have become more knowledgeable over time.

Provision of social assistance in local municipalities

From the discussion of the local regulations above we know that the local social assistance does not reflect the national law to the full extent. But do the municipalities actually provide the social assistance as prescribed by the local regulation? Are there any problems encountered? The head of the town municipality said:

I know too well that local municipalities only have one type of benefit or that the benefits are being individually evaluated.

The social workers noted that there are municipalities where all the money for social assistance is spent on transportation benefits for children to go to the school, as there is no school available nearby. Another municipality may choose spend all or a significant part of the money to sponsor school lunches for all the children of the municipality.

The processes involved in provision of the social assistance in the town municipality are usually standard: application – income declaration (for benefits) – information received from the applicant is compared to local regulations to determine eligibility – the social assistance employee makes a decision – the decision is presented to the Social Issues Commission and, because of clear criteria applied, usually accepted – the decision is presented to the applicant.

A similar application would at a rural office undergo the following processes: application – income declaration (for benefits), which in many cases is not used – based on the provided and the personally available information, the social worker makes an intuitive decision – the decision is brought up to the Social Issues Commission – the discussion continues at a Municipal Council meeting – a certain decision, based on the opinions and the available finance, is made – it is presented to the applicant.

Officially, the municipalities are required to base their decisions on the Income Declaration, developed by the Cabinet of Ministers (CoM)²⁹. The income is understood as cash income and value of movable and immovable property and bank accounts.

The Income Declaration is confusing to both the social assistance employees from the town and the rural municipalities, and it is used by neither of them to a full extent. The

town municipality does use the declaration, with exception of a few points. The points impossible to use are those regarding the value of property. Not all of the houses have an established value. Evaluation of the property is expensive. Therefore, inclusion of property value into one's income would be difficult. In addition to property value, the social assistance office in town D excluded also the value of cars from the income.

In rural municipalities of the sample, the Income Declaration provided only additional information, or was not used at all. These were the words of one of the social workers from the focus group:

We have broken the rules (about the Income Declaration) of the CoM.

First, the workers said it as difficult to control hidden employment in the countryside. This is a widely known phenomenon, and the official declaration does not take hidden employment into account. The social workers are uncertain whether they should act as the "good" guys and disregard the hidden employment, or the "bad" guys who take the hidden source of income into account when calculating one's total income. The approaches differ, but hidden employment always remains a factor to be considered.

Second, income in the countryside has a different value than in a town or city. A social worker from the focus group says:

The criteria of determining who is rich and who is poor are different in cities and in the countryside.

If applying the official criteria:

At least half of the inhabitants should receive the benefit for the needy people.

Income other than cash income is very important in the countryside. The head of the rural municipality of our study put it like this:

I am not at my present situation for the first year, but I am still uncertain how it should be possible to evaluate the real income of people in the countryside.

As regards provision of other forms of social assistance, it is limited. The so-called "social support" in form of advice was being performed. As none of the municipalities had a psychologist or formally educated social workers, the advice given was not always professional. As we will see in the section about the social workers below, they felt they lack knowledge to handle the task professionally. Home help was the only alternative form of social assistance provided in the rural municipalities.

All of the municipalities from the focus group had introduced home care for elderly and lonely people. However, home care was not always sufficient. According to one of the social workers from the focus group:

It's a pity that we are yet not able to ensure home care so that the (elderly) people do not need to leave their homes for the nursing home.

Among the problems connected to provision of the home care was the difficulty of matching the personalities of the home-helpers with those of the patients.

²⁹ CoM rules nr. 75

The town municipality was the only one where the home-care was provided by a non-governmental organization (NGO): the Red Cross. It was also the only one that had established a social care centre.

In addition to home help, both the rural and the town municipality sent their clients to social assistance institutions for elderly and for children, and rehabilitation centres. Access to the latter was very limited due to the high demand among the municipalities and the limited number of places available.

The town municipality was aware of the fact that the state finance for institutions will gradually be withdrawn. The head of the municipality says:

We are trying to localize the system – the services that can be provided locally, are provided locally

Two of the social workers said that the institutions are favored neither by the clients nor the social workers. Especially the elderly patients would rather stay at home, but the municipality did not have sufficient support available. Indeed, as one of the social workers said:

The elderly are taken to a social care institution only in case of final necessity. The institution is so badly tolerated that it often ends in a patient's death.

In addition to home help and assistance in institutions, the town municipality had set up a special social assistance centre with day care units for the elderly, crisis centre for children, a home help unit and a night shelter. None of these services were available at any of the rural municipalities. The services of the centre could be outsourced, but at the time of the study, very few rural inhabitants had been using the night shelter. In general outsourcing of services is not a widely used option. There are only very few outsourcing cases – for example, one of the rural municipalities had sent a group of children to another municipality where the children received professional treatment for an illness. The rural municipalities claim to have no money available to outsource social assistance services.

Rehabilitation is another alternative form of social assistance. None of the municipalities had any social rehabilitation facilities available locally. Aside from financial reasons, it has to do with lack of appropriate staff. The social workers from rural areas claimed that it is difficult for rural municipalities to attract professional staff. It was again the social workers who tried to take steps to “rehabilitate” cases, but they were not professional enough.

It is interesting to note that it was the social worker from the town municipality with most developed social assistance who believed that the role of money would gradually decrease. Furthermore, the social worker from the town municipality also had most of the ideas about further development of the assistance – a day-care centre for children that would make it possible for the mothers to work. Another idea was to establish a crisis centre for children. A unit for work with families with children was at the time of the interviews (June 2000) being developed. Ideas from other social workers included psychological counseling, but were expressed rather as ideas than possible future actions.

The social workers claim that alternative forms of social assistance are met with suspicion from the side of the society. According to the social workers, people are not used to the “social care” part of the assistance – the society is not ready for it yet. Psychological barriers to approach the office do exist, and the social workers need to take extra care not to

insult the recipients, especially older recipients. People are reluctant to change their attitude even if the social worker explains why it is necessary.

In particular, change of the benefit system from a universal one to a system based on the needs of the clients has been especially difficult to introduce. According to the social workers, the clients do not wish to participate in own assistance, but see the office as a bank.

The social workers, however, seem determined to change the popular perception of social assistance as easy-to-receive social benefits:

Today is not like yesterday when a family with many children could come and simply ask for money.

The motivation of social workers to do so is twofold. First, the social workers believe that the previous system, which in essence consisted of social benefits available to certain categories of inhabitants, is not effective and may result in an even less equal distribution of resources.

Secondly, the system in which it is possible for people to live on benefits is not fair. A social worker says:

After all, we all have arms and legs, why don't we just go out into the labor market and start working.

Some of the social workers believe that presently, social assistance goes mostly to alcoholics and lazy people:

When will there be a time when social benefits will go to a normal family?

Unearned benefits are provided not only within the social assistance, but also the social insurance system. The social workers interviewed did not approve of a situation when a person who has willingly left his or her job, is entitled to an unemployment benefit.

Introduction of public work in return for social benefits has been one of the measures taken to prevent people from abusing the social benefit system. Public work in return for social benefits means that the benefit is earned by working for the municipality (in municipal enterprises). In town D, public work is assigned in return for the benefits for needy families as well as the child benefit. Sickness of the recipient is the only excuse for not taking part in public work. In both town and one of the rural municipalities, the public work was exchanged for a free lunch at school. While in the rural municipality it was the parents who were providing the labor, in the town the children themselves provided it. The system had developed so far that the school itself employed most of the children with no direct involvement of the social assistance office. For the children who are employed by the municipality, their employment was planned in cooperation with a child specialist.

In a similar fashion, parents covered the expenses of school maintenance (typically covered by parents of the children in Latvian high-schools). In the town municipality, the public work was recognized as a very useful tool to help the inhabitants maintain their income and as system worked well among the municipalities of the focus group according to our informants.

In rural areas, there is competition among the recipients of benefits to be employed by the municipality. The reason for this was that municipal work is regarded as being less burdensome than work at a private farm. In a private farm, the owner of the farm would put

harder demands on the employee and also control the work more without substantially higher salaries:

Why should one get up early and milk a cow if it is possible to get up at 9 am for public work?

The social workers said they have observed that some people are proud of being “registered unemployed” and living on the expense of the municipality.

Despite measures taken to prevent abuse of social assistance, the social workers gave examples of how it sometimes is being creatively abused. For example, some recipients of food coupons had learned to falsify the coupons in order to purchase sugar and make spirit.

Among problems encountered by the social workers in their daily job were mentioned recording and storing the client information. Who should be recorded, what should be recorded and how should it be done? First, there are many people who visit the office only “on their way”. Are they the clients of the office and should they be recorded? Second, the official requirement to keep detailed information about each of the visitors is not widely supported. How should one deal with the clients who refuse to, or cannot, provide all the necessary detailed information? Third, in absence of an electronic database, recording and filing the client information can be a very time-consuming process, and it is difficult to administer. The question of confidentiality and abuse of sensitive information was not raised by any of the social workers, however.

Social workers and their job in the local municipalities

All the social workers in our focus group had started to work as social workers in the middle of the 1990s. It is worth noting that none of them originally had a social worker education, but had all undergone various training courses. Their previous jobs were in agriculture, sales and in other areas not related to social work at all. Not all of the respondents were employed as social workers full time. Apart from social work, they were performing other municipal responsibilities. For example, one was a planner of municipal development; another acted as a local deputy.

In some municipalities, the task description of the social workers is given in the local regulations. The social assistance office employee is expected to provide benefits and advice; organize home help; keep and up-date a client data base; make analysis; provide statistics of the local social situation; provide information and ideas to the Social Issues Committee; inform inhabitants of the municipality about their rights to receive assistance; provide a reasonable application procedure and office hours; guarantee quality of the service and confidentiality. The employee is expected to constantly raise qualification and coordinate and cooperate with other organizations that work in the field of social assistance.

In the town municipality, there is a larger expected focus on development of social assistance and monitoring of social assistance institutions that are subordinated to the town’s council as well as coordination of human aid within the town.

The role of a social worker as perceived by the workers themselves was different in the town compared to the rural municipalities. The rural social workers regarded themselves as a distributor of the tight social assistance resources, and somebody who tries to keep the

unfavorable social situation at least on the existing level. In the town, the social worker had a longer-term perspective. In addition to the daily routines, she sees herself as a matron of further development of social assistance services in the municipality. Among the respondents was also a representative of the regional social assistance office. Due to the coordinating profile and structure of the regional office (it had two employees and a driver), the social worker felt less related to every day provision of the assistance and her role was more managerial.

The social workers of local offices participate in solving a wide range of problems encountered by the local inhabitants. As perceived by the social workers themselves, their role is “to be a manager and a subordinate at the same time”. Besides payment of benefits and organization of social assistance for the vulnerable groups, the social workers may get involved in personal problems of the inhabitants on a detailed level. Examples are problems a mother has with her daughter who wants to flee from home after she has completed the primary education, or a bad relationship with one’s neighbors and others.

Indeed, the social assistance office is perceived as a place where to turn to in various situations in life. It is also a place to visit when passing by, especially among the elderly people. Very often, people turn to the office with questions that are not related to social assistance. The social assistance office is expected to have various information including pensions, taxes and housing.

The social workers participate actively in local social life. Examples from our study include support to a local NGO for elderly people and organization of an excursion for school children.

The social workers think that the job of a social worker has become more and more difficult over time as the duties have expanded. The social workers complain about lack of time. It is difficult and time consuming for them to gather and remember all the information:

In order to know everything, we need to be involved in everything.

The social workers, however, try to reach up to the expectations of the inhabitants. For example, they attend all the meetings of the Municipal Council. Another reason for the social workers to try to stay updated is that tasks that are not their responsibility are easier done than delegated. There is no evidence that the social workers would, however, refuse to perform the tasks that are not their responsibilities. At the same time, the social workers do not feel comfortable with all of their tasks. In all of the municipalities, provision of the benefit to needy often involves the social workers making sure that the money is spent on food. In one of the municipalities, the worker had to accompany the recipient of the benefit to a food shop:

They (alcoholics) do not understand. There is a certain discomfort involved.

At the same time, the social workers agree that doing the shopping together is a better solution than having the person spend the money on alcohol and dealing with financial problems later on.

The social workers recognize lack of knowledge and experience in their work. This is related to the multiple tasks they perform and a lack of time to accomplish everything. In particular, the workers would like to have more knowledge about psychology. They would

also like to have a guidebook for social workers, availability to use computers and databases for their clients.

Furthermore, due to the high importance of the local politics in social assistance, the workers recognize their lack of skills necessary to influence the local political decisions:

We all wish to study...in order to become more clever and have skills to convince the politicians that the social policy should go into this or that direction.

With regard the future, the views expressed were rather pessimistic. For example, the workers believe that there will be more hidden income and more cheating in the social security system.

Social assistance – to whom and what?

Vulnerable groups

While unemployed, families with many children and single breadwinner households were singled out as the most vulnerable; it was no agreement whether or not pensioners should be included. One of the social workers was bewildered by the statistics showing that the pensioners are not among the poorest in the country:

When pensioners are said to be among the richest persons in the state, something must be completely wrong. (...) Sometimes it is so painful to listen to those pensioners, even though I understand...

Some of the social workers held the view that all families with children could be considered as households at risk. Nearly all such families experienced financial problems.

The head of the town municipality said that unemployment was a bigger problem in the district than what is the average for the country, and several of the social workers also claim unemployment to be a very big burden on the social assistance resources. Young people who leave school and cannot find work were mentioned as a special case by a social worker:

If someone has only nine years of school, who would then employ such a person?

Some were also concerned with the large group of people in working age who degrade because of addiction to alcohol and drugs, a problem seen as particularly worrying in the rural municipalities.

Disabled were also mentioned as a risk group. The same was the case with people who have just come out of prison. In the words of the head of the rural municipality:

These people are not fit to live in freedom because they are used to other people providing everything for them.

Roma people were not mentioned as a risk group by anyone, but were mentioned by the rural head of municipality as a group receiving special attention:

Another unpleasant problem concerns the gypsies that we have here. Their cultural attitude to work is that one doesn't work. They are also on social assistance. (...) They

come; they fill in the {income} declaration. We give the benefits: Free lunch for the children, we help to keep their flats in an acceptable condition. We try to help as best we can. The gypsies would be glad if they could come here for benefits every day.

Priorities

In a World Bank report on poverty assessment, Latvia was grouped together with Estonia and Poland in a typology of the importance of social assistance where the number of recipients is low but where social assistance is relatively important for the recipients (Milanovic, 2000). With the relatively high degree of discretion that the social workers have on the distribution of social assistance, their priorities will have a great impact on the allocation of resources. For potential receivers the decisions may have serious implications.

All the interviewees who spoke on the issue held the opinion that under the present budgetary constraints they need to make priorities about which groups and individuals that should receive social assistance. However, there were some conflicting views on whom should be given the priority.

Some of the interviewed said that all groups experience hardships and should be given assistance when they need it. However, there was some concern among several of the social workers whether it is worthwhile to assist alcoholics and drug addicts:

All groups should receive assistance (...) except alcoholics and drug addicts. It is too difficult to deal with these people. We may be able to help for a while, but after a month they are back.

It was also claimed that drug addicts and alcoholics misuse public money and that it is too difficult to deal with them. Some claimed one could help these groups only by using food coupons or other in kind support (see below).

Children stand out as the group most commonly mentioned as highest on the list of priorities for receiving social assistance. In the worst cases, with hardly anything left on the budget for social assistance, children are still likely to receive some help. However, the social workers were not very specific on how they make their priorities. To a large extent such priorities appear to be left to the discretion of the social worker. One social worker mentioned as an example that they had bought a cow for social assistance money to a needy family to help the children in the household.

Whether or not pensioners should be among priority groups to be helped by social assistance was another debated issue. The social workers were aware of research showing that pensioners are no longer among the most needy and that you find few pensioners among the poorest segments of the population, but still several of the informants claimed that pensioners have special needs and few alternative income sources. For example, elderly people have health problems more often than the young that make them in need of special attention from the social workers. This was one of the reasons why many people in the districts were negative to the introduction of a guaranteed minimum income (GMI). The introduction of such a reform would reduce the opportunities to give help to pensioners and others belonging to the moderate-income groups but with special needs.

There was some concern among the social workers in the focus group that local politicians interfere with the decisions made by social workers. In other words, the priorities of

social workers need to be confirmed by local administration. In many cases local administration rule over decisions made by social workers, and often make ad-hoc changes. Both the local administrators that we talked to, however, were clear that there was little or no such interference with the day-to-day work of social workers. When the administration interferes, it concerns the major policy issues and setting up rules and regulations, and not individual cases, according to the heads of the administration.

Cash or in-kind assistance

The social workers and the heads of municipalities who spoke on the issue all favored in-kind assistance to cash benefits. Some benefits are also transferred directly without involving the recipient, such as housing benefits. There had also been a trend towards more benefits in kind over the past years and several reasons were mentioned for this. Most importantly, the informants claimed that benefits in kind were better targeted. For example, if you want to help the children in needy families, instead of handing out money to unemployed parents, many of whom are not responsible in dealing with money, children get free transport and free food at school.

In the town food coupons were a typical form of social assistance. In the rural area provision of firewood in the winter was common. But what about cases where there are other needs than food? As the head of the town municipality said:

Surely, there are also some individual cases when a person needs to buy something else than food. We evaluate this individually then. This need arises because the people work at the farms and are paid in kind already, so they need some clothing instead of food.

The head of the rural municipality gave an example of the type of assistance given to ex-prisoners:

The social worker goes together with the ex-prisoner to the shop for food. When the food is out, the person comes back again. We also have cooperation with the school, and the ex-prisoners receive free lunches there. They sometimes work for the school as well.

The implications of the guaranteed minimum income on the in-cash or in-kind assistance were, according to some of the social workers, not fully clear. The social workers and the heads of the municipalities were unable to give a uniform answer as to whether or not it will be possible to pay out some of the GMI in kind; although they all assumed this would be the case. Housing benefits will, for example, be deducted from the payable amount of the guaranteed income. However, the question itself was not considered as particularly relevant, since no one believed that there would be enough money to pay out the guaranteed minimum income to everyone who is entitled to it anyway.

Other issues with implications for allocation of resources

The present system of basing allocation of social assistance on information filled out in the income declaration opens up for cheating. There are many people who work but who do not have an employer who pays social taxes, and it is therefore difficult to assess their current salary. This prevents the allocation of resources to those most in need. One of the social workers expressed the fear that there would be even more cheating in the future. In the

rural area the head of the municipality admitted that the income declaration is not used as basis for allocation of social assistance, rather it is used as a control function. In the town, however, as we have already seen, the income declaration is more often taken into consideration when social assistance is being allocated.

Summary and discussion

Within the Latvian social assistance system, social security and social assistance policy is the competence of the Ministry of Welfare. The providers of the social assistance are the local municipalities, while the Social Assistance Fund's role is to monitor the implementation of the social policy. Social assistance in Latvia is understood to be composed of social benefits, social care and social rehabilitation.

The municipalities receive only a fraction of Latvia's taxes, and the municipal social assistance is to be financed from municipal budgets. For each of the services the source of finance needs to be clearly identified. Social assistance is currently provided both by the state and the municipalities. The state benefits, however, are targeted to certain groups of inhabitants rather than needy people. In certain cases such as foster families and guardianship, the finance is provided by the state while the provision of the service is left to the municipality.

There are many municipalities which have not yet established social assistance offices. Some do not even have a social worker. Only a small fraction of the social workers in the country have relevant professional education, while many of the social workers are currently undergoing training in courses.

Indepth investigation into one Latvian district shows that there is lack of communication between the policy making level and the local municipalities. The role of the Social Assistance Fund on the local level is not clear, and the Social Assistance Fund's involvement in provision of social assistance is marginal. The information and feedback exchange between the Ministry of Welfare and the local municipalities is not functioning. The local politicians and the social workers regard themselves as having to face a situation where centrally made decisions bear no consideration for the local environment.

A clear source of finance for each type of social assistance has not been identified. In our case, insufficient finance of the system was an acute problem faced by heads of the municipalities and the social workers both in rural areas and the town municipality. In the opinion of the local politicians, the municipal budget was insufficient to finance the types of social assistance provided for by the law already. The question of how much finance the local municipalities would need to be able to provide a reasonable level of social assistance services, however, remains open as no threshold minimum level or any other benchmark has been determined. It is therefore not possible to judge if the finance available at the municipalities is insufficient or not.

Development of social assistance aside from social benefits was observed only in the town municipality. For the rural municipalities, the social workers found it difficult to find sufficient finance to provide basic social assistance. Adding new municipal social assistance responsibilities would only be possible in case they be accompanied with adequate financing.

The social assistance provided by the local municipalities does not fully reflect the municipal obligations under the national law. Each of the municipalities in our study had

developed local regulations that were considered better fit to municipal interests and possibilities. It was the local regulations that framed provision of social assistance in the municipalities, not national ones. Because the local regulations across the municipalities are different, the possibility for inhabitants to receive the social assistance is not equal. The funding of social assistance in relation to local budget as well as in absolute terms, vary.

Despite recent policy debates with the aim of developing of alternative care, the social assistance in the municipalities was dominated by provision of social benefits. Except for provision of home help, additional forms of social care were only available at the town municipality. Social rehabilitation components appeared neither on the level of local regulations, nor was it provided in reality. It should also be mentioned here that social care and social rehabilitation are vaguely defined also on the national level. No benchmarking or explanations of what the two types of assistance should include is provided.

The "umbrella style" of the national law, debates over the financing of assistance and the intention to decentralize the system delegates considerable power and authority for social assistance development on the local level to local politicians. The influence of politicians and local politics on provision of social assistance was felt also by the social workers of the focus group. The views and opinions of the social workers and the politicians were often different. The social workers felt a lack of skill and power to efficiently argue for their case.

The role and influence of the social worker in development of local assistance in the various municipalities was different. On the local level, the intermediary between the social workers and the municipal council is a Social Issues Committee. It is a municipal political body with a responsibility for social questions in the municipality. The interaction among the social workers, the Social Issues Committee and the Municipal Council was more formal in the town municipality than in the rural ones. In the town, the municipal council did not interact with everyday provision of social assistance, but was dealing with questions on a more strategic level. The rules that guided social workers and the committee in provision of everyday assistance were more standard and detailed than in the rural municipalities, and were strictly followed.

In rural municipalities, in contrast, the roles of the social worker, the committee and the city council were often overlapping. The council was involved in social assistance provision on the level of an individual client. The different roles in the town and rural municipalities are closely connected to the availability of social assistance finance. The lack of funding in the rural municipalities was considered to prevent application of uniform rules, and resulted in a necessity to evaluate each case individually. Personal opinions, community information and the availability of finance influenced the decision to provide social assistance in the rural municipalities significantly. In the town, the decision is largely based on the information provided by the client. Social assistance provision in the town municipality was more uniform and standard than in the rural municipalities.

Local social assistance (mostly benefits) tends to support disabled and the elderly, especially the lonely elderly people as well as children. Less often, the benefits are for the needy families or families from a social risk group. The priorities among the municipalities, however, are different.

The social workers in our study were typical for the situation in the county as a whole in that their educational background was other than social work. Their tasks were varied and on different levels of activity – managerial or everyday tasks; work with an individual, fam-

ily, local political organization or another type of organization; tasks related to social assistance and those that have little connection to it. All of the social workers, however, experienced lack of professionalism and skill to deal with the complex social situation, the role of the social assistance office and that of the worker. Many people are used to receiving unconditional social benefits and refuse to accept social assistance as a means to actively participate and improve one's own condition. Belief in other assistance than benefits is not very strong yet. The social assistance office is furthermore often perceived as providing support in any situation of life. As a result, the demands on the social workers are high. Not all workers in our study were happy about their role in the local community. Policy solutions such as GMI that threaten to increase the pressure even further were therefore viewed with great suspicion.

The municipalities have introduced measures to increase the social assistance recipients' (mostly – benefit recipients') participatory role through social work. The town municipality was engaged in provision of social work more actively than the rural municipalities. The reasons for this are firstly the more active attitude towards the changing role of the social assistance assumed by the town municipality. Secondly, the potential use of social work was more valuable in the town than in the rural municipalities, and thirdly, the rural municipalities assumed that laboring for rural family farms is an alternative source of income open to those who are willing to deliver.

The social assistance as a concept and its recent focus on alternative social assistance development is challenging for all groups involved. The social workers buy the idea of a decentralized, participatory assistance provided locally very well. The implementation of such a system, however, is inhibited by the lack of sufficient finance and political will. The existing legal and finance systems do not provide the right incentives for development of the assistance on local level, and is not explanatory enough with regard to social care and social rehabilitation. In an attempt to solve the problem, the Ministry of Welfare is currently working on a new social assistance law. It is hoped that the new law will address the shortcomings of the existing legislation, be more outcome-oriented and backed-up with more sufficient financing for the social assistance system.

This report has shown great local variation within a district in solving issues related to social assistance. This variation is likely to be even greater within the country as a whole. Partly this is caused by lack of precision as to what is expected from the local municipalities, partly it is a matter of economic resources, but it is also a conscious lack of will to implement the national legislation because it is seen as irrelevant or unrealistic in relation to the needs at the local level.

The future of social assistance in Latvian regions will depend on a number of factors, where the decisive one is likely to be the development of the Latvian economy in general and particularly regional economic development. Continuous high unemployment rates in many districts will put a pressure on the local budgets and this is bound to affect the level and types of social assistance available to the population.

As hinted in this report, other factors – all of which are linked to the economy – will also be crucial. The direction of social policy in the country will undoubtedly play an important role. There are many issues that are discussed by Latvian politicians, within the relevant ministries, by interest organisations and the general public – sometimes involving international organisations as well. The welfare state regime developing will be of great

importance to the local municipalities; will Latvia focus on universal principles or go more in the direction of means-testing for distribution of social assistance to the poorest? Today there the trends go in both directions with a guaranteed minimum income to all being introduced, combined with a greater degree of discretion of the social workers, and even the local politicians in some cases, in distributing social assistance.

The development of local government and the distribution of roles between the state, the districts and the municipalities have not yet been settled. At present the municipalities feel that the policies introduced at the government level are far from the needs that they themselves experience in their everyday dealing with social issues. Neither is the institutional set-up well suited for the needs of the municipalities. On the other hand, the large number of municipalities Latvia and the hesitation among many local politicians in introducing reforms of the local government may also put obstacles to a more rational and economically founded use of scarce resources.

Finally, the future will be influenced by development of the role of the social worker in Latvia. Today there is a need for more professional social workers, especially in the districts. However, social work is not very prestigious and has low pay, and those social workers who receive a professional education are likely to seek work not in the rural districts but rather in better paid jobs in larger urban centres where the possibilities to perform other tasks than poverty relief are better. The frustrations that social workers in the smaller municipalities experience are unlikely to disappear even if the economic situation in the country improves. Still, this report has shown that substantial assistance is actually being performed despite economic hardships and an inability to comply with the norms of national legislation or the aims of social assistance as perceived by the social workers themselves.

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Appendix: Guide for focus group discussions and interviews in Estonia, Latvia and Norway

Introduction

Aim, tasks

Present - past - future
Aims by law and regulations related to reality
What are the expectations from the general public?
What is your opinion?

Changing situation

Changing needs
Changing resources
Changing attitudes

Seen from different perspectives: society, community, individual and different agencies

Evaluation of organisations, regulations and implementation agencies

Targeting
 Regional distribution
Co-ordination and co-operation
 Between levels
 Between agencies
 Understanding themselves in relation to other institutions
Labour market connection
 (workfare/public works/active labour market policies)
Where are the decisions made?
The gap between needs and resources
Accountability and trust
Division of responsibility (public, private, NGO, family/community?)
The balance between different means (social security, benefits and services)

Vulnerable groups

What are the most vulnerable groups?
Who deserves social assistance?
What do you do when you lack resources to give assistance to all who fulfil the criteria?
What are the priorities?
What do you think should be the priority? Who should pay?
What should be expected from the recipients?
How to reach the vulnerable groups?
What are the good things about these priorities?
How are you dealing with the gap?

Social work/ The social worker

Professionalisation

What kind of knowledge do you need in your work?

Power of the sw (towards the client)

Independence of the sw.

Networking

Methods

The needy - how to reach them?

Description of a working day (yesterday)

Was yesterday a typical working day?

From a Local Perspective: Social Assistance and Social Work in Latvia



Institute for Applied Social Science
P.O.Box 2947 Tøyen
N-0608 Oslo
<http://www.fafo.no/engelsk/>

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